

**School Self-Evaluation; Improving Infant Literacy in a
DEIS School through a model of Collaborative Inquiry
and Reflection.**

By

Sinéad Mangan

B. Ed. MA (Hons).

Supervisor:

**Professor Gerry McNamara
School of Education, Dublin City University.**

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: Sinead Mangan _____

ID No: 10101764

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Abstract

It is my intention in this thesis to explore the concept of School Self-Evaluation to improve infant literacy in a DEIS Band 2 primary school of diverse pupil population. The desired outcome of this research is to design an individualized reading methodology, a direct instructional paradigm for teaching reading in a rural multi-cultural school with 15 nationalities. This school-based action research approach is consistent with international trends and has become a very significant focus in improving quality in our schools (McNamara, O'Hara, 2008, Matthews, 2010). The research question that guided the study is simply: How can we improve our daily practice to raise literacy levels in infant classes?

The literature review focuses on literacy, school self-evaluation, action research and motivational leadership. An action research methodology is used for systematic inquiry and the continual need for critique (Mc Niff, Whitehead, 2010), in order to identify school needs and develop action plans to support the change process.

A large volume of qualitative and quantitative data was generated and while I engaged in a mixed methods approach, quantitative findings are secondary to qualitative findings. The analysis is based on the literature, research data and my experience as Principal. Further timely validation of the research came during a pilot Whole School Evaluation/Management Leadership and Learning Inspection. This is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate Division. 'It affirms positive aspects of the school's work and suggests areas for development' (Department of Education and Skills, 2010). The findings of the Inspectorate further added to our evidence base, authenticating our data and highlighting the importance of the leadership style of the Principal.

It is a principle argument of this cases-study that, internal evaluation should be supported by external evaluation, with constant reference to context and pupil population. Schools need to be taught how to self-evaluate, not investigated nor expected to comply with our present trends towards over-regulation. This study engages with a framework that represents the very meaningful empowerment of classteachers who crucially depend on the action and interactions of their leader, developing a shared collective responsibility, a bottom-up approach with top-down support. This is done by balancing what is best for individual pupils

and what is best for our school community. ‘This is particularly important in educational communities of cultural diversity, where living together with difference calls for living together with understanding and tolerance’ (Taysum, A. 2010).

Findings also reveal that the necessity for early intervention if all pupils are to succeed to the best of their ability cannot be ignored as it is central to social inclusion and future life chances. If improving quality means ensuring sustainability of best practice, then leadership in this study involves empowering teachers to drive sustainable change to suit individual pupil needs through the provision of appropriate support and resources. The emergent leaders that became manifest in the school, were encouraged through critical reflection, open collaborative inquiry, participative decision making, clearly defined objectives, and creative autonomy. Leadership in this study has to do with change. A significant feature of change is the teacher as change agent. In operational terms, without change no leadership has occurred.

Conclusions will then be drawn and recommendations made proposing the most appropriate strategies for dealing with the complex issues of school improvement and school self-evaluation.

Chapter 1

Introduction

To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark. (Victor Hugo).

1.1 Introduction

The teaching of reading is a complex activity requiring dedicated and creative teacher interventions. The gap between theory and practice in the teaching of reading to pupils from diverse backgrounds is the subject of this research project. The theory practice gap represents an ideological divide with its roots in the history of early education. This case study outlines the context within which the research developed, the key literature and the methodology used.

While literature exists relating to educational change in our classrooms and the importance of teacher experience and expertise in facilitating the many changes in the Irish Education System in the last decade, there is a dearth of literature on the additional burden these changes have brought to schools and the daily implications for class teachers and Principals. This research highlights the central role of the class teacher in the evaluation/change process towards literacy improvement, and the significant role of primary school principals in leading and managing that change.

It is the author's intention using action research to evaluate and improve a reading programme for infant classes in a school with a diverse population of pupils from middle class, non-national and socio economic disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically the purpose is to assess the reading programmes presently practiced in our infant classes, building on them and collaboratively improving practice in light of our particular pupil population and the current national framework on literacy. It is hoped through collaborative research to support the individual learning trajectories of children in a mixed ability setting, and to develop a coherent instructional framework catering for all our pupils.

The challenge is to improve literacy, through a model of proactive inquiry and reflection, to balance the needs of all pupils, no matter what their background, to give each child a good start.

1.2 Rationale

Historically, the education system has conformed to the requirements of regulatory or compliance accountability systems, usually based on government statutes, subscribing to professional norms established by associations of educators and departments of education. As the economies of nations compete for strong positions within a competitive global marketplace, many governments have focused their attention on the performance of their education system.

Talk of ‘quality’ is in fashion presently (Altrichter, H. 1999). In recent years the emergence of quality as a key issue in education has led to the development of a plethora of policies and procedures that are handed down from politicians and government departments to administrators, principals, teachers and learners alike. Today’s economic climate is arguably tougher than at any time in the last number of decades. Most markets are facing huge upheaval and the ideology of neo-liberalism which seeks to apply the values of the market place to education is placing an added burden on the Irish education system. In a short few years a quality industry has mushroomed in schools creating an ever-increasing bureaucratic workload on those daily responsible for the running of schools and the delivery of education and training. Much has been written about school improvement (Miles & Huberman 1984, Mortimore 1989, Stoll & Fink, 1996, Macbeath 1999, Syed 2008), the importance of teacher expertise to enhance pupil outcomes (Earley & Porritt 2010, Gleeson 2012, King 2012), and initiatives to promote the raising of standards in literacy, (Fawcett, G. and Rasinski, T. 2008, Kennedy 2010, Eivers et al, 2010, Guthrie, J. 2011, Allington, R., 2012).

School effectiveness is a complex idea that needs to be understood both in relation to teachers’ perceptions and how these vary over time in different institutional and personal contexts and in comparison with other teachers in similar contexts in terms of value-added pupil attainment| (Day et al., 2006c). Guy Neave (1998) speaks of the ‘evaluative state’, which entails state schools and other academic institutions having full autonomy to manage their own affairs, while at the same time often subjected to greater regulation and ‘surveillance’. ‘School self-evaluation has become the new buzzword in Irish education’ (McNamara & O’Hara 2008, Matthews, 2010). The term evaluation is often linked to quality assurance, effectiveness and improvement. The multiple purposes of evaluation can be broadly grouped into two: accountability and school improvement (Matthews, 2010). It is expected that

individual schools will, through greater autonomy, accept responsibility for the quality of education they provide.

The evaluation and inspection of many public services, including education, has become increasingly common in most countries in the developed world. (McNamara, & O'Hara, 2008).

School Self Evaluation has become a widespread activity internationally in a variety of contexts since the 1960s aiming to provide information to policy makers and the public about value for money, compliance with standards and regulation, and the quality of the services provided (OECD, 2009b). The present concept of evaluation is rooted in reform efforts and the quality of education in our schools. This reform agenda according to McNamara & O'Hara have been systematically encouraged by governments, sections of the media and most influentially by key trans-national agencies such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development the World Bank and the European Union). School self-evaluation is about maintaining high standards and improving the learning experiences and educational outcomes for all pupils by using 'evidence informed leadership'(Taysum,2010) .It demands much from school leaders as it is a collaborative reflective process of internal school review whereby the principal, deputy principal and teachers in consultation with the board of management, parents and pupils engage reflectively on the work of their school making informed decisions and reaching consensus towards school improvement for all involved. Through enabling schools to collaboratively identify areas in need of improvement and development it contributes to better learning for both pupils and teachers. The Programme for Government, 2011-2016 sets out specific targets in relation to self-evaluation and improvement...'all schools to engage in robust self-evaluation and put in place a three-year school improvement plan which includes specific targets for the promotion of literacy and numeracy'.

Evaluation criteria help to guide schools in making quality judgements about their work e.g. the quality of curriculum delivery, the quality of documentation, the quality of pupils' learning ,the quality of teachers' practice ,the quality of reporting/reviewing. These criteria help to maintain standards of best practice as well as improving the learning experiences and educational outcomes for the pupils. Evaluation criteria and tools assist in gathering data or evidence related to each chosen evaluation theme. This evidence helps schools to organize

its self-evaluation processes. According to the new guidelines... 'by using such a framework with themes and related criteria to organize its evaluation activities, a school can undertake an in-depth inquiry into teaching and learning, literacy and numeracy in a systematic and coherent way' (School Self Evaluation Guidelines, Department of Education and Skills, 2013). The salient issue for evaluating is change.

The maelstrom of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has necessitated change at a pace few have imagined a generation ago. Change demands leadership and a focus on improvement and transformation of practices. School leadership has emerged as a considerable force in realizing a change agenda in education. The need for systematic change that empowers and sustains this leadership is ongoing. Leadership requires focus, collective action by those who govern schools and those who work in schools; requires the development of all knowledge and skills that underpin school improvement; and above all, requires that the best potential leaders are motivated to take up leadership roles. Any refocusing on a more learning-centred role for school leaders can be strengthened by these considerations, but will also challenge the orthodoxy of practices towards a school environment where leaders, principals and others, are comfortable with the increased focus on classroom practices' (O'Sullivan & West-Burnham, 2011p.57).

These are extraordinary times in education. Leaders in this academic arena are coping with constant change and face regular challenges in their improvement quest. By appreciating their pupil population, school culture and context, effective leaders hope to build on tried and tested instruction and positively promote change for the whole school. Jackson in his writing observes that school systems are attempting 'to reach 21st century goals using 19th century concepts' (Jackson, E. 2008). The ability to motivate and create incentives for others to act for the greater good must be accomplished as a change method. Articles and books have been written on change management, how to build teams, how to motivate, review, reflect and connect with staff, pupils, parents, all stakeholders. Effective leaders know that everyone does not find change easy or even acceptable. What staff need in this time of transition, of professional learning and growth is appropriate support and training to help them celebrate what they already know, and to generate 'new knowledge' (Mc Niff, 2002). Many companies are paying thousands in fees to encourage staff to attend such training courses. While been aware of how schools are politically, structurally and functionally different from

companies and factories, where intuition and professional judgement are not culturally accepted and conformity the norm, schools need this type of input and training if they are to emulate market-driven demands, conforming to compliance accountability structures, to become organisations ‘where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together’ (Senge,1990, p.3).

Many countries have adopted school accountability systems, school self evaluation is on their educational agenda for some time and is a prominent feature in public school systems in a number of countries including Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland and the Netherlands. Calls for quality assurance and evaluation has resulted in a growing demand for practicable, small-scale development work and evaluation both from schools and from educational administration (Altrichter,H.,1999) It is perceived as a logical consequence of the greater autonomy enjoyed by schools (OECD, 1998) and as a method of enhancing school effectiveness in their response to the needs of their pupil population, as well as to allow them to improve (Meuret D. & Morlaix, S. 2003). In the 1980s and 1990s, the governance of Finland’s schools was transformed through the delegation of authority for curriculum development and the evaluation of learning outcomes to local schools. ‘The 1985 curriculum gave teachers and their schools control over the selection of teaching methods and the evaluation of learning outcomes’ (Sabel et al., 2011:23). Self-evaluation in Finnish schools is part of the deliberate development of the curriculum and is recognized as a necessary means of creating a productive school. In England and Scotland there are long-established external inspection models in use. Other countries like New Zealand, Netherlands and some Australian states are also considering introducing school evaluation systems (DES, 2013)

In keeping with school accountability approaches in other parts of the globe, the Irish Inspectorate launched the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) initiative in 1996, followed by years of negotiation with teacher unions in relation to content and practicalities and in the year 2003-04 the first phased implementation of WSE started in primary and post-primary schools. Ireland’s approach to quality assurance through internal school review and self-evaluation with the support of external evaluation is in many respects consistent with international trends. Previously evaluation has been the responsibility of the inspectorate, ‘an

external mechanism with a focus on compliance and standards’ (Matthews, 2010). The present concept of evaluation nationally is based on efforts to reform the quality of education in Irish schools, using best practice and in-school techniques that will encourage innovative new approaches and strategies to create a truly dynamic educational atmosphere.

With this in mind Ruairi Quinn our present Minister for Education, in his speech at the IPPN (Irish Primary Principals Network Conference 2014), focused mainly on improving quality and accountability in our schools ‘The roll-out of School Self Evaluation will create a culture of internal reflection and accountability in a school community, rather than an artificial accountability, which is better for political sound-bites than it is for educational improvement...to give teachers and schools the information they need to respond to the learning needs of children, providing valuable system-wide information to support our efforts to improving teaching quality, strengthening school leadership and creating the right opportunities for Irish adults’ (Ruairi Quinn, Minister of Education 24/1/2014).

Using the recent DES School Self Evaluation framework which supports an internal review of school procedures for promoting school effectiveness and improvement, it is hoped during this research to bring about positive change in how we teach our pupils to read. ‘It can bring real benefits to schools and have a positive impact on the way in which teachers discuss how they teach and how well their pupils/students are learning’. (Hislop , H. 2012).

A core element of the Finnish system so positively praised in the literature, is early identification of learning difficulties and immediate provision of sufficient appropriate support to meet the learning objectives while allowing pupils with special learning needs to remain in class with his/her peers (Sabel et al., 2011; 28). In the context of this action research project all pupils in junior and senior infants will be withdrawn daily for individual help thus banishing any stigma and giving everyone the daily one to one tuition they enjoy and benefit from hugely. In this case-study school self evaluation and action research go hand in hand ‘when an organization adopts and implements the fruits of their endeavours’ (Mc Namara & O’Hara, 2000) by acting as change agents to improve daily practice in their context:

‘Action research is intended to support teachers and groups of teachers in coping with the problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way’ (Altrichter *et al.*, 1993:4).

While acknowledging that ‘the process is problematic’, we have used action research to ‘contribute to the process of managing change’ (Mc Namara & O’Hara, 2000) and in order to lay the groundwork for their necessary co-operation and enthusiasm, teachers will be fully consulted through regular staff meetings, focus groups and dialogue. The purpose and direction of each change cycle discussed before implementation and good open communication structures set up to ensure positive participation by all staff involved.

