

**An Exploration of the use of Children's Literature in Early Reading in the North and  
South of Ireland**

**(EuCLER)**

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**Preamble**

This project relates to the presence of children's literature within educational policy in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In particular, it focuses on the place, profile and prevalence given to children's literature as a key component in the teaching of reading in the early years (0-8 years). It also explores the potential of rich and varied authentic children's literature to promote deep and meaningful literacy learning.

The Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) in the Republic of Ireland and the Primary Curriculum in Northern Ireland (CCEA, 2007) advocate a balanced approach to the teaching of reading in the early years in general terms. The mention of children's literature is more implied than explicitly stated as central to such an approach. This is especially true in the latter case where a greater emphasis is placed upon oral language and phonemic awareness in the Foundation Stage (4-6 years). Indeed, in the United Kingdom and in the United States there has been some criticism of the over-emphasis on constrained skills such as phonics to the detriment of a more holistic approach to reading that would include children's literature (Millar, 2009).

Since schools in both jurisdictions continue to work within constricted budgets, continuous professional development opportunities are less widespread. Therefore, schools are encouraged 'to build strength from within' so-to-speak (DE, 2016). Consequently, if the use of children's literature is assumed rather than given priority within both curricula, it is likely then that the breadth and depth of reading experiences young children receive involving literature

depends largely on the expertise of individual teachers and knowledge at school level. As a result, there may be variation in terms of subject knowledge and quality of provision (ETi, 2018).

This being the case, it seemed apt to design a research project that would provide both a policy backdrop and practical element whereby students and serving teachers as well as teacher educators could re-consider the place and potential of children's literature especially within both jurisdictions' increasing diverse populations (Sims Bishop, 1990).

Therefore, this research project planned to interrogate the extent to which Irish teachers are encouraged to use children's literature in the teaching of early reading. As teachers in the Republic of Ireland face the era of a new Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and primary teachers in Northern Ireland are now compelled to be '*learning leaders*' in their own schools (DE, 2016), this is a pivotal time to examine and define how reading might be taught with a greater and more explicit emphasis on rich and varied literature in the early years. Thus, this research project is both timely and very relevant since it can potentially help identify aspects of policy that might be developed more fulsomely and thus lead to bespoke, future professional development for those teaching reading in the early years across the island of Ireland.

The project sought to explore the following research questions:

1. What is the place and prominence of children's literature in policy relating to the teaching of early reading in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland?
2. How does literacy policy north and south compare to research-based best practice in the use of children's literature in teaching early reading?
3. What improvements could be made to policy and practice in this area?

The project methodology involved desk research, a teacher education conference and a post-conference questionnaire. The desk research was designed to identify gaps in current policy so that the proposed conference might seek to address these concerns. Subsequently, the aim of the questionnaire was to gauge the types of practice occurring out in schools in relation to the use of children's literature to teach meaningful reading in the early years.

The first section of the report will explore the notion of balance in early reading instruction and the approach to reading instruction outlined in policy documents in both the north and south of Ireland. It will also examine the rationale for using children's literature in the teaching of early reading and the need for professional development in this area. The second section of the report will examine the current practices of teachers in relation to the use of children's literature in the early years' classroom as reported by the participants of the teacher education conference who completed the questionnaire.

### **Section 1: Rationale for using children's literature in the teaching of early reading and the related policy landscape**

This section will explore the findings of our desk-based research in relation to the use of children's literature in the teaching of early reading. It will begin by examining the case for a balanced approach to early reading. It will then progress to explore the rationale for using children's literature to develop a range of early literacy skills and how this is manifested in policy documents in the north and south of Ireland. It will conclude by discussing the need for professional development in this area.

#### **A balanced approach to teaching reading**

Despite decades of 'reading wars', there is now a general consensus in the research literature that children's early literacy experiences need to involve a balance of varied activities

and experiences (Neuman & Dickenson, 2010, Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, Pressley, 2006; Torgerson et al., 2019). Young children should experience reading instruction that involves a combination of skills-based and meaning focused teaching in a motivating and supportive environment (Cowen, 2005; Pressley, 2006; Torgerson et al, 2019). Teachers should teach a wide range of literacy skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, concepts about print, fluency skills, high frequency words, vocabulary and comprehension within meaningful contexts. A balanced approach to literacy teaching can be defined as an approach to literacy that is ‘cognitively challenging, balanced in terms of attention to lower and higher order skills within authentic contexts, balanced in terms of assessment and balanced in terms of attention to oral language, reading and writing which are recognised as reciprocal and mutually supportive processes’ (Kennedy, 2012, p. 201).

