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Parental Engagement and Children's Literacy: The Evidence, Policy and Practice

Introduction

This paper will review a selection of government policies in support of literacy developments in schools with a particular focus on the complex range of issues and challenges that exist for primary schools in areas of socio economic and educational disadvantage. The first section reviews the current literacy attainment of primary school pupils. This is followed by a discussion of the policy support and literacy initiatives currently operating in schools with disadvantage status (DEIS). The final section considers the disconnect between policy and practice.¹

¹ National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (2012); Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS report (Smyth et al., 2015).



Current literacy attainment

The 2012 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics (NAERM) showed the first significant improvements in reading at primary level as recorded in national assessments of reading in over 30 years (Shiel, Kavanagh & Miller, 2014). At post-primary level, the performance of Irish fifteen year-old students in reading, as seen in consecutive cycles of PISA, including that of 2012, compares favourably with the international average. Relative to their peers internationally, low-achieving Irish students are maintaining and improving their performance levels in reading. More recently, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reported on the 2016 survey of reading among fourth class (or equivalent) pupils in Ireland and 50 other countries. Irish pupils performed extremely well on PIRLS. The Irish mean score of 567 was well above the study centre point of 500 and significantly higher than that of 43 participating countries (Eivers, Gilleece & Delaney, 2017).

However, findings from the evaluation of the DEIS² programme (DES, 2015) indicate that while the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools is narrowing, overall achievement in reading and maths, particularly in Band 1 schools (i.e. the most disadvantaged), remains below that in other schools. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS), acknowledged that *"while many students in our education system achieve a very good standard of literacy and numeracy, a significant minority do not. In addition, many students acquire adequate skills but could do even better,"* (DES, 2012:12).

An interim review of the NLS conducted in 2016 acknowledged that while some significant achievements have been gained, *'a gap in achievement has persisted between those learners in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage and other schools (DEIS Band 1 in particular), and must also be addressed'* in the new targets outlined from 2016 - 2020.



Policy support for literacy

The DES policy support for literacy is informed by three recent NCCA³ research reports: *Oral Language in Early Childhood and Primary Education; Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education* and *Towards an Integrated Language Curriculum in Early Childhood and Primary Education*, (NCCA, 2012). These three reports informed the new Language Curriculum which is now in place in all schools from Junior Infants to second class (NCCA/DES, 2016). The curriculum for senior classes (third to sixth) is currently in development.

Alongside the curriculum framework for English, the School Support Programme (SSP) provides additional resources and support to all DEIS schools. Since 2005, the SSP has had a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools, for example literacy programmes and interventions such as *Reading Recovery, First Steps, Write Minded, Literacy Lift off, Power Hour, Reading for Fun, Maths for Fun, Write to Read, Better Basics, Paired Reading, Peer Tutoring, Buddy Reading, Word Wizards, Doodle Den* and others, are widely used in many DEIS schools.

The advisory body to the DEIS review noted that the literacy programmes chosen should complement the DES policy and language curriculum and stated that the literacy interventions chosen for piloting *'should be targeted, meaningful, based on research, evidence based practice, be strictly time bound and subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation,'* (2017, p.46).

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) which supports DES policy, has recently been tasked with supporting literacy development in schools through its two key documents – *Effective Interventions for Struggling Readers: A Good Practice Guide* (2012), and *A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years* (2016). These additional resources for teachers are presented in a user-friendly format and reflect the research base outlined in the NCCA research reports (2012).

It is acknowledged that while there are multiple and wide ranging programmes in existence in schools to support literacy and numeracy, there is no cap on the number or range of literacy initiatives that schools may implement. This can lead to 'fatigue' among teachers, particularly in DEIS schools, as interventions are introduced frequently, or difficulties arise in sustaining an intervention when staff members move on and the training resources provided leave the school.

² DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.