Nationally it is anticipated that schools will self-evaluate and individually accept responsibility for the quality of education provided to pupils. While it is acknowledged that schools need to be assessed and self evaluate, there is little guidance as to how this might be achieved. Practitioners find the absence of external support frustrating, and external inspections daunting. There is a great degree of uncertainty and very little consultation regarding appropriate actions to improve standards. As Principal and researcher I agree with Mc Namara & O’Hara’s contention that the ‘the absence of a critical mass of understanding or even awareness of the concepts requires significant advocacy work on the teacher practitioners’ part in their own communities’ (2000). Little is written documenting the diversity of some of our schools and the factors that facilitate or inhibit their efforts towards achieving school effectiveness. While evaluating schools I believe that it is necessary to take cognizance of these factors, something only a Principal and classteachers can do, together. Who else knows the daily reality in schools? Who else can effectively access the rich, raw data of the infant classrooms?

A particular feature of this research is the diverse pupil population of this West of Ireland casestudy. Differences in pupil intake i.e. their particular social class background, ethnicity, as well as their initial attainment levels at entry to junior infants are the focus of this research. Our school community has altered beyond recognition in ten years. Our local community as a result of extensive social and economic change has ‘changed utterly’. A case study approach suits as it facilitates flexibility (Yin, 2009) and teachers, through their shared journey of participatory action research to discover how to assist the school and wider community. The iterative nature of this research approach is appropriate for the highly isolated and individualistic nature of class teaching and enables teachers to be guided by their

own collaborative research while critically looking at the processes that enable and inhibit the teaching of reading in infant classes.

As principal I aim to promote teacher collaboration and involvement in decision-making, problem-solving and forward planning (Webb, 2007) while encouraging reflective practice (Dewey 1933, Schon 1987, Mann et al., 2009) and teacher autonomy (Seed, 2008). It is hoped to encourage a more meaningful empowerment of practitioners which I believe is at the heart of learning in primary schools while helping class teachers who grapple daily in their efforts to develop practices which are practical and reliable. The author hopes her leadership will facilitate a culture of learning (Leonard, 2002; Fullan et al., 2005) to improve professional practice and increase the capacity to change.

It is hoped to change how we are teaching reading in our junior classes, to highlight good practice that will contribute to addressing the complex issue of underachievement in literacy in disadvantaged areas of diverse population, thus feeding into current future reading programmes nationally and internationally. Furthermore, in a rural town with high unemployment, emigration and immigration, it is necessary to challenge the theory practice gap and the actual delivery of reading skills to multi cultural classes by providing a differentiated reading experience and tailoring learning to suit the reading needs and ability of each child in junior and senior infants in primary school.

I am convinced that by catching pupils early, despite their diversity, before they start to fail, the better chance they will have in later years. I believe that change is necessary and that despite possible resistance the whole school will benefit from that change. Through openly communicating the problem, and following a set of practical action cycles (Mangan, 2013), collaborative inquiry and reflection will identify pupil needs, clarify the allocation of authority and responsibility within the school and lead to the creation of sustainable solutions in a supportive problem-solving workplace. By empowering staff members to be proactive and creatively reactive in this time of change I hope to promote a positive social, intellectual, emotional and physical environment for all our pupils, whatever their needs. While providing the direction and vision for the school, and ensuring that all who wish to participate in decision-making have the opportunity to do so, I exhibited a perspective on leadership as a shared phenomenon.

Organisational learning theorists focus on the need for collective inquiry, with the shared aim of improving pupils' outcomes (Bolam et al., 2005) and the collection and analysis of reliable school based data. In order to do that we need to have made an evaluation that is formative and have the ability to gather different points of view in the process (Stake, 2006), to engage in continuous learning and to enhance student achievement. Greater autonomy is encouraged but with it comes greater responsibility and the challenge to be critical rather than prescriptive of daily practices as there is no 'one size fits all' (Bell & Bolam, 2010, Kennedy, 2012). An historical overview of a broad range of theoretical perspectives of early childhood literacy development indicate that three paradigm shifts—from behaviourist to cognitive to socio-cultural perspectives are necessary for full participation in our education system. In this exploratory case study, the author as researcher creatively uses existing theories and perspectives to focus on the complex study of literacy in her school context, thus hoping to produce a more appropriate 'model' that can be used as a guide or a map to illuminate and/or generate new knowledge.

Intrinsic to this research is the belief that children should gain enjoyment and understanding from what they read as often as possible releasing serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with feeling good about ourselves and having a positive attitude, this is called 'the mood transmitter' (Greenspan, 1997). Greenspan's research has shown that when individuals read successfully their serotonin levels increase, when they struggle with reading they feel dejected that they cannot learn and their serotonin levels decrease. 'It is impossible to over-estimate the pain and frustration of children exposed every day to failure in the classroom situation' (Reading Association of Ireland, 2000). It is hoped in this case study that reading instruction will be associated with success and enjoyment from the outset. Opportunities that enable pupils to achieve success in reading will be paramount, preventing the need for remediation and negative self esteem patterns developing in 4 to 7 year olds.

This research has arisen and been driven by demand. Teachers in this school want to focus the research in the area of literacy. Class teachers constantly verbalize that the 'average' Irish child is losing out, as the focus is off their needs in large multi-cultural differentiated classrooms. This inescapable present reality is challenging for pupils, teachers, parents/guardians and if the truth be known, our local community. Essentially this longitudinal project will embrace 3 key elements, those of principal led motivational action

research; collegial collaboration to raise standards and promote change; and developing individualized reading instruction for infant classes.

1.3 Research Context

As a primary school principal with an action oriented, mixed methods research agenda, I aim to evaluate and improving reading in this DEIS school (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools 2005a). Mary Hanafin while Minister for Education & Science, launched DEIS, a new action plan for education inclusion in May 2005. DEIS is designed as an integrated policy on educational disadvantage, drawing together a focus on literacy, numeracy, home-school engagement and family literacy for schools designated as the most disadvantaged. The plan sought to put in place an integrated strategic approach to addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. As principal the author's focus is on conducting an evaluation of reading in infants in a DEIS, Band 2 school using the School Self-Evaluation Guidelines (DES, 2012), and improving how we teach infant pupils. The school was classified as disadvantaged by the Social Inclusion section of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) using the DEIS Banding categorization.

The magnitude of the gap in literacy achievement between children in disadvantaged schools and their more advantaged peers and the possible life time impact of low levels of literacy is no secret (Kennedy E. 2007, Eivers et al., Weir 2003; DES, 2005a; Morgan & Kett, 2003). The 2009 National Assessments of Maths and English reading in primary schools unexpectedly found that pupils in larger classes performed slightly better than those in smaller classes. However, this is due to the fact that DEIS schools tend to have smaller classes. We are a BAND 2 school (some supports e.g. reduced class size are restricted to BAND 1 schools only, because of their having greater concentrations of disadvantage). All our classes have 30 plus pupils with an average of 7 non-national and 2 travellers in each. There is evidence from research in Ireland and elsewhere that the achievement disadvantages associated with poverty are exacerbated when large proportions of pupils in a school are from poor backgrounds (a 'social context' effect). (Coleman Campbell, Hobson, Mc Partlan, Mood, Weinfeld & York, 1966; Sofroniou Archer & Weir, 2004; Thrupp, 1999). Principals and teachers play a central role in successfully implementing complex social inclusion policies but despite much continuous professional development and good practice in recent years, there has been little observable shift in levels of pupil literacy problems in areas of disadvantage. Eivers et al, found that 30% of pupils in first and sixth classes in a national sample of designated disadvantaged schools had 'serious literacy difficulties'. This was

defined as scoring at or below the tenth percentile on a nationally normed test. (Eivers, E. Shiel, G. & Shortt, S. 2004).

This is a totally practicable study in which the author as principal seeks to answer the questions which have driven this work. How can we make pupils with literacy difficulties lives in school easier? How do we make reading more enjoyable for all pupils? In particular, how might each individual teacher be empowered to become critically aware of daily practices, and make a difference to the lives of their pupils while at the same time contributing to new knowledge in twenty first century Ireland?

A critical component for school improvement is sustainability of new practices and yet very little research exists on whether schools sustain the use of new practices (Baker et al., 2004). How do we measure the impact of all the professional development carried out by teachers in DEIS schools? Often considerable focus is on short-term actions with long term impact ignored (Ofsted, 2006, Timperley, 2008). Schools need help sustaining practices and the highly individualistic nature of teaching (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003) results in limited time and access to new ideas (Hargreaves & Fullan 1992) and little 'reflective practice' (Schon 1983).

In this school of 239 pupils teachers have been disappointed with test results since the influx of non-nationals into the school from 2001 with an average 23% scoring below the 10 percentile in the MICRA-T. (Mary Immaculate College Reading Attainment Tests). This series of reading tests was first developed by Eugene Wall and Kieran Burke to provide accurate and reliable information on the reading performance of Irish primary school pupils. The chief advantage of nationally standardized norm-referenced tests, such as MICRA-T is that they almost uniquely allow teachers to benchmark pupil's performance against reading standards nationally. The recent addition of software to analyse the quantitative data generated has helped to manage the results when it comes to making decisions at staff meetings. A major disadvantage however is that it does not cater for pupils who have a mother tongue other than English.

The school caters for 15 nationalities in a West of Ireland town with a population of approximately 2000. It is a constant issue at staff meetings as is evidenced in the documented minutes. In spite of much in-service and continuous professional development

on the part of teachers, outcomes don't match input when we come together biannually to analyse standardized test results. National and international research shows that there is no single literacy method or approach that works for all. Kennedy makes the point, (2009 : 36) citing the International Reading Association, that "policy makers need to acknowledge that there are no quick fixes and no best way or no best programme to teach literacy effectively to all children" (International Reading Association, 2010).

Newcomer children who arrive without a word of English are immediately disadvantaged, take up a lot of teacher time, tend to be demanding, particularly the males, they are continuously asking for help. On the educational side most non-national pupils are motivated to do well, and the teachers have responded positively to their enthusiasm. In December 2010, the DES published the most recent in a series of incidental visits (i.e. unannounced) inspections of over 800 lessons in 450 primary schools undertaken during the 12 month October 2009/10 period. Inspectors recording that although '..... satisfactory learning outcomes were evident in the vast majority (85.5%) of the lessons, there was a significant minority (14.5%) of lessons in which pupils' learning was not satisfactory'. The report highlights that in more than one third of the English lessons viewed they noted that records of pupils' skill development and or attainment levels were not available, pupil's written work was monitored infrequently and formative assessment approaches were not in evidence.

When approached about this research the staff highlighted once again their difficulties in promoting quality reading and literacy given our particular pupil population as compared to all other local/country schools. Peer collaboration among teachers and strong motivational leadership will be a main focus at all times in keeping with Mc Beath's, 1999 framework. Strong leadership is vital to the success of this study, a "resilient attitude" (Bottery et al., 2008 : 198) by the Principal in the face of change and challenges will get through as long as the agenda is pure and for the greater good of the pupils. A Principal has a unique perspective on his/her school. They are responsible for creating a rich and wholesome working environment, focusing on staff needs as much as pupil needs, and in so doing working collaboratively towards staff goals. There is increased recognition that the development of people/human resources development is more effective in enhancing the performance of an organization/school than any other single factor. In the words of Coleman & Earley:

The importance of the organisation's people resource cannot be underestimated. Educational policy makers and practitioners worldwide are facing major challenges as education systems develop from predominantly bureaucratic, hierarchical models to those which give greater emphasis to school site management and where institutional level leaders take decision-making responsibilities with colleagues. Devolution to site based management also means increased responsibilities on the part of school leaders for the quality of staff, especially teaching staff and the education delivered to students; ongoing training and development is therefore crucial and whereas it was once seen as an activity that was predominately 'done to' teachers, it has been shown that adult learners must now fulfill a more active role as they learn to create and use the opportunities available. The role of educational leaders in all this is crucial as they encourage teachers and other staff to participate in institutional-based development. Principals and other leaders themselves need to be up to date and demonstrate a commitment to CPD, to be 'lead learners' promoting a learning climate or culture and monitoring and evaluating the progress of teachers' and other staff's professional development. (2005: 249).

This research is driven by local school based demand. The author as Principal has an action oriented research agenda.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature will be presented in two ways, initially in a section on its own and subsequently throughout if I feel it adds to the structure, connecting each section, and the analysis of the data. In the context of this research the literature review will include literacy, action research, collaborative school self-evaluation in the area of literacy, and motivational leadership.

The complexity of the term literacy needs to be identified. In this study it will include, reading, writing and comprehension for 4 to 7 year olds. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (DES), notes that:

Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media. (DES, 2011 : 8).

Developing good literacy and numeracy skills among all young people is fundamental to the life chances of each individual and essential to the quality and equity of Irish society.

(The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, DES 2011 : 9).

Intensive and strategic teaching underpins the development of reading, writing and spelling (Ofsted, 2009) and vocabulary (Gleeson, 2012). In order to make improvements in the area of literacy there must be multi-component instruction; reading fluency, word recognition and reading comprehension (Vaughn et al., 2000). Proficiency in these areas is affected by phonological deficits in pupils with special needs (Vaughn et al., 2001; Lerner, 2003). Reid (1999) and Lovett et al., (2000) emphasized the importance of developing accurate and fluent word reading skills as a prerequisite for reading comprehension skills.

Given the diversity of languages being used in Ireland, O'Brien (2006) suggests that it is not possible to provide instruction in children's various home languages in school. Hammersley agrees with Kennedy stating that "the search for one size fits all solutions to complex questions around teachers and teaching is a futile enterprise – it offers a false hope of dramatic improvements in quality, while at the same time undermining the conditions necessary for professionalism to flourish" (2004 : 134). In their review of educational disadvantage policy P. Archer & Weir note the need for future initiatives to include attention to: helping teachers and families raise expectations for children in relation to literacy achievement: enhancing professional development for teachers; supporting teachers in disadvantaged schools in maximizing opportunities offered by smaller class sizes; and exploring ways of helping parents/guardians support learning. Effective teachers of literacy recognize the importance of such initiatives as well as the fundamental importance of making reading an enjoyable experience for all their pupils, but they need positive sustainable support.