Too often, early literacy practices are reduced to decoding and encoding activities, as classrooms become dominated by phonics. While phonics is very important aspect of reading instruction, it is also limited in that it only represents one part of the ‘reading puzzle’ and must be complimented with the ‘unconstrained skills’ of comprehension and vocabulary development in authentic literacy tasks from the earliest juncture so as to create life-long readers (Pressley, 2006). Indeed, interventions that only target phonics instruction tend not to transfer to comprehension achievement (Suggate, 2016). According to the National Reading Panel Report, phonics programmes that emphasize decoding exclusively and ignore the other processes involved in learning to read will ‘not succeed in making every child a skilled reader’ (NICHHD, 2000, p.113). Hence, all aspects of reading development must be recognised in early reading instruction. Indeed, studies that used dialogic reading with children’s literature reported significant, positive effects on children's language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes (Hall & Burns, 2018; Sedwick & Stothard, 2018; Swanson et al., 2011). Hence, it is crucial that teachers incorporate high quality

children's literature in their early literacy instruction to enable children to develop the 'unconstrained' skills of vocabulary and comprehension alongside the 'constrained' skills such as phonics and phonemic awareness (Paris, 2005).

In the south of Ireland, *The Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) encourages a balanced approach to early literacy teaching as its learning outcomes incorporate both constrained and unconstrained skills. Indeed, the curriculum emphasises that 'unconstrained skills, such as comprehension and vocabulary, develop across the lifespan of the child' while 'constrained skills, such as letter knowledge and conventions of print, are essential because they are fundamental to children's subsequent learning and development' (p.18). However, the term 'balanced literacy' does not appear explicitly at any point in the actual policy document nor in the support materials but it is mentioned over forty times in the research paper by Kennedy et al. (2012) which underpins the curriculum. It may be surmised that if teachers do not go as far as to consult the research papers they may not be familiar with the term and its implications for classroom practice.

Similarly, in the north, the *Primary Curriculum* document (CCEA, 2007), does not contain the term 'balanced literacy'. However, a range of instructional approaches along with explicit reference to increasingly complex phonic skills and comprehension strategies are cited as cornerstones in the literacy repertoires of early years' teachers. Specifically, in the Foundation Stage (4-6 years), it is recognized that 'children should have opportunities to listen to a range of interesting and exciting fiction, non-fiction, poetry and rhymes, retell familiar stories and share a wide range of books with adults and other children'. (CCEA, 2007, p.20). This philosophy is extended in the Key Stage 1 (6-8 years) section, where mention is made of the need for children to 'read and be read from a wide selection of poetry and prose' while also having the opportunity to 'read, explore, understand and make use of a range of traditional and digital texts' (p.54). It goes on to raise the expectation of engagement with texts by stating that

children should be facilitated to ‘explore and begin to understand how texts are structured in a range of genres’. Furthermore, they are required to ‘begin to locate, select and use texts for specific purposes’ (p.54). Such directives rely upon teachers’ own knowledge of a broad and varied array of high-quality children’s literature.

### **Rationale for the use of children’s literature within a balanced literacy framework**

There is widespread consensus that children’s literature should be an essential resource embedded within a balanced literacy framework, particularly in relation to the teaching of early years reading (Pressley et al., 2001; Verhoeven & Snow, 2001; Norton, & Norton, 2010). At its most fundamental level it contributes to children’s oral language development (Bodrova & Leong, 2006), vocabulary knowledge (Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever & Ouellette, 2008), phonological awareness and comprehension abilities (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Furthermore, it increases their motivation and engagement in reading (Kennedy et al., 2012) while also enhancing their social and emotional development (Sullivan, & Strang, 2003).

A number of research papers underpin the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) and they all contain a consistent message about the need to ensure that teachers use high quality children’s literature in their teaching of reading. For example, Cregan (2019), emphasises that ‘when children are exposed to high quality literature—both narrative and expository—through read-alouds, shared reading, or independent reading, in a wide range of genres, they encounter a standard and style of language not readily available in typical interpersonal interaction, which benefits not only first language learners but also children who are learning English as an additional language’ (p.27)

The emphasis in the research papers may have grown out of concerns related to the review of the implementation of the previous English curriculum (DES, 1999) in the south of Ireland. The review (DES, 2005) found that there was a limited number and range of books in

one-fifth of classrooms, and the inspectors found that poor provision and use of resources limited the implementation of the English curriculum in these classrooms. Significantly, difficulties with regard to the teaching of reading were identified in a quarter of the classrooms observed. In these instances, there was evidence of mechanical reading of texts and a lack of variety in the reading material provided. In addition, there was a lack of emphasis on higher-order questioning or on the use of reading material as a stimulus for discussion and analysis.

