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Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues

Supplementary Report

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Preface

This is a Supplementary Report to the NESF Report No. 39 *Child Literacy and Social Inclusion: Implementation Issues*. The main report focuses on examining the implementation of existing literacy policy in relation to social inclusion. It seeks to identify best practice in current policy and to pin-point barriers and supports to effective implementation in and outside of schools, including in the home and the local community.

The NESF established a Project Team to conduct this work, chaired by Professor Áine Hyland. The Team included literacy experts, representatives from the community and voluntary sector, Oireachtas members, trade unions, employers and independent. As part of the work of the Project Team, 95 Submissions were received by interested parties including educationalists and members of the public.

This Supplementary Report presents a Summary of these Submissions prepared by Tracey O'Brien. It also presents a Research Paper commissioned for the Project from Dr Eithne Kennedy of St Patrick's College, Dublin. The Secretariat would like to thank both Tracey and Eithne for their excellent work.

Copies of the main report can be obtained from the NESF.

NESF Secretariat

1 Summary of Submissions

Prepared by Tracy O'Brien

Introduction

1.1 In December 2008, the Project Team placed a call for written submissions in the main national newspapers. This resulted in 95 submissions from a range of individuals and organisations with an interest in or experience of this area[1].

1.2 A significant proportion of the submissions were received from principals, teachers, support teachers, librarians and academics. Submissions were also received from individual members of the community (most notably parents and retired school principals/ teachers), service providers working in a range of community and voluntary settings and statutory bodies. A list of the individuals and organisations that made submissions is provided in the main report.

1.3 In issuing the call for submissions, the Project Team highlighted that submissions should focus on *experiences of child literacy initiatives in primary schools and communities experiencing disadvantage*. Consistent with this, a high number of submissions focused on child literacy initiatives that are in place within *specific* schools, libraries and communities. A number of other submissions included a more *general* focus on child literacy initiatives, identifying models of good practice for use across a broad range of settings. Lessons arising from child literacy initiatives were highlighted in many cases and a number of key recommendations presented for enhancing work in this area.

1. Additional submissions were received after the plenary conference in May and these are listed and discussed in the main report.

Terms of Reference for 'Child Literacy and Social Inclusion'

1.4 The decision of Government and the NESF Project Team to focus on the area of child literacy and social inclusion was welcomed in all cases. There was some criticism, however, of the decision to focus specifically on communities experiencing disadvantage, with one such submission noting that:

'...[t]he association between poor social background and poor reading performance is strong, but there is compelling evidence that 'poor performance does not automatically follow from low socio-economic status.' [Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna]

1.5 It was argued that 'disadvantage' should be defined in broader terms to ensure that Irish policies are directed towards *all children*, with additional supports provided to disadvantaged areas, where appropriate. According to one such submission:

'In its recommendations, the NESF should highlight policies and practices which could be targeted at all socio-economic groups within the education system and should encourage the development of future policies and practices which work to ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, have access to literacy supports.' [The Rehab Group]

1.6 A number of submissions stressed the need to ensure that the work considers child literacy at secondary school level as well as at primary school level. The rationale for this was summarised in the following way in one submission:

'While the focus of the project team seems to be at primary level, it is important that there is a focus on literacy and numeracy at post-primary as well. Poor literacy and numeracy skills are early warning signs of potential early school leaving. Students might survive primary school with poor literacy and/or numeracy but transferring to post-primary with poor literacy and numeracy skills can be devastating for a student trying to cope with a number of subjects and less teacher attention.' [The School Completion Programme Co-ordination Team, Curriculum Development Unit, Crumlin]

1.7 While welcoming the focus of the work on disadvantaged communities, a number of other submissions called for specific consideration to be given to children with special educational needs, in particular children with autism, children with dyslexia and children with visual and aural impairments. The needs of Traveller children and children from minority ethnic groups (in particular 'language minority students') were also identified as priority considerations for the work.

1.8 It was further noted that the terms of reference should reflect a broad definition of literacy. Here, emphasis was placed on the importance of improving children's numerical and oral skills as well as their reading and writing skills. Submissions also emphasised the need to incorporate 'digital literacy' into the definition.

Overview of Child Literacy and Social Inclusion in Ireland

1.8 Much attention was given to the importance of literacy in early childhood. The links between literacy and social inclusion were also highlighted in a great many cases, for example:

'To be literate is to have life, education and employment possibilities. Being literate means entering into a community of practice and having a sense of belonging to or being a part of society, in short, being socially included. Literacy is the mechanism that facilitates young children to move effectively between the world of home, school and community.'
[Irish Preschool Play Association, Tallaght]

1.10 The pivotal role that literacy plays in all aspects of life was contrasted with existing data on levels of literacy in Ireland. Statistics were presented to draw attention to both the prevalence and consequences of low levels of literacy in early childhood. There was repeated reference to the 2004 report on literacy standards in disadvantaged primary schools from the Department of Education and Science which showed that up to 30 per cent of children in Ireland experience severe literacy difficulties:

'In 1997 the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) revealed that a quarter of the Irish population had the lowest level of literacy. A report prepared by the Department of Education and Science in 2004 on literacy standards in disadvantaged primary schools shows 30 per cent of children suffer from severe literacy problems.' [National Youth Council of Ireland]

1.11 According to another submission:

'... [l]iteracy and numeracy difficulties among pupils are a matter of serious concern with around 1 in 3 children in disadvantaged areas experiencing significant difficulties. In fact, overall standards have not changed since 1980... [A] comparison of 1998 data with 2004 data shows no change in national reading standards, despite the reduction in class sizes and an increase in the number of learning support teachers available.' [Barnardos]

1.12 As this excerpt suggests, submissions expressed deep dissatisfaction with the level of progress that has been made in reducing the number of children experiencing literacy difficulties. It was argued that data must be seen in the context of existing literacy targets, including those set in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2013* (i.e. to reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties from the current 27-30 per cent to less than 15 per cent by 2016). While it was noted that target-setting is crucial for informing policy direction, it was felt that limited progress has been made in this area:

'...there have been many literacy targets set over the years which have not been met despite significant levels of investment in initiatives and programmes. This begs the question of the effectiveness of these interventions.' [Barnardos]

1.13 There was considerable agreement across the submissions that the achievement of existing targets on child literacy in Ireland must remain a priority for Government. While it was stated that priority should be given to children of all ages, the need to make significant progress at pre-school and primary school levels was emphasised:

'We know that the ability to read and write is vital for any functioning member of society. And yet we permit children to 'graduate' primary school without the facility to read, write and numerate. These children will of course fail at secondary school level, given that they do not have the skills to acquire the knowledge that secondary school imparts.' [Church of Scientology]

Causes of Low Levels of Child Literacy

1.14 Much attention was given to the causes of low levels of literacy. In the vast majority of cases a range of causal factors were presented, reflecting the assertion that:

'... [t]he reasons why students fail in school are complex and multilayered and sometimes involve a combination of history of learning failure; poor attendance patterns; seeking peer approval; unstructured environments; drugs and alcohol; family conflict and breakdown; poor communication skills; poor literacy; and lack of relevance of the curriculum.' [National Co-ordinator, Junior Certificate School Programme Support Service]

1.15 According to the same submission:

'Literacy development can therefore never be seen in isolation. It has to be tackled in tandem with developing personal and social skills, developing self-esteem, offering a relevant and appropriate curriculum, providing emotional support where necessary as well as family support programmes. There must also be time provided for catch up and acceleration of skills.'

1.16 The role of the family, and parents in particular, was singled out by many submissions, with a high number noting a correlation between low levels of adult literacy and low levels of child literacy:

'When one has low levels of literacy, they are in many instances disempowered and socially excluded from society... The implications of a child growing up in a household where the adults have low literacy levels means that the cycle of poverty and educational disadvantage continues to pervade throughout the family.' [National Youth Council of Ireland]

1.17 In the case of a smaller number of submissions, problems within the home environment were identified as causal factors. Such problems were considered 'multi-faceted' and included, amongst other things, family conflict and/or breakdown, limited time with family members and a lack of congruence between literacy practices in the home and literacy practices in the school.

1.18 While some submissions criticised the role played by parents in this matter, many submissions directed their criticism at:

- low levels of effective interventions and supports for parents; and
- low levels of funding for the targeted engagement of parents and children.

1.19 These were identified as priority areas by a number of the submissions received and as a prerequisite to work on enhancing parental involvement in child literacy development. This was summed up in the following way by one submission:

'Parental involvement in a child's education is of paramount importance in terms of reinforcing what is learned in the classroom through assisting with homework, encouraging reading and providing essential encouragement. Unless effective intervention takes place ... the child has very little prospect of escaping from a cycle of educational disadvantage.' [The National Youth Council of Ireland]

1.20 The role of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in enhancing communication and literacy skills was also highlighted, for example:

'[p]re-school presents an opportunity to build young children's literacy dispositions and practices both informally and threaded across the curriculum. One of the key roles of early childhood care and education is to build bridges between home and childcare settings, valuing and building on home literacy initiatives.' [Irish Preschool Play Association, Tallaght]

1.21 According to another submission:

'... it is very clear from an economic perspective that the best returns from Government investment is in the first three years of life and before a child starts school. This applies to a number of important skill areas, cognitive and literacy skills being one of these.' [Early Childhood Development Co-ordinator, Clondalkin Partnership]

1.22 It was argued that child literacy could be greatly enhanced by increasing opportunities for children to access pre-school supports. The benefits that would accrue to children were summarised in a number of submissions, for example:

'[In pre-schools] babies and toddlers learn in the sharing of songs and stories. Sharing books is sharing language (words, tones), sharing emotions (cuddles, closeness) and sharing concepts of print (black marks have meaning). By age 3 or 4 years, children themselves are providing environmental print, displaying paintings on the walls, dictating stories to family and friends, imitating the practitioner or confidently writing to Santa.' [Irish Pre-School Play Association, Tallaght]

1.23 Submissions noted that there is currently a disparity between students' learning needs and the teaching methods used within the formal education system. This disparity was identified as a major cause of literacy difficulties amongst young children in Ireland, leading a number of submissions to call for a complete restructuring of the education system to ensure that all students:

'... belong, are succeeding, have a voice and are in a controlled, structured and supportive environment ... where learning thrives.' [National Co-ordinator, Junior Certificate School Programme Support Service]

1.24 Submissions also stated that there is a lack of consistency in the methods of literacy teaching employed across pre-schools and primary schools. In the case of one community, for example, it was noted that:

'... some pre-schools in the community were using different methods to teach literacy to that employed by the junior infant classes in the primary schools – i.e. 'Letterland' vs. 'Jolly-Phonics.' It was also discovered that one primary school was teaching Italian as a third language while

the local secondary school was teaching French. While the impact of this situation on young children hasn't been clearly identified, surely common sense would indicate that all schools serving a particular community should employ similar methodologies and syllabi to ensure the best possible results from its pupils.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.25 Drawing from personal experience of the education system, one submission summarised how mainstream education benefits some children but not others:

'My own formal education was up to Leaving Certificate level and my older son is currently at 3rd level while my younger son is in his second last year of school. My sons, while equal at home, were at either end of the spectrum in education terms. My older son, when tested in primary school, scored in the top 2% of the population while my younger son scored in the bottom 2%. My younger son has a mild intellectual disability. Through them I have experienced how well the main-stream education system works for some and totally fails others.' [Adult Literacy Tutor]

1.26 The sentiments expressed in this excerpt echo those from a range of submissions, particularly those focused on children with special educational needs (SEN). The impact of limited learning styles and teaching techniques within primary schools was also highlighted in the case of Traveller children, with one submission noting:

'There is sometimes a clash between the style in which Travellers learn and that of the educator – there is a need to explore different methodologies and find one that suits the learner.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.27 Similar issues were pointed out for children from minority ethnic groups, particularly those classed as 'minority language students.' A lack of adequate language teaching provision was identified as a major cause of literacy difficulties here, leading to calls for:

'... an open-ended commitment to providing language support for as long as it takes for students to have the level of English required to access all areas of the curriculum.' [Dublin Inner City Partnership]

Impact of Low Levels of Literacy

1.28 Low levels of literacy were identified as impacting significantly on people's personal, social and economic well-being. It was noted that a child's ability to participate in classroom events is compromised as is his/her ability to interact positively with people in different environments. A major aspect of this is the *shame* associated with low levels of literacy:

'One of the greatest barriers to improving literacy levels is the shame that people feel regarding their poor literacy levels and also the secrecy that results from it.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.29 Challenging behaviour, both inside and outside the school environment, was highlighted in many submissions and was linked to the sense of shame attached to poor literacy skills. One submission summarised this in the following way:

'Children affected by poor literacy develop coping mechanisms and unfortunately some of these are manifested through challenging behaviour in the classroom. Children can be aware of their literacy difficulties and in order to hide their difference to their peers in the class will act out inappropriately to divert attention away from the literacy skills and onto their physical behaviour. It is not unusual to hear a teacher state that when having asked a particular pupil to read a paragraph of text, that the pupil responded with defiance or humour to the request and in some cases the response was to physically disrupt the class. The reasoning for the child is that it is better for their peers to see them being reprimanded for misbehaviour than being embarrassed due to their literacy difficulties in front of the entire class.' [Regional Manager East, ISPCC, Dublin]

1.30 The effects of literacy difficulties on children were identified by many as being 'far reaching.' In the case of one submission, for example:

'From the individual's perspective, poor reading ability has been proven to affect educational attainment, employment prospects, health, likely involvement in crime, and even social skills. The cost to society can be seen in a variety of ways, such as the increase in costs associated with greater demand for special education, higher social welfare payments, deterioration in health and an increase in crime.' [Neuron Learning]

1.31 The impact of poor literacy levels on an individual's *personal development* and on the *economy in general* included the following:

1.32 Personal Impacts

- Difficulties participating in group discussions;
- Difficulties following written and oral instructions;
- Increased likelihood of repeating classes in school and/or requiring special education services;
- Increased likelihood of leaving school early;
- Lower potential job prospects and lifetime earnings;
- Increased likelihood of welfare dependency, homelessness and/or ill-health;
- More limited interactions with family, friends and people from other social settings; and
- Increased likelihood of engaging in criminal activity.

1.33 Economic Impacts

- Increased expenditure on special education;
- Reduced economic productivity and competitiveness at a macro-economic level;
- Lower income tax and social contributions (resulting from a reduction in earnings);
- Increased expenditure on healthcare, homelessness, crime and rehabilitation; and
- Less social cohesion.

1.34 A number of submissions noted the links between low levels of literacy and crime leading to imprisonment. Here emphasis was placed on existing data, in particular that from the Prison Adult Literacy Survey of 2003 which was carried out on behalf of the Irish Prison Service and found that:

'... 92.6% of those surveyed had left school before the age of 16. And over 50% were functionally illiterate.' [Individual]

1.35 Imprisonment was noted as the 'ultimate form of exclusion' for young people with literacy difficulties and was summed up in the following way by one submission:

'The Prison population is a clearly defined group of individuals who have been 'socially excluded'... Whilst it is a grouping that is not representative of the population as a whole, the prevalence of illiteracy within its ranks is so high as to render irrelevant any quibble about the contribution of literacy skills towards responsible citizenship.' [Church of Scientology]

1.36 Reflecting these considerations, submissions emphasised the need for policy responses to child literacy to take account of the long-term consequences of literacy difficulties for children and to be set within a strong social inclusion framework.

Strategies for Enhancing Child Literacy Levels

1.37 The current departmental programme to combat educational disadvantage, i.e. *Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS)*, featured in the submissions, with many of them highlighting its role in progressing literacy supports within schools and identifying models of good practice for use across the education system. While the DEIS initiative was broadly welcomed by the submissions, specific aspects of it were criticised, most notably:

- the budget allocation:
  '[This] has been minimal.'

- the number of schools benefiting from the initiative:
  '[This] is too low, e.g. the reading recovery programme is being rolled out in only 147 schools.'

- the DEIS identification process for schools:
  '[This] resulted in some schools that were previously designated as disadvantaged losing this status and the accompanying supports with little compensation. This loss is even more pertinent as Budget 2009 saw these schools loose their further supports including the capitation funding for Traveller children.'