Hargreaves (1994) advocates a 'new professionalism' which promotes teacher collaboration and autonomy. Teachers are involved in decision-making, problem-solving and planning (Webb, 2007) which in turn fosters teacher autonomy and ownership (Patton, 1997) in relation to school improvement (Seed, 2008). This form of distributed leadership (Durham et al., 2008) is part of the new managerialism that represents a more definite empowerment of teachers and crucially depends on the actions of school Principals and how their leadership is exercised in schools. This case study represents a very meaningful empowerment of class teachers who crucially depend on the action and interactions of their leader, and how leadership is exercised to improve literacy in a DEIS school. This qualitative work focuses on a specific action research project carried out in infant classes, requiring teachers, learning support, reading recovery, HSCL and Principal to work collaboratively for 2 years, which if successful may act as an impetus for change (Goos et al., 2007), thus leading to the development of other collaborative practices. A significant factor of change is the teacher as a change agent, the 'agentic' teacher and this study is the development of bottom-up collaboration with top-down support. Teachers engage in deep learning at the pedagogical level to answer questions such as why do we do what we do daily? How can we improve? Have we created something that results in progressive change?

2.2 ‘Reading Wars’

Teaching young children to read is a fiercely contested field, which in England came to be regarded as the ‘reading wars’. Battle lines were drawn between advocates for the primacy of ‘making meaning’ (Lloyd, 2003) and the proponents of ‘phonics first’ (Rose, 2006). Present day arguments surrounding literacy are concerned not only with teaching methods used-traditional or more progressive-but more with the appropriate age to start formal literacy instruction. Street (1995) analyses the two approaches in terms of ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy. Exponents of the autonomous model study literacy in its technical aspects and independently of the social context. The ideological model, on the other hand includes the technical aspects of literacy within a context which has a meaning for the participants;

The ideological model...does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the ideological model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the autonomous model. (Street, 1995 :161).

Of particular interest to the author is the contradiction between ‘Aistear’, a play-based curriculum currently being rolled out (2013) by the DES, and the expectation that senior infant/first class pupils will achieve targets in early learning goals in reading, writing and synthetic phonics, thus leaving little time for play, structured or otherwise. Also, the Drumcondra Tests of Early Literacy (DTEL) were created in response to demands for Infant screening and diagnostic tests suitable for use with emerging readers, specifically those at the end of senior infants and the beginning of first class. The Drumcondra Test of Early Literacy-Screening (DTEL-S) and the Drumcondra Test of Early Literacy-Diagnostic (DTEL-D) draw on international best practice in early reading assessment to provide tests suitable for the Irish context. (Educational Research Centre, 2010, St Patrick’s College Dublin 9), leaving play not a priority.

‘The DTEL (Drumcondra tests) can compliment a teacher’s observations and assessments of a child’s performance and increase understanding of particular difficulties. It’s aim is to provide information on pupil’s literacy difficulties so that instruction can be improved but

these tests necessitate early strategic teaching in phonics, reading and writing: and the view, expressed officially by Rose, 2006 is gaining firmer hold that an even earlier start to literacy should be made. This contrasts greatly to the European practice of starting at age 6 or 7, and informal evidence suggests that it is commonplace to find inappropriate phonics activities in pre-schools. Thus the very young have become targets for testing which have so long characterized the schooling of older pupils in first and fourth. According to Mabbott when children start formal literacy instruction at age 6 or 7, they learn quickly and suffer no long term disadvantage from an early start (Mabbott, 2006). Others believe that the very youngest of our children, even those in nursery and pre-schools are at risk of becoming subject to the targets and testing which have for so long characterized the English Education System, such that their pupils are among the most tested and the unhappiest in the world and whose relatively high standards in reading attainment have been achieved at the expense of the enjoyment of reading (Harlen, 2007; Nut, 2006; UNICEF, 2007; Whetton, Ruddock and Twist, 2007).

Because of this lack of consensus and many contradictions on when and how to start formal literacy instruction we as educators need to view our role objectively, become critically aware and suit our context, not national or international norms. The infant classteacher in this study will use a child-centered approach which stresses the primacy of context the importance of skills teaching; a flexible curriculum to be of service to each learner's literacy needs for future communication, reading and comprehension skills. The ability of the child to use a range of cueing strategies, similar to that used for 1:1 tuition in 'reading recovery' (see appendices) including phonemic awareness, prediction, clarifying, questioning and summarizing, used in 'first steps' (see appendices), in order to gain meaning from text (Waterland, 1985, Palinscar A. S. & Brown A. L., 1986, King, F 2009, Gleeson, M. 2012). Phonics teaching requires drill, repetition and rote learning by pupils, even though nowadays these activities are often described as 'fun' and 'games' (Rose, 2006).

To quote Ofsted Chief Sir Michael Wilshaw: “Having a strong grasp of literacy needs to start with the youngest pupils which is why we are introducing phonic screen checks at the end of Year 1” (2012) .

2.3 Pupil Motivation

Pupils’ motivation to overcome their reading difficulties is a more important and influencing factor for positive academic results than any specialist intervention programme (Aaron, 1989). Good teaching can react to pupil interest and motivation (Price, 2001; Greenwood et al., 2002). Good teaching involves instructional changes such as active pupil learning and pupil engagement, (Kohler et al., 1997; McMahon, 2003; Greenwood et al., 2002). Active pupil learning and engagement is when pupils are actively involved on a task (Kohler et al., 1994); able to access needed materials independently; understand what has to be done and can do the activity (Greenwood et al., 1989; Greenwood et al., 2002; Hennessy and Cooper, 2003). Greenwood et al., 2002 provide evidence of a ‘casual path’ between instruction, engagement and academic achievement.

This thesis attempts to find the best way forward while at all times understanding the contradictions in and between present theories and practices in the teaching of reading. Teachers need freedom, support and openness to acquire new knowledge to better understand their crucial role if their pupil’s are to be successful in reading. This theory practice gap represents an ideological divide with its roots in the history of early years education. If as aforementioned, present practice in Ireland is characterized by the contradiction between the Aistear (DES, 2007) play programme and the requirements of summative assessments especially in the area of phonics and phonological awareness, which must be completed at the end of infant classes, it is up to each school to develop programmes that suit their pupil population and context. State control or the changing views of DES officials can never be absolute while schools engage in evaluation to inform themselves in a realistic and worthwhile manner on progressive methods to help all pupils.

The author is of the opinion that early childhood literacy supports enhances the capacity of the whole school to succeed. “tus maith leath na hoibre”. In essence it will be an early intervention programme including grammatical and contextual awareness as well as phonic

skills to assist all infant pupils by using specific strategies and providing a more in-depth understanding of letters, sounds and their meanings, while always recognizing the fundamental importance of making reading an enjoyable experience.

Regarding the age at which formal instruction should start, in this study, literacy strategies will start in junior infants (4-5 years old), in contrast to typical European practice, and more in line with the British government –commissioned Review of the Primary Curriculum (Rose, 2009). This report recommended that the formal age of instruction be reduced to four and this has become government policy. In this study when children attend school for the first time, they bring different background knowledge and reading skills. Some have better starts than others, some have experience of written words, some have even started to read, some have good oral language, some have not a word of English! A few might be familiar with letter sounds, others have no knowledge of letter sound, not to mention having had books read to them in the home. It's difficult for the junior infant teacher to cater for such diversity so we will start assuming that they can all be taught together from day one, not waiting until senior infants and even first class as has been the norm up to now.

As always the teacher will start by reading to the pupils daily to enhance pupils' collective experience of discussing words and their meanings and to bridge the gap between oral and written language. The immediate aim of this change process will be that children learn formal literacy strategies as soon as it is practicable, preferably immediately after Halloween break (Oct/Nov). They will start the technical work of sounds and graphemes, phonemic awareness, irregular words, complex words and grammar for example the use of capital letters, full stops, how to decode letters, using a structured phonics programme, (e.g. Jolly Phonics, giving the teachers a specific approach to teaching 42 phonemes of the English language). The pupils will subsequently learn how to decode text, derive meaning from text and finally proceed to enjoy text. It is hoped that pupils become active participants in their own learning earlier than before, irrespective of their initial status.

It will be a co-ordinated approach of professional educationalists doing what they do best for their pupil population and local community, drawing heavily from tried and tested best practice and approaches from the present DES primary English curriculum and all the more recent initiatives/in-service received since we became a DEIS school. 'Community-based education(Gandin and Apple,2002,cited in Evidence Informed Leadership in

Education,Taysum,A.2010) has the potential to give community members more control over how they experience their lives ,and how they recognize and celebrate the diversities of their different cultures.’(p. 160).

It’s interesting that the first line in the English curriculum reflects our problem immediately ‘English has a unique position and function in the curriculum because it is the first language of the majority of children in Ireland’ (NCCA 1999), rather dated as far as DEIS schools are concerned. It is hoped to integrate the continuous professional development undertaken by staff over the last ten years and build upon their priceless cumulative knowledge and experience. All known early reading approaches and phonics programmes that focus on intensive, individualized teaching to advance all junior and senior infant pupils to a level at which they are more likely to succeed and keep up with their peers will be used. The class reader as we know it will be abandoned throughout the research as it has become a crutch for teachers and a headache for parents/guardians of children in difficulty.

McNiff states “action research has as a main purpose the generation of knowledge which leads to improvement of understanding and experience for social benefit” (2002 : 17).

A robust body of research (National Reading Panel, 2000; Duke and Pearson, 2002: Block and Duffy, 2008; Raphael et al., 2009) demonstrates that explicitly teaching children strategies for understanding what they read improves their comprehension, keeping in mind, however that interventions that improve coding skills typically do not transfer their effects to comprehension and vice versa (Edmonds et al, 2009). In the 1980’s and 90’s it was recommended that as many as 45 different comprehension strategies be taught in a given year (Gleeson M. 2012). More recently the trend has been to teach fewer rather than too many comprehension strategies annually but to teach them thoroughly. “Good comprehension strategy instruction enables children to become purposeful, active readers who are in control of their own reading.” (Gleeson. M, 2012 : 8) Previous research has shown that pupils who receive explicit instruction are more successful at acquiring and transferring new science – related knowledge than children engaged in discovery learning (Klahr & Nigam, 2004; Strand & Klahr, 2008). Moreover children who receive explicit instruction may continue to demonstrate superior conceptual understanding as late as five months after the actual lesson. (Mather & Klahr 2010)

With this in mind participation in all existing literacy initiatives will continue and will be evaluated. These initiatives include First Steps, Reading Recovery, Guided Reading, Big Books, Story Sacks, jolly Phonics and Phonological Awareness Training..It is hoped to optimize existing resources so that each pupil will receive 20 minutes one-to-one reading instruction 4 times weekly, in the Reading Room, created during the pilot phase of this study. This is the most difficult aspect of the research as we don't have the small class sizes of DEIS BAND 1 schools, so we will be calling on all learning support, language support and resource teachers to assist. Our Home School Liaison teacher hopes to train parents/guardians to assist us by modeling the methodologies, so that they can repeat them at home or at least not sabotage the work done in school.

Findings from large scale national assessments of reading (Eivers et al 2010) and from international studies suggest that many students in Irish schools fail to achieve adequate reading skills. For example, the PISA 2009 print reading assessment showed that 17% of 15 year-olds in Ireland performed below a level considered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to be the minimum needed to participate effectively in society and in future learning (OECD 2010a). The consequences for young people who fail to learn to read are profound; they are more likely to leave school without qualifications, to have limited earning power and to have poorer emotional and physical health (DES 2011). Ruairi Quinn, regularly compliments DEIS schools for their advanced work in literacy, for using their cumulative practical knowledge and experience of social diversity to improve learning for all pupils regardless of background (RTE News, December 2012),.

The challenges faced by those who struggle to acquire adequate reading skills as they progress through school and in life should not be underestimated. Some children need intensive intervention to enhance their literacy abilities. Teachers need to change their mode of instruction. Instructional changes can be divided into instructional tasks and instructional groupings. Carlisle (1993) stated instructional tasks must take account of the difficulties with decoding, fluency, learning sequences and a poor ability to use contextual cues. These difficulties are the same as those described by Metsala et al., 1998 and Ott, 1997, which are evident at the cognitive and behavioural levels. A critical component of any instruction is “control of task difficulty i.e. sequencing examples and problems to maintain high levels of pupil success” (Vaughn et al., 2000 : 99). Successful outcomes for pupils depend on teachers

adapting instruction to accommodate individual difference (Fuchs et al., 1992; Slavin, 1993). Hart (1992) described the process teachers use in adapting instruction, to achieve a better match between the demands of the task and the children's existing knowledge and skills, as the term differentiation.

Differentiation is the key to successful curricular inclusion (Thomas et al., 1998, NCCA, 2002; Lerner, 2003). Differentiation of support is achieved through using alternative teaching methods, resources and groupings to meet an individual's needs (Visser, 1993; Sebba and Ainscow, 1996). As part of this differentiation, the pupil with special needs demands a structured, explicit, cumulative, multi-sensory approach to allow for control of task difficulty e.g. using graded reading texts (Miles and Miles, 1990; Ott 1997; Westwood, 1997; Klinger et al., 1998; Vaughn et al., 2000; Lovett et al., 2000; Owen Jones, 2002; BDA, 2003; Lerner, 2003). A multi-sensory approach is where the learner simultaneously uses the eyes, ears, voice, fingers and muscles and is enabled to do tasks using their strength e.g. visual (Hickey, 1977 cited in Ross-Kidder 2004; Ott, 1997). Multi-sensory learning enables the pupil who has visual or phonological deficits to learn through their strength e.g. auditory, and simultaneously exercise their weak area e.g. visual (Hickey, 1977, cited in Ott, 1997)

Pupils with special needs who exhibit difficulties at the behavioural level e.g. with sequencing, organization etc. need specific strategies to enable them to comprehend text efficiently (Snow et al., 1998; Vaughn et al., 2001; Seymour and Osana, 2003; Hennessy and Cooper 2003). Pupils may have difficulties remembering the order of things e.g. letters, words ideas in a story (Ott, 1997). Strategies can be described as "an individual's approach to a learning task" (Hennessy and Cooper, 2003, p. 17). Strategies make pupils aware of how they learn (National Research Council, 1998; Vaughn et al., 2000) and they give pupils the responsibility for their own learning (Vaughn et al., 2001). Vaughn et al., (2000) believe that the difficulty lies in getting pupils to understand when and how to use strategies and transfer them i.e. apply the strategies in other contexts. This necessitates the need for teaching strategies in an integrated context as endorsed by Reid (1999) and the need for metacognition, which is considered an important element in the teaching of children with special needs (Reid, 1993; Arraf, 1996; Westwood, 1997).

