

Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Editors
Eithne Kennedy
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Reading
Association
of Ireland

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READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

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Preface

This volume is based on the 28th Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland, and offers a range of papers devoted to the theme of *Learning to Read and Reading to Learn*. The three keynote speakers discuss aspects of the past, present and future of the teaching of reading in Ireland and internationally. Other papers consider a range of reading research including early literacy instruction, reading in disadvantaged areas, intervention for children with specific learning difficulties, assessment, and reading in the Irish language.

In the first keynote *Mark Morgan* (St. Patrick's College) reviews the substantial research on reading in Ireland since the late 1950s, and comments that, while reading may be the most researched feature of Irish education, relatively little attention has been paid to 'reading to learn'. He considers the evidence regarding the significance of literacy for learning in school, and its critical importance in transferring successfully from primary to post-primary school, yet he notes the low priority accorded to reading in post-primary education. Morgan reminds us of the personal curtailment suffered by those with limited literacy. Morgan argues that we need to focus on prevention rather than remediation, and reassert the primacy of literacy as the foundation of learning. He suggests that the priority for the next Curriculum Review should be a consideration of the centrality of 'reading to learn' and issues such as the time allocated to literacy in a crowded curriculum, developing advanced comprehension skills and the role of reading in developing higher-order thinking skills.

Finian O'Shea (Church of Ireland College of Education), the second keynote speaker, continues the focus on reading to learn. He looks at some current approaches to fostering comprehension in the classroom and highlights the need to move away from a reliance on teacher-initiated questions of limited interest or challenge to the reader, and toward more reader-centred activities. O'Shea argues that promoting comprehension requires that teachers start asking more probing questions, so that children will be exposed to, and learn how to ask, more inferential and evaluative questions and engage more fully with texts. He explores a number of strategies in the pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading phases to help children to interact with fictional text and argues forcefully for a different and more sensitive approach to story comprehension than that required for expository texts. The comprehension of fiction, he suggests, can be further promoted through the experience of Literature Circles which encourage the child's response and serve as a springboard to further development, empathy and discussion. These have a higher value in

promoting real understanding than the frequent shallow book reports and superficial worksheet activities of many classrooms.

Eve Bearne (Homerton College Cambridge), the third keynote speaker, considers the topical issue of concern regarding the declining standards of literacy among boys. Government tests in the UK show a continuing and, in some areas, increasing, gap between boys' and girls' literacy achievement, especially in writing. Bearne discusses the findings from several research projects in the United Kingdom. Surveys conducted prior to intervention highlight that boys experience a high 'fear factor' in relation to reading aloud in class, citing fear of embarrassment. She claims that boys tend to make better progress when the emphasis is placed on 'being a reader' rather than on 'learning to read'. In order to achieve this shift in emphasis she recommends enhanced provision of books and extended access to them, buddy systems where older boys mentor younger ones, reading groups which stress enjoyment and sharing of the pleasure of reading, teachers modelling ways of responding to the meaning of books rather than on decoding, homework that encourages reading a wide variety of text genres, and drama activities that help a student to experience a text more vividly. Bearne concludes that many children need wider experience of the language to talk about writing before they are ready for writing itself and that an integrated approach to literacy is crucial.

Martin Gleeson (Mary Immaculate College) focuses on early literacy instruction. He begins by presenting a synthesis of the international research on evidence-based early literacy instruction and raises a number of interesting points in the discussion of the English Language Teacher Guidelines (1999) in relation to the international research presented. This research underpinned the design of an early literacy intervention project which sought both to prevent reading difficulties and to accelerate reading development. Elements of the programme are clearly outlined and the results of the programme present some interesting longitudinal data in an Irish context. *McClernon, Ferguson and Gardner* (Queen's University of Belfast) also look at early literacy instruction, examining the differences between the '*Phono-Graphix*' approach (McGuinness & McGuinness 1998) and other reading approaches. They specifically highlight differences in the teaching of letter names, letter-sound correspondences, decoding of words, the development of a sight vocabulary and the introduction of early reading materials. '*Phono-Graphix*' claims to be a logical and effective method of helping children learn to read, and the authors explore its suitability for teaching children with moderate reading difficulties in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Another engaging contribution examines the teaching of science through literacy-rich lessons. *Ginny Muller* and *Anne Tapp* (Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan U.S.A.) share the *Quality Science Experience Cycle* and illustrate how children in the early stages of literacy can be taught to read and write effectively through using non-fiction levelled texts and providing opportunities for children to record their observations and document their experiments. They present a framework and a number of useful strategies that can be used to simultaneously teach science concepts and literacy skills in rich and authentic ways.

Emer Eivers (Educational Research Centre, Dublin) shares some of the qualitative elements of the study on *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Schools* (2004). She presents the views of parents, teachers and principals in a Dublin suburb and a country town through data obtained from semi-structured interviews. While there were differences in priorities among the city and town participants, their recommendations included the extension of Early Start and Reading Recovery, early targeting of oral language development, earlier intervention and better access to NEPS, more help getting parents involved in Shared Reading, improved public libraries and more class time devoted to reading in designated disadvantaged schools. *Timothy Blair* (University of Florida) considers the challenge of teaching reading to children in Florida from low socio-economic backgrounds as well as from a variety of racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In line with international research, he argues that more than anything it is the teacher and the quality of instruction in the classroom that matters most. He discusses the characteristics of effective literacy instruction and outlines the features of innovative reading programmes in culturally diverse classrooms.

Turning to the issue of assessment *Siobhán Cahillane-McGovern* (St. Patrick's College, Dublin) and *Kathy Hall* (Open University) look at different tools used in assessing reading, and examine the messages about reading and learning that they convey to children. They present data on children's perception of being tested, and argue that formative assessment (as well as the required periodic standardised testing) allows children to feel part of the process and more aware of what they need to learn, rather than of their failures and mistakes.

The early identification of reading difficulties requires sensitive and appropriate testing, and *Pauline Cogan* and *Ray Fuller* (Dyslexia Research Group at Trinity College, Dublin) present an up-date on the development of the Trinity Early Screening Test for Dyslexia, a battery of tests currently being developed for children aged 4-6 years. They describe

the two phases of the project and the statistical analyses conducted to identify the predictive sub-tests of the screening instrument. This is a longitudinal study which will ultimately lead to the development of a screening instrument normed on Irish children, an important and welcome development.

A significant challenge facing many pupils worldwide is that of learning to read in more than one language, and learning the rules relating the orthographies and phonology of their different languages. *Lyddy, Ó Loinsigh and Parsons* (NUI, Maynooth) collected Stroop test data in order to explore the differences between English-dominant and Irish-dominant bilinguals in how they process text in Irish and in English. Such analysis of how bilinguals process reading in their two languages offers valuable information on this complex psycholinguistic task.

In all, this volume presents a valuable sample of papers covering a number of the most topical concerns in the field of literacy, and gives an excellent insight into national and international research on literacy today.

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Reading Association of Ireland