In the north, a pilot study influential in the restructuring of the first two years of the primary curriculum, grew out of concern that children in socially deprived parts of Belfast were not thriving on the-then more formal approach to teaching in general and reading in particular. The authors who reviewed this project, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum, advised the postponement of using formal reading instruction and commercial reading schemes. However, there was no mention of the use of children's literature to support their suggestion that children avail of more 'oral language and emergent literacy activities' instead (Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty, Walsh, Sheehy & O'Neill, 2005, p.2).

In the South of Ireland, *The Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) does not explicitly refer to the use of children's literature as a crucial resource in the teaching of early literacy. Instead it refers to 'texts', which are defined as 'all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, Braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital' (p.20) and to 'genre' which is defined as refers to a selection of oral and written forms in order to recount, explain, entertain, inform, give instructions, narrate, persuade and justify opinions. Oral forms include, but are not limited to, storytelling, drama, poetry, speeches, debates, film and digital media such as podcasts, videos, advertising, tv and radio broadcasts' (p. 20). While the use of these terms are useful in their holistic connotations, they may not be direct enough to ensure that children's literature is a widely used resource in Irish classrooms in the coming years. This is unfortunate as the *National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* (2011) was keen to promote reading

engagement and motivation for reading through children's literature. Indeed, it states that 'all learners should benefit from the opportunity to experience the joy and excitement of getting 'lost' in a book' (p.43).

North of the border, a national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy document entitled *Count, Read: Succeed* was launched in 2011 by the Department of Education. Despite its broad and comprehensive perspective on how to raise standards in these two key areas, the promotion of literacy skills through the use of literature was expressed generically. That is to say, that although pupils were expected to 'use language associated with texts', 'recognise some forms and features of texts' and to 'use evidence from texts', the authors defined 'texts' as materials that 'refer to ideas that are organised to communicate and present a message in written, spoken, visual, digital and symbolic forms' (p.68). It is perhaps noteworthy that the strategy only mentions the word 'enjoyment' once in the beginning (draft) levels of progression relating to the cross-curricular skill of Communication. Interestingly, enjoyment is referred to more directly in regard to the function of school and public libraries as opposed to the use of literature in class. Such facilities can provide pupils with 'free access to a wide range of high quality information and reading resources...to improve their reading and also foster their imagination, natural curiosity and an enjoyment of reading' (p.15). The Chief Inspector's 2016-2018 Report (ETi, 2018, p.64) cautioned that 'where children's reading and writing are confined to a narrow range of texts and genres, the development of comprehension skills, including inference, is compromised and there is limited opportunity for the children to articulate, refine or justify their reasoning'.

### *Phonological awareness and phonics*

Phonological awareness refers to a sensitivity to the sounds of language that is crucial in order to be able to learn how to read and write. While phonological awareness developed

the child's knowledge of phonemes aurally, phonics introduces the corresponding symbols that will enable the child to decode (read) and encode (write) words. In the report by Kennedy et al (2012), it is recommended that these skills begin in informal contexts such as storybook reading, with the teacher asking questions such as 'What is the beginning sound in this word? What other word in this sentence has the same beginning sound? Which of these words have the same beginning sounds? What are the other sounds in this word?' (p. 233). Rhyming books or books that contain unusual word play, alliteration or predictable refrains are very useful in developing phonological awareness skills. The teacher support materials include a section on phonological awareness that refers once to the use of rhyming books but otherwise overlooks the potential of children's literature to develop skills in this area. The *Primary language curriculum* document (NCCA, 2019) does not make any references to the use of children's literature in developing phonological awareness and phonic skills.

In the north, a specific section within the Talking and Listening strand of Literacy is entitled 'Phonological Awareness'. It denotes experiences through which this concept might be imparted, such as 'responding to a steady beat' and 'identifying syllables' (CCEA, 2007, p18). However, when you move up to Key Stage 1, it is merely alluded to by way of children being expected to show phonological awareness through rhyming, for example. This is somewhat surprising, considering a myriad of on-going, practical opportunities are necessary to consolidate the various elements of phonological awareness in a deliberate way (Magennis & Mulholland, 2020).