2.4 Metacognition

Metacognition is an awareness about thinking and about how learning takes place, being able to monitor and direct one's own learning (Reid, 2002). Swanson and Hoskyn, (1998) and Vaughn et al., (2000) cited metacognitive and strategic interventions as effective interventions for achieving academic improvement. Vaughn et al., (2000) noted that improvements with reading rate for pupils with disabilities was not enough to close the gap with their peers. Strategy training along with vocabulary, background knowledge to understand text, and procedures for monitoring and repairing comprehension instruction is vital (Vaughn et al., 2000; Lovett et al., 2000; Lerner 2003). Strategies can be taught to the whole class, where the teacher models the strategies and then allows time for pupils to practice the strategies. These strategies can then be worked on in small groups or pairs (Vaughn et al., 2001). One such strategy is the use of the K-W-L chart (Know-Want-Learned, Ogle, 1986). This strategy facilitates activating prior knowledge, focusing on what one wants and what one has learned. Vaughn et al., 2001 argues that more support for content area learning is needed for pupils with significant reading difficulties. In this study support will be given to all pupils. It is hoped to give intensive early intervention, and strategy training to all pupils from Halloween of junior infants. By this time the pupils have settled into primary school and will be given every tool and strategy to assist them to find reading a rewarding and exciting experience. Early disfluent reading can be avoided and the author feels that while it might not be popular (Adams, 2004; Mabbott 2006), it is crucially important to intervene and teach literacy skills strategically as soon as possible. With appropriate teaching and constant assessment on a sustained basis it is hoped that all pupils will gain and become more proficient readers. The focus of this research is clear and unambiguous; early intervention for all pupils not just those with special needs is the way forward. It acts as the gateway to successful entry to the world of print and digital literacies (Perkins et al., 2011). Given that the majority of pupils have the wherewithal to read and read with understanding. (Alexander, Anderson, Heilman, Voeller & Torgeson, 1991; Brady, Fowler, Stone & Winbury, 1994) it is hoped that by direct teaching we will lay the foundation for the acquisition of advanced reading skills before second class in primary school. As literacy is a cumulative process best developed early, it is clear to the author that intensive classroom instruction is necessary both in the early years as they 'learn to read' and later years as they 'read to learn'. (A. M. Pinkham & S. Neuman, 2010).

Step 1; Our pupils will first ‘learn to read’, (in the second 2 terms of junior and first 2 terms of senior infants);

Step 2; They will enjoy reading, (third term of senior infants, and first 2 terms of first class);

Step 3; Pupils will, ‘read to learn’, (third term of first class and all of second-sixth classes);

2.5 Early Intervention

Early intervention is important for many reasons, the main one been that pupils who lag behind in Junior Infants are not only likely to struggle in later years but also to face low reading skills into adulthood that will potentially jeopardise later life chances and career options (Ashley M. Pinkham & Susan Neuman, 2010). Considerable variability exists in literacy skills at the beginning of formalized instruction. Attainment levels are reached at varying times. (Juel, 1988, cited in Barbara H. Wasik, 2012). There is an 88% probability that children who are poor readers at the end of first grade will remain poor readers at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 1988). Taking on board that during the middle years, from 2nd -4th the demands of reading and reading instruction progressively shift from learning to read to reading to learn (A. M. Pinkham & S. Neuman, 2010). Then children are required to integrate information across extended tracts of text without clarification. As texts get harder, and the language content less comprehensible, pupils increasingly experience difficulty understanding what they read.

As previously stated it's more difficult to assist literacy deficits as pupils age, thereby underscoring again the imperative need for earlier intervention. Brain research shows that between the ages of 4 and 6 is the ideal time to formally introduce children to reading (D'Arcangelo, 2003). He argued that between the ages of 4-6 the brain is better able to clarify information than at a later stage of development. He demonstrated that three parts of the brain are used for reading. Poor readers have interference in the posterior part of the brain that is not resolved with maturity. Westwood (1997) maintains that ‘learning to read is not a simple task even for some children of average intelligence’. In the teaching of reading

there is no room for complacency and many difficulties can be avoided through better teaching, more individualized teaching methods, improved teaching materials and empowerment of teachers. No one method or approach to the teaching of reading will succeed, a combination of best practices is necessary. In his study the concept of emergent literacy reflecting a 'reading readiness' perspective, so popular in the 60's, 70's and 80's moves to a more strategic developmental perspective. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998 : 849) define emergent literacy as 'the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing' while Aistear (NCCA 2009 : 54) views emergent literacy as developing through 'play and hands – on experience (where) children see and interact with print as they build awareness of its functions and conventions'. By including linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication it is necessary to at all times be aware of the interconnectedness of oral language, reading and writing within the emergent literacy phase.

2.6 Oral Language Development

The Revised English Curriculum envisages that approaches to reading will be grounded firmly in the child's general language experience. 'It is concerned not just with language learning but with learning through language' (1999 : 2). Thus teaching phonics as part of language development and not as an isolated skill is advocated. New words which have been learned should be immediately incorporated in reading for comprehension and pleasure and also be used in writing and spelling. This will help the pupil to appreciate the use of what he has learned and make learning more meaningful and worthwhile. Success will lead to further success. Transferring the skill of decoding to new reading situations or unseen pieces is vital to becoming an independent reader, the whole process becoming automatic.

It is clear that there is no one right way to teach reading considering context, culture and while reviewing the literature on literacy it is also clear that we have reached a point at which both our traditional approaches to the teaching of reading and newer approaches have to be radically reviewed and restructured if all our pupils are to develop the skills, knowledge, understanding and confidence necessary for full enjoyment of the gift of reading;

without adequate literacy and numeracy skills, a young person or adult is cut off from full participation in many aspects of life and cannot participate fully in schooling, further and higher education, nor can they take up satisfying jobs and careers.’

(EPSEN, Gov of Ireland, 2004).

2.7 Special Needs

Underpinning the development of literacy is a range of skills which include phonological awareness, spoken language, sequencing, memory. Townsend and Turner, (2000 : 4) maintain that ‘any child who exhibits a disability or late development in one or more of these areas could be at risk of literacy failure’. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998 : 60) write that; ‘Skilled readers can be compared with less skilled readers on their comprehension (meanings of words, basic meaning of text, making inferences from text) and on the accuracy and speed of their identification of strings of letters as words (decoding familiar, unfamiliar and pseudo words)’.

Most of us learned to read without a systematic programme as described for the teaching of phonics and other word recognition techniques, some children will still learn to read automatically, but why not teach the strategies to all from the first term in junior infants? The author believes after 30 years teaching that all children will benefit from early intervention and phonic work is beneficial. Whole word approaches to the teaching of reading are beneficial for a period of time but at some stage a learning plateau is reached. The rapid expansion of reading vocabulary needed at this stage is difficult to achieve by the use of sight methods alone so new techniques to help word recognition must be introduced. It is often at this stage that pupils present with literacy problems. Word-attack skills or phonic decoding must be employed if the child is likely to achieve and become a better reader. Why wait for pupils to fail? According to Westwood (1997 : 86) ‘without such information children are lacking a reliable strategy for unlocking words. Children cannot become independent readers unless they master the code’. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998 : 55) argue that phonics ‘presumes a working awareness of the phonemic composition of words....to the extent that children who lack such phonemic awareness are unable to internalize usefully their phonic lessons’. This is also borne out in the DES ‘Learning Support Guidelines’ where they

suggest that ‘once children have developed phonemic awareness they will benefit from instruction in word identification strategies’. (Guidelines 2002 : 5). Once the basic levels of phonic knowledge is mastered the pupils can move on to the next level of phonic knowledge-recognition of common clusters or strings of letters. Whilst some children need very little direct instruction in phonic decoding there are those who will never master this valuable skill on their own.

They need to be taught systematically in order to develop the skills, to quote Westwood (1997 : 87) ‘the vast majority of children with reading problems exhibit poorly developed phonic knowledge and in-efficient word-attack skills’

Therefore it is critical that pupils start early, (especially that those who suffer with reading difficulties), get recognized early and are given prompt intervention, or the problem will persist. This same view is upheld by the works of Mather; (1992), Gunning (1995), and Gaskins et al, (1995), Kennedy (2010) and King (2012).

Convinced that from a developmental point of view, that the most opportune time to formally teach reading is 4-6 years which in this case study is junior/senior infants. Foreman; (2004) also supports early intervention. He challenges that if difficulties are not spotted early, intervention requires more time and effort, and that students who are not instructed in phoneme awareness from early on ‘are at risk of developing disabilities and need explicit instruction if they are to become skilled readers and spellers’. Edelan-Smith; (1997) previously claimed that there is a close link between phoneme or phonological awareness and subsequent reading mastery as well as the reverse –lack of phoneme awareness leading to reading problems. Specifically and more recent studies indicate that students exposed to explicit phonological instruction or PASP (teaching letter-sound association, subsequent blending these letters-sounds into whole words in order to teach pronunciation) performed better than those in other instruction programmes (Torgesen et al., 1999, cited in Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002). To successfully achieve in literacy it is necessary to promote phonological awareness, decoding, (process of translating text into words), comprehension and writing.

2.8 Fluency

Reading fluency is when oral reading is accurate and smooth, and decoding is effortless (Lovett et al., 2000). As a result of difficulties at the cognitive level, opportunities to practice reading, repeated reading, modeled oral reading, sight words and a graded scheme are all required to help the pupil attain fluency (Vaughn et al., 1998; Chapple, 1999; Chard et al., 2002; Lerner 2003).

Reading fluency, the ability to read accurately, effortlessly and with meaningful expression, is the hallmark of proficient readers and lack of fluency is a common characteristic of struggling readers (Hudson, Lane and Pullen 2005; 2009). Yet it is only in recent years that fluency has gained recognition as an essential area of reading instruction for many older struggling readers (Boardman et al 2008; Brozo 2011; Rasinski, Rikli and Johnston 2009). Lack of fluent reading is a problem for struggling readers because reading that is inaccurate and halting with a focus on recognizing words or reading that is excessively fast without attention to phrasing and expression makes comprehension of the text difficult, if not impossible (Fawcett and Rasinski 2008; Hudson, Lane and Pullen 2009). In addition to instruction in other key elements of reading, older struggling readers who read either too slowly or too quickly need plenty of fluency-focused practice if they are to understand what they are reading.

2.9 Word Recognition

Word recognition requires a need for additional emphasis on phonics and phonic activities (Chard & Osborn, 1999). This is important for pupils with special needs who have a double-deficit i.e. in phonological processing and rapid word naming (Ross-Kidder, 2004). A recent review stated that effective interventions with struggling readers must include phonological awareness training and systematic phonics instruction that is linked to spelling (Rayner et al., 2001). However, Lovett et al., (2000) maintained that phonic based approaches alone were not enough for achieving optimal reading results as difficulties were reported with generalization and automaticity. A multidimensional approach that would teach multiple decoding strategies e.g. syllables, phonological awareness, vowel variation, rhyming, sight words, etc., along with direct instruction and strategy training, was recommended for pupils with special needs to promote transfer of learning and generalization (Swanson and Hoskyn,

1998; Swanson, 1999b; Lovett et al., 2000, Lerner, 2003). Lovett et al., (2000) conducted studies using multi-dimensional approaches and reported improved decoding skills of children with severe reading disabilities even at an older age (grades 5 and 6) along with an increase in generalization skills.

Accurate and effortless word recognition allows the reader to give the maximum amount of attention to the most important task in reading—making sense of text (LaBerge and Samuels 1974). Attention is limited so if readers read slowly and laboriously, using all their efforts to recognize words, they will lose the meaning of what they are reading (Deeney 2010; Pikulski and Chard 2005).

Slow disfluent reading not only affects comprehension, it also limits the amount of reading material that students are able to cover (Ash and Kuhn 2010 cited in Kuhn, Groff and Morrow 2011, p. 3). As students progress through school, the texts they are required to read increase both in terms of complexity and length. This can put disfluent readers at a significant disadvantage in comparison with their more skilled peers (Kuhn, Groff and Morrow 2011). Comprehension requires higher order thinking so it cannot become automatic. Word recognition must become the automatic process. Fluent readers identify most words automatically, without conscious effort so they can give their attention to constructing meaning. (Hudson, Lane and Pullen 2005; Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger 2010; Samuels 2012). To read with expression, children have to monitor their comprehension; they must have a sense of the meaning of the passage to know where to pause within sentences, to raise or lower their voices, and to emphasise particular words (Rasinski and Samuels 2011). It is sometimes assumed that if children become proficient at decoding, comprehension will follow, but comprehension does not naturally follow proficiency in word recognition and improving decoding does not automatically result in greater comprehension as children get older (Suarnio, Oka & Paris, 1990, Edmonds et al, 2009).

2.10 Comprehension

The process of comprehension is complex, involving the application of complementary cognitive processes such as word identification, vocabulary knowledge, visualization, making connections, predictions, questioning, comprehension monitoring and synthesizing in the interaction between text, reader and content. (M. Gleeson, 2007). Gleeson maintains that

knowledge is created through the integration of new information from text with a person's prior knowledge of a particular topic.' Knowledge is organized into a series of networkable connections known as schema (like computer files) which are stored in long term memory.' According to Schema Theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1980), 'knowledge is organized in complex relational structures which constitute our previous and new knowledge about objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions and consequences' (Rumelhart, 1980 : 34). In the Literacy Dictionary comprehension is defined as 'intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between reader and text '(Harris & Hodges, 1995 : 39). The Rand Reading group (2002 : 11) defines comprehension as 'the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language'. Pardo, (2004 : 274) defines it as 'a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text though the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text'. Comprehension is not however measured in a short period of time, but rather takes many years to develop, the earlier we start the better.

