

Literacy at the Crossroads, pp. 1-18.

1. Reading Standards in Ireland: Moving Forward, Looking Back

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In the past decade, the Government has invested in national and international assessments of reading literacy that are designed to provide information about standards. While it is acknowledged that the average performance of 15-year olds in Ireland in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003 is strong, concerns are expressed about the absence of some low achievers from PISA and about low levels of engagement in reading among boys in particular. The performance of primary-level pupils in the 2003 Study of Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Schools suggests that standards are particularly low in some areas of socio-economic disadvantage, while the outcomes of the 2004 National Assessment of English Reading indicate that the 1999 Primary School English Curriculum has yet to have a significant impact on the reading achievements of pupils in Fifth class. It is concluded that a range of initiatives must be implemented in tandem to raise standards.

This paper looks at reading standards in Ireland and some factors related to standards. First, a historical perspective on reading standards is presented. Then, outcomes of three studies designed to assess standards in the past decade are described – the Study of Reading in Designated Disadvantaged Schools in 2003, the National Assessment of Reading in Primary Schools in 2004, and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003. The contribution of each

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study to our understanding of reading standards in Ireland is considered with reference to key factors associated with reading achievement, including socioeconomic status, home educational resources, and engagement in reading. The paper concludes with a look towards the future.

READING STANDARDS THROUGH THE YEARS

In a review of reading literacy standards in Ireland, Kellaghan (2001) noted that concerns with standards were raised at least 130 years ago, when the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education (1870) concluded that ‘the progress of children in the national (elementary) schools of Ireland is very much less than it ought to be’. The Commission recommended the payment-by-results scheme, whereby teachers’ salaries would be partly dependent on the results of annual examinations in reading, spelling, writing and arithmetic, to deal with the situation. According to Kellaghan, inspectors reported an increase in standards in the early years of the twentieth century, following the conclusion of the scheme.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, almost no objective information on standards was available. Yet, in 1927, the Commission on Technical Education expressed concerns about defects in primary education among entrants to technical colleges, while deputies in the newly established Dáil Éireann regularly debated educational standards in primary schools (Kellaghan, 2001).

The first empirical attempt to provide information on standards of achievement in the Irish education system was John Macnamara’s study of bilingualism carried out in 1961, with fifth-class pupils (Macnamara, 1966). The Teacher Study Group carried out surveys of English Reading in representative samples of Dublin schools at regular intervals using a standardised test of English reading, and recorded significant improvements between 1964 and 1979 (Kellaghan & Madaus, 1982; Ward, 1982). However, Macnamara’s study, and the studies of the Teacher Study Group, all of which used tests normed in Britain, found

that pupils in Ireland performed less well than their counterparts in the original British standardisation samples.

Beginning in 1972, the Department of Education and Science began its own series of national assessments of English reading in primary schools. Subsequent surveys, usually involving 10- or 11-year olds, or pupils in the Fourth or Fifth classes, were conducted in 1980, 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2004. Whereas performance increased significantly between 1972 and 1980, perhaps arising from implementation of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (Department of Education, 1971), no overall differences in achievement were recorded between 1980 and 2004 (Eivers, Shiel, Perkins & Cosgrove, 2005). A notable feature of the national assessment series was the transition, in 1993, from tests developed and normed in Britain, to tests developed, and linked to curricula, in Ireland.

In 1991, 9- and 14-year olds in Ireland participated in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) Reading Literacy Study. Irish 9-year olds (all in Third class, primary level) achieved an overall score that was not significantly different from the international and OECD² average scores, ranking 12th of 27 participating countries, and 10th of 19 OECD countries (Martin & Morgan, 1994; OECD, 1995). Irish 14-year olds (all in Second year, post-primary level) also achieved scores that were not significantly different from the international and OECD average scores, ranking 20th of 31 participating countries, and 16th of 19 OECD countries (Martin & Morgan 1994; OECD, 1993). An important feature of the IEA reading literacy study was the reporting of performance by text type. At age 9, students in Ireland performed best on narrative texts, next best on expository texts, and poorest on documents. At age 14, students in Ireland performed at about the same level on the three text types.