Having said that, the Linguistic Phonics Programme (Belfast Education Library Board, 2009) which drew on the findings of the Rose Report (2006), was launched in Belfast in an attempt to stymie the persistent low levels of literacy attainment as exemplified by the high percentage (70%) of children leaving primary schools without achieving Level 4 in the Levels of Progression for Communication (CCEA, 2007). Such a programme (2009) emphasises a

mixture of phonological awareness and phonics instruction supported by a strong oral language base with a simultaneous view to deepening comprehension and writing. (See their 'Model for Language Development' graphic). Much of its success was found to be due to its clear focus on phonological awareness along with a systematic programme design and delivery (Gray, Ferguson, Behan, Dunbar, Dunn & Mitchell, 2007). Consequently, many teachers in the north received training in this programme. In regards to contextualised teaching, 'scaffolded texts' are present within the Linguistic Phonics Manual, to teach letter combinations and the like. Moreover, mention is made of the need to embed instruction meaningfully through various approaches to the teaching of reading. Despite the fact that the Primary Curriculum (CCEA, 2007:20) states that young children 'should be encouraged to develop a curiosity about words, how they sound, the patterns within words and how they are composed', the chance to highlight the direct use of children's quality literature as a vehicle for phonics instruction which is fundamental to early reading acquisition (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017) has again been missed.

### *Vocabulary development*

High quality texts have a significant effect on young children's vocabulary development as they expose pupils to sophisticated and complex language not found in children's everyday speech (Serafini & Moses, 2014) and presents the teacher with ample opportunities to enhance their pupils' vocabulary development within an engaging and meaningful context (Gamble & Yates, 2008). In the report *Promoting Oral language Development in the Primary School* (Cregan, 2019) which underpins the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), Cregan (2019) contends that book reading enhances vocabulary development due to the opportunity to repeatedly expose children to vocabulary items, the frequency of exposure is needed to strengthen vocabulary learning, especially when considering unfamiliar words that children do not use in their conversational speech. Trelease

(2019) expounds the virtues of using read aloud as a medium across all grade levels but particularly to increase listening vocabulary which in turn positively impacts speaking, reading and writing vocabulary.

Research has shown that the quality of book reading interactions during the early school years predicts vocabulary outcomes (e.g. van Kleeck, 2003), and that these, can predict later reading outcomes (Sénéchal, Ouellette & Rodney, 2006). However, it is critical that the book discussion is dialogic in nature (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). A dialogic approach to reading children's literature is a form of interactive shared reading in which an adult reader asks the child or children questions about the story or the pictures in the book and provides feedback is recommended in the *Oral Language Development 3-8 report* (Shiel et al., 2012)

In the South of Ireland *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019), the learning outcome related to vocabulary refers to the acquisition of 'appropriate vocabulary to support the comprehension of text' in its learning outcome label. Within the support materials, there is an oral language outline related to the story in which teachers are guided in how to use children's literature to maximise oral language development. Support material that focuses specifically on vocabulary recommends that vocabulary is best developed through interaction within meaningful contexts, such as pretend play, read aloud, guided reading, shared writing and writing workshop (p.78). However, it might be argued that further support in the form of webinars and videos of good practice would enhance the likelihood of teachers actively using children's literature as an effective tool to develop vocabulary.

In the north, the fifth strand specifically outlined in the Talking and Listening element of the Foundation Stage Literacy curriculum, is entitled 'An Extended Vocabulary'. As well as providing opportunities to listen, respond and interact with others, fiction and non-fiction texts, teachers are encouraged to create 'focused experiences to introduce or generate vocabulary'. It is anticipated that by doing so, children will 'express themselves with increasing clarity and

confidence, using a growing vocabulary and more complex sentence structure' (CCEA, 2007: 19). The use of such an expanding and increasingly precise vocabulary range is also expected to spill over into their discussion and writing (pp.21 & 22) as they move up into Key Stage 1 (p.52). Similarly, the cultivation of cross-curricular vocabulary is stipulated as part of the statutory requirements in primary.

### *Comprehension*

Children's literature creates authentic, engaging contexts for comprehension instruction (NEPS, 2015; Shanahan et al, 2010). The read aloud format provides a context for introducing comprehension strategies (predicting, connecting, inferring, summarising and questioning) that children will later employ when reading independently. Research has established the benefits of text-based discussion for comprehension (Nystrand, 2006). Notably, Harvey and Goudvis (2017) vividly capture the intricacies involved in teaching comprehension strategies in their book entitled, *Strategies That Work*. In particular, they explain the strategic, deep-seated, interactive nature of comprehending texts by encouraging readers to follow their 'inner conversation' (p.88) in order to monitor their understanding. Not only do they provide a list of professional resources but also an array of children's texts for teaching and embedding such comprehension strategies. Tompkins and Rodgers (2019) extend this complex picture by illuminating the connections across the reading-writing continuum. Even among students reading in a second language, cognitively challenging discussion supports inferential thinking (Collins, 2016). Comprehension benefits from both peer and whole-class discussions facilitated by a teacher (Van Den Branden, 2000).