- the process for supporting schools that improve literacy performance:
  '[This could result in schools] loosing their designated disadvantage status with no compensation. With no compensation the schools could revert to the original situation with the next set of pupils thereby perpetuating the cycle of educational disadvantage.'

- the Family Literacy Initiative:
  'The format, content and scale of this initiative is unknown as yet.' [2]

1.38 Particular nuances of the initiative's approach to literacy development were also criticised, including its approach to 'structured play,' with one submission pointing out that:

'[... the DEIS Action Plan] fails to explicitly acknowledge the genesis of literacy activity in young children. It fails to promote for instance, the inclusion of socio-dramatic play (make-believe play with other children) as a context within which children can display, develop, practice and refine essential early literacy skills.' [Lecturer Early Childhood Education, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra]

1.39 There was also strong opinion about where responsibility for low levels of child literacy lies, with a number of submissions attributing blame to Government, the education system, educational practitioners, families, communities and/or children themselves. According to one submission:

'Many reasons are given for why children cannot read or write. Among them are psychological, psycho-social, behavioural, economic, ethnic, cultural reasons. Seldom does one see teaching method highlighted as the substantive reason why children do not learn to read or write.' [Individual]

2. Quotations from Barnardos' Submission.

1.40 This submission concluded that:

'... [a]ll children can learn to read or write if they are taught persistently, consistently and in a logical and coherent manner.'

1.41 The sentiments expressed in this submission were shared across a high number of the submissions received, with considerable criticism levelled at the Government's failure to introduce a coherent policy on literacy and at the resulting variations and inconsistencies in teaching methods used by Irish schools. Within this context, submissions strongly advocated the need for a shift in thinking in terms of how education is both conceptualised and delivered. This led to repeated calls for the adoption of a more child-centred approach to education provision in Ireland, for example:

'... many ... initiatives, while frequently beneficial to the small number of pupils affected, have been too school based... [T]o combat educational disadvantage the focus must be on integrating the school based responses with a whole child approach to educational and social inclusion. A whole child approach means taking all the influences which impact on a child's life in and out of school (i.e. their family, home and community) into account in policy design and implementation.' [Barnardos]

1.42 It was noted that all aspects of educational provision should be interpreted from the perspective of the child, leading one submission to call for:

'... a root and branch examination of how we approach language teaching in our schools.' [Phonics Ireland]

1.43 According to this submission:

'The child needs to have basic linguistic principles explained in a matter-of-fact, easily understood language. We need to see words as the child sees them and to guide him/her as to their nature and nuances ... It is time we agreed an over-arching consistency in literacy teaching, from teacher to teacher, from class to class, from school to school. No mainstream child should be leaving first level schooling with deficient literacy skills.'

1.44 In addition to consistency of teaching methods, submissions called for some degree of flexibility as '*... children learn at different paces.*' Drawing from personal experience of this issue, one submission stated:

'The key to making progress with a child is to find the level they are at and start from there. I have seen how successful this has been with my younger son through assessment of where he was at in literacy and numeracy and starting to progress his learning from there. I believe that in mainstream primary schools if this approach was taken with every pupil for literacy and numeracy ... children would be much better prepared for the challenges of secondary school and life. This means that learning literacy and numeracy skills must be ability rather than age based.' [Adult Literacy Tutor]

1.45 Early intervention and individual assessment comprised two key strategies for both identifying and monitoring a child's literacy needs. It was also stressed that a child's support requirements should be continuously reviewed over time. This was captured in the following way by one submission:

'A student's support requirements can also vary during their educational career and should be reassessed at regular intervals. For example, the transition from the primary school system's pupil-centred approach to the more subject-focused approach at second level may create additional difficulties for students with SEN and they may require additional supports during this period.' [The Rehab Group]

1.46 As this suggests, consistency and flexibility in literacy education, together with early intervention and ongoing assessment, were amongst the key priorities of the submissions. In was further noted that the primary school curriculum should focus almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy development, for example:

'... I think if a child is learning nothing else other than good literacy skills (i.e. the ability to read and write with understanding, and basic numeracy) then they will have achieved the basis for life-long learning and have the confidence and knowledge to continue in education. This, in turn, will lead to better prospects of inclusion in society, work and good health.' [Individual]

1.47 While it was acknowledged that children learn in many different ways, the need to incorporate play into all stages of learning for children was emphasised, with one submission noting that:

'... in the early years 'play' is their preferred and most effective way [to learn].' [Irish Preschool Play Association, Tallaght]

1.48 Submissions stressed the need for the primary school curriculum to incorporate a form of play which can enhance written, oral and numerical skills. Official guidance on this matter is required, however, with one submission noting that:

'Currently, there is no official guidance offered to teachers in The Primary Curriculum regarding play/structured play as it relates to early literacy, nor are there any clear connections made in relation to exactly what aspects of play might best support early literacy development. In the absence of the publication of the NCCA's long anticipated Framework for Early Learning there is no official guidance available for practitioners working with young children of pre-school age.' [Lecturer Early Childhood Education, St. Patrick's College, Druncondra]

1.49 The importance of incorporating different learning styles into the education system was emphasised throughout:

'Research shows that people learn in different ways. For example, some people are good visual learners and benefit from a 'look and see' learning approach, while auditory learners have preferences for approaches which enable them to sound out words while reading. No one approach will work for each pupil and this may be particularly true for pupils who have SEN.' [The Rehab Group]

1.50 Strategies for addressing children's special educational needs were criticised in a number of submissions, in particular the practice of removing children from the classroom situation to receive remedial supports. This, according to many submissions, can be detrimental to a child's development and can exacerbate the 'shame' associated with his/her literacy difficulties. One submission gave considered attention to this issue, pointing out that:

'Each and every teacher should be able to manage all pupils in their care ... and should be able to provide the proper support to weaker pupils within the classroom context without recourse to having pupils withdrawn. To date, no research has been undertaken to determine how much 'teaching/learning' pupils miss when they are withdrawn from class.' [Primary School Teacher]

1.51 It was further pointed out in this submission that:

'... if a child is receiving literacy support in senior infants and the same child is receiving literacy support in 1st class and 2nd class and 3rd class and 4th class and 5th class and 6th class, as many children in disadvantaged schools are, then the system is failing them.'

1.52 There were repeated calls to ensure that children with literacy difficulties remain in the classroom and that alternative support strategies, including peer support measures, be put in place. Schools were encouraged to work reciprocally with out-of-school services to explore strategies for progressing work in this area and for strengthening the overall continuity of their literacy initiatives.

1.53 There was widespread acknowledgement of the need to bring about change at many levels to ensure quality outcomes for children in primary schools. According to one such submission:

'... the most effective responses to educational and social disadvantage are family-oriented and community-based; involve teams of professionals, parents and community workers; balance prevention and intervention; adopt multi-agency approaches, and have a mix of funding, including private sources.' [Education Co-ordinator, Cork City Partnership]

1.54 Research evidence was highlighted regarding parental involvement in literacy initiatives, with one submission noting that:

'... parental involvement in literacy initiatives ... [leads] to higher academic achievement, greater cognitive competence, greater problem solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and few behavioural problems at school.' [HSCL Co-ordinator, Mahon/Blackrock HSCL Centre, Cork]

1.55 Submissions therefore emphasised the need for a more appropriate range of strategies to empower parents to meet their role as primary educators. Parent education also featured strongly in the submissions, with one such submission stating that:

'It is not possible to focus on child literacy without having parallel programmes supporting the literacy skills development of the adults/ parents.' [Cork Anti-Poverty Resource Network]

1.56 According to another submission:

'It is necessary to take parent education seriously so that they can be in a better position to help their children from the start.' [Anonymous]

1.57 The need for literacy patterns in the home to be consistent with those in pre-school and primary school settings was also emphasised. Submissions placed value in parents working collaboratively with schools and communities and in playing a more active role in the development of child literacy initiatives. In fact the involvement of the wider community was considered essential for creating a supportive learning environment for children, with one submission noting that:

'The relevance and importance of good literacy skills (among children and adults) to social inclusion is a community issue and must be clearly identified as such.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.58 Concern was expressed, however, about what was described as the *'overshadowing'* of the community dimension of the work by *'larger and more powerful agencies and organisations such as schools/VECS/ HSE etc.,'* leading one submission to suggest that:

' ...outreach, pre-development, personal and community development work [should] go hand in hand with basic educational and literacy work...' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.59 One area where a gap was seen to persist within the community was that of the provision of literacy and numeracy supports during the summer period, with one submission pointing out that:

'Summer slide has a particularly harmful impact on the reading achievement of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds.' [The School Completion Programme Co-ordination Team, Curriculum Development Unit, Crumlin]

1.60 This submission included a call for the identification of best practice in the provision of Summer Literacy Programmes, including the use of integrated approaches to working with local communities, agencies and families during the school holiday period. Libraries were identified as having a major role to play in this process. In fact, libraries were singled out for specific mention by a number of submissions and were described as a key community-based resource for enhancing child literacy. In the case of one submission, for example, libraries were identified as being in a unique position to:

'... work in partnership with a wide range of agencies to contribute towards alleviating both illiteracy and social exclusion. The service is local, community based and has the potential to deliver material specific to the needs of each individual.' [Librarian, Cork County Library]

1.61 It was noted that public librarians have demonstrated their commitment to child literacy through their involvement in a range of initiatives including:

'...regular class visits to children's summer reading schemes, competitions, author visits, creative writing, arts and cultural events, summer camps, quizzes, games support, homework clubs, mother and toddler groups, storytelling, toy libraries and reading groups to children and young people.' [Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna]

1.62 The fact that public libraries support reading in a range of settings was identified as a distinct advantage. Submissions stressed the importance of encouraging 'reading for pleasure' within the formal education system and as part of this, acknowledged the need for close collaboration between schools and public libraries. The contribution that the Schools Library Service has made to the quality of primary school libraries was highlighted in this context. However, there was much disappointment at the Government's decision to withdraw funding from this scheme in 2009, leading to calls for:

'*... the service to be reinstated and every effort made to build on the successes already recorded.*' [Individual]

1.63 An additional area of concern was identified as 'children's dependency on television and other forms of technology,' with one such submission noting that:

'[t]he advent of electronic media, electronic games and a stance of receiving information and entertainment without too much effort, seems to damage the creativity and hunger for learning.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.64 It was suggested that children's access to such forms of entertainment should be restricted and that strategies should be developed to help increase children's participation in other types of activities, most notably reading, sport and play.

Models of Good Practice for Enhancing Child Literacy

1.65 A broad range of models of good practice were presented in the submissions. While a number of the models included those which are used by a range of schools, e.g. Reading Recovery, there was much reference to models of literacy supports that have been developed by specific schools and communities.

School-Based Initiatives

1.66 The following is a summary of some of the school-based initiatives which were endorsed by the submissions:

Reading Recovery

1.67 The most significant component of the DEIS initiative was identified as Reading Recovery. With much experience in the area of literacy supports, one submission noted that:

'The Reading Recovery training is proving one of the most transformative educational programmes of my entire career to date. The structure, delivery and monitoring of the programme is of immediate relevance to the daily Reading Recovery lessons. The fortnightly contact with leader and peers renders it one of the most applicable teaching enhancement tools possible and one which gives the teacher learner hands on feedback in the classroom setting.' [Reading Recovery Trainee, Scoil Ghleanna Maghair Íochtaraigh, Co. Cork]

1.68 According to another submission:

'Most Learning Support teachers followed the Dolch list and the school used the Oxford Reading Tree readers ... it was still very difficult to monitor each pupil's progress and success rate ... What was missing was an overall structured programme that could be constantly monitored and developed year by year. Hence, the introduction of Reading Recovery to our school ... So far thirteen pupils have achieved enormous success rates on this programme ... They are actively engaged in their own learning. They can see their own success rate.' [Reading Recovery Teacher, Scoil Na Croise Naofa, Mahon, Cork]

1.69 In fact much of the feedback provided on Reading Recovery was from teachers (including learning support teachers) with extensive experience in implementing child literacy initiatives. For these teachers, Reading Recovery represents a new and successful departure for children. One such teacher summed up her experience in the following way:

'During my years teaching I have seen how a failure in learning to read has affected children in my care. In spite of my efforts and the efforts of learning support teachers most children who began to fail in infants continued to be the weakest readers all through their school lives. Last year ... we were offered the chance to have a teacher trained in Reading Recovery ... I have been completely amazed by the results this type of

teaching produces. Children who begin this programme are selected because they are the weakest readers in their age group and when they finish, approximately twenty weeks later they are usually in the group of the most able readers in the class … [W]hat can't be measured in terms of reading ability is the changes in self-esteem and happiness that Reading Recovery can produce.' [Primary School Teacher]

1.70 Key aspects of the Reading Recovery method were identified as: the focus on early intervention; the overall quality of the Reading Recovery approach and curriculum; the quality of training provided to Reading Recovery teachers; the level and type of one-to-one reading supports provided to children with literacy difficulties; the provision of ongoing feedback to staff on each child's progress; the provision of in-class supports by many Reading Recovery teachers; and the use of Reading Recovery teachers to guide planning for literacy in schools, particularly in relation to DEIS plans.

1.71 Some drawbacks in the approach were noted, however, the most significant being the provision one-to-one supports *outside* the classroom environment. Here one submission stated:

'Reading Recovery methods should be utilised in the classroom by teachers.' [Learning Support/Resource Teacher, Doon CBS, Co. Limerick]

1.72 Other submissions advocated combining both methods and ensuring that all Reading Recovery teachers work with their colleagues to provide relevant *in-class supports*.

1.73 On the number of Reading Recovery teachers available in schools, one submission asked:

'In the larger schools, with large numbers of Senior Infants, should we be deploying Reading Recovery Teachers rather than a solitary Reading Recovery Teacher?' [Principal, Scoil Íosagáin, Fearann Rí, Co. Cork]

1.74 In fact there were repeated calls in the submissions for more Reading Recovery teachers within schools and for appropriate budgetary provisions to be made towards extending the Reading Recovery method to all schools. Concern about budgetary cutbacks featured here with one such submission stating:

'I am writing because I would be slightly worried that in some future time more cutbacks might affect our ability to use Reading Recovery in our DEIS schools. I also feel that in an ideal world every school would have a Reading Recovery teacher. After all a school that could drastically cut back on the need for learning support through successful intervention in the early school years might save the state money in the long term.' [Primary School Teacher]

Literacy Lift Off

1.75 Frequent reference was made to Literacy Lift Off as a model of good practice in this area. For many, it represents an important means of transferring the Reading Recovery method into the classroom environment:

'The offshoot programme of Reading Recovery called Literacy Lift Off, which applies the practices of a Reading Recovery lesson in the classroom using multiple copies of differentiated text is [crucial].' [Principal, Scoil Íosagáin, Fearann Rí, Co. Cork]

1.76 Examples were provided of how Literacy Lift Off has been used in specific school environments and of the benefits accruing from intensive work with small groups of children who:

' ... move from one literacy station to the next where they engage in different literacy activities at each station, such as reading, phonics, questioning etc.' [Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Scoil Chríost Rí, Ennis]

The First Steps Reading and Writing Programme

1.77 The First Steps Reading and Writing Programme was also identified as a valuable literacy tool, the benefits of which were summarised in the following way by one submission:

'The aim of First Steps is to help teachers to identify stages of development within Literacy. Using this information teachers are enabled to teach to the specific needs of the child. It links assessment to teaching and offers practical teaching support for teachers. It offers ideas on how to teach rather than what to teach. The school is involved in the First Steps Reading and Writing Programme and teachers report great satisfaction with it.' [Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Scoil Chríost Rí, Ennis]

1.78 As with Reading Recovery and Literacy Lift Off, experiences of this programme were described as positive, although there were a number of calls to extend training in this area:

'Overall we ... are finding the First Steps Writing Programme to be a great advantage to our students. If I was to give one constructive criticism I would say that I think the programme could have had a smoother transition in being implemented quicker, if all teachers in our school were given the opportunity to be trained to teach the programme at a First Steps course to begin with.' [Principal, Scoil Íosagáin, Fearann Rí, Co. Cork]

1.79 As this suggests, Reading Recovery, Literacy Lift Off and the First Steps Reading and Writing Programme were singled out for specific mention by many of the submissions. This reflected their track record in helping to improve child literacy levels. Literacy for Fun, Letter Land, Jolly Phonics and Accelerated Reader were also highlighted by submissions, although to a much lesser degree.