² OECD: the Paris based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which advises its 30 member countries, including Ireland, on policy development in a range of areas, including education, and oversees the implementation of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

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In 1994, Irish adults participated in the International Adult Literacy Study, in which the main assessment domains were prose literacy (narrative and expository text), document literacy, and quantitative literacy. On the prose scale, Ireland ranked 14th of 22 countries/regions (OECD/HDRC, 2000). Irish adults performed significantly less well than adults in ten countries/regions, significantly better than adults in five, and at about the same level as adults in six. Almost one quarter of Irish adults (23%) scored at Level 1, the lowest proficiency level, on the prose scale, while 30% achieved Level 2, 34% achieved Level 3, and 14% Levels 4-5. Level 1 scores were more common among older (56-65 years old) respondents, of whom 39.9% scored at this level, than among younger (16-26 year-old) respondents (15.9%). Performance on the documents and quantitative scales was similar to performance on the prose scale.

We can see that the term ‘standards’ can be interpreted in at least three different ways. First, perspectives on standards can arise from a comparison of current performance with the performance of students at some earlier time, without reference to specific evidence (such as test results). Second, standards can be defined with reference to performance on a test of reading. Historically, the practice has been to ascertain if there has been a significant difference in average scores between two administrations of a test. More recently, performance at key benchmarks such as the 10th and 90th percentile has been tracked. These practices represent a norm-referenced approach to evaluating standards. Finally, in more recent surveys, such as the International Adult Literacy Survey and PISA, standards are also described in terms of the skills and processes that subjects can implement at different levels of test performance, through the development of ‘proficiency levels’. This can be taken to represent a criterion-referenced approach to describing standards.

THE STUDY OF READING LITERACY IN DESIGNATED DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS

The National Anti-poverty Strategy (NAPS), starting in 1997, was one of the Government’s key programmes to address social inclusion in general, and educational disadvantage in particular. A review of the NAPS in 2001 proposed halving of the number of pupils with serious

literacy difficulties in designated disadvantaged primary schools by 2006 (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2001). If we take a score on a standardised test of reading that is at or below the 10th percentile as indicative of a serious literacy difficulty (e.g., DES, 2000), we can say that a reduction in the proportion of pupils with scores at or below the 10th percentile would represent progress towards the NAPS target. To generate baseline data against which this target could be measured, the Educational Research Centre conducted a study of reading literacy in designated disadvantaged schools in urban areas in 2003 (Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004). In all, 6,500 pupils in the First, Third and Sixth classes in 94 designated schools were assessed on a standardised test of sentence reading. The pupils also completed questionnaires, as did their teachers, school principals and parents. Principal teachers and class teachers in a selection of schools also participated in focus groups. In addition to describing reading standards, the study sought to describe factors associated with reading achievement, and ways in which the teaching of reading might be supported (see Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004).

The outcomes of the survey indicated that overall reading standards in designated schools were poor. At Third class level, for example, 30% of pupils achieved scores at or below the 10th percentile (compared with 10% in the standardisation sample), while just 3% achieved scores above the 90th percentile (again compared with 10 percent nationally). The average score of pupils in Third class in designated schools was over two-thirds of a standard deviation below the national mean. Teachers indicated that 4% of pupils in Third class would not be able to cope with the reading demands of post-primary schooling, while 24% would need assistance in coping with those demands. On a more positive note, teachers indicated that 31% would be able to cope very well, and 41% would cope adequately.

A number of variables distinguished more able from less able readers in designated schools. In a multi-level model of reading achievement in Third class (Sofroniou, 2004), male pupils attending schools with high levels of disadvantage did less well than female pupils attending such schools, and male and female pupils attending schools with lower average levels of disadvantage. Pupil-level variables that were

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associated with achievement included medical card access (pupils with access did less well), number of books in the home (those with fewest books at home did least well; 22% of pupils lived in home with fewer than 10 books), number of siblings (pupils with 4 or more did less well than pupils with fewer siblings), and an interaction between attendance at school and frequency of being read to before schooling started (pupils with poor attendance who were rarely read to before schooling started did less well by the end of Third class than pupils with higher levels of attendance who were read to more often).