In the literature a preponderance of research exists on decoding and phonological awareness. Surprisingly little research is available on the early acquisition of comprehension skills resulting in an overly narrow view of early literacy. Wolf and Katzir-Cohen, (2001) argue whether a relationship exists between reading fluency and comprehension. Although the average kindergarten teacher spends 80 minutes daily on literacy instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009), the bulk of this time seems to be spent on decoding. In fact, during 660 hours spent observing 55 kindergarten classrooms when children were not yet reading Wright & Neuman (2010) observed 2000 lessons devoted to explicit vocabulary instruction. Their findings suggest that implicit exposure (storybook reading) may be sufficient to promote children's vocabulary knowledge and by extension their comprehension knowledge. Yet despite all the evidence indicating that vocabulary instruction should be addressed earlier there is surprisingly little evidence or emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction in Irish classrooms (Gleeson M. 2012).

Conclusion

For successful literacy, the depth and breadth of teacher's knowledge will shape pupil's learning. All pupils benefit from expert teaching, explicit instruction and qualified scaffolding, which suggests a support system that is both temporary and adjustable (Rasinski, 2003). To acquire this, access to resources is important, but expert informed progressive teaching is more beneficial. Focused infant teachers, supported by a proactive principal, particularly one with infant experience, intent on success in literacy and learning are most important factors for success in reading. While teachers are encouraged to be autonomous in this initiative, their perceptions on literacy and that of their principal being aligned results in strong supportive preconditions for positive capacity building for change to benefit all. My objective is to influence staff using a wide range of approaches, 'political, symbolic, participatory and bureaucratic' (Kieran, 1989) to encourage and support the development of a collaborative reflective school culture with clear educational missions and processes, structures, and resources that will allow educational change to flourish.

Efforts simply cannot be delayed until pupils are supposedly 'reading to learn'. The most valuable time is when they are 'learning to read', and that should start early in junior infants, no later. All reading and writing strategies should be incorporated into the infant mainstream classroom. Early literacy learning is crucial for laying the foundation for success in reading and giving pupils the gift of reading, not to mention lifelong learning. The earlier pupils are exposed to the language and content-rich settings that help them to acquire a broad array of knowledge, skills and reading dispositions essential for the enjoyment of reading, the better.

Intervene early (4-5 years) not earlier, and teach to their strengths, not their weaknesses. Leave it until later (7 years) and prepare for an obstacle course.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the foundation for this piece of work by offering a background to the selected topic and highlighting the significance of this research. The aim of this chapter is to facilitate a better understanding of what others have contributed to reflection and other related concepts. To contextualize reflective practice within the wider discourse of education, this chapter examines various discourses that contribute to our understanding of what reflection and reflective practice is. My focus here is to provide a broad summary of reflection and reflective practice in order to highlight the significance of this topic in teaching.

Some qualitative researchers delay the literature until they reach the analysis part of the research so that the research can inform but not bias the researcher's interpretation of the study. However, as the researcher I have a keen interest in this area of research for the past ten years and in particular the past three years. Therefore to ignore this fact and to intimate otherwise would be disingenuous both to myself and my profession.

I have chosen a mixed methods casestudy approach within the overall methodological framework of action research. It is a focused 3 year strategy, piloted in year 1. Action research focuses on improving learning 'taking purposeful action with educational intent' (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2009). It must be acknowledged that it is complex as a route to change 'Action research claims to support the change management process in organisations such as schools. Never an easy task, 'effecting change in the school context is particularly challenging' (McNamara & O'Hara 2000) agreeing with Fullan (2005) but appropriate in this context as we hope to improve literacy levels. ..Teachers and principals must learn to overcome barriers and cope with the chaos that naturally exists during the complex change process. According to Fullan, (2005) those skilled in change appreciate its volatile character and they explicitly seek ideas for coping with, and influencing change towards some desired end. Fullan argues that teachers, as change agents, are career long learners. Systems don't change by themselves. Rather the actions of individuals and small groups working on new concepts intersect to produce a breakthrough (Fullan, 2005).

The hallmarks of this kind of inquiry according to Bowen (2008 138) are characterized *inter alia* by 'research in natural settings' and 'the tentative application of findings'. A case study approach is suitable in this context as it allows for an in-depth study into specific phenomena

in their natural settings (Robson, 1993; Denscombe, 2003) and it emphasizes the importance of the relationships within the context of the research (Yin, 1994). It involves an 'understanding of oneself in relation to others' (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2010) and is a process that helps a practitioner to develop a deep understanding of what an insider researcher is doing. By using 'Thinking tools such as critical analysis, reflection and the ability to develop evidence informed leadership to help learners understand the interplay between what shapes what they can and can not do and the power issues involved' thus helping to 'free them up from structures that are constraining, which is arguably liberating' (Taysum, A. 2010; 159).

McNiff & Whitehead (2009 : 19) believe it has both personal and social aims. 'The personal aim is to improve your learning in order to use that learning to help you improve your behaviours. It's social aim is to contribute to other people's learning to help them improve their behaviours' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). According to Pring case study research highlights 'the uniqueness of events or actions, arising from their being shaped by the meanings of those who are the participants in the situation' (Pring: 2000: 40). It is usually small-scale research carried out in real settings, with emphasis on depth of study not breadth (Denscombe, 2003) and on 'words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data' (Bryman, 2004: 366)

Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms. It involves philosophical assumptions, the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and the mixing of both approaches in a study. Thus, it is more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of the study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research. (Creswell, 2009 : 4).

3.2 Rationale

The rationale for selecting action research in this study is the need to produce practical knowledge that will change how we teach reading to suit our diverse pupil population; to change pupils' attitudes to reading and in so doing their lives and future well being.

Concerns about literacy progress of individuals and groups of pupils are what drives this research. Fundamentally this case study wants to investigate our situation, our local context, to be critical, to understand the factors that are contributing to learning and the factors that inhibit learning. To use the combined pedagogical knowledge on-site to optimize skills and improve daily practices and in so doing improve pupils' chances. Thus leading to new knowledge that can be used in the wider educational context. It is value-laden and 'rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation' (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003 : 13). Gaining knowledge is always positive but what is more important is (p.20) 'achieving real outcomes with real people'. Action research in this case study offers a methodology that will clearly benefit all the participants. . The aim of this approach is 'to arrive at recommendations for good practice that will tackle a problem or enhance the performance of the organization and individuals through changes to the rules and procedures within which they operate' (Denscombe 2010: 12).

Stake (2010) contends that 'case studies are a common way to do formal and informal enquiry', that our focus is to be on the case;" a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". Bassey (2007 : 143) echoes this assertion describing an educational case study as "an empirical enquiry which is conducted within a local boundary of space and time (i.e. a singularity) into interesting aspects of an educational activity, or programme, or institution, or system".

There are critics of case study methodology however; Nisbet and Watt assert that results are not generalizable, Shaughnessy et al (2003) contend that case study research is impressionistic and biased while Cohen, Manion and Morrison (200 : 183) argue that it is its position within the interpretative paradigm that "rendered the case study an objective of criticism, treating peculiarities rather than regularities" and suggest that it is "significance rather than frequency" that matters most and that this offers "an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people' '(2000 : 183).

Taking account of the possible weaknesses of a case study approach it is important to state that it suits in this non contrived action research case study. Practical knowledge lies in the extensive 'raw data' gained through thorough daily collaborative contact. This knowledge is as valuable as any gained from statistical analysis and as McNiff contends it can be

authenticated by participants, critiqued by critical friends, legitimated by validators, so that claims are demonstrated to have credibility and the evidence taken seriously by policy makers. Credibility is achieved in this study by letting the participants guide the inquiry process, checking the generated theoretical construction against the participants meaning of phenomenon, using the participants' words verbatim in the theory and by disclosing the researchers own personal views and insights regarding the experiences explored (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). As McNiff & Whitehead assert 'it combines the ideas of taking purposeful action with educational intent; is value laden and is about knowledge creation, going beyond professional practice, which emphasizes the action but does not always question the reasons and motives'' within a local boundary of space and time ' (Bassey, 2007).

The primary focus is on solving our literacy issue from within our own practice, using the School Self Evaluation framework. In action research there are no 'rights' and 'wrongs' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009) just passionate people together finding a sustainable long term solution using a transformative cyclical process that changes continuously between theory and practice. Furthermore Robson's (2002 : 89) view of case study as 'the development of detailed, intensive knowledge about a single case' echoes Glatthorn and Joyner 's view of case study research as research undertaken 'to provide a detailed description of a particular situation, organization, individual or event' encourages the use of this approach, which it is hoped will lead to Praxis. Praxis, a term used by Aristotle, is the art of acting upon the conditions one faces in order to change them. It deals with the disciplines and activities predominant in the ethical and political lives of people. Aristotle contrasted this with Theoria-those sciences and activities that are concerned with knowing for its own sake. He thought both were equally necessary. Knowledge is derived from practice, and practice informed by knowledge, in an ongoing process, is the cornerstone of action research (O'Brien. R, 1998) .

Taking a critical stance and engaging critically with daily practices in literacy is essential in action research where 'subjectivity' can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Insider knowledge is advantageous but to get a 'reasonably unprejudiced view' others must critique your findings and interpretations of same. It is a case of people working together to improve their own learning and by so doing improving daily practices. "Practice therefore becomes the site for the co-creation of knowledge of practice". (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010)

The philosophical paradigm that underpinned and influenced this research approach and design will be outlined in this chapter. It will also outline the approach taken in the research which sought to develop and implement a coherent instructional reading programme supporting the individual learning trajectories of infant pupils in a diverse mixed ability classroom setting. It gives the rationale for the chosen research design and methodology while indicating the opportunities and challenges as we go through the different phases. Research questions and the participants involved plus the reasons for their selection will be explained. Ethical issues and how they are organized are discussed. The approach used for data gathering, management and analysis is described in detail as well as other key issues in terms of operationalization. The final section concludes with details of the limitations of the case study.

3.3 Philosophical Underpinnings

Values, like politics, are ever present and will impact on the research process. Rather than deny their existence, prudent researchers will attempt to understand and make explicit their personal values while at the same time, seek to understand the values held by people, organisations or cultures being researched or supporting the research. (Anderson, 1998 : 33). Altrichter refers to actors on all levels of the system, using research strategies and evidence *compatible with the educational aims of the situation under research* to build on *democratic and cooperative human relationships and contribute to their further development*.

A theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance informing a methodology, providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria (Crotty: 2003). It is essential to note that all theoretical perspective is influenced by an epistemology. Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology. In other words, epistemology deals with the nature of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It shows the researcher's own perspective of the study and details all the variables within the study. In an exploratory study, where one is learning more, a theoretical framework is fundamental to the research. It expects the researcher to be creative in their use of existing theories, 'it is the guiding star and engine by which one devises, establishes and adheres to a rigorous scrutiny of the research area' (Slattery, G. 2012). It demands a declaration of one's philosophical stance to the topic: a commitment to a method of collecting, organizing and analyzing data and an identification of all previously

and publically established theories which will act as a model in the illumination of and/or generator of new knowledge in this field.

Epistemology is concerned with knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and how we get that knowledge, whereas ontology is more concerned with the social reality or the nature of existence (Morrison, 2002). Epistemological and ontological stances influence the philosophical stances or paradigms that inform research by providing frameworks of ideas and perspectives upon which methodology is based. (Gray, 2004). Simply put, ontology is what exists, epistemology is concerned with knowledge, and methodology is the means of acquiring this knowledge. While the theoretical framework is the broad theory built from the literature on which the study is based, the conceptual framework is the researcher's own structured guide.

This research is situated within a praxis research paradigm and is more of a holistic approach to problem solving, focusing on principal and teachers' perceptions of how they use the curriculum, it is subjective and personal, aiming to understand 'the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen et al., 2007: 21). It contends that knowledge is personal and can be developed and acquired in different ways according to individuals' contexts, experiences, circumstances, place, time and perceptions. In this way knowledge can be socially, culturally and historically constructed and therefore aligns well with this research, which examines the daily reality of a school which is a complex social organization that is constantly changing and searching for new knowledge. This aligns with the epistemological foundation of agency, which acknowledges the personally mediated construction of knowledge (Billet, 2009). Interpretive researchers embrace the notion of subjectivity and the personal involvement of the researcher in constructing their own knowledge and beliefs. Trowler states that 'individuals' thoughts and decisions are more significant than the structures they operate within' and that agents or participants 'have powers to actively transform their social world whilst in turn, being transformed by it' (Trowler et al, 2005: 434). Stake (2005) highlights the fact that taking account of a variety of experiences and contexts in qualitative research optimizes understanding. However, there remains a commitment to objectivity by acknowledging the effects of people's biases (Robson, 2002).

This research is predicated on an underlying ontological position that reality in the social world is constructed by the participants, their intentions, perspectives and beliefs. Aligned

with this is the epistemological position that this reality or knowledge of the social world can be constructed through individual's perception or beliefs which may be influenced by their context, circumstance and experience. In this exploratory case study, the author as researcher creatively uses existing theories and knowledge to focus on the complex study of literacy in her school context. Thus hoping to produce a more appropriate 'model' that can be used as a guide or a map to illuminate and/or generate new knowledge in a way which contributes to 'widescale insight and understanding beyond the immediate focus of the original piece of research' (Slattery G, 2012).

Different styles, traditions or approaches use different methods of collecting data, but no approach prescribes nor automatically rejects any particular method. (Bell, J. 2012). There is general consensus, that the two dominant approaches are qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative researchers collect facts and study the relationship of one set of facts to another. They use 'numerical data and typically, structured and predetermined research questions, conceptual frameworks and designs' (Punch, 2005 : 2005). They use techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, 'generalizable conclusions' (Bell, 2010). Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned with understanding individuals' perceptions of the world. They doubt whether social 'facts' exist and question whether a 'scientific' approach can be used when dealing with human beings (Bell, 2010). There are occasions when qualitative researchers draw on quantitative techniques and vice, versa but Punch, interestingly points out that 'qualitative research not only uses non-numerical and unstructured data but also, typically, has research questions and methods which are more general at the start, and become more focused as the study progresses' (2005: 28). This is certainly the case with the author's chosen research methodology, action research.