1.80 A broad range of other school-based models of good practice were also outlined in the submissions. A significant proportion of these included models which were developed by and/or implemented within specific schools. While the names given to these school-based initiatives were many and varied, there was a high level of similarity between them. They included, for example:

- *Child literacy screening programmes:*
Using a range of techniques to measure children's literacy and numeracy skills and their need for literacy and numeracy supports.

- *Out of school literacy supports and services:*
Offering children additional opportunities to enhance their literacy and numeracy levels through homework clubs, reading clubs, art and craft clubs etc.

- *Paired reading and maths programmes:*
Using paired reading and mathematical techniques to enhance literacy and numeracy skills for children of different ages.

- *Speech and language programmes:*
Providing speech and language training to children and young people and speech and language education and training for pre-school and primary school teachers.

- *School book clubs:*
Creating opportunities for children to come together to access age appropriate books, to avail of 'peer reading' opportunities and to begin 'reading for pleasure'.

- *ICT literacy programmes:*
Teaching children core competencies in the use of computers from an early age.

- *Story-time sessions:*
Creating time and space for teachers, children and parents to come together to read and discuss specific books and stories.

- *Parent and child reading programmes:*
Supporting parents and children to work together to complete specific reading challenges.

- *Language and creativity programmes:*
Developing children's language and creativity skills through the use of puppets, story sacks and drama.

- *Reading workshops for parents:*
Enhancing parents' capacity to develop their children's literacy, numeracy and oral skills.

- *English literacy programmes:*
Teaching the English language to minority language students and their parents.

1.81 A significant proportion of these programmes were premised on collaborative working arrangements and included (albeit to varying degrees) parents, the wider community and relevant support agencies.

The same can be said of the numerous community-based literacy initiatives which were highlighted by the submissions.

Community-Based Initiatives

1.82 As mentioned, submissions placed considerable emphasis on the role of the community in tackling low levels of child literacy and there were many examples of work undertaken by community activists in this area. In the case of one submission, for example, the establishment of a Local Education Committee, comprising parents and representatives of relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies, was highlighted. The Committee, known as the Cork Northwest Literacy Forum, covers four communities in the Cork region and examines issues affecting education in these communities. Another example of community agencies coming together to improve child literacy was that of the Quality Development of Out of School Services (QDOSS) Network which was established in 2005 and:

'... comprises a range of stakeholders who share different perspectives, expertise and a common aim. The principal aims of QDOSS is to enhance and develop the field of out-of-school services so as to influence and enable positive educational outcomes for children and young people, particularly those experiencing educational disadvantage.' [The Quality Development of Out of School Services Network]

1.83 The level and type of out-of-school services provided by the Network were set out in the following way by this submission:

'Out-of-school services refer to a range of structured programmes, clubs and activities for school-age children and young people (4-18) which take place within supervised environments during the times that they are not in school ... Out-of-school services can therefore be offered in a variety of schools, attached to school and non-school environments, including community centres, child-care centres, places of worship, libraries, parks etc. Out-of-school services are sponsored by inter alia, statutory and non-governmental agencies, schools, community-based groups, faith-based organisations, and other voluntary sector groups.'

1.84 As with the school-based initiatives summarised above, the community-based initiatives primarily involved schools, parents, children and the wider community working together. Details were provided, for example, of local community groups working with a range of professionals to provide, amongst other things, early school leavers programmes, after-school clubs, homework and career guidance groups, speech and language therapy and English language training. Numerous examples of such community-based literacy initiatives were provided. The initiatives themselves targeted a number of literacy domains including writing, text comprehension, phonics, independent reading, fluency and computation. While it is not possible to detail all of them, some examples include the following:

The Young Ballymun Initiative

1.85 This is a ten year community-based strategy focused on improving learning and well-being outcomes for children. As part of the initiative, Ballymun is running Literacivic which:

> '*... incorporates literacy in its broadest sense – from reading and writing to communications, interpersonal interactions, self-esteem and creativity.*' [Rehab Group]

1.86 The overall aim of the initiative is to develop a community-wide strategy for enhancing child literacy and to support children in their *'language development, creativity and self-expression.'* [ibid]

Familiescope Community Based Prevention and Early Intervention Service, Ballyfermot

1.87 This service focuses on improving literacy by working with a range of key 'players,' most notably children, parents and teachers. It is a speech and language therapy service that provides assessment and intervention for children with speech and language deficits in the Ballyfermot area. The overall goal of the service is to:

'... provide a high quality, cost effective speech and language therapy service to the children and young people of Ballyfermot and to maximise the effect of that service by delivering it in collaboration with parents, teachers and caregivers. As part of this approach, to provide education to parents, teachers and caregivers in enhancing children's language and communication.' [Director, Educational Disadvantage Centre]

The Write Together Family Learning and Family Literacy Project

1.88 This project is focused on parents of pre-school, primary school and secondary school children and provides:

'... an opportunity and a framework which would develop their confidence and skills in exercising their role as the first educators of their children.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.89 It was developed as a partnership between the local Adult Literacy Scheme, Home School Liaison Teachers, community groups/learners and other agencies. The objectives of the programme include supporting parents to take a more active role in their children's education and encouraging local leadership around formal education in disadvantaged communities. The programme has included work with parents in primary and secondary schools, libraries, pre-schools, youth training centres and community centres across the north-side of Cork city and has involved:

'...four short programmes of six weeks focussing on the parent as educator and the forms of learning that take place in the home and community through environmental print. This was followed by a four week programme developing Storysacks as a novel way of developing reading and creativity. Following this over the 18 month programme we ran in total 19 family learning programmes in 11 community and primary school venues involving 8 tutors and with the participation of 120 parents.' [Adult Education Coordinator, City of Cork Vocational Educational Committee]

The Glen Language and Learning Project

1.90 This was a joint initiative of the Health Services Executive (HSE) and Cork City Partnership which was run on a one year pilot basis, ending in June 2008. The project comprised two parallel interventions as follows:

'The first was a speech and language development programme for Junior Infants classes in the two primary schools, St. Brendan's and St. Mark's, which was designed and implemented by the Speech and Language Therapy Service for the HSE-South in collaboration with Cork City Partnership and the schools. The second programme involve five pre-schools … (the HSE was not directly involved in the pre-school programme) … the Cork City Partnership played a central role in facilitating both the pre-school and the primary school programmes' [Education Coordinator, Cork City Partnership]

1.91 A primary objective of the project was to support communication skills development among primary school children in order to enable them to more readily access the school curriculum. An independent review of the project emphasised its importance as a collaborative model for enhancing early language development and stressed the need for the project itself to be continued. According to the Cork City Partnership, for example:

'…[t]here are few documented examples of effective multi-sectoral partnerships, so [this] initiative … can serve as an innovative case study in the area of early years services.'

The Educational Action Research (E.A.R.) Project

1.92 This project focuses on young people in the Athlone area and was initiated by the Athlone Community Taskforce in 2005. It is a child-centred project which aims to:

' … examine from a young person's perspective the experiences of the transition from primary to post-primary school.' [Project Coordinator, the Athlone Community Taskforce]

1.93 This is achieved by a variety of means, including working with young people, their families, school personnel and agencies to develop integrated responses to the transition experience and enabling schools to engage with a broad range of services to assist them to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Initiatives undertaken by the project have included a 'Study Skills Programme,' a 'Transition to Secondary School Programme' and a specialised 'Information Communication Technology (ICT) Programme.' According to the Athlone Community Taskforce:

'... in keeping with the projects aim ... the project has identified a number of issues in relation to how a positive or negative transition from primary to post-primary education can impact on young people's holistic well-being and future possibilities of experiencing social exclusion or participating fully and availing of various opportunities within society.'

The Children's Reading Development Partnership Project

1.94 This is a collaborative literacy intervention project involving Mayo County Library and the HSE (West) Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) Service. The rationale for this project was outlined as follows:

'After initial discussions it was decided that 'the Special Educational Needs' collection being provided by the Mayo Schools Library Service might prove helpful in filling the special needs resource gap identified by the SLT. It was further agreed that the knowledge and expertise of the School Librarian would greatly facilitate in educating and assisting the parent with the information and knowledge required to confidently support the child's continuing reading development.' [Executive Librarian, Mayo County Library]

1.95 Under this Project, children with particular reading difficulties are referred by the Speech and Language Therapist to the Mayo School Library Service to avail of an individual reading programme using specific and targeted language and reading resources:

'This material is pre-selected based on information regarding the child's interests and reading level provided by the Speech & Language therapist. This ensures the best opportunity of successfully engaging the child in the reading project.'

1.96 This intervention is only one of many representing collaborative working arrangements between libraries, schools, families and local agencies working with and on behalf of children. A range of community-based literacy supports which are specifically provided by libraries were highlighted in many cases. In the case of the Kilkenny County Library Service, for example, the following is provided:

'Through a network of 7 branches, a Mobile Library Service – visiting over 60 stops – and a Schools' Library Service Van – visiting over 77 Primary, Special schools and Pre-Schools – we offer a range of quality books and alternative formats to children and teenagers of all ages, stages and abilities across the County.'

1.97 The many and varied community-based events hosted and/or supported by libraries included, amongst other things, annual Summer reading schemes, class visits, author visits, community visits and various exhibitions and displays. Reference was also made to the significance of the 'Children's Book Festival,' described by one submission as the:

'long-standing collaborative national event between authors, public libraries and bookshops.' [Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna]

1.98 The contribution of other less structured forms of community-based literacy supports was also highlighted by the submissions. One such submission outlined how children within a local community learned from a woman whose own literacy levels improved through attendance at an adult literacy scheme:

'[A] ... successful event occurred where some local women/parents, having been involved in paired reading in the classroom wanted to help some of the students with their reading. One of the women had very low levels of literacy a few years ago and attended the Write Together Adult Literacy Scheme where she upgraded her reading and writing skills. When she told her story to the students they were very encouraged. They felt that if she could learn how to read and write as an adult they felt they could too. Many of the students she worked with said that they could learn easily form her... There are no barriers between them and there is great empathy towards the students and where they are at in their learning. It puts the spotlight on the need for community-based literacy tutors at all levels.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

1.99 Reflecting on its work in supporting child literacy development, one submission noted that quality child literacy initiatives are those which are:

'- consistent; - structured; - supported; - incremental; - monitored; and - evaluated' [Primary Professional Development Service]

1.100 Other key aspects of quality work in this area reflect many of the points already raised in this summary, including:

The need to adopt a community-based approach, where child literacy development becomes a collective and shared responsibility.

1.101 A major consideration of the submissions was that child literacy should not be seen as the remit of the education system alone. Collective and shared responsibility at a community level was therefore emphasised, with one submission stating:

'… unless these …issues are tackled at a community participation level, at the same time as focusing on children's needs at school, we will go through the cycle of disadvantage again and again and again – and it cannot be broken without the active participation of the parents and the community.'

The need to ensure effective planning and resourcing, where implementation plans (and associated targets and actions) are developed for all child literacy initiatives.

1.102 A key aspect of this work is to ensure that *'the pace of implementation is controlled'* and that any gaps in provision and resourcing can be identified and addressed as soon as possible.

The need to ensure good leadership, where clear direction and advice is provided on all aspects of child literacy work.

1.103 Submissions advocated the need for principals and key community activists to take responsibility for leading and supporting child literacy initiatives within their schools and communities. It was further noted that they should monitor and evaluate progress and oversee work on developing strong collaborative working arrangements.

The need to provide a range of relevant teaching programmes and techniques within schools and communities.

1.104 Here submissions noted the benefits of running a range of literacy-based initiatives concurrently. This reflected the emphasis submissions placed on having a balanced and co-ordinated set of literacy supports for children. As one submission put it:

'It is necessary to avoid relying too much on different teaching programmes to provide the desired results on their own.' [The Cork Northwest Literacy Forum]

The need to involve children and their parents at all planning, implementation and delivery stages.

1.105 Programmes which both consider and include the views of children and their parents were identified as being best placed to support literacy development amongst children, with one such submission stating that:

'Programmes that include or, at the very least, inform parents on how they can support their children's learning (Maths for Fun, Paired Maths, Paired Reading, First Steps) are more likely to succeed ... Such collaboration is key to successful implementation.' [Primary Professional Development Service]

Conclusions and Recommendations

1.106 The issues outlined above were considered central to work on enhancing child literacy and social inclusion in Ireland. A common point of reference was the need for a more consistent and integrated set of child literacy supports. Other key considerations included developing a national policy on child literacy and ensuring that child literacy remains high on the political agenda. A priority for many of the submissions was to develop strong partnership arrangements between educational practitioners, relevant national and local service providers, community activists, parents and children themselves. Numerous challenges were presented in the submissions, not least of which was the need to promote a love of reading amongst children:

'I believe children will learn to read and love books and stories if they are given positive fun experiences from the very earliest age. The challenge is to get this message out there to everyone working in the field. To get it into the teacher training and courses for pre-schools carers. To get this message to parents and all adults working with children.' [Individual]

1.107 Submissions put forward recommendations for enhancing child literacy policy and provision in Ireland. Underlying many of these recommendations was a call for additional funds and resources to enhance the level and quality of provision. It is not surprising therefore that Budget 2009 was heavily criticised, with repeated references to the Government's decision to:

- increase class sizes at primary and secondary school levels;
- reintroduce the limit of two language support teachers per school;
- abolish library grants to school libraries;
- restrict support for school books to DEIS schools only;
- end the roll-out of the early childhood education component of the DEIS programme; and
- reduce capitation funding for Traveller funding and capitation grants for non-DEIS schools.

1.108 It was noted that these cutbacks will have a significant negative impact on child literacy levels, leading one submission to conclude that:

'The focus on the improvement of literacy levels should now be galvanised in this period of economic downturn. Any deviation from this focus will be regretted in years to come.' [National Co-ordinator, Junior Certificate School Programme Support Service]

1.109 It was recommended therefore that Government should withdraw its recent decisions in regard to education and consider ways of enhancing the existing level and quality of provision for children with low levels of literacy. However, the announcement in Budget 2009 to extend the National Educational Psychological Service to all primary and post-primary schools by the end of the year was welcomed in the submissions and it was noted that this could play a major role in helping to address the social, economic and behavioural difficulties that can trigger literacy difficulties for children.

1.110 Other key recommendations from the submissions included calls to:

Improve Existing Policies and Provisions by:

- undertaking a comprehensive review of existing policies and provision in the area, including the practice of providing remedial supports to children outside the classroom environment;
- developing a national strategy on child literacy from an early age and setting clear goals and targets for meeting the needs of children with low levels of literacy;
- ensuring the full implementation of the National Play Policy as a means of supporting literacy in early childhood; and
- developing child literacy policies and practices that can be targeted at children from *all* socio-economic groups, while making additional literacy supports available to disadvantaged schools, *where appropriate.*

Enhance Provision at Pre-School and Primary School Levels by:

- developing an early years curriculum for children of pre-school age;
- developing a structured pre-school programme with an emphasis on speech and language development to prepare children with delayed speech and language skills to meet the challenges of primary school;
- ensuring the availability of a dedicated Speech and Language Therapy service for pre-schools;
- providing official guidance in the Primary Curriculum regarding play/structured play as it relates to early literacy;
- ensuring that pre-school and primary school teachers are equipped with the skills necessary to assess how literacy skills can be developed through play, including socio-dramatic play;
- ensuring that all children under the 20th percentile in the Micra T screening test receive learning support teaching; and

- ensuring that all pre-schools and primary schools cultivate a literacy environment through the appropriate use of posters, labels, signs etc.

Enhance Skills and Training to Improve Child Literacy by:

- making continuous professional development mandatory for *all* teachers and ensuring that teacher performance is monitored on an ongoing basis;
- ensuring that teachers have opportunities to access a range of relevant training courses, including strategies for adopting a whole-school approach to meeting children's needs;
- providing in-service training through the Primary Professional Support Service (or equivalent body) to all practitioners involved in delivering and supporting literacy and numeracy development;
- ensuring that pre-service and in-service professional training for teachers and childcare workers includes modules on speech and language development and the use of phonics;
- developing a more comprehensive range of training policies to assist pupils and teachers to adapt to different learning styles; and
- developing tailored in-service training on differentiated teaching and language-awareness teaching methodologies and ensuring consistency of practice within and across schools.