After considering the views of principal teachers, class teachers and others, it was concluded that the target of halving the proportion of pupils with scores at or below the 10th percentile by 2006 would not be feasible, and that a more realistic target was required. A target focusing on reducing the proportion of pupils with serious difficulties to 15% within 10 years (i.e., by 2013) was suggested. Further, it was recommended that the target should be supported by short-term targets at system- and school level, including targets for average and higher-achieving pupils.

THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH READING

The National Assessment of English Reading (NAER) series began back in 1972, and has continued at regular intervals since then. The most recent NAER took place in 2004 and involved 4,143 pupils in First class in 114 primary schools, and 4,424 pupils in Fifth class in 133 such schools. NAER 2004 was implemented in First class in order to gather baseline against which performance in future assessments could be benchmarked. Since NAER had been administered in Fifth class in 1998, it would be possible to establish links between the 1998 and 2004 assessments. The outcomes of NAER were eagerly awaited, as it was the first national assessment of English reading since the implementation of the Revised Primary School English Curriculum (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 1999b). In this section, the performance of pupils in Fifth class in 1998 and 2004 is considered.

As indicated earlier, no difference in overall reading achievement was observed between pupils in Fifth class in 1999 and 2004, nor were differences on narrative, expository and document texts statistically different between the two years. However, in 2004, pupils scoring at the 50th, 75th and 90th percentiles on the documents subscale achieved significantly higher scores than their counterparts scoring at these benchmarks on the same scale in 1998.

NAER 2004 points to a number of groups that are ‘as risk’ of reading difficulties, and the performance of pupils in these groups may contribute, at least in part, to the slow progress in raising standards. These include pupils attending schools designated as disadvantaged, members of the Traveller community, pupils living in lone-parent households, pupils in large families, and pupils with low levels of school attendance. Clearly, these groups are not mutually exclusive, and efforts to improve reading standards will need to take their needs into account.

Other relevant findings to emerge from NAER 2004 (Fifth class) included:

- Girls outperformed boys on the overall scale, and on two of the three content scales – narrative and documents. The gap on narrative texts was marginally larger than on documents.
- One-third of pupils did not borrow books from a public library while 13.3% did not borrow them from a school or class library. Pupils who did not borrow books had significantly lower reading achievement scores than those who borrowed books.
- Pupils who engaged in daily reading of stories and novels at home outperformed pupils who read such texts less frequently.
- Pupils who reported that they enjoyed reading, viewed themselves as competent readers, and enjoyed challenging reading materials tended to outperform those who did not.

THE OECD PROGRAMME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT

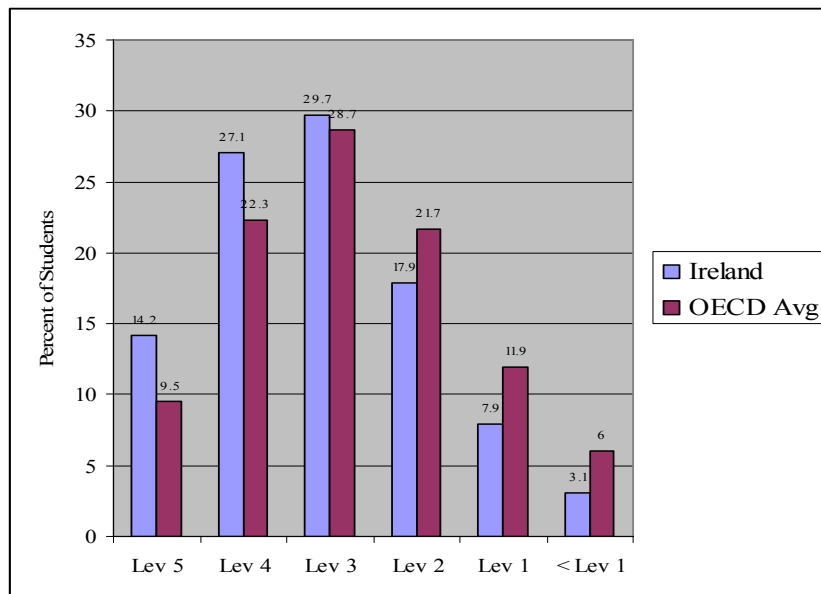
To date, Irish 15-year olds have participated in three cycles of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – an international assessment of reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy that takes place every three years. This paper reflects on the outcomes in reading literacy for two years – 2000 and 2003. In 2000, reading literacy was a major assessment domain in PISA, and was assessed in a comprehensive manner. In 2003, it was a minor domain, and less detailed information on performance was generated.

