

Literacy at the Crossroads:

Moving Forward, Looking Back

Editors

Bernadette Dwyer

Gerry Shiel



**Reading
Association
of Ireland**

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Moving Forward,
Looking Back*

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READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

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Literacy at the Crossroads

PREFACE

The theme of the 30th Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland (RAI) was “*Literacy at the Crossroads: Moving Forward, Looking Back*”. This theme provided the literacy community with a moment to pause, reflect and debate on current issues in relation to literacy, including the challenges posed and the opportunities presented by the introduction to our schools of the Revised Primary School English Curriculum in 1999. The persistence of low levels of literacy among children in schools with designated disadvantaged status in spite of considerable government investment in these schools (including additional funding, the reduction in class sizes and increased staff allocation) is a serious concern. The ever-increasing volume of electronic texts in our daily lives has led to calls to include the new literacies of digital technologies in a reconceptualisation of what it means to be literate in an Information Age. The ability of our children to search for information on the Internet, to critically evaluate the information found, summarise and synthesise that information so that it can be presented to others, is crucial. As technologies change and new contexts continuously emerge, it becomes really important for us to “enable children to learn how to learn” as the Primary School Curriculum, p7, 1999 extols and to develop the metacognitive skills and strategies necessary to adapt to changing information technologies.

This volume is based on RAI’s 30th Annual conference and presents a range of papers which explore aspects of the Conference theme. These aspects include reading standards both nationally and internationally, the development of early literacy skills, teaching and learning in a new media age, the development of reading comprehension, evolving perspectives on literacy and disadvantage and the development of motivation and engagement in reading.

Keynote Addresses

In the first keynote address, *Gerry Shiel* draws on national and international data to describe current standards in reading literacy in Ireland. While acknowledging the strong performance of our 15-year olds in the reading

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literacy component of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003, he highlights low levels of engagement in reading among students in Ireland (and male students in particular) as well as a decline in performance between 2000 and 2003. He also describes standards at primary level, and notes that there was no increase in reading achievement, at least at Fifth class level, following the implementation of the Revised Primary School English Curriculum in schools from 2001 onwards.

In the second keynote address, *Colin Harrison* delves deeply into definitions of reading comprehension and the key principles underpinning the development of comprehension including the importance of activating prior knowledge and modelling strategies. The Effective Use of Reading project (Lunzer & Gardner, 1979) observed reading instruction in lessons in primary schools in England and noted that very little time was actually spent in intensive reading. DARTs (Directed Activities Related to Texts) provide an opportunity for active reflective reading engagement and discussion between peers. Colin provides practical examples of DART activities including deletion, sequencing, prediction, highlighting, diagram completion and segmenting texts. Crucially, he provides examples of how to model DARTs in the classroom.

In the third keynote address, *Jackie Marsh* describes the effects of digital literacy on teaching and learning. Noting the dearth of research on children's use of media and new technologies, she describes a survey that investigated the range of digital literacies that children encounter at home. Then she outlines the impact and use of some of these literacies in a class of 8-9 year olds. Pupils in this class contributed multi-media texts to a blog on dinosaurs. The description of the pupils' work gives valuable insights into ways in which classrooms everywhere will need to evolve to hold the attention of technology-wise children as they engage in reading and writing activities.

Evolving Perspectives on Disadvantage and Literacy

Two papers relate directly to educational disadvantage. The first, by *Áine Cregan*, looks at children's oral language patterns in 'working class' and 'middle class' school settings, and reflects on the implications

of the differences that are observed for the children's future development. In particular, Áine notes the relevance of 'literate-style' language for the development of children's literacy skills, especially beyond the initial stages of learning to read and write. In concluding, she makes the pertinent point that teachers need to understand different varieties of English and the choices that accompany their use.

The second paper, by *Eithne Kennedy*, describes a programme designed to raise the reading and writing performance of children in four First class classrooms in a school designated as disadvantaged. The programme, which was successful in improving scores on standardised measures of reading and writing, involved a strong element of teacher professional development and support and a 'balanced' approach to literacy development. The programme also emphasised the integration of school-based literacy services and had a focus on formative assessment. Eithne's paper illustrates the challenges that face disadvantaged schools as they try to raise standards, and the levels of commitment and support that are required to make progress.

Guiding the Development of Reading Comprehension Strategies

In addition to Colin Harrison's keynote address, two papers elaborate on ways in which pupils might be facilitated in developing reading comprehension in classroom settings.