The *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) in the South of Ireland, states that children in the junior classes should be required to 'draw on background knowledge as well as a range of comprehension strategies to engage and create meaning when working with a range

of texts' (p.27). Again, while the use of high quality children's literature is not mentioned in the policy document, there is a danger that teachers may misinterpret this learning outcome label and use levelled texts to achieve this learning outcome rather than consider the potential of children's literature in this area. However, the research papers supporting the curriculum do explicitly state the importance of reading aloud in developing comprehension skills and strategies (see Kennedy et al, 2012). The support materials related to the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) do contain some useful resources for teachers that promote the use of children's literature in the development of early reading skills. Most notably there are a suite of videos on critical thinking and book talk developed by Mary Roche. There are also useful resources in relation to the use of picture books and wordless picture books when introducing and supporting new comprehension strategies. (p.6). Indeed, in the support materials, it states that 'direct comprehension instruction, although a vital aspect of the reading process, can often be neglected, particularly in the infant classrooms where a great emphasis is placed on phonics. However, as can be seen in the accompanying videos, the development of comprehension skills can be comfortably integrated with oral language lessons, reading, writing and Aistear, ensuring time for all curricular areas'.

In terms of current classroom practice in the South of Ireland, *Building Bridges of Understanding* (Gleeson & Courtney, 2012) is a popular comprehension programme developed by researchers in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick that is widely used in Irish classrooms in the South of Ireland. This programme recommends the use of children's literature in the teaching of comprehension strategies.

In the north, the Primary Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) refers to the need for Key Stage 1 and 2 children to 'use a range of comprehension skills, both oral and written, to interpret and discuss texts' (p.54). However, individual strategies, namely predicting and inferring are mentioned in passing. It is fair to say that the complexity and richness of understanding

required on behalf of the reader when engaging with texts, is not fully expressed in the wording of this document. In terms of support materials, the CCEA website which was updated and ‘restocked’ in February of this year, does contain a swathe of video clips exemplifying the use of Reciprocal Reading skills in action.

### *Motivation and engagement in reading*

According to Frank Smith (1988), teachers need to invite children to “join the literacy club.” The most effective method of doing this, is to teach reading using children’s literature. The social nature of literacy that is maximised during an interactive read aloud can be overlooked in the early years of school if the focus of reading instruction is on decoding skills. Indeed, reading aloud using high quality children’s literature is known to be ‘the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read’ (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p.23). Children who love having books read to them today are the children who tomorrow are engaged in lessons with books and who eventually become lifelong readers. Teacher read-aloud using high quality children’s literature also help to develop a bond between a teacher and his/her pupils through the shared delight and wonder that a great book can bring, a bond which can prove essential in effective teaching (Fox, 2008). Children’s literature can be a catalyst for building a community of readers. In addition, in order to develop oral language skills, children need something to talk about that is motivating and engaging (Cregan, 2019). Literature can act as a source of vicarious experience which can encourage classroom discussions (Serafini & Moses, 2014).

In the South of Ireland, *The Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) highlights the importance of motivation and engagement in reading experiences as they are the first two learning outcome labels a teacher discovers on exploring the content for reading in the junior classes. This builds on the emphasis placed by the 1999 English curriculum in which the

importance of developing a reading culture in schools, in which books and reading are seen as valuable and pleasurable was emphasised. However, the 1999 curriculum was criticised for the lack of specific guidance on how to cultivate motivation, engagement and positive dispositions (Kennedy, 2012). The support materials which accompany *The Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2019) are useful in this regard, though their format as a written document rather than a webinar or seminar may affect teacher engagement.

In the north, the ‘Big Picture’ of the Curriculum at Primary (CCEA, 2007a) outlines the essential attitudes and dispositions that underpin the design of the current curriculum. These include ‘curiosity’ and ‘openness to new ideas’. It also stipulates that such aptitudes are more likely to be fostered through learning experiences that are ‘challenging and engaging’ as well as ‘relevant and enjoyable’. The introduction to the curriculum document itself, goes on to state that motivation is engendered by pupils’ personal choice and voice when it comes to deciding on what to learn and how to improve.

Perhaps one of the most notable and prevalent initiatives to take root in the north in recent years is the Accelerated Reading Programme. This digital platform, although not a form of instruction in itself is designed to encourage pupils to read independently. Indeed, it would appear to chime with at least some of Cremin et al’s (2014) recommendations regarding the building of a ‘community of readers’. However Willingham (2015) cautions against the potential danger of extrinsic motivation such as rewards (or points in this case) that can become the prize itself rather than the long-term pursuit of reading for enjoyment.