The outcomes of PISA 2000, as they related to performance on the combined (overall) reading literacy scale, can be summarised as follows:

- Irish 15-year olds ranked 5th of 29 OECD countries
- Ireland's mean score was significantly higher than the OECD country average score.
- Just one country, Finland, had a significantly higher mean score than Ireland
- Eleven percent of students in Ireland achieved at or below the lowest proficiency level (Level 1), compared with an OECD average of 18% (Figure 1).
- Higher achievers in Ireland (those scoring at the 90th percentile) achieved a score that was above the corresponding OECD country average score, but below the scores of high-scoring countries such as Finland, Canada and the United Kingdom.
- The standard deviation in Ireland was below the OECD country average standard deviation, indicating a narrower range than in several other countries.
- On the Evaluate subscale, Ireland had a mean score that was not significantly different from Canada, the highest ranking country on that scale.

In PISA 2003, Ireland again achieved a mean score that was significantly higher than the OECD average, and ranked sixth among OECD countries, with three countries, Finland, Korea and Canada, achieving significantly higher mean scores. However, Ireland was one of three countries in PISA 2003 that had significantly lower mean scores than in 2000. The others were Italy and Spain. Just one OECD country, Poland, had a higher mean score in 2003 than in 2000. Students in Ireland scoring at the 75th, 90th and 95th percentile ranks in 2003 also did significantly less well than students in Ireland who scored at these benchmarks in 2000.

Figure 1: Percentages of Students at Each Proficiency Level on Combined Reading Literacy in 2000 – Ireland and OECD Country Averages



Like other national and international assessments, PISA identified a range of variables associated with performance. In Ireland, student level variables associated with achievement in PISA 2000 included the following:

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- *Gender* – the difference in favour of female students in Ireland (one-third of a standard deviation) was similar to the OECD average difference; the gender difference was greater on continuous texts (e.g., stories, descriptions) than on non-continuous texts (e.g., tables, charts, figures); the difference in favour of females was greater on the Evaluate subscale than on the Retrieve and Reflect subscales.
- *Socioeconomic status* (SES, based on parent occupations) – A wide difference in reading performance was observed between students in the highest SES category (the top third of SES scores) and the lowest (the bottom third). Nevertheless, the effect of socioeconomic status on achievement in Ireland was close to the OECD average effect (OECD, 2001, Table 8.1).
- *Family structure* – 15-year olds in lone-parent households did significantly less well than students in other household types
- *Home educational resources/Number of books in the home* – Students with more books in their home outperformed students with fewer books at home. Ten percent of students reported having fewer than 10 books in their homes, and a further 22% reported that they had between 11 and 50.
- *Absence from school* – students who were absent for one or more days in the two weeks prior to PISA testing in their schools did significantly less well than students with full attendance.

PISA also examined associations between a range of reading-related variables and achievement. Key findings from PISA in relation to students in Ireland can be summarised as follows:

- *Frequency of leisure reading/Reading for enjoyment* – one-third of students in Ireland in PISA 2000, reported that they did not engage in any leisure reading (i.e., reading for enjoyment), while 15% reported spending at least an hour a day reading for enjoyment (Table 1). On average, more frequent readers achieved higher reading scores (Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou, Kelly, 2001).
- *Diversity of reading outside of school* – Twenty-five percent of students in Ireland in PISA 2003 reported that they never read fiction

for enjoyment outside of school time while 46% reported that they never read non-fiction; newspapers were read more frequently than other text genres, with non-news items (e.g., sport, features) being read more frequently than news items (Shiel, 2006).

Table 1: Mean Percentages of 15-Year Olds in Ireland Engaging in Leisure Reading on a Daily Basis, and Mean Reading Literacy Scores (2000)

<u>Daily Reading</u>	<u>Percent of Students</u>	<u>Mean Reading Score</u>
No time	33.4	491.0
30 minutes or less	30.9	535.6
30 to 60 minutes	20.4	557.5
60 minutes or more	15.4	551.9
Missing	--	228.5

Overall mean = 527; Standard Deviation = 94. Valid percentages are reported. Data on leisure reading were unavailable for 1.3% of students.