The underlying philosophical frameworks commonly associated with an outcomes based research approach will be adopted here, with the outcome of each phase contributing to the planning of the next. (McNiff, 2002). The author believes that change is necessary, and that despite possible resistance the whole school will benefit from the change. Through openly communicating the problem, and following a set of practical action steps (McNiff, 2002), collaborative change will identify school needs, clarify the allocation of authority and responsibility for literacy within the school and lead to the creation of a collaborative, supportive and reflective workplace. By empowering staff members to be both proactive and

reactive in this time of change the author hopes to promote a positive social, intellectual, emotional and physical environment for all children. Teacher empowerment is central to this study. The author is 'seeking to empower teachers to develop and implement their own theories and practices of education through researching their own professional practice. (McNiff, 2002a; Black and Delong, 2002 Anderson, 2002);

Through research school practitioners can begin to talk back to those politicians and corporate leaders who have made them the scapegoats of current school reform efforts. Practitioners can also use research to provide an analysis that runs counter to that of academic researchers who use research to develop market scripted curricula that result in the de-skilling of practitioners. (Anderson, 2002 : 24)

The implementation of change and improvement in this study has more to do with 'mobilising the interest and support of those involved and contributing to the professional development and autonomy of practitioners' (McNamara and O'Hara, 2004). Organizational capacity which consists of providing training and ongoing support for teachers is an essential element in the 'change process' (Fullan, 2005). This is highly significant in promoting a move from teacher education as a transmission model to a transformative one where teachers' knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and social contexts are acknowledged, and teachers are equipped to critically engage with education policy and practices at a personal, professional and collective level (Kennedy, 2005). One which is led by the Principal aids teachers working in supportive environments to reach higher stages of development (Phillips & Glickman, 1991). This can lead to powerful organizational learning and the development of a culture of inquiry (DeLong, 2002).

The evaluation would be conducted participatively. It's epistemological base would be self-study and it's methodology would be action research. In the school, teachers and Principals could undertake their action enquiry into their practices and produce accounts to show how they felt they were justified in claiming that they had improved the quality of educational experience for themselves and the children in their schools. (McNiff 2002b).

Department guidelines envisage a collaborative pro-active approach between the learning support team and classteachers, with the learning support teacher in the capacity of advisor and consultant in her support of the class teacher

While the theoretical framework is the broad theory built from the literature on which the study is based, the conceptual framework is the researcher's own structured guide. It shows the researcher's personal perspective of the study and details all the variables within the study. To aid the project from the beginning I wish to frame the research question using Jack Whiteheads (1989) 'living theory' of professional practice. In this case the question is simply. How can we improve our daily practice to improve reading levels in infant classes?

This consultative and iterative research puts an in-depth focus on how teachers teach reading in the early infant years drawing on best practice, promoting the importance of early reading instruction for 4 to 7 year olds. It is hoped to create a leveled approach that takes into account the varying degrees of differentiation and disadvantage with particular emphasis on developing more effective literacy instruction specific to the pupil's individual needs and context. Thus enabling them to become self-regulated strategic readers, possibly shedding strong traditionally used methods and classroom practices potentially leading to success for all from the beginning. Having a broad teaching experience the author knows that to include middle and senior classes would be overambitious.

Hargreaves and Fink encourage leaders to provide structures and opportunities to help staff collaborate and develop to improve their work place practices in order to become a 'professional learning community' (2006 : 125). In this research project the participating teachers will be engaged from the outset as they were for the pilot. Thus hoping to enhance further their 'sense of ownership' (Patton, 1997). They can be trusted to have their pupils needs to the fore and reminded that the quality of their work is valued. Bottery (2004) sees trust as the vehicle for converting leadership into fellowship;

....a happy, tolerant and healthy society depends upon the blossoming of trust relationships both within communities and between them..... If the first order values of a society are not economic, but personal, social and moral, then trust has to be seen as a first order value that should be promoted for it's own sake.

(Bottery, 2004: 121).

3.4 Action Research

The term ‘action research’ was first coined in the USA in the 1940s through the work of Kurt Lewin, a social scientist but went into decline because of cultural, political and economic changes. It became popular again in the 1970s in Britain through the influence of Lawrence Stenhouse who believed that the curriculum ought to be organized in schools so that it was meaningful and relevant to students’ experience, and that they should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. In the 90s John Elliot’s action steps were employed, based on Lewin’s ‘spiral of cycles’, with the outcome of each phase contributing to the planning of the next.

Action research is often referred to as practitioner based research; and because it involves the practitioner thinking about and reflecting on their work, it can also be called ‘a form of self-reflective practice’ (McNiff, 2002). This is in keeping with Schon’s (1983, 1988, 1995) concept of reflective practitioner. The principle of reflective critique ensures people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made. Dowling (2004) believes reflexivity to be continuous process of reflection by the researcher regarding personal values, preconceptions, actions or presence and those of the participants which can affect the responses. According to O’Brien it is in this way that practical accounts and solutions give rise to theoretical considerations, (1998). It is not a method or a technique according to Bell, ‘it is applied research, carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement’ (Bell, 2010 : 6). Action research emerged from earlier theoretical traditions, including critical theory. The aim of critical theory was to critique normative assumptions, including your own, to improve thinking and action within a particular situation. (McNiff & Whitehead 2009). While traditional science has always valued ‘knowing through thinking, action research emphasizes knowing through doing’ (O’Brien Maguire, 2011).

Action research is a participatory, democratic process with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

(Reason & Bradbury, 2008 : 1).

3.5 Reflective Practice

The concept of reflective practice is a popular theme in the teaching literature and has become a prominent theme in education in Ireland. Reflective practice was introduced into professional undergraduate programmes and continuing educational programmes by the relevant regulatory bodies within a wide range of professions. Research has shown that there is value to be gained from being a reflective practitioner. Accounts about the beneficial importance of reflective practice are principally founded on theoretical assumptions, even in empirically based evidence to demonstrate focused research.

The eminence of reflection and reflective practice are frequently referred to in the literature. Indeed the capacity to reflect is regarded by many as a fundamental characteristic for professional competence. Educators affirm that the emergence of reflective practice is part of a change that acknowledges the need for students to perform and to think professionally as a central element of learning throughout their programme of study, integrating theory and practice from the outset. Reflective practice is an approach designed to assist professionals to become aware of the theory or assumptions involved in their practice with the purpose of closing the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted. Ultimately this is argued that it contributes to improving both, as it may be used to scrutinize both practices and embedded theories. This perception of reflective practice is therefore a practice that may initially start as a method of learning from practice as a novice to a particular profession but also as a method of life long learning for the qualified practitioner/classroom teacher.

There have been many attempts at defining and pinning down the concept of reflection over the past fifty years, and as a significant number of Authors have contributed towards reflection and reflective practice both within education and other professions, in this study emphasis has been placed on the structure of reflective practice espoused by McNiff &

Whitehead as a method of ensuring that practitioners are competent with the anticipation that by using reflective practice the student will be able to establish meaningful and realistic links between education and practice.

You choose your methodological framework on the grounds that you have a clear sense of how an action research project may be conducted. It needs to demonstrate your capacity to ask critical questions, to refuse to come to closure in the form of definite answers, and to see the end-point of one part of the research as the beginning of a new aspect. Your choice of methodology communicates your values of openness to new possibilities, the need for systematic enquiry and the continual need for critique

(McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

These new developments with the introduction of reflection as part of professional practice may reflect several converging lines of beliefs, assumptions and reasoning regarding reflective practice (Mann et al., 2009). Firstly, to learn effectively from ones experience is critical in developing and maintaining competence throughout a life time of professional practice. An essential aspect of most models of reflection encompasses critically reflecting on an experience and practice that would identify a learning need or situation (Schon, 1983; Johns, 1992; Boud et al, 1985). Secondly there is an expectation that professional identity is developing as ones professional and personal beliefs and values are questioned with the context of professional practice. There is a building of or connecting of actions to existing and new professional knowledge. Finally there is a connection in its broadest sense made between ‘thinking and doing’ (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2010), leading to the development of a professional who is self aware and therefore competent (Mann et al, 2009).

There are several theoretical views on reflection and what it constitutes. Indeed many attempts to define reflection have been regarded as intellectual efforts to grasp something as if reflection has some sense of objective reality, ‘a point of reference so that everyone would know exactly what it is’ (Johns, 2005: 3). What is clear from the literature is that there is little consensus but plenty of opinions related to what reflection is. This is perhaps because reflection is essentially a subjective and personal process and is essentially a way of being in a world which is subjective, holistic and intuitive. Hence, by its composition cannot be

reduced to a neat conceptual analysis 'the idea of practice as non-linear, showing that people are unpredictable and creative, and that life seldom follows a straightforward pathway' (McNiff & Whitehead, 1010).

The term 'reflective practitioner' was popularized by Schon in his seminal and highly influential publications. *The reflective practitioner and Educating the reflective practitioner*. These publications have stimulated the interest of several theorists and educationalists worldwide (Eraut, 1995; Newman, 1999; Brookbank and McGill, 2007). Although Schon was not the first person to write about reflection and reflective practice, his seminal work and contribution to the debate played a significant role in raising its awareness to professionals and educationalists. Indeed his work is widely referenced today and for many, provides the foundations for understanding reflection and its contribution to learning within professional practice. John Dewey (1933) an educationalist and philosopher, was among the pioneers to write about reflective practice when he looked at the role of learning from experience, interaction with the environment and reflection. Dewey inspired several writers such as Boyd and Fales, 1983; Schon, 1983; Boud et al., 1985 and Saylor, 1990.

Dewey (1933) argued reflective thinking was an 'active, persistently and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends' (Dewey, 1933 : 9). Moon (1999) advocates that reflection is a method of mentally processing with a purpose that is applied to a relatively complex idea or ideas for which there is no obvious solution, while Johns (1995) argues that reflective practice is an activity pursued to realize desirable practice. These three definitions emphasize that purposeful critical analysis of knowledge and experience is required to achieve a deeper meaning and understanding (Mann et al, 2009). From these descriptions reflection would seem to be both subjective and specific. It is an amalgamation of perceiving, sensing and thinking linked to a precise experience 'in order to develop insights into self and practice' (Johns, 2005 : 3) with the intention of increasing effectiveness in practice. Within these definitions presented reflection is viewed as something that involves more than intellectual thinking, since it is intermingled with practitioners' feelings and emotions and recognizes an inter-relationship with action. This term conscientization or consciousness awareness refers to the intrinsic connectedness of the individual's experience and the sociopolitical structure in which the individual exists (Freire, 1972).

However, what is clear from the literature is that reflective practice is not simply a pause for thought from time to time (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). Unlike Dewey, (1933) who advocated that reflective practice is solitary and individualistic, Thompson and Thompson (2008) believe that it would be an error to adopt too individualistic an approach to reflection and that more can be gained from a group approach to reflective practice, which is exactly what this case study is about, described by McNiff (2013) as going from 'I' to 'We'. Foucault (2001) says that it is our moral duty to exercise what he calls *parrhesia*. This is described as one's capacity to tell the truth, despite the hazards involved (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) reflection concerned reviewing ones repertoire of experience and knowledge to invent novel approaches to complex problems to provide information for self evaluation and learning. (Saylor, (1990).

The above definitions offer some insight into the historical and contemporary debates and influences regarding what reflection and reflective practice constitute. These definitions essentially establish that there is no singular definition within the literature. It appears that an understanding of what reflection is somewhat determined by epistemological and ontological backgrounds of the professional engaged in such a process. However, despite there being no universal definition of reflection there are similarities that are evident. They all involve exploring an experience. They involve some level of self analysis and evaluation of the experience so that learning has occurred. There is also a level of critical inquiry where there is an evaluation of what influenced the practice and what will involve changed conceptual perspectives and action in future practice 'New forms of enquiry tend to use non-traditional ways of thinking. The aim is to show how dynamic processes of enquiry can lead to improved practices' (Mc Niff & Whitehead 2010).

3.6 The Pioneers of Reflective Practice

The origins of reflective practice can be traced back to the American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1916; 1933, 1938) who offered a new pragmatic view to education. He articulated that the ability of an individual to reflect is initiated only after they recognize a problem as well as identifying and accepting the ambiguity this generates. Dewey argued that all humans have the ability to learn from experience. He regarded reflection as an essential element to success in learning. Dewey's argument suggested that the learning environment should have more *stuff*, referring to the notion that the learner that the learner

should have more opportunities for doing things so that ‘when the learner is engaged in doing things and in discussing what arises in the course of their doing’ (Dewey, 1916). Dewey’s theories of education were offered in his publications such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938). His epistemological view held that knowledge is achieved through social interaction with the environment. Furthermore, it was believed that the newly acquired knowledge should translate into decisions that would guide future encounters. Common recurring critical arguments are evidenced within these writings: Dewey consistently argues that learning and education are social and interactive processes which occur in schools which are social institutions where social reform should take place. Additionally, Dewey argued that students flourish in environments where they are permitted to experience and interact with the curriculum.

Dewey advocates that the purpose of education is to realise ones full potential through growth which he regarded as living. Education in his opinion did not necessarily need formal aims and objectives. He believed that education is a lifelong process, a place to learn how to live, which continues until death. In this regard, Dewey lamented what he regarded as the inactivity of students within the curriculum. He argued that in effective education the content needs to be presented to the student in a manner which permits the student to relate the data to prior experiences and thereby creating an association with what is already known with the new knowledge. Dewey advocates the need for awareness among educationalists that is cognizant of an educational composition that can create a balance between delivering knowledge while being mindful of the student’s experiences and interests. He argues that “the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction” (Dewey, 1902 : 16). Dewey insists that experience should be the primary instigator of thought and action. It is through this reasoning that Dewey became one of the most eminent advocates of experimental learning. He argued that “if knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind” (Dewey, 1916: 217-218).