The non-profit organisation, Understood.org (<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/tests-standards/accelerated-reader-what-you-need-to-know>) also cautions that quizzes may prove difficult and therefore much less accurate for children with attention and working memory issues, even if they have read and understood the books in question. On the upside, the data generated for those who are not ‘neuro-diverse’ can

be analysed to inform potential interventions and upgrades to challenges, both individually and collectively within a class. In addition, it is vital that teachers supplement this programme with rich, interactive discussion around texts where pupils have the opportunity to ‘leave tracks of thinking’ on their pages (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017, p.16).

### *Socio-emotional development*

Reading children’s literature provides a platform for children to experience characters, locations and circumstances that they may not be able to experience in real life. These vicarious experiences allow children to develop a sense of empathy for others and understand their own context in more meaningful ways. While the 1999 *English curriculum (DES, 1999)* in the South of Ireland included an emotional and imaginative development through language strand unit where it emphasised the importance of encouraging children to connect with a wide variety of emotional life through stories and literature and to respond to fiction and poetry and relate these to personal experience, the new *Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019)* does not explicitly state the need for a holistic perspective in relation to language learning.

Similarly to the south, direct connections between children’s literature and personal development within the Language and Literacy area of learning in the Primary Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) in the north, are absent. This is unfortunate, considering the power of high-quality children’s literature in sensitively addressing a myriad of life issues (Magennis, 2009). Since the curriculum is holistic in design, general opportunities to connect personal experiences with new learning are peppered throughout. However, socio-emotional development is dealt with most pointedly in the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) area of learning. These two specific but interlinked strands allow for exploration of self and others in the wider community through a range of units of work such as ‘Living, Learning Together’, and ‘Stepping Out’ among other resources.

Complementary to this, are the Self-Management, Working with Others and Being Creative aspects of the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities component of the statutory curriculum. Again, resources have been produced by CCEA to help facilitate and embed such aptitudes deeply. These include Emotion Cue Cards as well as two series of stories called ‘Listen and Think’ (Foundation Stage) and ‘Wise Up and Listen’ (Key Stage 1). Prior to the current iteration of the primary curriculum, Montgomery and Birthistle (2001), under the auspices of CCEA produced a literacy-based resource file entitled ‘Primary Values’ to support the teaching of social understanding and emotional regulation through story.

It is clear that children’s literature can enhance the teaching of early reading in many ways but teachers need to feel confident in choosing and using children’s literature for reading instruction. This points to the need to consider the professional development needs of primary school teachers in the early years’ classroom.

### **Need for professional development**

Teachers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practice (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). Indeed, the *National Strategy for literacy and numeracy 2011-2020* emphasises the need for teacher CPD in order to ensure literacy is being taught effectively.

*The Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) was introduced for junior classes in 2014. Following its release, the NCCA compiled an interim report on the issues related to the dissemination of the curriculum. The most frequently suggested improvement related to effective communications about the curriculum. Many respondents also suggested that comprehensive professional development would be required moving forward including online demonstrations, online toolkits and online tutorials. Teachers most wanted guidance on comprehension, oral language and phonics. Currently, teachers are participating in a series of

webinars to facilitate curriculum implementation. No data has been gathered on whether or not the current available suite of resources is deemed adequate by teachers. There is also a dearth of resources in presentation format in relation to the teaching of reading. That is, to date most resources are either in written document format or in demonstration video format. This project presents an opportunity to contribute to teacher professional development through a teacher education conference.

In 2016, the Department of Education (DE) launched Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning. However, the out-workings of this document were ‘put on ice’ with the collapse of the northern Executive in January 2017. Consequently, it was due for a relaunch in 2020 but as yet, that has not happened due to the restrictions incurred by the Coronavirus pandemic. It is based on the vision that ‘every teacher is a learning leader’ (p.4) and to this end, they have made 15 policy commitments. Their objective is to provide ‘a structured framework for teacher professional learning; [to] develop the leadership capacity of teachers; and [to] provide practice-led support within communities of effective practice’ (p.10). Anecdotally, teachers are hungry for professional learning opportunities as many availed of on-line courses, especially in literacy during the recent summer months. Other popular avenues for gaining professional growth include the TeachMeet culture where educators share their expertise in informal, social settings. Much support is offered in the recently upgraded CCEA website resource portal. However, in the academic year 2018-2019 CCEA produced a report, outlining their findings in relation to their curriculum monitoring project. Among other recommendations, they have vowed to increase the quantity and accessibility of the professional learning opportunities they offer as well as make their resources easier to navigate (CCEA, 2019).