- *Diversity of reading at school* – Thirteen percent of students in Ireland in PISA 2003 reported that they never read fiction at school, while 21% said that they never read non-fiction, and 71% that they never read e-mails/web pages (Shiel, 2006).
- *Attitude to reading* – the correlation between attitude to reading (defined as a positive disposition towards reading) and reading literacy in PISA 2000 was .43, which can be considered high. Students with a positive attitude to reading indicated strong agreement with statements such as ‘Reading is one of my favourite hobbies’, ‘I like talking about books with other people’, and ‘I feel happy if I receive a book as a present’.
- *Engagement in reading* – PISA 2000 constructed a measure of engagement in reading, based on responses to questions about frequency of leisure reading, attitude to reading, and diversity of reading. The OECD average score was set at 0, and the standard deviation at 1. The mean score for students in Ireland was -0.20, the fourth lowest among OECD countries, with only students in Belgium, Germany and Spain reporting lower levels of engagement (Kirsch et al., 2002). The mean score for male students in Ireland (-0.43) was

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particularly low. Only Belgium among OECD countries reported lower reading engagement (-0.48) than Ireland among male students.

LOOKING AHEAD

On the face of it, Ireland's performance in PISA reading in 2000 and 2003 suggests that reading standards here are satisfactory. There are a number of reasons for the relatively strong performance, including the following:

- The strong degree of overlap between Junior Certificate English syllabus/examination and PISA reading literacy. Curriculum experts in Ireland estimated that just 10% of PISA 2000 items assessed processes that would be unfamiliar to Higher and Ordinary-level students, while one quarter assessed processes that would be unfamiliar to Foundation level students (Shiel et al., 2001).
- The structure of the school system, where all students at Junior Cycle take a common academic course. This contrasts with the situation in countries such as Germany and Austria, where students are placed in academic and vocational tracks at an early stage in their schooling.
- The fact that relatively few 15-year olds are retained or held back a year. Ireland might fare differently in a study with a grade-based sample, against countries that retain larger numbers of students for one or more years.
- The relatively homogeneous nature of the population, with proportionately fewer immigrant students at age 15 in 2000 and 2003 than countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (OECD, 2006).

Although a decline in Ireland's average performance was observed on PISA between 2000 and 2003, it is unclear at this time whether the decline is real, or simply an artefact the particular passages used to link students' performance in the two years. Future assessments may throw further light on this matter.

Another concern is the absence of some lower-achieving students from PISA in Ireland. According to Cosgrove (2005), students who were absent from, or declined to take, the PISA tests had lower Junior Certificate examination grades in English than students who took the tests. While Ireland met OECD criteria with regard to student participation, more students in Ireland were likely to be absent for PISA than students in other countries, and those absent here were more likely to have studied Junior Certificate English at Foundation or Ordinary levels than at Higher level. These observations suggest that PISA may underestimate the proportion of students in Ireland scoring at or below Level 1 on the reading proficiency skills – about 11% of students in both PISA assessments to date.

It is also of interest to note that 27% of students in PISA 2003 who took the Junior Certificate English examination at Ordinary level scored at or below Level 1 on PISA Reading Literacy (Cosgrove et al., 2005). Since just 1.5% of students taking Ordinary level English in the 2003 Junior Certificate examination scored a grade E or lower, it might be concluded that about a quarter of students who achieve a pass in Ordinary level English do not have adequate levels of literacy to meet their future needs. A similar situation arises with respect to Foundation level English. Whereas 3% of students nationally achieved a grade E or lower in Junior Certificate Foundation-Level English in 2003, 77.5% of Foundation-level students taking PISA in 2003 achieved at or below Level 1.

Thus, while Ireland's overall performance on PISA reading literacy is good, there are some concerns about lower-achievers. There are also concerns about the amount of leisure reading in which 15-year olds in Ireland engage. And it is noted that higher-achievers in Ireland do somewhat less-well than higher-achievers in other countries. Clearly, the challenge for the future is the raise the achievement of higher- and lower-achieving students, and, perhaps as part of this, to ensure that all students engage in frequent reading.