Improve Children's Digital Literacy by:

- ensuring the use of ICT within primary schools and adapting education policies to ensure that all children reach an acceptable standard of computer literacy at both primary and post-primary levels; and
- ensuring that computers and appropriate literacy software (e.g. Workshark and Reading for Literacy) are widely available to children in the education system;

Enhance Levels of Provision for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) by:

- investigating international best practice in the development of literacy policies for children with SEN and children with specific disabilities in order to increase the capacity of existing educational approaches to meet their literacy needs;
- developing strategies which can support the full participation of children with SEN in the school environment and which can encourage them to build lasting social networks with their peers; and
- ensuring early diagnosis (preferably in the first year of life) for children with speech and hearing impediments and put in place a consistent and coherent set of literacy supports for children diagnosed with speech and/or hearing impediments.

Enhance Levels of Literacy Supports Available to Parents by:

- developing policies and strategies which can support parents in their education role, strengthen parent-child and family relationships and promote positive parent-child interactions;
- ensuring that family learning programmes which are intended to help adults support their children's literacy development are focused on adult learning methodologies; and
- making additional supports available to parents with limited knowledge of English to ensure that their role in helping to educate their children is maintained.

Support Non-National Children to Develop Fluency in the English Language by:

- ensuring that there is an open-ended commitment to providing language support for as long as its takes to ensure that children have the level of English required to access all areas of the curriculum; and
- developing a clear policy on English language services, such as 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' (ESOL) to meet the needs of migrant workers, as well as asylum seekers and their families.

Enhance the Work of Libraries in Supporting Child Literacy Development by:

- providing relevant training and support to library staff to promote 'reading for pleasure' and to work with schools and local services to develop integrated child literacy initiatives;
- increasing public awareness of libraries and the role they play in enhancing child literacy; and
- providing bigger grants to school libraries and ensuring that the support for reading development be continued.

Improve Levels of Co-ordination Between Schools and the Wider Community by:

- ensuring that schools work reciprocally with out-of-school services to strengthen the continuity of positive education and literacy initiatives for children and young people;
- ensuring close co-ordination between *all* pre-schools, primary schools and secondary schools operating within specific communities in order to develop a standardisation of child literacy practice;
- developing a coordinated interagency approach to literacy development between primary and post-primary schools with a view to sharing information on students who have availed of additional supports at primary level and ensuring that the same supports are put in place for the student at secondary level. (It was recommended that Home School Liaison Officers and School Completion Officers could be used to transfer this information);
- improving existing partnership arrangements between mainstream and specialist education providers to ensure the availability of appropriate supports for children with SEN, Traveller children, children with disabilities and children from minority ethnic groups;

- encouraging communities to establish a Community Literacy Forum to help identify and monitor barriers to child literacy development within specific communities. (It was further recommended that the such forums comprise parents, school representatives, local representatives, statutory bodies and state agencies); and

- identifying best practice in the provision of Summer Literacy Programmes, including the use of integrated approaches to working with local communities, agencies and families during the school holiday period.

Develop Appropriate Systems for Monitoring and Tracking Performance Over Time by:

- undertaking research to establish child literacy needs within specific communities and ensuring that the outcomes of this research are used to monitor/track performance and identify appropriate policy responses;

- developing a system of tracking children's development from an early age, including a system of traceability through the primary school system;

- developing a system for the ongoing evaluation of all literacy initiatives within communities with a view to identifying models of good practice for use within specific schools and wider support services;

- establishing a Literacy and Numeracy Committee in each school, lead by an appointed Literacy and Numeracy Co-ordinator, to gather information on literacy levels within schools and monitor consistency of practice; and

- establishing a Network of Literacy and Numeracy Co-ordinators involving a range of primary and secondary schools to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current provision, discuss resource requirements, monitor performance within and across schools, enhance links with local agencies, libraries etc. and facilitate the sharing of good practice in the area of child literacy.

Ensure Appropriate Levels of Funding and Resources are Available to Address Child Literacy by:

- providing extra resources to pre-schools and primary schools to meet all early language development requirements, including resources for play equipment and materials, books and games and activity packs for teachers and parents;
- increasing funding for programmes which have a proven track record in enhancing literacy levels;
- providing funding for a classroom assistant in all Junior and Senior Infants classes to ensure that additional attention can be given to those who really need it;
- ensuring funding is available for the targeted engagement of parents and children in early reading and early positive experiences with books; and
- establishing a direct funding line in the Further Education Section of the DES which is specifically dedicated to meeting family learning needs.

1.111 A final recommendation in a small number of submissions was that funds should be made available for an intensive national literacy campaign. This, it was argued, should be undertaken on an annual basis to draw attention to the importance of literacy development in early childhood.

2 Improving Literacy in Disadvantaged Schools: Policy and Implementation issues

Research Paper by Dr. Eithne Kennedy, Lecturer in Literacy, St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra

Introduction

2.1 Since the start of the new millennium, governments around the world have put an unprecedented focus on educational policy, to ensure the acquisition of literacy skills for all children. This focus recognises that the acquisition of literacy skills often mediates an individual's opportunities in life. This intense interest in the teaching of early literacy and in shaping of policy to ensure that all children learn to read has occurred because in every country there are substantial numbers of children – many of whom live in high-poverty areas – who leave primary school without even the most basic literacy skills. However, in today's society, basic literacy skills are no longer sufficient for success at school or work. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) defines reading as *'the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society'* (OECD, 2006, p.21). Not having the skills to participate in today's knowledge society seriously compromises an individual's *'income, social mobility and ultimately their quality of life'* (Neuman & Celano, 2006, p.199).

2.2 It is not surprising then that reading standards have become highly politicised, particularly in the US and the UK where they have been the subject of parliamentary debate, sustained media interest and the focus of various lobby groups all purporting to have the answer to the complex question of how best to teach early literacy. This focus has in recent times seen major policy shifts which have had and continue to have, far-reaching consequences for literacy teaching in both countries. Here in Ireland, we have not seen the polarisation of views on how best to teach early literacy that has occurred in other countries. Nevertheless, how best to narrow the well-documented gap in literacy achievement between children in disadvantaged schools and their

more affluent peers (Archer & O'Flaherty, 1991; Cosgrove *et al*., 2000; Weir, 2001, 2003; Eivers *et al*., 2004; DES, 2005b[3]) has been a major focus of government educational policy over the past fifteen years. This paper will begin by examining policy in the US, UK and Ireland in relation to literacy teaching. The next section presents the key components and outcomes of a highly successful research project on improving literacy in a disadvantaged school. It will share some of the insights gained and the lessons to be learned from that research. The paper concludes with policy implications and the challenges involved in scaling up.

Policy in Relation to Literacy

Policy in the US

2.3 In the US, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001, currently in process of being re-authorised) mandates scientifically-based literacy instruction, such as that identified by the *National Reading Panel Report* (NRP, 2000) and stipulates that every teacher must be highly qualified in the teaching of literacy. This policy thus recognises the importance of the teacher and gives a central role to the *classroom* teacher as the main agent to provide high-quality reading instruction, particularly in the early and most critical years of schooling. In order to support teachers in acquiring high levels of knowledge in relation to the relevant research on literacy, and translating this into effective teaching in the classroom, schools may use part of their budget to provide professional development that will enable teachers to further build their expertise in this area. It has also seen accountability measures built in with extra funding for those schools that show progress and punitive consequences for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress. One would expect, given these conditions that the numbers underperforming on standardised tests of reading achievement would be reduced significantly. However, an independent review of the effects of the NCLB which examined the achievement data of 17 school districts across 12 sites in the US, (Gamse *et al*., 2008) indicated that despite the shift in policy and practice there has not been a statistically significant change in achievement.

3. Department of Education and Science

While on average, daily instructional time spent on the five essential skills identified in the NRP report (2000) i.e. phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension had increased, there was not a statistically significant increase in children's reading comprehension. In addition, the impact of the legislation on the per cent of children reading at or above grade level was not significant. Taylor *et al.'s* (2003) research reminds us, the 'how' is as important as the 'what'; simply including the essential skills in a literacy programme and increasing the time spent on them is insufficient. How these skills are mediated in the classroom is also critical. Hall (2006) concurs and reminds us of the host of other factors that impact on learning to read, including how children view themselves as learners, how they view the reading process, the range of skills they need to be successful readers, and the influence of the teachers' views of the literacy process. These, she argues, impact on the climate and pedagogy of the school and classroom as well as the home and the wider community.

Policy in the UK

2.4 In the United Kingdom, the National Literacy Strategy has been in place since 1998. As in the US, this too has been a top-down approach, stipulating what and how teachers should teach during literacy instructional time in school. Like the US, there has been an emphasis on professional development achieved through the provision of a network of literacy consultants and a range of literacy support materials.

2.5 The strategy is regularly revised and updated in the light of research. Recently, a review of national policy on reading in the early years has culminated in the publication of the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (DfES, 2006a) or the Rose Report as it has come to be known after its first author. The findings of this report have been incorporated into a renewed framework for the Primary National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 2006b). The Rose report argued for the simple view of reading which sees reading as being composed of two distinct dimensions: word recognition processes and language comprehension processes. The teaching of phonics, specifically multi-sensory synthetic phonics, has been privileged over other methods of teaching the alphabetic principle, as the *'prime approach used in the teaching of early reading'* (DfES: Primary framework for literacy and mathematics: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary, p.3).

This needless to say has proven controversial, particularly so when one considers the range of other factors that impact on learning to read (as noted above, Hall, 2006) and when one considers the position statement of the International Reading Association (I.R.A., 2000) which stipulates that there is no one best way to teach beginning reading. Thus, narrowing the gap in achievement is a complex issue and one not easily remedied through top down prescriptive dictums which can have a number of negative effects. First, they can result in a narrowing of curriculum in order to meet the standards set, which in turn can impact on the time available for instruction as teachers prepare students for the mandatory testing. As noted in the recent Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander & Flutter, 2009, p.1):

'As children progress through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced primary education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by the 'standards' agenda. The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and those kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas; memorisation and recall have come to be valued over understanding and enquiry, and transmission of information over the pursuit of knowledge in its fuller sense.'

2.6 Prescription of curriculum also tends to decrease creativity in teaching and focuses attention on acquiring the basics rather than on the higher-order thinking skills of literate individuals. In speaking about the teaching of writing in the UK, Grainger *et al.* (2005, p.178) argue that teachers have:

'...not felt fully involved in shaping, controlling or managing the extensive overhaul of the literacy curriculum and as a consequence some have appeared insecure, tentative and even distanced from the teaching of writing...If teachers are to find ways forward to maintain their professional integrity, make use of their knowledge of child development and achieve high standards in writing, then the adoption of a more creative stance and the assertion of their own agency in the classroom is essential.'

2.7 In addition, mandating programmes can lead to a de-professionalisation of the profession, compromising teachers' decision-making capacities and their autonomy and can lead to a decrease in morale, making it difficult to retain teachers in the system, as has happened in both the UK and US in recent years (Hall, 2006). Policymakers in the UK have recognised these drawbacks and in recent times there has been a move toward including schools in decision making for policy formation as evidenced by the change in tone apparent in a recent letter to schools in the UK *'we plan to harness the informed professionalism of practitioners and the leadership capacity within local settings'* (DfES, 2006a, p.1).

2.8 While changing outcomes for disadvantaged schools at a national level in the UK and the US has proven difficult to achieve, there have been some notable exceptions and these have been highlighted in the research surrounding effective schools (Lein *et al*., 1997; Puma *et al*., 1997; Designs for Change, 1998; Johnson *et al*., 1999; Taylor *et al*., 1999; Mosenthal *et al*., 2002; Lipson *et al*., 2004). Schools that had 'beaten the odds' had succeeded in helping the majority of their pupils to perform well in relation to literacy, despite the demographics of the pupils attending the school. It seemed that there were a number of school-level factors that distinguished these schools from their more typical peers, including: a strong focus on improving student achievement in literacy; strong school leadership; collaboration between classroom teachers and support teachers; all staff members taking responsibility for helping all children to acquire high levels of literacy; use of assessment data to inform teaching; a sustained on-site professional development programme focused on school and student needs; and strong home-school links.

2.9 Paralleling these studies were a number of large-scale studies of effective teachers of literacy in both the USA and the UK (Pressley *et al*., 1996, 2002, 2003; Taylor *et al*., 1999, 2002, 2003; Wray *et al*., 2002). Like the effective schools research, it emerged that these outstanding teachers succeeded in helping their pupils perform better in literacy than their more typical peers, and that there were several defining characteristics to their instruction in literacy including: a balanced literacy framework; a metacognitive approach to instruction; skills taught in a meaningful context; use of formative assessment; and

expert classroom management. To date there have been no such studies in Ireland. How the Irish government has responded to the challenge of underachievement is the focus of the next section.

Policy in Ireland

2.10 A number of policy frameworks have been developed to address various aspects of disadvantage including: *The National Children's Strategy*, the *National Development Plan*, the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy* and the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion*. The latter plan has set the ambitious goal of halving the number of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2016. In response to these policies, several government initiatives have been put in place in recent years, particularly in educational settings. Until recently (2005), these initiatives focussed primarily on improving staffing and resources including: improvements in the pupil-teacher ratio (15:1 in junior classes in the Breaking the Cycle scheme); the appointment of large numbers of support staff in schools such as learning support, resource and home-school liaison community teachers; and the funding of programmes such as Early Start, Breaking the Cycle, and Giving Children an Even Break. Unlike similar programmes in the US and UK, no specific approaches to teaching literacy were referred to in these initiatives. However, as Cross (2004, cited in Neuman & Celano 2006) points out, initiatives that target funding and resources are based on the premise that lack of resources is what is at the heart of the problem and that equalising resources should equalise opportunity. But, as recent studies in Ireland show (Eivers *et al*., 2004; DES, 2005b) the gap between children in disadvantaged schools and pupils in schools in general is as wide as ever. Indeed, in the most disadvantaged schools (Breaking the Cycle, 1996) there is evidence to suggest that the gap has widened since the inception of that initiative with children's achievement declining as they progress through the primary classes (Weir, 2003). Weir found that on average, 38% of 6th class pupils were performing below the 10th percentile. In fact, Weir speculated that this figure was a conservative estimate and that the true figure was closer to 50%. Conclusions were founded on the fact that teachers had excluded almost 8% of pupils from taking the test on the basis that the children would not be able to attempt it. This represents a major increase on the percentage of exclusions (1%) in the baseline study

conducted in 1996. In addition, a number of reports have highlighted weaknesses in the provision for the teaching of literacy in Ireland (DES, 2005a, DES 2005b) and a number of gaps in relation to policy (Archer & Weir, 2004).

2.11 Thus, as we can see, the provision of extra funding, resources, staffing and smaller class sizes have not succeeded in narrowing the gap, much less in closing it. This has also been found to be the case in the US where Puma *et al*. (1997) reported similar findings when they undertook a major review of the impact of government funded programmes. As in the US, research in Ireland also shows that while children in both advantaged schools and disadvantaged schools make progress in school, the rates of growth of children in disadvantaged schools is not accelerated enough to narrow the gap, even with participation in learning support programmes (Eivers *et al*., 2004). So in general, where a child starts out is where s/he finishes up, still significantly behind their more affluent peers. Clearly, if underachievement in literacy is to be addressed, policy must have a dual focus – a focus on funding to equalise resources and on finding ways to accelerate achievement for those most in need of it.