Dewey not only revolutionized the method in which the learning process should be, but also addressed the role which the teachers should play in the process. Dewey believed that the role of the teacher was viewed as ‘deliverer’ of information to passive students who absorbed this information. Thereby advocating that the teacher becomes a partner in the process of the

student learning and thus, guiding the students to determine meaning and understanding within the subject area. The teacher is not recognized as an expert but as a creator of personal growth.

Additionally, Dewey argued that reflection was a necessary prerequisite for meaningful learning. Rodgers offers a summation of the 'four criteria' which define Dewey's concept of reflection. He argues that reflection 'moves the learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships and connection to other experiences and ideas' (Rodgers, 2002: 845). In this sense, it is a continuum of learning and this flow of continuity of learning ensures progress for the student and ultimately society. It is a systematic, rigorous and disciplined way of thinking. It should occur in interaction with others, and reflection requires a sense of value of the personal and intellectual growth of self and others.

Schon's area of interest was the relationship between professional knowledge and practice. He further refined the notion of reflective practice to do this. Schon's work on reflective practice is based on several premises that are also evident within Dewey's work. Both Dewey and Schon were interested in potential growth for the learner that would occur over a life time on a continuous basis. The actions and level of integration of the student was also a key aspect of both theorists who advocated the importance of facilitating the student in a way which encourages the student to learn from prior experiences. Schon, whose background, similar to Dewey was in education had an interest in what he refers to as 'professional knowledge' (Schon, 1983 : 3) or more so 'the crises of confidence in professional knowledge'. This interest was based on the critical question asked by Schon, which is '*is professional knowledge adequate to fulfill the espoused purposes of the profession*' (Schon, 1983 : 13). He argues that this crises of knowledge is as a result of a mismatch between professional knowledge and the fluidity of changing practice situations based on complexities, instabilities, uniqueness and value conflicts (Schon, 1983) which are in essence the normality's of profession life practice. This crises according to Schon results from the notion that 'high ground' of theorizing about professionalism is not always reflected in the 'swampy lowlands' of professional practice. Therefore, professional knowledge according to Schon, requires a sense of constant transition to facilitate professional knowledge meeting the demands of new professional practice. Thereby intimating that the role of the professional will change over the decades and, with this, will come a reshaping of the knowledge required to meet that changing role in practice for the professional. Schon argued that professionals

did not simply draw from their professional knowledge base in a simplistic way or direct manner to inform their professional practice. There was no direct relationship between professional knowledge and practice.

Schon dedicated a significant part of his books (1983; 1983) to the epistemological underpinnings of technical rationality and lamented its dominance in professional education (Burns and Bullman, 2000) which was regarded as normative in professional life in western society (Kinsella, 2009). Schon defines technical rationality as a professional activity which 'consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by application of scientific theory and technique' (Schon, 1983). Schon's highly critical comments argue that technical rationality is the dominant model of professional knowledge embedded not only in men's minds but also in the institution's themselves and as such is a 'dominant view of professional knowledge as the application of scientific theory and technique to the instrumental problems of practice' (Schon, 1983: 30).

In essence this model suggests that there is a unidirectional trajectory arrangement between knowledge and practice. Lecturers and academics are armed with the role of providing knowledge of theory for practitioners to apply to practice. This approach to the social sciences is a rather naïve one as it implies that all human situations or encounters can be interpreted in terms of 'scientific methodology in a similar fashion to the physical world scientific world (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). This model suggests that not only is there a hierarchal affiliation between academics and practitioners but that there is a top down approach to education where the students play a passive role within the educational process and the educators are regarded as the imparters of such knowledge. Subsequently this knowledge is the only source of knowledge that professional practice is based upon.

This technical rationality model was first challenged in the 1970's and 1980's by the teaching professions which was led by Stenhouse (1985) who urged school teachers to engage in their own classroom related research rather than relying solely on information from research academics. Thereby constructing a new epistemology of practice where practice knowledge was evident in the actions of the experienced practitioner (Rolfe et al., 2001). Subsequently advocating that practice knowledge was not purely sought from theoretical knowledge, that can be read from a book. Therefore, in addition to scientific knowledge and theory generated by researchers and academics which is applied to practice, many educationalists argue (Usher

and Byrant, 1989; Carr and Kemmis, 1986) that there is another kind of knowledge which is implicit in practice and subsequently emerges from practice. A practice therefore is not some behaviour which exists separately from theory which is then applied to practice. All practices, similar to observations have 'theory embedded in them' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

Schon (1983) argues that practitioners confined to a positivist's epistemology faced a dilemma; their understanding of rigours of professional knowledge excludes phenomena that they have come to see as central to their practice. Kinsella (2007) argues that part of the conceptual confusion surrounding Schon's work is perhaps related to a failure to acknowledge and appreciate this significant epistemological assumption and its impact in professional practice. Schon's theory of reflective practice shows that there are alternative understandings of what constitutes professional knowledge. 'Knowing that' he refers to as the scientific facts or general theories what is commonly taught by the professionals. Some of the other aspects of professional knowledge will now be discussed.

3.7 Ryle's Influence

In contrast 'knowing how' or the application of 'knowing that' is much more difficult outside the environment where 'knowing how' is practiced (Fook and Gardner, 2007). Reflection in action is required to convert facts into usable knowledge. Schon advocates that both 'technical rationality' and professional artistry are 'reflection in action' and are required for practice. According to Fook and Gardner (2007) the tensions that are present between the espoused theory and the theories in use embedded in practice can cause a 'crisis for professionals'. This frequently occurs because 'rules' are often limited in their applicability and because the context of the situation in which these 'rules' are being applied can complicate the action significantly.

This distinction between knowing how and knowing that are also evident within the works of Gilbert Ryle who rejects the notion of dualism and argues that there is a link between intelligence and action which he refers to as 'knowing how'. Ryle advocates that intelligence cannot be separated into operations within the mind and then executing them with the body. Ryle argued that the body and mind are far more integrated. (Ryle, 1949). For Ryle the mind is revealed in the doings of the person. Schon had similar beliefs, as he argued that the focus of knowledge is evident in doing. Schon advocated that professionals do not necessarily

think before they perform an action, nor is it necessary. For Schon 'doing and thinking are complementary' and thereby occur simultaneously. Schon believed that the practitioner can and does inform practice while doing and does not 'abstain from action in order to sink into endless thought' (Schon: 280, 1983). Thereby reinforcing the rejection of dualism.

Ryle's theories of 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' are also evident in Schon's work. Ryle refers to knowing in action as the type of know how that is revealed in intelligent action. Ryle contends that the distinction between knowing how and knowing that is the relationship between doing and intelligence. Schon refers to this theory within his own writing arguing that the knowing within professional practice is often revealed within the context of practice and that professionals are unable to articulate this type of knowing effectively. Thereby demonstrating that knowledge can sometimes only be demonstrated through actions of professionals.

3.8 Dewey's Influence

Artistry plays a very significant role in Schon's and Dewey's writing of reflective practice. It is argued that this is where the implicit influence of Dewey's work on Schon is evident (Kinsella, 2009). One of the central roles of Dewey's philosophy was the aesthetic aspect of the experience. Dewey regarded the experience as art itself.

Schon's (1987) use of artistry within everyday practice has similarities to that of Dewey's which is evident in his acknowledgement that 'an appreciation of the artistry required to negotiate the struggles and achievements of everyday practice' (Kinsella, 2009 : 8). Mc Niff & Whitehead describe this as creativity, the notion of that 'knowledge transformation' involves the capacity to respond to challenge, self and others, and is central to the notion of creativity' ((2009 : 143), which suggests that deep creative learning and action leads to change of 'both the learner and what is learnt (2009 : 143). Schon uses the term 'professional artistry' to describe the actions of professionals when they are working within unique, uncertain or conflicting situations at work. He argues that educators and professionals are aware of the artful ways in which practitioners deal competently with value conflicts in practice. Nevertheless they are dissatisfied because there is no process for practitioners to espouse what they do. Schon also disapproves of the uncritical adoption of the scientific paradigm within professional schools which has neglected to include the artistry of practice and

obscuring the concept of professional practice as an art by identifying it as a technique (Kinsella, 2009).

Reflective practice acknowledges the importance of the theories which are implicit in practice which represents a nontraditional view of the relationship between theory and professional practice (Fook and Gardner, 2007). In contrast to traditional views which conceptualize a very traditional top down deductive approach to theory and practice, reflective practice acknowledges a more bottom up inductive approach (Schon, 1983) which facilitates established theories being modified and the development of new theories from practice (Fook and Gardner, 2007).

An essential aspect of Schon's work is focused on reflection with action which presents itself as reflective practice, reflection in action and reflection on action. Reflective practice is described as a critical assessment of one's own behavior as a means towards developing one's own abilities in the workplace and as a dialectical process in which thought and action are integrally linked. Reflection in action is commonly referred to as thinking on our feet or thinking while doing. Reflection on action refers to reflection after the event - experience is reviewed to make sense of it and ultimately learn from it. Both should however interconnect to facilitate integrated facilitation of theory into practice – ensuring that practice is informed by theory and also theory is informed by practice. (Thompson and Thompson, 2008).

Schon, (1993) advocates that reflection in action is central to the artistry of the practitioner and argues that this process does not necessarily require words. Schon likens this to jazz musicians playing and improvising together, They (the musicians) 'get a feel for their material and they make on the slight adjustments to the sounds they hear'. They can achieve this for several reasons. Their collective effort can make use of scheme familiar to all of the musicians. Also each musician has a repertoire of musical figures which he can draw from. Therefore as the musicians interpret the route the music is going they can make sense of it and modify their performance to the new sense they have created (Schon, 1983). Indeed Schon considers reflection in action and on action to be the most important form of reflection for experienced practitioners.

Reflection on action is retrospective, it assumes that it is underpinned by practice and using this process can uncover knowledge by a process of analysis and interpretation (Rolfe et al.,

2001). It is a method of looking back on actions carried out by the practitioner which ultimately will have the potential of influencing future practice (Schon, 1992). Therefore the relationship between reflection and intelligent action are significant to both scholars.

3.9 Schon's Tacit Knowledge

A significant theme central to Schon's theory of reflective practice is Tacit Knowledge. McNiff and Whitehead believe that 'people have a deep reservoir of tacit knowledge (or personal or intuitive knowledge). (2010:191). This concept was popularized by philosopher Michael Polanyi (1967). Many researchers draw on the idea of tacit knowledge as the basis of good practice (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Sternberg and Horvath 1999, cited in McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) This concept is based on the example of face recognition. Polanyi (1967) argues the premise that 'we know more than we can tell' (Polanyi, 1967: 4). In this classic example of tacit knowledge Polanyi explains that we can know and recognize a person's face, recognizing that face among a million faces, however we are not usually capable of explaining why we can recognize the face, I call this intuition.

In writing I tap my tacit knowledge. I externalize my thoughts-at-competence through my action - at -performance. My writing becomes both symbolic expression of thought (this is what I mean) and the critical reflection on that thought (do I really mean this?). My writing is both reflection on action (what I have written) and reflection in action (what I am writing). The very act of making external, through the process of writing, what is internal, in the process of thinking, allows me to formulate explicit theories about the practices I engage in intuitively.

(Mc Niff, 1990: 56., cited in Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2010).

Essentially most of this knowledge cannot be put into words. Therefore we as humans demonstrate a skills of recognition and knowing yet we are incapable to put this knowledge into words. Schon centres the implication of tacit knowledge of the professionals. Argyris and Schon (1974) in their early writings together explain that tacit knowledge is an effective method of comprehending 'theories in use'. In their opinion 'theories in use' is an aspect of each professionals theory of practice whether consciously or subconsciously. This theory is generated by explicit knowledge that they are able to articulate and 'theories in use' which

may be unconscious and only evident in behavior. Argyris and Schon (1974) convey that it is imperative to make ones tacit theories explicit and to be conscious that one possess them so that individuals can place ‘a normative template on reality’ (Argyris and Schon, 1992 : 28). This template serves as a platform to test the norms and exceptions of reality. The ability of consciously taking this stance implicates practice, as it facilitates the practitioners to be freer to test their own theories (Kinsella, 2009).

Schon, refers to tacit knowledge as ‘frames’ in his later work. He emphasizes that when the practitioner becomes aware of their ability to construct the reality of their own practice they become aware of the range of frames that are available to them and the necessity for reflection in action on their prior tacit frames (Schon, 1983). Conversely according to Schon many practitioners are unaware of the tacit knowledge that they use within the practice setting. This lack of awareness leads to the inability on behalf of the practitioner to choose among their frames for roles. They are unable to comprehend the ways in which they can construct their realities of practice for them it is a given reality (Schon, 1983).

Schon in contrast advocates that when the practitioner is aware of alternative ways of framing the realities of their practice the practitioner can then be conscious of those values and norms which guide their practice. Awareness of tacit frames thereby creates awareness of possibilities for practice. In this sense awareness of tacit frames on the practitioners behalf enables the practitioner to critique practice and more specifically change their own practice. This in turn contributes to Schon artistry of practice, which recognizes that the majority of professional situations cannot be gleamed from a text book, that situations within the context of professional practice are created by the application of knowledge and science to a situation.

You decided to take action to improve the situation, first by improving your understanding of how you were positioned in that situation. You began to make your tacit knowledge explicit. You and others worked collaboratively to raise your collective tacit knowledge about your shared values to a conscious level’

(McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

This section concerns itself with the philosophical underpinnings of theory of reflective practice by Schon who was regarded as one of the foremost theorists within the context of reflective practice in education. It also examined some of the central epistemological

underpinning of Schon's work such as technical rationality, tacit knowledge, artistry of practice knowing how and knowing that and links it to the more recent works of McNiff & Whitehead. It also addressed some of the definitions concerning debates related to what reflective practice is.