Tara Concannon provides a comprehensive review of research-based best practice in relation to comprehension strategy instruction. She focuses on strategies that impact on comprehension including monitoring, visualising, questioning, summarising and inferring, as well as the activation of background knowledge. Then she provides practical classroom examples of these strategies in action.

Considerable attention has been paid in the literature on comprehension to explicit strategy instruction. But what does explicit strategy instruction entail and how do teachers implement such instruction in the classroom? *Ann Courtney* and her colleagues *Fredrick King* and *Joan Pedro* explore these issues in their paper based on a three-year

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longitudinal research project in an elementary school in the United States, using a traditional ethnographic approach to data collection. The results of their research project suggest that teachers need to be mindful of using precise language when modelling strategies to enable subsequent independent use of these strategies by readers. The examples of teacher-student interaction in this paper serve to extend our understanding of the importance of teacher scaffolding in developing reading comprehension.

Early Literacy Skills

There are three papers dealing with aspects of early literacy skills. First, *Brian Murphy* examines the impact of the Revised Primary School English Curriculum on early literacy instruction in Infant classrooms in Ireland. The results of a nationwide questionnaire survey, which explored the attitudes, views and instructional approaches of teachers in relation to the teaching of reading, are presented. For example, almost 90% of teachers felt that it was important to teach formal reading in Senior Infant classes, while a similar proportion agreed that frequent testing of Senior Infants was important for evaluating their progress in reading. Brian notes the persistence of traditional practices in relation to the teaching of reading and presents suggestions on how the balanced reading pedagogy espoused by the Revised English Curriculum can be implemented.

Helen McLernon, John Gardner and James Ferguson focus on the development of basic literacy skills. Their study explores the effectiveness of the *Phono-Graphix* (McGuinness & McGuinness, 1998) approach in relation to the promotion of phonics, spelling and writing skills among children with moderate learning difficulties. Results of the study suggest that the *Phono-Graphix* programme influenced progress for the children in these areas. Follow up assessments after one year showed that this progress was sustained after the intervention had ceased. In their conclusion, the authors note the importance of appropriate implementation of the programme by teachers.

In her paper, *Cecile Arquette* discusses the use of work stations as a way of motivating all learners within the classroom. Examples of activities

which may be incorporated into each work station are given. Management issues involved in the implementation of these work stations in the classroom are also explored. Cecile notes that activity centres can promote learning in five aspects of literacy mandated by the No Child Left Behind legislation in the United States – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. However, she argues that work stations can also help with the development of oral language, the provision of literary experience, and the establishment of connections between reading and writing.

Motivation and Reading

The final set of papers covers aspects of motivation and reading. First, *Heidi Davey* provides a theoretical overview of motivation and explains its associations with interest, self-efficacy (confidence) and self-regulation of learning. She notes that reading comprehension is a ‘motivated act of will, goal setting and pursuit’, and cites research showing that an interplay between knowledge, interest and strategic engagement can result in enhanced understanding and recall of significant ideas in a text. In addition to its cognitive and affective aspects, Heidi stresses the social aspects of motivation, and the positive effects that sharing and discussing texts can have on students’ intrinsic motivation.

In his paper on Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), *Gregory Bryan* uses single-subject case study methodology to question the view that SSR works equally well for all children. His subject, Jobe, a 12-year old boy, is a reasonably good reader, and engages in reading and discussions about reading when the material is of interest to him. However, Jobe copes less well with the independent reading requirements of SSR. He often distracts other children and appears disinterested and disengaged. An implication of this study may well be that teachers should monitor the levels of engagement displayed by pupils during SSR, and develop ways to enhance engagement. It also seems important that SSR be firmly embedded within a balanced literacy framework that includes opportunities for social engagement.

The final paper, by *Mary Motavon and Carol Delaney*, addresses the issue of teaching children for whom the language of instruction is a

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second language. Recognising that some teachers may not understand the difficulties encountered by their students in learning content in a second language, the authors immersed 31 English-speaking pre-service and in-service teachers in a sheltered science lesson on simple machines that was delivered in Spanish. Their qualitative analysis of the teachers' responses showed that, despite initial frustration and uncertainty, the teachers increased their appreciation and understanding of the difficulties encountered by second language learners. The paper emphasises the importance of implementing strategies to promote understanding of language, as well as conceptual understanding, during content-area lessons for non-native speakers.

Bernadette Dwyer
Gerry Shiel
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