Indeed, the United Kingdom Literacy Association [UKLA] in their 2009 publication ‘Occasional Paper on Literature and Literacy in Primary Education’ propose that teachers have

an obligation to ‘help each other build a richer conception of literacy learning, one in which creativity and the imagination have central roles’ (p.3). They postulate that this challenge can be met through comprehensive approaches to reading that include both ‘efferent’ and ‘aesthetic’ goals underpinned by a wide and exciting range of high-quality children’s literature.

## **Section 2: Current Practices**

This section will explore the findings from the questionnaire completed by participants at the teacher education conference, held in September 2021. In this questionnaire, we invited the participants to share their experiences of using children’s literature in the teaching of early reading and any new learnings that they gleaned from the conference. One hundred and twenty teachers, student teachers and teacher educators attended the conference and we received 33 responses to our survey. Our survey consisted of five open ended questions designed to elicit current practices and future possibilities relating to the use of children’s literature in the early years’ classroom.

### **Current use of children’s literature in the classroom**

The first question asked participants to share their current practices in relation to the use of children’s literature in the early years’ classroom (table 1 below). Amid the open responses, the goal of enthusing or encouraging children to read was mentioned most often, with eight respondents commenting on this. Other popular uses included using children’s literature to enhance oral language development and to inspire writing. For example, one respondent commented: ‘I have used literature as a springboard for class discussions, as a starting point for writing and as a means of merely encouraging children to immerse themselves in listening to a story’. Using children’s literature in relation to teaching a topic or a theme was also mentioned numerous times, for example: ‘As part of a thematic approach to teaching and learning in the foundation stage’. While some respondents mentioned the use of children’s

literature to teach some reading skills such as rhyme, grammar and spelling, for example: ‘from simple story time, to working on word level work using a text, to dramatising a story or using a story sack / story props. Anything that brings stories to life!’; it was interesting to note that the use of children’s literature to enhance comprehension and vocabulary development was rarely mentioned in relation to current practice as recommended by the literature (Serafini & Moses, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2010).

To teach vocabulary	To teach comprehension	To inspire writing	Explore a topic or theme	Art or drama	To model reading	To enthuse or excite about reading	Oral language development / discussion	Skills: rhyme, grammar, spelling, word work
1	1	7	6	3	3	8	7	4

Table 1: Tell us about how you have used children’s literature in the teaching of early reading in the past.

### Challenges of using children’s literature

The participants were asked to comment of the challenges that they have encountered in using children’s literature in the teaching of early reading (see table 2 below). The most common challenge mentioned was finding suitable resources. One respondent reported a lack of ‘teacher confidence in choosing quality texts’, another bemoaned the emphasis on a thematic approach, commenting: ‘the biggest challenge is finding stories that are interesting and at the appropriate reading level. We are being told to take a thematic approach to everything so at times I find it difficult to find literature that lends itself to a particular theme. at times there are books that I feel I can’t read to the children as it doesn't 'fit' into the curriculum!! Another common challenge was a perceived lack of time to include children’s literature in teaching, for example one respondent commented: ‘time constraints and pressures to achieve curriculum targets’ another had a ‘guilty feeling that reading for pleasure may not enough of a learning goal’. Others felt that more visible aspects of reading instruction such as phonics tended to dominate class time, with ‘so much emphasis on learning to read words rather than sharing books and reading and enjoying stories together’. Another difficulty that was commonly

reported was children's lack of experience with children's literature outside of school that lead to lack of engagement or a difficulty attending to a story, for example, one respondent commented: 'increasingly, children have very few books at home to read or to enjoy again and again. Some children have no experience or understanding of rhyme. There has been an increase in speech and language impairments'.

Time	Resources	Engagement, ability to listen and respond
11	13	8

Table 2: What are the challenges you have encountered in using children's literature in the teaching of early reading?