³ NCCA: National Council for Curriculum Assessment

Support initiatives currently operating in DEIS schools

The DEIS programme has been providing support to schools for more than a decade. In 2016 there were 190 Band 1 and 138 Band 2 urban primary schools receiving supports under the programme (for more details on participating schools see <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Social-Inclusion/>). Supports to these schools include reduced class size (max 20 in junior classes; 24 in senior classes, second to sixth); the allocation of administrative (non-teaching) principals; access to the School Meals Programme; access to homework clubs; access to Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) services (including literacy and numeracy initiatives involving parents and family members, such as paired reading, paired maths, Reading for Fun, and Maths for Fun), and access to planning and other professional development supports from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

A significant feature of the DEIS programme is that participating schools must engage in school planning in key areas. This involves the school setting targets in specific areas for example literacy, numeracy, attendance or parent involvement. Schools must measure progress towards these targets and measure the outcomes. The PDST and the DEIS/SSP provide templates and support to schools in their priority areas. Although schools are advised by PDST and the DEIS School Support Programme to support interventions which support and complement DES policy, more cohesion at policy level is required, with a greater emphasis on the Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA/DES, 2016) as the core overarching literacy framework to be implemented in tandem with parental support to increase their engagement with the school and their child's education.



Support initiatives currently operating in DEIS schools

Currently, in Ireland there exists a clear contradiction between the policy narrative and the practices that are taking place in schools. The recently published *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (2012), stresses the importance of a partnership between schools and families not only in the development of literacy skills but also in mitigating the effects of educational disadvantage. It states that while a broad range of interventions to support family literacy are organised by outside agencies, these initiatives need to be more effectively coordinated and connected.

Despite the stated objective of the above Strategy, there was no objective brief to examine the extent of parental engagement in the *Learning from the Evaluation of DEIS* report (Smyth et al., 2015). This lack of focus on developing effective partnerships between schools and parents is again evidenced in the DEIS Plan 2017 *Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools*. While the plan sets out five key goals and details the actions required to achieve them, and despite decades of research pointing to the importance of parental engagement in education, it fails to address how key partnerships between schools and parents can be fostered in support of better learning outcomes for all. In the Irish context, while the policy clearly highlights the important role of the parent in supporting their child's education, many of the interventions to support literacy such as *Reading Recovery*, *First Steps*, *Literacy Lift Off*, *Power Hour*, *Jolly Phonics*, *Paired Reading and Reading Buddies*, adopt a closed door approach and exist as school based and teacher led initiatives. As already acknowledged in the literature, parental engagement in learning is not the same as parental involvement in the child's schooling. Involving parents in their child's *learning*, and supporting the engagement of parents in learning in the home brings about positive changes in children's academic attainment, (Emerson et al., 2012).

Parental engagement can be influenced by the school and policy practices which permeate everyday life in the classroom (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Engagement through a partnership approach which involves schools, parents, and national and local agencies is a stated priority of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life Strategy* (2011-2020) providing opportunities for cross-learning to benefit all DEIS schools, in particular, and this should be considered. This raises the challenge of timetabling a literacy partnership such as Doodle Families (DF)⁴ whereby parents and children can access the DF programme simultaneously.

⁴ Doodle Families: A literacy programme for children in First Class, and their parents, developed by CDI as a follow-on from its effective Doodle Den Programme.



While Irish government policy states that “schools on their own cannot tackle disadvantage and they need to be supported by wider social policies addressing socio-economic disadvantage with buy-in from families”, (DEIS Review Report, 2015, p.41), the current approach being supported by the DES lacks a unified approach between the DES and other organisations charged with supporting parental empowerment and engagement in education, resulting in a failure to sustain a coherent approach to family literacy and associated interventions. In addition, this fragmented approach is at variance with the clear recommendations to engage in a ‘partnership approach’ as outlined in the NLS for 2011-2020.

In conclusion, it must be stated that if the enhancement of parental engagement in literacy is to be seen as a core element of improving children's literacy development, we need a coherent, overarching literacy strategy which is fully implemented and appropriately monitored, with all parties working in unison to achieve successful outcomes.

This policy brief was written on behalf of CDI, by Dr Margaret O' Donnell and Dr Thérèse McPhillips, DCU.

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The Area Based Childhood Programme 2013–2017