2.12 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School (DEIS) (DES, 2005a) is the latest strategic response of the Department of Education and Science to address gaps and weaknesses in educational provision in schools of designated disadvantage. It charts an action plan over five years and aims to bring coherence to the various government initiatives in disadvantage already in place by integrating them into the plan. The plan addresses education across the continuum of schooling from age three to eighteen, and using a new system of identification, has banded schools according to levels of disadvantage. The DEIS plan differs from earlier initiatives in a number of ways. First, schools have been asked to set up three-year action plans to include: (a) specific literacy achievement targets to aim for and identify how they will systematically monitor achievement to reach those targets; (b) strategies to improve attendance; and (c) plans to enhance parental involvement. Second, in line with research recommendations (Eivers *et al*., 2004; DES, 2005), a team of literacy co-ordinators have been appointed to help schools devise their plans and to support them as they begin to work towards the achievement of targets set out in

their action plans. These co-ordinators have been trained in First Steps (particularly the writing strand of the programme), an Australian literacy programme and schools have been encouraged to take on this programme as they seek to address literacy difficulties. Co-ordinators may work with a school on-site or may offer support to them outside of school hours. Why the First Steps programme was chosen over other programmes and how this decision was reached is not apparent from the DEIS strategy document (DES, 2005a). Given trends in the UK and US to move toward the implementation of scientifically-based research as a starting point in addressing literacy achievement, it is perplexing that a programme which has not been researched extensively or been shown to be superior to others has been adopted and rolled out to all disadvantaged schools. As noted earlier, the research does not support the notion of one best programme to teach reading and when one considers the host of factors involved in effective literacy teaching it is unlikely that this one programme will meet with success. It is also disquieting that no evaluation of the programme has been commissioned here to date.

2.13 In addition to First Steps, Reading Recovery, an early intervention programme for reading has been extended to all schools in Band One of DEIS and there are plans to extend it to all disadvantaged schools over the next five years. While there is sufficient research on Reading Recovery to illustrate its effectiveness as an early intervention (though there have been a number of questions raised about components of the programme, the way in which research has been reported and the washout of the gains post-intervention), one again has to wonder why it was the *first* option adopted by the DES in response to literacy difficulties in disadvantaged schools. Reading Recovery is an individualised early intervention programme and requires a teacher specially trained in the programme and as such it is expensive. In addition, Reading Recovery is targeted at a particular age group and due to its individualised nature the number of children in the programme is very small. When one considers the large numbers of children presenting with reading difficulties in disadvantaged schools (27%-50%), this is perhaps not the most effective way to reach all children who need help. The DES does not provide an additional teacher to schools to implement the Reading Recovery programme.

Rather, one of the Special Education Team (SET) teachers is released from regular teaching duties to undertake the training and provide the instruction. This means that the SET team is down a team member and inevitably results in a reduction in the numbers of children catered for by the SET team. Another difficulty with Reading Recovery is the fact that the programme is very different to regular classroom instruction, and when this happens, the research indicates it has the potential to confuse children (Santa & Hoein, 1999). It remains to be seen if the adoption of Reading Recovery and First Steps will work, as the DEIS strategy is still being evaluated. Given the experiences in the UK and US already outlined above there is reason to suspect that the Irish experience will be no different in changing outcomes. So while resources are a vital element of the change process as is provision of professional development and support for schools, it appears to be not enough to effect change.

2.14 So is there a way to effectively address the gap in achievement and to realise the goal of every child a reader and a writer who can use literacy as a tool for 'personal empowerment' (www.unesco.org). What needs to be done to make this a reality on the ground? The next part of the paper will share the results of a two-year, mixed methods, longitudinal study which was successful in raising literacy achievement in a Band 1 DEIS Junior school (designated as most disadvantaged) (Kennedy, 2008). The study took an innovative approach - one not yet tried here in Ireland. It brought together the insights gained from the wide range of international research on effective schools and teachers of literacy that had been successful in raising achievement despite students' low socio-economic status (and noted earlier). Also taken into account were research on change processes, research on high-quality professional development and the literature on current understandings of essential pedagogical content and strategies in effective literacy programmes. The study also sought to address the many concerns highlighted in the Irish research literature (DES, 2002, 2005b, 2005c) regarding instructional programmes e.g. cohesion between classroom and special education programmes, differentiation, and systematic planning and assessment of literacy. Building on the insights of (Knapp, 1995; Taylor *et al*., 2002a, 2003), it sought to gradually introduce a cognitively challenging curriculum while simultaneously addressing

the basic skills. Given the research base on student engagement in literacy as a key factor associated with achievement, the study also set out to work with teachers to help children develop reading and writing as a life-long habit – an activity that they would choose to do for the realisation of their own personal goals. In addition, it sought to address the policy gaps identified by Archer and Weir (2004) in their review of Irish policy in disadvantaged contexts. They noted the need for an initiative that would prioritise literacy to the same degree as successful initiatives internationally: *'our impression is that the development of literacy and numeracy, while clearly central in all of the (government) schemes, is not assigned the kind of priority that it receives in apparently successful initiatives in the USA'* (p.29). They also noted the need for future initiatives to include attention to: (i) helping teachers and families raise expectations for children in relation to literacy achievement; (ii) enhancing professional development for teachers; (iii) supporting teachers in disadvantaged schools in maximising opportunities offered by smaller class sizes; and (iv) exploring ways of helping parents support learning. The factors that gave rise to the success of the study in raising achievement will be presented next along with the insights gained and lessons to be learned for Irish policy and its implementation. Comparisons and contrasts will be made between the implementation process in this study and that of the DEIS strategy.

Features of a Successful Approach to the Improvement of Literacy in a Disadvantaged School

Research Design

2.15 The study set out to investigate the range of home, school, and classroom factors that can interact and impact on literacy achievement in a disadvantaged urban setting. Specifically, it set out to examine: (a) how a research-based best practice balanced literacy framework could be designed for and implemented in the Irish context in *collaboration* with a Band 1 DEIS school; (b) the particular conditions, resources and kinds of professional development required to support teachers in implementing such a framework and how teachers would respond to the change process; (c) the impact of the changes on children's motivation and engagement with literacy, their knowledge of literacy

strategies, and their achievement on standardised tests of literacy; and (d) parents' perspectives on their children's motivation and engagement in literacy following the changes in instruction. A rich range of data, both qualitative (interviews with children, teachers, parents and observations of teaching) and quantitative (questionnaire, test results, work samples), was gathered and contributed to a deep understanding of how the complex problem of underachievement in literacy may be addressed successfully. For the first time in the Irish context, it brought together the perspectives of teachers, children and parents and documented the actual change process. The researcher worked closely with the classroom teachers and support teachers involved in the study over two years with levels of intensity designed to: (a) equip them with the latest research base on literacy; (b) give them an opportunity to enhance and consolidate their expertise; and (c) enable them to use the research to design a coherent, effective and systematic literacy programme that would be suitable for their own particular context. The study was conducted primarily through the transformative-emancipatory paradigm which sees *'social justice for marginalised groups as the goal of research'* (Tashakorrie and Teddlie, 2003 p.677-678) and shares a number of features as outlined by Mertens (2003). First, research questions were framed to shed light on the persistent social problem of underachievement in literacy of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Second, as Government policy is often formulated at a distance from the recipients and as such may not always be in touch with reality on the ground, the researcher spent considerable time in the field. This facilitated the building of an accurate picture of the environment, culture and perspectives of the participants at several levels i.e. the school and classroom, the community, and the children themselves. Third, a creative and experimental approach was taken with the teachers active in shaping the process of change and their expertise and self-efficacy was cultivated so local capacity to respond to ongoing challenges after the study could be strengthened. Finally, conclusions were stated in a manner that would be useful for the formulation of future policy with the ultimate aim of improving provision for disadvantaged schools, mindful that 'truth is not stagnant' but evolving (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.18).

Main Outcomes

2.16 By the end of the two years of the study, the numbers of children performing below the 10th percentile had been reduced by three quarters and there were now 20% performing above the 80th percentile (there were no children at this level at the start of the study) on a standardised test of reading achievement. Children also made statistically significant gains in writing and reached the national norms in spelling. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were considered to be large, indicating that progress was substantive. Had the intervention not been implemented, children would have been expected to hold their own but not make the substantial gains that they achieved in this study. In fact, almost 12% of the children who presented with very low achievement at the outset of the study made exceptional progress and were performing in the top quintile at the end of the study.

2.17 There was certainly a cohort of children who made slow and uneven progress. This was true even with the additional support offered to them in the form of Reading Recovery, Resource Teaching or Learning Support, in addition to the enhanced classroom programme for literacy provided in the context of the current study. In most cases, support was sustained over the two years of the study. The majority of these children had documented learning and behavioural difficulties, as well as problems with school attendance. It should be noted that not all of these children were performing below the tenth percentile. It confirms that there will always be children who will need a sustained and individualised literacy programme throughout the primary school, even with a quality classroom literacy programme and quality small group and individualised early intervention in place. These children may also be experiencing difficulties across the board and may need an inter-disciplinary approach (e.g. involving health and other professionals) to enable them to reach their potential. A quality classroom programme, offered in the context of a school-wide balanced literacy framework can therefore contribute hugely to a reduction in the numbers of children requiring intensive and individualised support, but it will not necessarily address the needs of all very poor readers.

2.18 Teachers attributed the achievement gains to the changes they had made to their classroom instruction. As one teacher said: *'I've never really seen teaching like we've been doing in any school, no, I haven't really.'* (FIB/p.77)[4] Perhaps this is not surprising, as when one examines the curriculum documents for English it is abundantly clear that there is not enough guidance and support within them to help teachers put in place a highly effective literacy programme suitable to their own context. Moreover, the support to DEIS schools to date has been concentrated on the implementation of First Steps rather than on a broader integrated research-based approach to literacy. The curriculum is now ten years old and has yet to be updated and revised in the light of current research on literacy. This is in stark contrast to the US where instructional programmes must be based on evidence from the research and in the UK where the National Literacy Strategy has been updated as recently as 2006.

2.19 Teachers also reported having higher expectations for the children and higher levels of self-efficacy and confidence in their own ability to address literacy difficulties. Evidence from parents, teachers, classroom observations, and interviews with the children themselves indicated that the children were more motivated, engaged, and strategic in their approach to literacy by the end of the study. Teachers reported that parents were now engaging more with the school. Parents were aware of the changes that had taken place in the school and were proud of their children's achievement. They reported that children were choosing to read and write both inside and outside school and this had also had a positive influence on the family as a whole (see Kennedy 2008; Kennedy & Shiel In Press, 2009).

Achieving Success

2.20 Within the two years of the study, the current goal of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion to halve the number of pupils with serious reading difficulties by 2016 was achieved, confirming Shanahan's (2001) view that *'effective, powerful school reading programmes can teach most children to read – no matter what the income or education levels of their parents'* (p.158).

4. These are codes for the interviews: Individual teachers: F(Final), M(Medial), I(Initial); Class teacher: ABCD; SET team: SET(LS/ABCD); Group discussions with class teachers: CL(1..) and together with SET: CLST (1...): children: name/f (final interview)/page of transcript.

This requires that the right conditions and supports are in place and that a collaborative inclusive approach is taken which involves children, teachers, and parents.

2.21 Not surprisingly, the study revealed that there is 'no quick fix' (Allington & Walmsley, 2007) to the complex problem of underachievement in literacy. Rather there are many home, school and classroom factors that interact in synergistic ways to create conditions that either support achievement or act as barriers to success. There were many factors at work that acted as catalysts for the emergence of other equally critical factors and which contributed to the observed gains in achievement, motivation and engagement of the children and which facilitated the changes observed in teachers and in the instructional programme for literacy. Understanding these factors and how they interact, can provide insights that can shape future policy so that it will be more effective in supporting schools as they endeavour to not only radically reduce the number of children with serious literacy difficulties but also ensure that every child is provided with the opportunity to realise their potential, unlock talents and use literacy to, pursue personal goals and dreams. The next section of the paper outlines: (a) the nature of the balanced literacy framework adopted; (b) the change process and professional development provided to support teachers in implementing the balanced literacy framework; and (c) parental involvement in the study.

The Shape of the Literacy Programme

2.22 A key contributing factor to the achievement outcomes attained in this study was the design of the research-based cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework which was gradually adopted over the two years of the study. Teachers valued the opportunity to design an instructional programme that was in line with the research base but which also honoured the needs of children while providing autonomy for them to respond creatively to the 'pedagogical content strategies' (Shulman, 1987), they had learned in unique and personal ways. Their enhanced expertise enabled them to create their own curriculum while honouring the balanced literacy framework and the pedagogical strategies agreed upon.

Time

2.23 As reported in many of the studies of effective high-poverty schools (e.g. Knapp, 1995: Taylor *et al*., 1999) a minimum ninety-minute uninterrupted block of instructional time was gradually put in place over the course of the first year of the study and was retained in the second year. This allowed for acceleration of instruction to take place. It also allowed for the implementation of a cognitively challenging curriculum as the blocks of time available within this allocation created opportunities for the deep engagement in text that is necessary for higher-order reading and writing skills to be developed. Children spent blocks of time meaningfully engaged in the acts of reading and writing, constructing their own interpretations of text in reading workshops and creating their own texts in writing workshops. Teachers cited this daily consistent and predictable schedule as being a critical part of the change process. Children noticed this priority on literacy and they understood that it was a valued part of the school day and it served to heighten their awareness and motivation. This level of priority and focus on literacy has been cited as being largely absent from previous initiatives to raise achievement in Ireland and as being important to develop (Archer & Weir, 2004) and is a distinguishing feature of the most effective schools noted earlier. Teachers reported that even with 90 minutes devoted to instruction daily, that it was challenging for them to accommodate all of the essential literacy skills, embed them within the balanced literacy framework and ensure that instruction was tailored to children's individual needs within this time frame.

Greater Cohesion

2.24 Maximum use of time was facilitated as the SET team came into the classroom and worked on the classroom teacher's literacy programme three days a week and a rotation of activities occurred within these blocks which changed according to the needs and stages of development of the children. This 'push-in collaborative model' (Taylor *et al*., 1999, p.29) allowed for differentiation and attention to children's specific needs in small groups and ensured greater cohesion between class and special programmes. It also ensured that children had access to an adult for every minute of this instructional time and as such they were productively involved in academic learning activities.

Range of Texts

2.25 The class reader was replaced by a wide range of levelled texts in year one and was broadened to include a variety of high-quality fiction and non-fiction books as children developed in confidence. Children were matched to texts at an instructional level and, through the use of formative assessment measures, a dynamic and flexible grouping model (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) was used to ensure that they were operating within their 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978). Having a wide range of texts allowed children to read a new text every couple of days and to read a text through in its entirety on a daily basis, rather than a couple of pages a day, as often occurs when a basal reading series is used. This was hugely significant in building children's confidence, persistence, motivation and engagement and in helping them to develop a personal taste in reading. Teachers reported that it was challenging to keep children in the correct groupings all of the time particularly in the early stages of the study as various children made leaps at different points and needed to move groups accordingly. Teachers also reported that finding the time within the 90-minute framework to accommodate the use of running records to facilitate this response to children's needs was difficult but worthwhile.

Strategy Instruction

2.26 A special emphasis was put on teaching a range of word-identification and comprehension strategies - the ones used by good readers and endorsed by the research - to children over the course of the two years (NRP, 2000; Pressley, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Teachers very explicitly modelled and demonstrated strategies using a think-aloud approach which illuminated the use of the strategy for the children, making visible the invisible thought processes of expert readers. A gradual release of responsibility model (Fielding & Pearson, 1994) was used on the days the SET team were not working in the classroom, ensuring that children were not always ability grouped but had opportunities to work co-operatively in pairs and small mixed ability groups. This collaboration nurtured social interaction and enhanced motivation. Adopting the role of coach, teachers observed the children as they engaged with the strategies and scaffolded their efforts, documenting who had a secure knowledge of the strategy and

who needed more support. This information was used by teachers to plan future lessons. Metacognitive knowledge at the declarative, procedural and conditional levels (Paris *et al.*, 1995) was emphasised as children were encouraged to name and describe each strategy, to implement it appropriately, and to reflect on when to use it and why it was important to know. Children were encouraged to use the strategies as tools to help them in their independent work (Pressley, 2002). This in turn enabled them to develop independence and to persist at tasks that they found difficult.

Independent Reading

2.27 Having a quality classroom library is a feature of the successful schools documented in the research literature noted earlier (Pressley *et al.*, 2002; Lipson *et al.*, 2004; Calkins, 2001) with many classrooms having libraries of up to 500 books. In this study, a wide range of books was provided for classroom libraries. Children were encouraged to read widely and to take a book home to read every night in addition to the text that they were reading as part of their reading group. They were encouraged to develop a personal taste in reading and to choose a 'just right' book (Calkins, 2001).

