



EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

BETTER LITERACY

in Primary Schools

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ISSUES

February 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In 2001, the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) published *Improving English*¹, in which the strengths and areas for improvement in English in post-primary schools were identified. Since then, the Inspectorate has reported on the standards in literacy in Northern Ireland (NI) via the biennial Chief Inspector's Reports^{2,3}, and has also promoted the role of self-evaluation in improving the quality of provision across the education, youth and training sectors in the Province.^{4,5}
- 1.2 This paper is one of an occasional series produced by the Inspectorate. Unlike 'Better Mathematics' and 'Better Science,' which cover both primary and post-primary phases, the focus of this improvement report on literacy is exclusively within the primary sector. The report has been prepared in order to disseminate the effective practice found in primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI), in promoting literacy, and also to highlight key features of the successful teaching of literacy. The report's messages are fully reflective of the guiding principles for promoting better literacy which will form part of the planned, revised Northern Ireland Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
- 1.3 During the academic year 2006-07, 47 inspections with a specific focus on literacy took place in the primary phase. The paper indicates the strengths and main areas for improvement which were identified in the inspection reports. In addition, a series of questions has been included to help primary schools and teachers to become more self-evaluative in their bid to bring about improvement in the children's learning experiences in literacy, and thereby help to raise the standards achieved in literacy in primary schools across NI.

1 *Improving English in Post-primary Schools 200*

2 *The Chief Inspector's Report 2002-2004*

3 *The Chief Inspector's Report 2004-2006*

4 *Together Towards Improvement*

5 *The Reflective Teacher*

2. TALKING AND LISTENING

2.1 Strengths

In the best practice:

- ☺ in the early years, activities such as play-based learning, 'show and tell', singing and rhyme sessions, promote the children's talking and listening skills and confidence;
- ☺ parents are becoming involved in many aspects of school life, and participating in courses such as DELTA (Developing Early Listening and Talking Abilities) to assist them to support their children's learning;
- ☺ the effective planning for purposeful learning and teaching activities provides opportunities to develop children's thinking and communication skills and encourage them to observe, explore, collaborate and be creative across all subject areas;
- ☺ the well-planned and skilful interaction between adults and children through, for example, the effective use of questioning, encourages the children to reflect and respond in a more extended manner; and
- ☺ teachers give sufficient time to allow considered responses by the children, and then to use these responses effectively to engage others in reflection and discussion.

2.2 Areas for Improvement

There is a need:

- ☹ in the early years' classes, for a review and refinement of the activities to give the adults present more time to engage effectively with the children in promoting and supporting the children's learning, and to record in detail their development and attainment as a basis for planning their subsequent learning;

- ☹️ to address the narrow range of teaching approaches, undue emphasis on routine tasks and the more closed style of questioning that limits the development of talking, listening and thinking skills; and the lack of well-planned extended discussion that leads to insufficient challenge for the children;
- ☹️ to ensure that the planning for the development of talking and listening is embedded within the overall planning for reading and writing;
- ☹️ to have sufficient flexibility to allow teachers to make the best use of informal opportunities to develop the children's talking and listening skills across the curriculum; and
- ☹️ to raise the teachers' expectations of children's achievement, which are often too low, resulting in learning opportunities which lack adequate pace and display limited evidence of progression.

2.3 Questions to Support Self-Evaluation

How does the whole-school and teachers' planning promote and support coherence and progression in the development of talking and listening skills across and within curricular areas?

How does the school monitor and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the opportunities for the development of talking and listening skills?

How effective are the teachers' questioning strategies in promoting the development of talking and listening?

3. WRITING

3.1 Strengths

In the best practice:

- ☺ writing is taught within the wide context of literacy which underpins the whole curriculum;
- ☺ there is effective planning for the development of writing at whole-school, key stage and year group levels in order to ensure consistency and progression;
- ☺ writing is an enjoyable, purposeful and creative experience which takes place within a relaxed and supportive environment;
- ☺ the teachers are aware of the importance of the appropriate use of ICT to enhance and support the children's learning. As they progress through the school, the children become increasingly competent and confident in their use of computers; they have opportunities to compose and edit work directly on screen, to draft and redraft their work, to use a range of appropriate computer packages and to present their work in a variety of ways including digital form;
- ☺ the teachers promote ongoing improvement in the children's learning through self-reflection and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress in writing; support is tailored to meet individual needs; and
- ☺ the children have opportunities to use a wide range of resources, for example, individual white boards, a range of media and texts which help build confidence and a positive disposition to writing.