### **Opportunities presented by children's literature**

Respondents were asked to identify what opportunities they identified in using children's literature in the teaching of early reading (table 3 below). The most common response related to the development of a 'love' for reading or unleashing the 'magic' of reading in the classroom that would inspire children to read (Fox, 2008). The respondents also commented on children's literature as a means for enhancing oral language development and to a lesser extent vocabulary development (Serafini & Moses, 2014). However, only two respondents mentioned children's literature as a vehicle for enhancing comprehension development (NEPS, 2015). While many respondents concurred that children's literature was a useful resource in cross curricular learning; some made particular reference to the possibility of socio-emotional development through children's literature as well (Sullivan & Strang, 2003). For example, one respondent commented:

'My P1's love story time - listening to a story is one thing. Say Harry and the Bucketful of Dinosaurs - the children enjoyed reading / listening to the story but the next day

during play I introduced some toy dinosaurs and a bucket. I left them on the mat with a copy of the book - the dramatisation, the excitement and language development that ensued was phenomenal. I had to get more copies of the book as it was so popular in our class library! The children drew dinosaurs, made their own puppets, we then looked at non-fiction books, made dough dinosaurs, created a dinosaur land ... it went on and on!’

and another stated that children’s literature ‘allow the students to see themselves in the literature they read (reflect realities); develops empathy; opens diverse and different worlds to young minds’.

‘love’ of reading/ ‘magic’ of reading	18
Oral language development	9
Vocabulary development	5
Cross-curricular	8
Comprehension	2
Socio-emotional development	3

Table 3: What are the opportunities in using children’s literature in the teaching of early reading?

### **New learning gleaned from the conference**

The respondents were asked to comment on what they had learned from the conference. Their responses revealed that many had gleaned new confidence in using children’s literature to develop comprehension skills and strategies in the classroom. One respondent commented that the conference had: ‘made me think about those comprehension skills. Sometimes with phonics, I feel that we get bogged down by the decoding and physical reading of a text that in the Early Years, these key skills are overlooked or are an afterthought in a reading session’, while another felt that ‘being taught how to use gradual release of responsibility was invaluable’. Others felt vindicated by the conference content, for example ‘trusting my own

teacher judgement on the balance between phonics, reading and writing. Also understanding that assessing comprehension or reading for meaning and T&L is equally as important as tracking children's phonemic awareness'. Many of the respondents also felt that they had received good input on choosing resources, for example: 'I have also left with lots of ideas such as book suggestions'. Respondents also frequently commented on a renewed confidence or awareness to spend more time on children's literature, for example: 'greater determination to find the time to bring literature to life in my room' and 'confidence to teach using children's literature. Reassured that reading for pleasure is an important motivator and essential tool in the toolbox for teaching'.

How to develop comprehension	11
Resources	9
To make time for children's literature	7
The 'love'/'magic' of reading	4
Confidence in using children's literature	6
How to involve children who get distracted	2

Table 4: What new learning will you take away from today's conference? Tell us about how it might impact your practice.

### **Motivation for conference attendance**

Respondents were asked to share their motivation for attending the conference. Many commented that they wished to enhance their own practice in reading instruction while others who were in leadership roles hoped to encourage others, for example: 'to re-invigour staff team on the use of literature as a way of promoting an improved vocabulary'. Many had attended due to an interest in reading instruction and/or children's literature, for example: 'I just love children's books and I enjoy listening to like-minded people'

Interest	Deeper understanding/ enhance practice	Encourage others (from a leadership role)
11	15	6

Table 5: What motivated you to attend today's conference?

In general, the conference was very well attended and well-received by the audience who left very positive comments on the event, for example: 'Thank you to the wonderful keynote speakers and reminding me why I love to teach!', 'I really enjoyed the conference-great to see the focus on keeping the magic alive. So important that we remember we have a community of learners', 'Today's conference was inspirational as there was a shared vision and a passion from the presenters and all the attendees', 'All speakers on the conference were great and helpful, all the information was very useful and will help me in my journey to becoming the teacher I would like to be', and 'The conference was exemplary! Congratulations to everyone involved. Thank you all for sharing your time and expertise, for bringing so much value and valuable discussion to such a wide audience today. Molann an obair na mná'.

## Conclusion

This project sought to explore the presence of children's literature within educational policy in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and to subsequently develop a teacher education conference that encouraged teachers, both north and south, to use more children's literature in the teaching of early reading so that learning to read is joyful and meaningful. The conference sought to demonstrate the value of children's literature in teaching reading while also paying attention to how to use this approach effectively. Indeed, according to Serafini (2012): 'If teachers do not value children's literature, and the possible roles that it may play in the reading curriculum, then they will not find time for reading and discussing

children's literature'. Teachers working in the early years' classroom need to make literacy learning engaging, enjoyable and most importantly- meaningful. Louisa Moats (2020), one of the foremost voices in the field of reading instruction in the US in the last 40 years, distills the essence of learning to read (and write) by stating that, 'the common denominator...is the ability to recognise, analyze, and produce language in all of its forms'. In other words, code-breaking and meaning-making are 'reciprocal and interactive' in nature (p.10). What better way to achieve such a fundamental and complex goal other than through the use of high-quality children's literature?

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