Writing Workshop

2.28 A writing workshop was put in place daily and children had autonomy over writing topics. In writing workshop, children were taught how to generate ideas, draft, revise, edit, have a go at spelling unknown words and publish their work. Their emotional and imaginative development was nurtured as they were encouraged to develop their ideas and express themselves well on paper in a variety of genres. The social dimension of learning was recognised (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999; Allington, 2002) and children often worked with writing partners at various stages of the process, which scaffolded and encouraged the more reluctant writers. A daily audience was provided which served as an additional motivator. As Guthrie and Anderson (1999, p.36) suggest, *'when students can talk to each other about their writing, they learn an acute sense of audience and authorship'.* Having the time and the choice of topic energised children and they invested thinking time both inside and outside school (Graves, 1994;

Calkins, 1986). The writing workshop became a forum for children to *'demonstrate their creativity, individuality, voice and verve'* (Grainger *et al*., 2005. p.1). It was therefore an important contributor to the enhancement of children's motivation and engagement in literacy. It was also an important development in the Irish context as research indicates that teachers have difficulty fostering children's creativity and emotional development (DES, 2005b, 2005c). In addition, skill development such as spelling, grammar and punctuation were taught in the context of children's writing rather than in isolation using workbooks. Again, this was an interesting development as research has indicated that teachers in Ireland have difficulty teaching these skills in meaningful contexts (DES, 2005b, 2005c). In fact the DES (2005c) have noted that the teaching of writing as a process was weak in more than half of the schools in that study.

Word Work

2.29 A strong word study programme ensured that children developed their word-attack and spelling skills and were able to see the purpose to learning these skills as they were applying them daily in the context of their reading and writing. An explicit systematic sequential phonics programme was devised that included a blend of synthetic and analytic phonics as recommended in the literature (NRP, 2000; Lewis & Ellis, 2006; Torgerson *et al*., 2006). Attention was also paid to the development of a sight vocabulary for high frequency words. These were taught daily in an interactive fast-paced multi-sensory manner with concrete hands-on activities using magnetic letters/ whiteboards. A curiosity and interest in words was cultivated through a 'word consciousness' approach (Graves & Watts Taffe, 2002) and as children were reading or listening to high quality literature they were encouraged to notice *'rich, precise, interesting and inventive use of words'* and to use these words in their writing (p.150).

Oral Language Development

2.30 Recent research in the Irish context (Cregan, 2007) suggests that children in disadvantaged areas require explicit support in acquiring the 'literate style' of language required in school. Therefore, a high priority was put on oral responses to reading and writing in lessons,

giving children the opportunity to engage in real conversations about what they were reading and writing, just as real readers and writers do. As Lucy Calkins (2001, p.15) reminds us *'teaching reading then is like teaching living'* and so students were taught how to listen, to respond, to question, to debate, to agree and disagree and to have the confidence to do so, all of which are key life skills. Children were explicitly taught how to engage in the art of conversation (make eye contact, take turns in the conversation, to listen critically and piggyback on each other's responses and to ask genuine questions of each other) in reading and writing workshops. This increased their self-esteem and self-confidence and was very apparent in final interviews where they expanded on their ideas and interviews lasted three times longer than they had at the start of study.

2.31 In short, a cognitively challenging curriculum embedded within a balanced literacy framework was gradually put in place by the teachers who worked as a team. The programme motivated and engaged children while also ensuring they developed the key skills and strategies essential for fluent reading and writing. As Pressley (2001) reminds us this kind of curriculum is unfortunately not the staple diet for most children and even less so for children in disadvantaged schools (Knapp, 1995). These factors created the conditions to motivate and engage children in ways that teachers had not seen before and resulted in the positive gains in achievement already alluded to. How teachers were supported in implementing this balanced literacy framework is the focus of the following sections.

A Collaborative Investigative Stance

2.32 In this study, a *collaborative* relationship was established with the school and the knowledge base of both parties was considered to be of equal value with each of the partners acknowledged as bringing *'separate but complementary bodies of knowledge'* (Ross *et al*., 1999) to the investigation. Loucks-Horsley *et al*. (2003, citing Smith 2001 and Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) suggest that *'there is a growing emphasis on professional development that engages teachers in examining practice with experts and colleagues to develop specialised knowledge of the profession'* (p.41). The study was conducted with the view that by working together and utilising the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et*

al., 1992) of children, teachers, parents and researcher, a creative and successful response could be jointly constructed that would contribute to a narrowing of the gap in achievement and to helping children adopt reading and writing as life-long habits. This kind of approach has been successful in raising achievement internationally and continues to show promise (Lipson *et al*, 2004; Au, Raphael & Mooney, 2007).

2.33 Building on the work of Guskey (2005, 2000) and Loucks-Horsley *et al.*, (2003), teachers and researcher worked through a process of change in five phases over two school years. This model involved the adoption of an investigative stance as students' current achievement in literacy was measured (formatively and summatively), analysed and discussed. The researcher presented successful evidence-based approaches to instruction in professional development sessions. Teachers then identified where they would like to concentrate their initial efforts to address the weaknesses identified and agreed on a first goal. A range of supports were put in place (detailed below) to help teachers achieve the goal, planning was facilitated and as teachers began to implement new approaches in their classrooms, further support was provided and regular checks were made on the effectiveness of the approaches taken by assessing the impact on student learning. The continuous cycle of analysis, supporting, planning, and evaluating actions ensured teachers had success in realising each target set.

Early Success links to Self-efficacy and High Expectations

2.34 Guskey (2000) argues convincingly of the need for participants to experience success in achieving goals early in the change process, as this helps to cement commitment to it and to the hard work required to sustain it. As Bandura (1995, p.3) points out: *'successes build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy.'* This was a vital element of the study as a deep and lasting commitment to the change process emerged when teachers very quickly saw a real difference not only in children's attainment, but in their motivation and engagement. This led them to continue to add new components to their literacy programme and it also had the effect of raising their expectations for the children as evidenced by the following comment from one teacher:

2.35 *'I think, I learned so much from it that my own confidence grew…But (it was) my expectations for the children that really grew. I was like wow, look at, like I said I wouldn't have thought they could have performed as well as they could, you know from the start.'* (FIC/p.43)

2.36 Research on disadvantage in the Irish context has indicated that teachers often have low expectations for their pupils (Eivers *et al.*, 2004) which can contribute to low achievement. Other research has also indicated that focusing on disadvantage and its effects over a number of generations can lead to a culture of low expectations and a certain defeatist view that the problems are insurmountable (Archer & Weir, 2004, p.30). According to Archer and Weir (2004) *'deliberate attempts to raise expectations could be important in the disadvantaged context,'* (p.30). In addition, disadvantaged schools are operating under challenging working conditions including: pupil absenteeism, poor discipline, low parental involvement and low student motivation and engagement (Eivers *et al.*, 2004, Weir, 2003). Teachers in this study reported that they had tried many things over the years to raise achievement but with few tangible results. As one teacher noted *'I used to feel a certain hopelessness. I tried certain things that either I met in college or afterwards, but I'd be keeping a bit of phonics, a little bit of this, that and the other. So for me it has totally transformed my attitude to literacy.'*(FIA/p.27) This lack of success had dented teacher confidence, led to lower expectations for the children and a concentration on a slower pace of instruction with more focus on lower-level skills at the expense of higher-order thinking skills. As teachers' confidence grew and successes continued to mount they were now no longer content for children to just master basic skills; they expected that children would develop into independent learners who could think critically and respond in deep and meaningful ways. As one teacher said *'but it was wonderful to raise the bar and the thing is not alone did they reach the bar, a lot of the children actually surpassed it.'* (SET2LSB/p.9)

A Multi-faceted Approach to Professional Development

2.37 Teachers cited the provision of a multi-faceted approach to professional development as one of the major factors contributing to their success with the children. It was provided over two years and delivered primarily on-site approximately once a fortnight for

approximately two hours duration. Several full days and a couple of half days were also provided for intensive work. In addition, the researcher was on site for demonstration lessons and to observe teachers teaching lessons in a non-evaluative capacity. It was the intention initially to provide the professional development over one year. However, it quickly became clear that a longer period was necessary so that new strategies could be implemented at a reasonable pace and to give time for teachers to feel confident in implementing them. Engaging with the school for such a prolonged period had a number of advantages. It helped to build 'relational trust' (Hord, 2008) whereby researcher and teachers supported each other, shared successes and failures, adopted a spirit of experimentation, inquiry and reflection on teaching and learning, and developed a common language around literacy which ultimately led to the development of the school as a 'professional learning community' (Hord, 2008). This helped create a 'unity of purpose' (Kellaghan, 2001) with everybody focused on a common goal. Establishing relational trust is an important element, because, as with any change process, participants are challenged to reconsider their beliefs, attitudes and habits of practice. It is therefore vital that the sessions are handled in a supportive environment that rewards reflection and risk-taking.

Building Teacher Expertise

2.38 A key feature of the professional development provided to teachers was a dual focus on 'pedagogical content' and the 'pedagogical strategies' (Shulman, 1987) needed to effectively mediate this content in the classroom. As noted earlier, the research base is clear: there is no one best method for teaching literacy (IRA, 2000) so the emphasis must be on helping teachers develop an in-depth knowledge of the reading process, knowledge of a variety of methodologies, knowledge of a variety of assessment tools and the ability to know when and how to use them. In this study – as already outlined in the previous section - the essential skills identified in the research: alphabetics, comprehension, and fluency (NRP, 2000) and writing skills (Graves 1994; Calkins, 1986, 2003) were all gradually introduced into classroom programmes within a cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework (Pressley, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) with each new element building incrementally on the previous one. The time allotted to each skill was balanced and reflected the needs of learners and their current stage of development. Teachers

were not limited to a particular programme; rather they created their own while honouring the research base and the components of a balanced literacy framework. They reported that they found the whole process intellectually stimulating and exciting and that it had consolidated their commitment to the change process, as is evident in the following comments:

2.39 *'Our knowledge has gone up one million per cent...'* (FIB/p.54)

2.40 *'For me personally, it has provided me with a huge amount of stimulation in my professional life... Personally, I feel I can teach literacy now...'* (FIA/p.53)

2.41 *'For me the highlight has been the professional development and just becoming more aware of the research that is out there, how to access it, what authors to read and just the quality of the lessons, my lessons, have improved.'* (FID/p.70)

2.42 The professional development provided, sought to put the processes of *'comprehension, reasoning, transformation and reflection'* (Shulman, 1987, p.13) into action. It began by supporting teachers in understanding the research base and the theory and philosophy underpinning the methodologies shared with them. The goal was to honour teacher autonomy and to encourage teachers to use the research base *'to provide the grounds for their choices and actions'* (Shulman, 1987, p.13). As a result, teachers felt that they now possessed knowledge about literacy that their peers did not have. This is exemplified in the following comment from one teacher: *'I got a lot from the readings. Challenging stuff, made me think. In reality we've been doing it wrong for the last 20 years! Everybody across the country has, all teachers.'* (CLST4)

2.43 Teachers in this study felt such specialist knowledge was one of the key components of their success in raising achievement and was a contributing factor to the enhanced self-esteem and confidence in themselves that they reported at the end of the study. As Bandura (1995, p.2) suggests, *'perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act'* as is evident in the following quote from one teacher:

2.44 *'So I found for me, the whole professional development, seeing and really understanding at a core concept level exactly what all the little areas of change do so then I felt I could identify problems and know what to do... I did find the process quite exciting ...'* (FIA/p.27).

2.45 Sharing the research base with teachers and helping them understand its significance for their own classrooms and school empowered them to design a robust literacy programme that could begin to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. Teachers were very creative in their response and reported a great sense of satisfaction that they now had the knowledge to create their own programmes confident that it was based on solid research. They requested the opportunity to gain a professional qualification for the professional development and consequently enrolled in the St. Patrick's certificate and diploma course with a view to continuing to masters level.

A Constructivist Approach to Professional Development

2.46 Also of critical importance, was the nature of the professional development provided which was based on the kinds of constructivist principles that teachers were expected to utilise in the classroom, and which would help them to construct their own understandings of the material presented. This, as Cambourne (2002, p.31) suggests, *'involves potential learners transforming the meanings and skills that someone else has demonstrated into a set of meanings and skills that is uniquely theirs.'* Shulman (1987) concurs and suggests that this knowledge is further enhanced and refined as teachers use their new understandings to teach in new ways. He suggests that it is as one evaluates one's teaching and reflects on it, new knowledge is consolidated and understanding deepened.

2.47 A first step in helping teachers reflect upon their practice is to provide opportunities for 'cognitive dissonance' (Thompson & Zeuli, 1999) to occur as this prompts teachers to question their current practices and beliefs. This was achieved through the provision of research-based professional literature which teachers read prior to attending sessions, thus providing the basis for debate. This was pivotal in helping teachers begin to see that there were other more successful

methods available to them in approaching literacy instruction and provided the 'social persuasion' (Bandura, 1995) that encouraged them to change their approaches. As one teacher remarked *'At least now I know that it's all based on the best research as well, you're not trying out things that might fail. You're trying out stuff that has worked in other schools and that's going to work with you if you use it properly.'* (FIB/p.64).

2.48 The provision of additional professional literature also provided teachers with insights into how other classroom teachers had actually implemented new approaches and strategies. Teachers particularly valued the readings that contained classroom vignettes of actual classroom practice which illustrated step by step how to approach a new strategy and the kinds of teacher language to use when implementing it. This contributed to the 'vicarious experiences' that Bandura, (1995) suggests help teachers envision how they might utilise these new methodologies in their classrooms.

2.49 Another key support that was offered to teachers involved demonstration lessons by the researcher on each new aspect that was introduced. Utilising Calkins (2001) approach to professional development, teachers sometimes offered their classroom as a 'lab site' and several teachers observed the same lesson and discussed it afterwards, providing opportunities for further professional dialogue and debate and consideration of what worked and what could have been done differently. Teachers were of the opinion that the modelling of the strategies was key and indeed in the second year of the study, they offered to model new techniques for the incoming group of First class teachers. It was interesting that teachers requested the demonstration lessons and also asked the researcher to visit their classrooms to oversee the change process and to observe their teaching. The research literature on effective professional development indicates that the teachers who experienced collaborative approaches to professional development involving classroom observation and feedback had stronger beliefs in themselves and their power to change things compared to those who had experienced observation in a supervisory or accountable capacity and who had not received feedback (Da Costa, 1993, cited in Cordingley *et al*., 2003; Joyce & Showers, 1988).

2.50 As part of this, observation frameworks adapted from Shanahan's Chicago Reading Initiative (2002) were devised and as teachers watched the researcher teach lessons they looked for evidence of the various elements and stages of a particular lesson and noted how the children were engaging with the lesson. These frameworks also served as useful supports to teachers as they set about structuring their own lessons. DVDs were also provided occasionally as a further support. Teachers commented that having the opportunity to actually see other teachers in action modelling the strategies for them was very helpful, again underlining the importance of valuing each teacher's learning style and providing opportunities for them to construct new knowledge for themselves.

2.51 Of particular importance, was the coherence that was brought to the whole proceedings through fortnightly meetings which ensured that each new component added, built on the one before and fitted within the overall balanced literacy framework that teachers and researcher were working towards implementing. Another important element of the meetings was that they provided a certain amount of accountability for implementation. As a new element was introduced and support such as that outlined above was given to teachers, it created an impetus for teachers to really engage and try out the new procedure, as the researcher would be back to discuss how it had worked out in the reality of the classroom. As one teacher noted:

2.52 *'But a lot of teachers are very perfectionist and fearful about launching into new things and away from structures they had and it's quite a leap this kind of programme…people need time to get, they need a mixture of time to get their heads round it but they also need a certain amount of pressure to just do the thing.'* (FIA/p.45)

2.53 The meetings provided a forum for teachers to question, debate issues, share ideas, evaluate and reflect on how the changes were impacting on the children and, as noted earlier, they analysed student data and set the change agenda in light of this data. Teachers cited this constant refocusing as essential. They were of the opinion that there would need to be one teacher from the school appointed to the position of instructional leader in the future in order to keep the change process going in the coming years and to drive it forward. A difficulty for

schools is finding the time within the school day for the professional development to take place without compromising instructional time for children. This internal support is recognised as a critical condition for sustaining change and facilitating the development of shared decision-making and professional collaboration where new beliefs and practices can be expressed, shared and nurtured. In this study, this was accomplished in a variety of ways. The Junior and Senior Infant class teachers took it in turns to provide cover to release the participating teachers and on a number of occasions, substitute teachers were employed to allow for more intensive sessions with teachers.

