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*Reading*

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*Development*

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*to Age 15:*

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*Overcoming*

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*Difficulties*

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EDITORS:

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**READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND**

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## PREFACE

The theme for the 19th Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland, which was held at Marino Institute of Education, Dublin in September 1994 was "Reading Development to Age 15: Overcoming Difficulties". The theme reflects RAI's interest in assisting educators to understand some of the current issues in the area of reading difficulties, as they relate to children in both first- and second-level schools. The Conference attracted a strong programme featuring several leading authorities on the assessment and teaching of children with reading difficulties. These included: Susan Mandel Glazer, President of the International Reading Association, who addressed the Conference on new approaches to the assessment of reading problems; Peter Pumfrey of the University of Manchester, who spoke on assessing and teaching children with specific developmental dyslexia (SDD); Usha Goswami of Cambridge University, who described her research on helping children with reading difficulties to use analogies; Linda Gambrell, a Board Member of the International Reading Association, who described strategies for motivating children to read; and Jean Whyte of Trinity College, Dublin and the RAI Executive Committee, who presented the results of a longitudinal study of good and poor readers living in a socially disadvantaged area of Belfast. The programme also attracted presenters who spoke about the reading difficulties of adolescents, early intervention, the teaching of writing, attention deficit disorder, the language and readability of textbooks, metacognition, self-esteem, the social context of learning to read, pupil profiling, and the IEA literacy study. Each presenter incorporated into his/her presentation, some insights on how to help children to overcome problems with reading and writing.

In reflecting on the content of the papers, we are encouraged by the strong interest in the teaching of writing. This is an area that, perhaps, has been neglected in the recent past, but deserves to share our attention equally with reading. We hope that, in addition to stimulating discussion about overcoming writing problems, the papers on writing will provide some baseline data in relation to current teaching practices, as we await the implementation of a new Primary Curriculum in English.

While several papers in this volume describe the teaching of reading to individual pupils or to small groups, we hope that the paper by Mark Morgan

and Michael Martin on the performance of Irish pupils in the IEA literacy study will draw attention to some of the factors in our school system and in our schools which can contribute to improvement in reading. There is a clear need for greater access to inservice training for teachers, an improvement in the quality and quantity of resources for teaching reading, and a greater emphasis on the development of higher-order thinking skills during reading instruction.

We experienced considerable difficulty in deciding how to organise the papers. While we finally divided them into four sections, we realise that several of the papers could justifiably have been placed in different sections, and some in all four sections!

We wish to extend our thanks to the authors of the papers for their co-operation and encouragement. We are particularly pleased that three of our student presenters, Evelyn Buckley, Colette Phelan, and Dympna Devine, agreed to submit their papers. Our thanks is also due to Marian Hartnett, Mark Morgan, Michael O'Leary and Alan Sayles for their helpful comments on several of the papers.

We are also grateful to Thomas Kellaghan, Director of the Educational Research Centre, for his support and to Hilary Walshe, also of the Educational Research Centre, for composition work.

We wish to express our appreciation to our colleagues on the Executive Committee of the Reading Association of Ireland. We wish to thank José Quintanal Díaz for contributing a thought-provoking commentary. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the financial assistance of our sponsors. Without their help, it would not have been possible to publish this book.

Gerry Shiel  
Ursula Ní Dhálaigh  
Bryan O'Reilly

*Guest Commentary:*  
*Reading*  
*A Hope for the Future*

.....  
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**R**eading is one of the most important activities in which people have been involved down through the ages because it opens the doors of communication and fosters human relationships; indeed, human relationships emerge from communication as a result of the projection onto others of our own personality, thoughts and feelings. An important way in which the human being grows is through interaction with books; so, to eradicate illiteracy means to help people grow. Reading brings hope and enthusiasm for the future and, consequently, faith in the future. It is something we sorely need in our ever more technological society. It demands that we widen our horizons in the spiral of loneliness that grips us. And a chink of light, understanding, sweet safety can come to us only through imaginative creativity, getting to know other worlds and cultures, universalising thought and reaching true freedom for human beings, in its most intimate, rational and sensitive form.

From this point of view, reading is also positive; I say 'also' because it may seem paradoxical to prove what, I am sure, our readers are already convinced of. But it is like this: reading favours, or let's say, allows,

encourages, stimulates and qualifies the development of the human personality. We find ourselves in a society which does not always appear to support reading and the development of a creative, imaginative nature. Which are the elements that restrict the development of literacy in our society? Let's look at some of the more significant ones:

First, the political system: **administrative states** which claim to be sensitive to cultural problems, and have been created to satisfy people's needs (among which the teaching of literacy occupies a very important place), but then do not seem to take them into account when they come to draft their budgets. They assign their budgets to other demands, perhaps more urgent according to some criteria, but of course, their effectiveness is limited when they ignore the programmes of the school and the welfare of the family.

Second, the atmosphere generated by TV and other **mass media**: the media fly the flag of freedom, but in fact their cultural work is subject to commercial constraints, surrendering to the power of audience ratings or controlled diffusion, so that there is a move away from the humanising principles that are the media's *raison d'être*.

Third, the so-called humanising elements of our society such as **the family and local community**: these groups delegate their responsibilities in the area of literacy development, and transfer responsibility for activities such as reading aloud, which give us such treasured moments, to secondary elements such as cultural associations, libraries, or organisations dedicated to encouraging reading, which are themselves immersed in a spiral of difficulties that limits the effectiveness of their programmes.

Last, **we ourselves**: we too must engage with humility in this worthwhile exercise of self-criticism and take our share of the blame. We who appreciate literature, are lovers of books and strongly convinced of our humanising task, even we are liable to give in to the strong force of this gigantic monster which is loneliness, that sometimes creates in us a feeling of incapacity. We fight alone against the continuous and strong flood that wants to take us with it, so, logically, the strength abandons us when we need to persevere. But let us remind ourselves of our duties, because we are the last humanising bastion that the children, who fill our classrooms with chatter and happiness, can depend on.

The last element listed above is the most important one. Our children deserve the best and I think that, for their sake, we must not give in to pessimism. Let's be realistic in analysing my arguments because, if what has been said seems obvious, the future can also offer some hope.

I feel that, on the threshold of the third millennium, the world is slowly awakening from a long lethargy of materialism. Every day, we find more and stronger voices that claim a way of expanding our creative natures. People are, at last, with growing concern, worried about children, who are the most important asset in a society which seemed to ignore them in the not too distant past. The child who reads is developing his/her imagination. Therefore, literacy development and especially the development of an interest in reading is a prerequisite for progress, and the basis for our hope for the future.

But, we can identify other reasons to have hope. There are many, an ever-increasing number, of us who are convinced of the benefits of reading and, accordingly, fight for a wide development of the activity: parents, teachers, librarians, storytellers. . . . and enthusiastic practitioners of the narrative vocation. Pushing together in the same direction, we generate a huge force. We must not be anguished by the results. Our work together is the best symbol of safety, because time will give us the reason. So, I want to encourage you to go on working for the benefit of the children. Don't surrender! Let the future of our children be in touch with reading. The future appears dyed with enthusiasm and hope, creativity and imagination. As we follow our different paths, each of us will experience the imagination which allows us to celebrate when children come to us with a passion for reading.