The National Antipoverty Strategy envisaged halving the numbers of pupils with serious learning difficulties in disadvantaged schools by

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2006. No study was implemented to ascertain if this target had been met by 2006. However, in May 2005, the Department of Education and Science launched its DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme to raise standards in reading literacy and other subjects in disadvantaged schools. So far, DEIS has involved the re-classification of schools according to levels of disadvantage. As part of DEIS, it is planned to implement the following strategies in the area of reading literacy, with a view to driving up standards:

- Extension of the availability of the Reading Recovery and First Steps programmes
- The development of after-school and holiday-time supports to assist students literacy development
- Further support and extension of activities taking place under the Junior Certificate Schools Programme at post-primary level
- Support for schools in accessing library services through local authorities
- Target setting in relation to literacy attainment and related areas (attendance, retention)

In addition, it is proposed to appoint co-ordinators for literacy and numeracy to work with DEIS schools to improve literacy levels in these areas. In order to establish baseline data for DEIS, it is planned to assess representative samples of pupils in DEIS urban schools (Second, Third and Sixth classes) and in DEIS rural schools (Third and Sixth classes) in 2007 and 2010. Using the 2007 achievement data, it should be possible to ascertain if there are differences in performance at the Third and Sixth classes in disadvantaged schools between 2003 and 2007, and hence whether or not the NAPS literacy target has been achieved. In addition to monitoring the overall impact of DEIS, it would be desirable to evaluate some of its components, such as Reading Recovery and First Steps. There is relatively little research available outside of Australia on First Steps, and it would be important to examine its effects carefully, as well as the extent to which its underlying strategies and content are compatible with the revised Primary School English Curriculum.

Reading Recovery might be compared with other approaches to addressing children's early reading difficulties, including programmes provided by learning support/special needs teachers, and special intervention programmes, such as that described by Kennedy in this volume.

The National Assessment of English Reading in 2004 did not show an increase in reading achievement since the previous assessment in 1998. This will have disappointed educators who expected an increase following the implementation of the 1999 Primary School English curriculum from 2001 onwards. There are several reasons why an increase in achievement was not recorded in 2004. They include the following:

- Reading standards may already be high; the observation that 15-year olds in Ireland did well on PISA reading literacy in 2000 and 2003 supports this, as does the observation that students in Sweden and the Netherlands, who perform at about the same level as students in Ireland in PISA reading literacy, are the top-scoring countries in the PIRLS international assessment of pupils in Fourth grade (primary level) (Mullis et al., 2003).
- Pupils in Fifth class who were assessed in the 2004 national assessment did not benefit from the full 1999 Primary School English Curriculum, as they started school before implementation began in 2001.
- There are difficulties with implementation of the English curriculum in some schools (DES, 2005), suggesting that schools and teachers might benefit from additional support with implementing the English curriculum. Difficulties with the teaching of writing are a particular concern, since enhanced performance in writing might transfer to reading (and vice versa).
- The average performance of pupils in certain subgroups, such as those with poor school attendance, those attending schools with high levels of disadvantage, and members of the Traveller community, is consistently poor, making it more difficult to raise overall achievement.

The National Assessment of English Reading series is set to continue into the future. In 2009, it is planned to assess pupils in the Second, Fifth

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(allowing for a comparison with 2004) and Sixth classes. It is intended that subsequent assessments will involve Second and Sixth classes only. While the National Assessments should prove useful in monitoring reading standards into the future at the end of the Junior and Senior classes in primary schools, attention should also be given to written composition. An assessment in this area might focus attention on writing standards, and, in as much as reading and writing are related, might contribute to raising reading standards. It would also be important for Ireland to participate in international assessments of reading at primary level that not only look at achievement (including the performance of higher-achieving pupils), but also at approaches to teaching reading across countries.

It is clear that a range of variables are linked to reading standards at any particular time. These include aspects such as student and school socioeconomic backgrounds, frequency of attendance at school, family structure, support for literacy in the home, engagement in leisure reading (by parents and children), access to libraries in school and in the community, and quality of teaching and assessment. These variables interact with one another, and with other variables, in complex ways. Hence, it is likely that any efforts to improve reading standards must be multi-faceted, focusing on several relevant factors at any given time.

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