Parental Involvement

2.54 While a major emphasis on parental involvement in literacy was beyond the scope of the study, there was evidence that the small amount that was done to involve parents was of benefit to the children's literacy development. As one teacher noted:

2.55 *'I think the parental involvement of every day had such an impact. If we'd had more, it would have had an even greater impact and would have reached families rather than just the kids.'* (FIA/p.35)

2.56 The majority of parents invited to interview took up the invitation and were delighted to be asked for their views. Teachers noted that parents were now engaging more with the school and were more comfortable in doing so. Teachers invited parents to work with them on literacy and in line with research (Senéchal, 2003) they trained parents in on some techniques that they could use at home to build children's fluency and their motivation and engagement.

2.57 One of the four teachers took the issue of parental involvement on as a research project for her diploma in the year following the study. A handbook was developed explaining literacy development in parent friendly language (as advocated by Marsh, 2006), and included strategies for parents to use at home. In addition, parents were invited into the classroom on a number of occasions and children modelled each of the strategies for them. Further, by having a number of sessions, parents had opportunities to raise and clarify issues (Marsh, 2006). This project is ongoing and should shed light on what is useful to include in a home-school partnership for literacy in the Irish context.

2.58 In addition, at the end of year one parents were invited into to the school to observe their children reading and writing in the classroom. Children showed the parents their writing folders and read aloud sections of their favourite texts for them. This contributed to the motivation and engagement of the children and also spurred the parents on to maintain the time they were investing in the children's literacy development as they could see firsthand the benefits to the children and the value that the school, teachers and other parents were putting on literacy.

Implications for Policy

The Balanced Literacy Framework

2.59 The issue of the amount of time allocated to literacy on a daily basis is a critical one and one which will have to be tackled in future policy on disadvantaged schools. It was one of the critical factors in raising achievement in the study for the reasons outlined above. Given that internationally, 90 minutes is considered a minimum when one is trying to raise achievement (Calkins, 2001; Knapp, 1995; Shanahan, 2001) and that it was a recommendation for the Irish context (Eivers *et al*., 2004), it needs to be given serious consideration. Granted this is a contentious issue, as, given the breadth of the primary curriculum, particularly in junior classes, and the short school day in Ireland, providing this time requires hard choices, and extending the time given to literacy may be at the expense of time taken from another subject. However, research nationally and internationally indicates that the reading achievement gap between children in disadvantaged and advantaged schools exists before school starts and in general remains in place throughout a child's schooling. Even more disturbing in the Irish context, is the research that indicates that children's literacy achievement declines as they progress through the primary classes (DES, 2005b; Weir, 2003), particularly in the most disadvantaged schools. Also, when one considers that children in disadvantaged schools often lose some of the gains made in the school year over the summer months due to the well documented phenomenon known as the 'summer slump' (Allington & McGill Franzen, 2003; Cooper *et al*., 1996), then clearly, children in disadvantaged schools need every opportunity for accelerated instruction if they are to catch

up with their more advantaged peers. That means more time on literacy and maximising use of that time so the kind of instructional density evident in effective schools internationally is achieved. Therefore, the provision of the 90 minutes is a matter of equality and entitlement and in the view of this researcher, the 90 minutes is therefore uncontroversial. However, allocation of that time without the necessary support for using that time well is a recipe for disaster. Things will not change if the time results in more of the same kinds of instruction as we currently have. As we have seen, the provision of smaller class sizes in disadvantaged schools has not yielded improved achievement on a national level and as, Weir (2003) speculates, this may be that teachers were not given adequate support in changing their teaching methods to suit the new dynamic. Similarly, if the time is allocated across the board and does not result in the implementation of a systematic, coherent and cognitively challenging curriculum then we shall not see the desired results either. Disadvantaged schools should be encouraged to adopt the 'push-in collaborative model' (Taylor *et al.*, 1999) used in this study whereby the learning support team contribute to the classroom teacher's literacy programme rather than withdrawing the children. This will help to bring greater cohesion to the literacy programme, allow for differentiation for children, make maximum use of time available and ensure the most efficient use of personnel. While this is a recommendation in the Learning Support Guidelines issued to schools in 2000, it has yet to be adopted universally in Irish schools as the research continues to indicate lack of cohesion between learning support and classroom programmes (DES, 2005b, 2005c; Eivers *et al.*, 2004).

2.60 Schools should be provided with an infusion of a range of high quality children's literature in a range of genres for the each classroom (an average of 500 books according to the effective schools research), and in a range of levels suitable for the range of ability in the classroom. Multiple copies of books should be provided for small group instruction where children can learn how to listen, respond, question, debate, agree, disagree and challenge each other's thinking. They should also be available to take home to share with the family. Schools will need guidance on the range of books available and how to match them to the interests and stages of development of the children in their

classrooms. As happened in this study, providing a strong classroom library can also positively impact on family literacy as children take books home to share with family members.

2.61 The merits of a cognitively challenging curriculum should be made transparent to disadvantaged schools. It was a key factor in the substantial gains made by children in the study in relation to both achievement, and, motivation and engagement. A dual emphasis on lower and higher-order skills, affording children choice and control over learning in reading and writing workshops, capitalising on children's interests in designing activities, providing opportunities for mixed ability collaborative groupings so children can learn in a social context, and providing an audience for completed work, are all key factors in capturing children's imaginations, heightening engagement, and building personal autonomy and positive attitudes to literacy. It makes school an exciting and desirable place to be. The influence of a metacognitively based transactional strategies approach using a gradual release of responsibility model of teaching (Fielding & Pearson, 1994, Pressley, 2002) on children's ability to persist, self-regulate and sustain attention on challenging tasks should also be highlighted for schools, as passivity and lack of persistence have been noted as contributing to literacy difficulties in disadvantaged settings. This again goes back to the earlier point on the need to revise the English curriculum so these factors can be included as essential elements of a research-based balanced literacy framework. Even modest occurrences of these elements are positively associated with substantial growth in achievement and as Taylor *et al*., (2003, p.19) comment: *'One can only wonder if a little goes such a long way, what would happen with wholesale changes in these practices'.* Again, bringing this to teachers' attention in professional development sessions would seem to be essential. Another benefit to this approach is that it builds children's confidence and their oral language abilities which again have been raised as issues affecting achievement. The typical discourse patterns in classrooms are replaced with a move toward literary conversations that help children see the purpose of reading and writing and what it can do for them on a personal level.

Professional Development

2.62 Given the link in the study between teachers' enhanced expertise in literacy and their confidence and proficiency in implementing new programmes and strategies, there is a need to invest in building the expertise of teachers of literacy in disadvantaged schools to high levels and in supporting them in maintaining expertise at those levels. A dual focus on content knowledge (such as the essential skills for literacy and the construction of a cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework) and innovative teaching strategies for translating the content into practice is critical. Simply having the content knowledge and focusing on that in the classroom is not sufficient to raise achievement as indicated in the recent evaluation of the No Child Left Behind Act U.S. 2001 (Gamse *et al*., 2008); how teachers mediate content in the classroom is equally important.

2.63 Given that the curriculum documents for English are not sufficiently detailed or reflective enough of current research on the components of an effective balanced literacy programme, the magnitude of the task in achieving change in literacy teaching is apparent. This is borne out by the comments of teachers in the study. As noted earlier, they noted they were teaching in ways that were fundamentally different to other schools. What is required then, is a shift in thinking, attitudes, and beliefs about how children become literate beings as well as radical changes in instructional methods. Helping teachers make these leaps and change deeply held beliefs, knowledge and habits of practice will require substantial professional development grounded in the complexities and realities of each individual school. Professional developers will require a high level of expertise around literacy processes, stages of development, methodologies, development of motivation and engagement and assessment procedures, as well as knowledge of change processes. In addition, the professional developer should be enabled to work *collaboratively* with the school with sufficient levels of intensity and over sufficient time to initiate the change process, to ensure it gathers momentum and is sustained. The school should have ownership of the change process and should set the agenda in the light of analysis of the assessment data. By being on site on a regular basis, the professional developer will also develop 'relational trust' (Hord, 2008) with the teachers and will be instrumental in helping them shape an action

plan customised to the needs of the school, teachers and children, ultimately leading to the implementation of a coherent cognitively balanced literacy framework such as that outlined earlier.

2.64 This raises questions about current provision for professional development in disadvantaged schools. By training DEIS co-ordinators in First Steps and encouraging schools to take it on as an answer to their difficulties, schools may think that this one programme can meet all their needs. This is flawed and is out of step with current research understandings about literacy. As Hall (2006, p.9) notes, privileging one method over another denies the complexities involved and may oversimplify matters by suggesting that a particular method can solve *'the long tail of underachievement'*. The sustainability of programmes has been highlighted as another difficulty in the research literature. They lose their shine over time and it can be difficult to keep teachers focused on fidelity to a programme, particularly if adequate support has not been given to them to help them adapt the programme to their own particular school and classroom context. Then again, if too many changes are made to a given programme it can dilute its effectiveness. In addition, the research base on literacy is constantly changing and updating as new research illuminates issues and as such, programmes need to be updated regularly. While it is more difficult to achieve, it would seem to make sense that a commitment to investing in classroom teachers with whom children spend most of their day and helping those teachers to build their expertise in literacy is more likely to result in long-term gains for schools and children. What is critical then is to give teachers the tools to enable them to stay abreast of the research. Investing in teachers to this level has additional benefits. It can ignite in them a life-long interest in learning and provide professional stimulation to sustain them through their teaching career and when they succeed in raising achievement in adverse circumstances it can result in greater job satisfaction and feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy. This may ultimately lead to a reduction in staff turnover in disadvantaged schools which has been noted as an issue in Ireland (Eivers *et al*. 2004, 2005; DES, 2005b).

2.65 A second issue is the level of workload of each DEIS co-ordinator. It is this author's understanding that the current workload of DEIS co-ordinators varies from between 17 to 20 schools. This would make it virtually impossible to engage with schools with the level of intensity which builds the kind of momentum that is needed to ensure a reasonable pace is maintained in the process of change. It also makes it difficult to build collaborative relationships and a 'unity of purpose' (Kellaghan, 2001) with each school. It is vital then that the workload of the professional developer is reasonable enough to allow this level of engagement to occur. A caseload of no more than eight schools per DEIS co-ordinator would make this a *possibility* and even then that may prove too large.

2.66 Another consideration is the nature of the professional development provided to schools. Multiple supports such as demonstrations, observations of lessons, provision of professional reading material should also be included as part of a multi-faceted approach to professional development; these are not features commonly found in professional development initiatives in Ireland. Regularly scheduled meetings, as utilised in the study, should be a priority and should help to keep the change process moving forward and allow for the re-setting of higher goals as key targets are met. This multi-faceted approach honours teachers' creativity, builds their expertise and values their individuality. It honours the professionalism and autonomy of teachers as critical decision makers who are creators of curriculum rather than consumers of it (Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2007).

2.67 A further consideration is whether the professional development is conducted with the whole school or just individual teachers. As a general principle, a whole-school approach is the most desirable outcome so that children will have access to a highly coherent, systematic programme for literacy throughout their time in the school. This is vital as Shanahan (2001, p.163) notes, *'powerful reading instruction is longitudinal…builds quality upon quality, across classes, grade levels and schools'*. Therefore, how structural supports (Hord, 2008) can be put in place are key considerations, so that the necessary time for the professional development is provided without compromising instructional time for children. This can represent a

considerable challenge in the Irish context as primary teachers teach all subjects all day and there is no time scheduled for professional development. There are two issues here: (i) time for the professional development; and (ii) time for teachers to meet after the professional development so that they can synthesise changes and plan specifics. This could be facilitated at school level by providing opportunities for teachers to meet fortnightly in class levels with the learning support team to plan, support each other and share assessment data in addition to the time provided for the professional development. It could also be facilitated by the provision of substitute teachers who could rotate across the school on a given day to allow these kinds of meetings to take place. This would require the DES to provide funding for this or to authorise schools to use some DEIS funding to do so. It is vital that these planning meetings continue long after the professional development has ended, as they will help to sustain the change process in the long term and help to put useful whole school plans in place and ensure they are continuously updated as is the case in the most effective schools of literacy in high-poverty areas. This has been highlighted as a weakness in the Irish context (DES, 2005b) and by Archer & Weir (2004, p.29) who have noted that while whole school plans are required by the DES in relation to initiatives such as Breaking the Cycle or Giving Children an Even Break *'there is a need to know how significant the process is in the life of a school. It seems unlikely that many Irish schools prioritise planning in the way that happens in programmes like Success for All or the School Development Programme'.* Collaboration then at class level, across class levels and with the Special Education Team is a key element in helping a school develop the 'unity of purpose' (Kellaghan *et al.*, 1995) associated with highly-achieving high-poverty schools and the transformation of the school into an organisation that is focused on every child achieving to their potential in literacy with everybody assuming a collective responsibility for realising this goal.

2.68 Another consideration is the setting of achievement targets and the development of three-year action plans required under the DEIS strategy for schools in Band 1. There is a fundamental problem with asking schools to set targets before they have had extensive professional development and experienced some success in raising

achievement. It is difficult to commit to a vision of raised achievement when one is operating under the challenging working conditions that are inevitable in disadvantaged schools. Why would one set high targets if over a large number of years one has not been successful in changing outcomes despite one's best efforts? Schools therefore, may set lower targets than could be achieved, as to set the bar too high is to risk failure and professional embarrassment if the targets are not achieved. Instead, action plans should be devised after professional development has occurred and some initial success has been realised. Short-term achievable targets should be set and specifically linked to formative assessment data to allow schools to experience early success which is critical to the raising of expectations and the commitment to a long term plan for change. Sharing of assessment data at a school level should occur at least twice a year in order to ensure that school level targets are being met and procedures put in place if targets are not being realised.

2.69 Given the success of the collaboration in the study between the researcher and school and the fact that the teachers requested the opportunity to acquire a qualification for the level of professional development engaged in and were willing to work outside of school hours towards that, the DES should consider facilitating partnerships between Colleges of Teacher Education and disadvantaged schools with a view to providing a combination of on-site professional development and course work for teachers. This could be done by funding a number of teachers each year to undertake specialist training in literacy (as is the case in recent international studies and literacy projects: Calkins, 2001; Au, Raphael & Mooney, 2007) so that they may adopt leadership roles and assist their school in developing and implementing a detailed coherent and spiralling whole school plan for literacy. This internal leadership is just as important as external leadership and more important in the long term if change is to be sustained and if schools are to evolve into professional learning communities. These teachers could then take on the role of reading specialists. Their high level of expertise would help them work collaboratively with fellow teachers in planning, demonstrating, observing and giving feedback on lessons. This would help to further build capacity within each school and sustain the change process and would help to induct new

members of staff. It would also have the added benefit of supporting student teachers as they would observe exemplary practice in literacy first-hand on their student teaching practices. Currently, the practices in literacy that students are studying in their undergraduate literacy courses are not always observable in classrooms for the reasons outlined earlier and as such it can lead to a watering down of the effect of these courses when students do not observe them as routine features of classroom instruction.

2.70 It is clear then that effecting change is a complex issue and one that requires a number of factors to be in place which together, operate in a synergistic manner whereby the development of one factor leads to the emergence of another. The development of teacher expertise to high levels whereby teachers understand the theory and rationale underpinning the changes they are making to their programme is a critical factor and is best achieved through the multi-faceted approach outlined earlier in this paper. This lays the foundation for them to respond successfully to the needs of the children in their classroom, which in turn enhances their self-esteem and self-confidence leading them to embrace further elements of change. It also facilitates the adoption of a research stance in the classroom and cultivates an interest in life-long learning. Teachers' success in relation to student achievement and motivation leads to the development of higher expectations for pupils. Early success also helps teachers commit to deep and lasting change in the long term. Setting this chain of events in motion is contingent on the quality of the professional development provided and as such requires a radical re-think of how support is provided to DEIS schools if we are to realise our goal of halving the number of children with literacy difficulties by 2016.