3.2 Areas for Improvement

There is a need to ensure that:

- ☹ the children's writing skills are planned for and developed progressively;

- ☺ through language-rich sessions, the children are encouraged and taught from an early stage to articulate, record and write their ideas, responses, views and feelings in their own words;
- ☺ the planning at whole-school and individual levels indicates progression, breadth and coherence in the children's writing experiences;
- ☺ the children have opportunities to develop their craft as writers within and across all learning areas by writing in different forms and for a variety of purposes;
- ☺ the children's progress and development in writing is not restricted by unnecessary, isolated and tedious exercises; and
- ☺ peer and self assessment form integral components of writing activities.

3.3 Questions to Support Self-Evaluation

What evidence is there to demonstrate that writing is promoted consistently and effectively within and across each key stage?

How do schemes of work show progression and coherence in planning for writing in all key stages?

How do you ensure that the children have sufficient opportunities to develop their enjoyment in writing in a progressive way across the school? What specific strategies are most effective in promoting the children's enjoyment of writing at key stage (KS) 1 and KS2?

How does the school monitor and track each child's progress in writing?

4. READING

4.1 Strengths

In the best practice:

- ☺ there is a supportive literacy environment within which reading is valued, promoted and enjoyed by children and teachers;
- ☺ whole-school and individual teacher planning for the teaching of reading is detailed, coherent and clearly indicates progression;
- ☺ there is a wide range of appropriate resources, including ICT applications and suitable collections of non-fiction and fiction texts to promote and support learning and teaching;
- ☺ the children's learning in reading is integrated well with writing and talking and listening activities, and supports, and is supported by, learning in other curricular areas;
- ☺ there is regular monitoring and evaluation of the children's learning experiences and the standards that they attain; the outcomes are used to track and plan for further improvement.

4.2 Areas for Improvement

There is a need to ensure that:

- ☹ in the early years, children can make connections between learning to read and its importance in learning;
- ☹ all teachers have the necessary skills and expertise to help promote a phonic awareness and its importance in the reading process;
- ☹ the children are taught to read through the use of a variety of word-recognition strategies, including a structured and progressive approach to the development of phonics and that they are given frequent

opportunities to practise and apply new learning in unfamiliar or challenging texts;

- ☺ there is clear evidence to show that the children's reading skills are taught and developed beyond KS1 and across all areas of learning; there is planned use of fiction and non-fiction texts, ICT and digital technology to enrich the children's learning.

4.3 Questions to Support Self-Evaluation

What evidence demonstrates that reading is promoted consistently and effectively within and across each key stage?

How do schemes of work demonstrate progression and coherence in planning for reading in all key stages?

How do the teachers identify the children's difficulties with learning to read?

How does the school monitor and track each child's progress in reading?

How does the school ensure that the children have sufficient opportunities to develop their enjoyment in reading?

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The acquisition (or otherwise) of good literacy skills influences personal and social development in almost every aspect of a child's life, for example, the ability to participate fully as a member of a school and the community it serves and, in turn, in later life, to secure employment and thereby make a positive contribution to society and the economy.
- 5.2 Literacy skills are the foundations that enable children to develop a view of, and make sense of, the world around them. Without adequate literacy skills they will miss opportunities to succeed and to achieve their potential, to access a good standard of living and to engage with, and function effectively in, everyday society.
- 5.3 The quality of the teaching of literacy, particularly how children are taught to read, write, spell and interact with one another, is fundamental to children's success in school. It is important that effective practice is identified and shared in order to promote ongoing improvement, to enrich the children's learning experiences and raise their attainments. It is hoped that this occasional paper will help primary schools to make their contribution to the further improvement of the standards of literacy currently achieved in Northern Ireland.

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