2.71 There are also wider implications for the teaching profession as a whole. There needs to be a greater focus on literacy in the undergraduate education of teachers. The current time allocation for literacy (44 hours) is inadequate to prepare them to teach literacy to the high level already outlined in this paper. In addition, the timing of the literacy courses should be examined and changes made to make the timing more suitable to the stage of development of the students. Providing opportunities for students to try out new methods and to work with an exemplary teacher on an ongoing basis would be

invaluable but difficult to put in place due to the current structure of the B.Ed. degree and the overcrowding that is inevitable in a three-year degree. In this context, it should be noted that in the UK and US primary teachers undergo a four-year programme. There also needs to be a consideration of how to create a culture of life-long learning within the teaching profession, as it is clear that all cannot be accomplished at undergraduate level. Just as other professionals, such as doctors and dentists, regularly attend refresher courses and stay abreast of new developments in the field, so too must teachers continue to update their professional knowledge base. As the research base on literacy is continuously evolving and new insights shed light on practice it is essential that teachers be provided with the tools to access the research base. As the research indicates, teacher knowledge matters and more important than any programme is the teacher. Every child deserves a knowledgeable teacher who will teach with 'purpose, passion and energy' (Fullan, 2003). In the US for example, teachers are required to obtain a masters degree within a number of years of qualifying as teachers and receive an increase in salary when they do so. In the UK, recent developments have included the requirement that all newly qualified teachers follow up their initial education with a masters' degree and government funding is provided for it. The Teaching Council should progress these agenda in the Irish context.

Parental Involvement

2.72 Programmes designed to enhance the literacy skills of pupils in disadvantaged settings should include a strong focus on parental involvement that includes provision of information and training in specific strategies to use with their children that are clearly linked to the classroom programme. They should receive frequent feedback on their children's progress and needs. Parental involvement should be introduced as soon as possible in an intervention.

2.73 Parents should be made aware of the summer slump in reading and their help should be enlisted in supporting reading and writing development during the summer months. Activities could include setting aside time for reading on a daily basis during the summer months, visiting the library weekly to obtain new books, and supporting initiatives in the community designed to enhance reading (e.g., summer book clubs, writing workshops).

A Synergy of Factors

2.74 This small-scale study demonstrates that it is possible to raise achievement in a disadvantaged school. Success comes through the interaction between a synergy of factors. It is important that policy makers recognise that an essential element of the support to schools must be to put the conditions in place that will allow for this synergy of factors to develop. A shift in thinking and in how current policy is being implemented could make a major difference to outcomes and the realisation of the goal of halving the number of children with serious literacy difficulties by 2016.

2.75 Policy makers need to acknowledge that there is no quick fix and no one best way or no one best programme to teach literacy effectively to all children (IRA, 2000). As Au, Raphael & Mooney (2007, p.28) argue, policy makers who want to effect changes in literacy achievement in urban schools would do well to treat teachers as professionals *'as creators, not just receivers of curriculum'* and should not fall back on prescribing particular programmes. Rather, what we need are expert teachers who have knowledge of a variety of methodologies and assessment tools and know when and how to combine them into an effective instructional programme appropriate for their particular context and for the stage and development of their children. This non-prescriptive approach values them as professionals, honours their autonomy and creativity and allows them to respond to the individuality of each child. Creative teachers adopt *'a learner-centred focus….responding to children's feelings, engaging their interests, maintaining their identity and autonomy'* (Grainger *et al.*, 2005, p.183). Providing enough time (90 minutes min.) in the classroom for this kind of higher-order focus to instruction signals a priority and value on literacy. This in turn motivates children and they begin to engage in ways not seen before in many disadvantaged schools. They begin to see the purpose and utility of literacy and begin to use it for their own 'personal empowerment' (www.UNESCO.org: Education page). They develop in confidence, self-esteem, persistence and independence. This change is also noted by parents who begin to engage more in the school and get involved in their children's literacy development. It has a knock-on effect within in the family as a whole, as reading and writing are seen as desirable activities and parents and siblings are influenced

by the enthusiasm and confidence of the children. Seeing first-hand the response of children to the changes in instruction and seeing the gains in achievement serves to strengthen and further enhance teachers' sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy and just as importantly, raises their expectations for the children. It fuels teachers' desires to learn more about the literacy process and, to introduce more changes in line with the research base.

2.76 Putting this chain of events in motion requires a multi-faceted approach to professional development that is intensive and sustained over time and which fosters a collaborative approach to the change agenda. It creates a school dynamic and atmosphere that illustrates there is much that can be done to enhance achievement despite the challenging conditions that are an inevitable part of life in a disadvantaged school. It contributes to a school vision in which the whole staff is focused on the goal of not only enhancing achievement but developing children as readers and writers who can use literacy for their own personal goals. It can contribute to the development of the school as a professional learning community where professional development is seen not as an event but *a way of life* (Mosenthal *et al.*, 2002). This makes for sustainable change.

Scaling-up

2.77 In order to scale up and replicate this study in other similar jurisdictions a number of conditions would need to be put in place:

Provision of Professional Development

- A team of highly-qualified professional developers who are well versed in current research in relation to both the theory and practice in literacy and whose knowledge base is sufficient to enable them to respond to the varied realities and complexities of a range of disadvantaged schools.

- Professional developers should work with a small number of schools (about 6-8) to allow for the development of collaborative relationship with a school and to be familiar enough with the academic achievement and current teaching methods used in literacy to enable them to help the school identify a beginning

point for the change process. They would need to be able to engage with a school with sufficient levels of intensity (be on-site at least once a fortnight) over a sustained enough period of time (minimum of one school year with the flexibility to continue for a longer period where necessary; a gradual release of responsibility model should be used).

- A developmental and phased approach should be taken to the change process with the elements of a coherent cognitively challenging balanced literacy framework gradually and progressively put in place. Rather than a focus on a particular programme, the aim should be the development of each teacher's expertise to a high level so they may design a programme suitable for their own classroom. Ensuring early success should be a priority for the professional developer and as each goal is met a new one should be put in place. This will help to create confidence and excitement in the change process both of which are crucial for the development of high expectations and for long-term sustainability.

- A multi-faceted approach should be taken to professional development within schools which should be: on-site; based on constructivist principles and the adoption of an investigative stance in the classroom; focused on current student achievement and the setting of short-term achievable targets; regularly evaluated to determine the success or failure of the changes being made to instruction and the impact on student learning; and refocused according to the particular needs of the children.

School Commitment

- At least 75% of teachers within a school should agree to work toward the implementation of the balanced literacy framework in order to ensure continuity and coherence over a number of years. Schools should have ownership of the change process.

- Structural supports should be put in place to allow time for the professional development to take place without compromising instructional time for children. As well as time for professional development additional time needs to be built in for classroom and learning support teachers to work collaboratively and to consider

the specifics of the implementation of the changes agreed. This would need to be formally timetabled.

- Assessment data on literacy should be shared at a school level at least twice a year and amendments made to practice as needed; opportunities for cross class level meetings twice a year should be built in to allow teachers to communicate with the teachers at the class level above and below them so a coherent whole school programme can be devised.

- Schools would need to facilitate a 90-minute block for literacy to allow for deep engagement with text. This may mean changing timetables within schools to prioritise literacy.

- Schools should use their DEIS funding to ensure a wide range of texts for personal reading on various levels and also multiple copies of particular texts for small group work. In addition, interactive materials for intensive word work should be provided e.g. magnetic white boards and markers and individual sets of magnetic letters for each child in a class and a range of ICT software.

- One teacher should be identified within the school to support teachers in between visits by the professional developer and who can oversee the change process at a school level. The Reading Recovery teacher or one of the learning support teachers would be ideally placed to take on this role. Additionally, teacher leaders for each class level should be identified who would be willing to support the change process at each class level e.g. to schedule meetings, ensure resources are in place and document the change process for the redevelopment of the school plan to reflect the new emphases. These teachers should have the opportunity to engage in additional study to support them in their new role.

- Parental involvement in the change process should be instigated at the earliest possible stage so parents can understand the changes being made to instruction and support both teachers and children.

Support from the DES

- There should be a debate on current policy under the DEIS strategy.
- A small number of highly trained teachers of literacy or existing DEIS co-ordinators (who have had additional training) should be employed to work with the most disadvantaged schools to see how a programme based on the principles outlined in this report, and tried out in a DEIS school, could be successfully scaled up. Workloads would need to be adjusted to allow for high-quality implementation.
- The DES should consider funding a number of teachers from each school to undertake additional study in literacy education to Masters level to enable schools to continue the change process as the professional support is gradually withdrawn on the condition that they continue to work in the school for a number of years post study (as occurs internationally). This would further build capacity in schools, help to retain teachers in the school and ensure new teachers would be successfully inducted into the school's literacy programme.
- The DES should work with the Teaching Council and put procedures in place to support teachers as lifelong learners.
- The DES should request the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to undertake a radical overhaul of the English Curriculum 1999.
- Greater consultation is needed between the DES and the Colleges of Education in relation to literacy policy. One way of doing that is to have a mechanism for the DES to liaise with the Colleges of Education Literacy Committee.

Colleges of Education

- The DES should consider facilitating strategic partnerships between the Colleges of Education and disadvantaged schools whereby the Colleges provide a combination of on-site professional development and coursework. This approach is showing promise internationally. Teachers should have the option to acquire a master's degree through participation in the professional development if they so desire. St. Patrick's College is in the process of designing a flexible professional master's degree for this purpose. This would support teachers in adopting a research stance within their own classroom and school as they investigate what does/does not work.

- A greater focus on literacy should be put on the education of undergraduate teachers and ways sought to develop mutually supportive strategic partnerships with schools.

Conclusion

2.78 It remains to be seen if the political will is there to provide the level of and intensity of support needed for real change. These are high stakes, as we will continue to lose whole generations of children who will struggle to reach their potential if we don't do what is needed. Teachers in disadvantaged schools are incredibly open, committed and hard working and deserve the highest quality support available. Schools have been bombarded with one initiative after another in recent years and should current policy not yield the desired improvements in achievement, we run the risk of implementation weariness. This will also have the effect of lowering teacher expectations and self-efficacy and may lead to a reluctance to engage with future initiatives. Much is now known about how to teach literacy successfully; the challenge remains to find ways to disseminate this knowledge to schools and to support schools effectively as they work toward change. As one teacher said at the end of this study: *'I think it affirmed for me that if the right structures are put in place and resources and thinking, something amazing can happen, do you know?'* (FIA/p.53) It is time policy in Ireland caught up with the research base and reality on the ground.

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Terms of Reference and Constitution of the NESF

1. The role of the NESF will be:
   - to monitor and analyse the implementation of specific measures and programmes identified in the context of social partnership arrangements, especially those concerned with the achievement of equality and social inclusion; and
   - to facilitate public consultation on policy matters referred to it by the Government from time to time.
2. In carrying out this role the NESF will:
   - consider policy issues on its own initiative or at the request of the Government; the work programme to be agreed with the Department of the Taoiseach, taking into account the overall context of the NESDO;
   - consider reports prepared by Teams involving the social partners, with appropriate expertise and representatives of relevant Departments and agencies and its own Secretariat;
   - ensure that the Teams compiling such reports take account of the experience of implementing bodies and customers/clients including regional variations;
   - publish reports with such comments as may be considered appropriate; and
   - convene meetings and other forms of relevant consultations appropriate to the nature of issues referred to it by the Government from time to time.
3. The term of office of members of the NESF will be three years. During the term alternates may be nominated. Casual vacancies will be filled by the nominating body or the Government as appropriate; members so appointed will hold office until the expiry of the current term of office of all members. Retiring members will be eligible for re-appointment.

4. The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the NESF will be appointed by the Government.

5. Membership of the NESF will comprise 15 representatives from each of the following four strands:
   - the Oireachtas;
   - employer, trade union and farm organisations;
   - the voluntary and community sector; and
   - central government, local government and independents.

6. The NESF will decide on its own internal structures and working arrangements.

NESF Publications

(i) NESF Reports

Report No.	Title	Date
1.	Negotiations on a Successor Agreement to the PESP	Nov 1993
2.	National Development Plan 1994 – 1999	Nov 1993
3.	Commission on Social Welfare – Outstanding Recommendations	Jan 1994
4.	Ending Long-term Unemployment	June 1994
5.	Income Maintenance Strategies	July 1994
6.	Quality Delivery of Social Services	Feb 1995
7.	Jobs Potential of the Services Sector	April 1995
8.	First Periodic Report on the Work of the Forum	May 1995
9.	Jobs Potential of Work Sharing	Jan 1996
10.	Equality Proofing Issues	Feb 1996
11.	Early School Leavers and Youth Employment	Jan 1997
12.	Rural Renewal – Combating Social Exclusion	Mar 1997
13.	Unemployment Statistics	May 1997
14.	Self-Employment, Enterprise and Social Inclusion	Oct 1997
15.	Second Periodic Report on the Work of the Forum	Nov 1997
16.	A Framework for Partnership – Enriching Strategic Consensus through Participation	Dec 1997
17.	Enhancing the Effectiveness of the Local Employment Service	Mar 2000
18.	Social and Affordable Housing and Accommodation: Building the Future	Sept 2000
19.	Alleviating Labour Shortages	Nov 2000
20.	Lone Parents	July 2001
21.	Third Periodic Report on the Work of the Forum	Nov 2001
22.	Re-integration of Prisoners	Jan 2002
23.	A Strategic Policy Framework for Equality Issues	Mar 2002
24.	Early School Leavers	Mar 2002

25.	Equity of Access to Hospital Care	July 2002
26.	Labour Market Issues for Older Workers	Feb 2003
27.	Equality Policies for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People: Implementation Issues	April 2003
28.	The Policy Implications of Social Capital	June 2003
29.	Equality Policies for Older People: Implementation Issues	July 2003
30.	Fourth Periodic Report on the Work of the NESF	Nov 2004
31.	Early Childhood Care and Education	June 2005
32.	Care for Older People	Nov 2005
33.	Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market	Mar 2006
34.	Improving the Delivery of Quality Public Services	Feb 2007
35.	The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion	Mar 2007
36.	Mental Health and Social Inclusion	Oct 2007
37.	Fifth Periodic Report on the Work of the NESF	June 2008
38.	Implementation of the Home Care Package Scheme	Oct 2009

(ii) NESF Opinions

1.	Interim Report of the Task Force on Long-term Unemployment	Mar 1995
2.	National Anti-Poverty Strategy	Jan 1996
3.	Long-term Unemployment Initiatives	Apr 1996
4.	Post PCW Negotiations – A New Deal?	Aug 1996
5.	Employment Equality Bill	Dec 1996
6.	Pensions Policy Issues	Oct 1997
7.	Local Development Issues	Oct 1999
8.	The National Anti-Poverty Strategy	Aug 2000

(iii) NESF Opinions under the Monitoring Procedures of Partnership 2000

1.	Development of the Equality Provisions	Nov 1997
2.	Targeted Employment and Training Measures	Nov 1997

(iv) Social Inclusion Forum: Conference Reports

1.	Inaugural Meeting	Jan 2003
2.	Second Meeting of the Forum	Jan 2005
3.	Third Meeting of the Forum	Feb 2006
4.	Fourth Meeting of the Forum	Nov 2007
5.	Fifth Meeting of the Forum	Nov 2008

(v) NESF Research Series

1.	A Study of Labour Market Vulnerability and Responses to it in Donegal/Sligo and North Dublin	Jun 2005
2.	The Economics of Early Childhood Care and Education	Sept 2005
3.	Delivery of Quality Public Services	Sept 2006
4.	Mental Health in the Workplace: Research Findings	Oct 2007
5.	In The Frame or Out of the Picture	Feb 2008

(vi) NESF Occasional Series

1.	Evidence-based Policy Making: Getting the Evidence, Using the Evidence and Evaluating the Outcomes	Jan 2007

(vii) NESF Seminar Series

1.	In The Frame or Out of the Picture	Feb 2008