3.10 The Effectiveness of Reflective Practice in Education

There is considerable debate surrounding the effectiveness of reflective practice in education, and less recent literature does not illustrate how reflective practice is developed to actually change practice. Schon's work (1983, 1987) focused on contextual knowledge for professional development this involved moving beyond knowledge application to create contextual knowledge, while Mc Niff and Whitehead see reflection and action research as a more holistic approach to problem-solving, rather than a single method of collecting and analyzing data,' I see educational research as research that is focused on information gathering and educational theory generation and testing for explaining educational influences in learning. (Whitehead, J. 2008b: 16-17, cited in Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2009)

From the methodological perspective more recent theorists consider the process of action research to have two aims according to Kemmis (1986), involvement and improvement.

There are two essential aims of all action research; to improve and involve. Action research aims at improvement in three areas; firstly, the improvement of a practice; secondly, the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place. The aim of involvement stands shoulder to shoulder with the aims of improvement. Those involved in the practice being considered are to be involved in the action research process in all of its phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. As an action research project develops, it is expected that a widening circle of those affected by the practice will become involved in the research process.

(Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 165).

Kemmis is influenced by the work of Lewin and Jurgen, Habermas and others (Mc Niff, 2013 62). In 2005 Carr and Kemmis emphasized the need to retain the original emancipatory impulses of action research in their book *Becoming Critical* (1986) and in more recent work (Kemmis 2009; Kemmis and Smith 2007), Kemmis has developed the notion of ‘ecologies of practice’ where practitioners use action research to develop their practices, their understandings of their practices and the situations in which they work and live, i.e. ‘the sayings, doings and relatings’ of people. Kemmis’s model shows the cyclical nature of action research as do many models in the literature (Carson, 1990; Clark, 1990, Elliot, 1992; Berry, 1992; Sagor & Barnett, 1994), each step initiating change and leading onto the next action. Not all theorists agree offering critique of each other’s use of models and metaphors, McNiff believes that models can be potentially prescriptive and disconnected from real-life practice. Debate is necessary as action research is ultimately about discussion and debate between committed professionals in the hope of achieving praxis i.e. morally committed practice (McNiff, 2013).

For the purpose of this thesis, educational action research is a term used to describe a family of closely related activities in curricular literacy development, professional development, school improvement, systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, observed, reflected upon, critiqued, and changed, where necessary. This research is concerned with the development of a quality culture of learning in the school and the role of the principal in sharing leadership responsibilities towards the development of such a culture. The author hopes that a critique of practice will result in improved practice. ‘Practitioners quickly come to see immense developmental potential and possibilities of empowerment through the process of investigating their own practice’ (McNamara and O’Hara, 2008: 203).

McNiff describes action research as a form of self evaluation, used widely in professional contexts as appraisal, mentoring and self assessment. It begins with an idea that you develop, is open-ended and does not start with a fixed hypothesis. A first step in an action research enquiry is therefore to problematize anything that is taken for granted, within discourses, practices and ideas. You challenge normative assumptions in your creatively original way, beginning with your own normative assumptions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009: 141). A key assumption in this type of evaluation is that evaluators’ interactions with their participants is itself part of the exercise (Galvin, 2005).

3.11 Gathering Data

Lomax (2007: 158, 169) encourages action researchers to ask useful questions under the headings of purpose, focus, relations, method and validation.

Can I improve my practice so that it will be more effective?

Can I improve my understanding of this practice so as to make it more just?

Can I use my knowledge and influence to improve the situation?

(Bell, 2010: 7).

The last question is pertinent to this study. The author, as Principal intends that this research will serve all involved and every effort will be made to ensure that the power relationship that exists will never be used to manipulate or exploit the participants or findings.

‘Action-oriented research typically seeks actionable knowledge in service of concrete changes in the context being studied, towards greater participation and empowerment, particularly of those with less power and privilege’

(Greene, 2007 : 18).

Under ‘method’ Lomax asks whether the action researcher can collect ‘rigorous data’ which will provide evidence to support claims for future action. The collection of data will be the responsibility of the author who agrees with McNamara and O’Hara that while teachers are ‘completely at one with our evaluation approach which prioritized their experiences, ideas, attitudes and knowledge and rejected any idea of external judgment, they did not wish to formally carry out research themselves’ (McNamara and O’Hara, 2004 : 467). ‘Teachers’ lack of research expertise, competence and confidence’, is still true in 2013. This will be taken into consideration. The research will be principal-led, where all the day-to-day experiences, ideas, and views will be discussed, documented and dated using the iphone. The power of judgment collectively shared by all participants.

McNiff believes new knowledge can be most effectively generated through dialogue with others who are equally interested in the process of learning, anxiety will be avoided. The dialogue is always that of equals, no one tells another what to do in action enquiries; we all

share and value one another's learning (McNiff, 2002). As a trained life-coach the author will recognize defensiveness or lack of enthusiasm and will treat it professionally and sympathetically. As can be expected with 'insider' investigations, difficulties can arise if views and practices are challenged and radical changes are suggested.

Because the activity of action research almost inevitably affects others, it is important to have a clear idea of when and where the action research necessarily steps outside the bounds of collecting information which is purely personal and relating to the practitioners alone. Where it does so, the usual standard of ethics must be observed: permissions obtained, confidentiality maintained, identities protected.

(Denscombe 2007: 128-9).

Later Kemmis describes the spiral of self-reflective cycles in action research as 'planning a change, acting and observing the consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then re-planning acting and observing ,reflecting and so on'. (Kemmis and Taggart, 2000: 595-596). Punch (2005) also favours action research because of its cyclical nature, with researcher and participants working towards a common solution by cyclical and iterative ways.

McNiff promoted the idea of 'teacher as researcher', believing that more enlightened forms of professional learning programmes work on the assumption that professionals already have a good deal of real world knowledge. By positioning themselves as practitioner – researchers who are researching their own practices, and producing descriptions and explanations for their work in the form of their 'living educational theories of practice' (Whitehead, 1989) they can improve that knowledge. Action research is an approach which is appropriate in any context when 'specific knowledge is required for a specific problem in a specific situation, or when an approach is to be grafted on to an existing system' (Cohen and Manion, 1994a: 94). They also describe it as an applied research, carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement, sometimes with external support, other times not. Leadership in this case study is to do with change, evaluation and school improvement in the area of infant literacy, and eventually literacy throughout the whole school.

3.12 Outside Experts

The support of the PDST co-ordinator will be employed during this study as Baker and associates (1991) discovered schools are more likely to improve if they employ external support, when they compared schools which drew on external support and those that didn't. Our NEPS (National Educational Psychological Service) psychologist has taken a particular interest in the study as well and has asked to be part of the validation group.(See Appendices). Mc Namara & O'Hara describe this as 'an outside expert was brought in to act as a catalyst for dissemination of these ideas to the staff' in their research project on collaborative decision making through action research (2000).

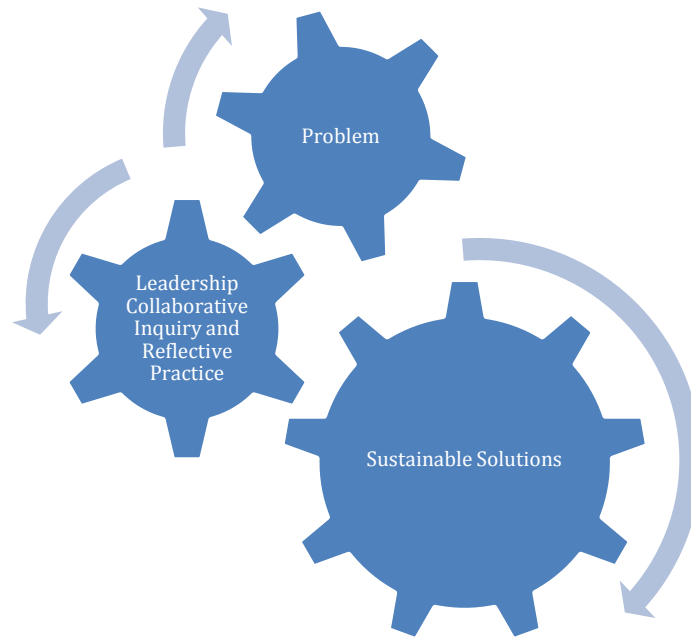
The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), formerly known as the Primary Professional is a DEIS initiative funded by the Department of Education and Skills since 2005. Central to the support provided by the DEIS advisor and pivotal to the professional development of teachers, will be the enabling dimension of DEIS support which aims to empower schools towards self sufficiency in areas of planning, target setting, implementation of literacy/numeracy programmes and on-going self evaluation. He also believes that collaborative partnerships between schools and outside experts who work together to advance the knowledge base between teaching and learning, are increasingly being reported in the literature on effective approaches to raising achievement levels in highly disadvantaged settings (Cordingly et al., 2003; Au et al., 2008). As the research model used during this study is a problem-oriented model the DEIS advisor will assist us as we 'adopt an investigative stance and work together as a staff to discover workable, practical, solutions' (Kennedy, 2009a).

Our literacy tutor has being chosen by the staff to act as a 'critical friend'. She is an Infant teacher, First Steps tutor, Parent's Association secretary, teacher nominee on the school Board of Management and most importantly a parent of 4 pupils in our school, 2 of which are in infants. She definitely ticks all the boxes, doesn't appreciate time wasting or that of resources, is a higher order thinker with an ever critical eye. Her purpose will be to keep the focus on literacy and evaluation, thus advancing the school's knowledge base in this complex area of infant literacy. Elliot's action-research cycle involves:

- (a) identifying a problem, 'the general idea is a statement which links an idea to action'
- (b) reconnaissance, describing and explaining the facts of the situation;
- (c) general planning, action steps to be taken;
- (d) developing action steps;
- (e) implementing action steps;
- (f) monitoring the implementation and the effects:

This is followed by a repetition of the cycle through 4 spirals. (Elliot, 1991; 72-81)

The model used in this research case study is similar and while there are a number available in the literature and I prefer the basic steps of the McNiff model, (influenced by Lomax and Whitehead). I have created my own based on the literature and the action research process as we found it.



Cogs On a Wheel Change Model

(Mangan , 2013).

This action research model suits our research scenario as there are many processes simultaneously at work. For me it depicts perfectly our systematic actions as we work our way through the many cycles as interconnected cogs in a wheel; all depending on each other to progress our own personal learning and as a result to move our student's learning forward. The latter providing great job satisfaction as Principal, 'insider researcher' and collaborative leader. At all stages I was ever present, engaged and pro-active throughout, which guarantees sustainability, something an 'outsider' cannot do.'

Your actions embody your learning, and your learning is informed by your reflections on your actions. Therefore, when you come to write your report or make your research public in other ways, you should aim to show not only the actions of your research, but also the learning involved. Some researchers focus only on the actions and procedures, and this can weaken the authenticity of the research'.

(McNiff, 2002).

McNiff also suggests similar techniques as Elliot for gathering data, but acknowledges that as one question is addressed, the answer to it generates new questions.

‘Things do not proceed in a neat, linear fashion. Most people experience research as a zig-zag process of continual review and re-adjustment. Research reports should communicate the seeming incoherence of the process in a coherent way’
(McNiff, 2002)

The techniques used in this study are diaries; document analysis; outside observers; interviews; questionnaires, and regular analytic memos on the iphone. McNiff (2002) advocates that ‘you can use different data gathering methods at different times if you wish. You will compare this first set of data with later sets of data, to see whether there is any change and whether you can say that you have influenced the situation’. This is similar to what Altrichter (2000) describes change as ‘productive action with a limited ‘toolbox’ of measures and resources, rather than a plan to be realized as written’

3.13 Quality and Rigour of the Study

This is a low risk research project undertaken by the school principal, supported by the BOM and Parents. Every effort will be made to minimize the impact of my position as Principal. The principal’s role and that of the school mirror to a large extent broader society, working through vision, values, passion commitment and practical action, inspiring and sustaining all in what is a challenging and onerous role. While acknowledging high levels of personal vision and energy, my ambition is first and foremost for the pupils of my school and the staff who are not content with the status quo. The staff have chosen a ‘critical friend’ to keep me objective, open to questioning and their interpretation. It is hoped that as Principal I can develop a team oriented leadership model of collaborative inquiry into our literacy practices that will support all pupils of diverse backgrounds and educational needs, every day conscious of Starratt’s contention that ‘those institutions exist only in and through our collective action’ (1993a: 147) .This will be invaluable to the school and similar schools and will support the learning of all participants, echoing Marti and Villasante (2009) who when discussing quality and rigour in action research suggest that a key criterion that distinguishes action research from other types of research is a clear focus on action. They identify five

dimensions: topics, participants, method, consequences and context, all of which will be subscribed to during the course of this study.

Altrichter in his writing on quality features of an action research strategy emphasizes the need for 'iterativity' in research:

Practitioners are under pressure to act and, thus, will have to put these ideas into practice And they will directly experience the results of their action (which are – indirectly-also the results of their reflection, of their practical theory). This should be a good reason for continued reflection which will lead to further development of the 'practical theory'. Precisely the fact that practitioners' reflection is rooted in their everyday practice allows them to put a practical theory to a series of tests, and to develop and refine it in several 'cycles of action research'. This characteristic repetition and progression of action and reflection in several cycles of research (which we dub 'iterativity') is the main source of 'rigour' in action research (Altrichter, 1999).

According to McNiff & Whitehead praxis is informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge as well as successful action. They believe that action research is informed because other people's views and feelings are taken into account and it is committed and intentional in terms of values that you have examined and interrogated, and are prepared to defend (2010 : 19). According to McNiff this type of research becomes a matter of 'I's working together. 'Collaborative working can also involve individuals taking a collective stance towards a particular issue so that they become a 'we'. (2013 : 10)

This method suits also as it involves the collaborative work of the group as opposed to the individual. Altrichter describes the process of reflective practitioners scrutinizing their own contribution to the situation, sometimes having differing interpretations about what is happening, theorizing and participating in professional discussion as a means of validating and developing the shared individual insights and broadening the knowledge base of the profession (1999). Practically, this is the way a school should operate, as a team, not just one person doing the work, but all participants in the school community involved in "checking with one another whether they are justified in claiming that what they are doing is the best it can be" (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2009). Mc Niff & Whitehead agree with the idea of action research as a shared task with all persons concerned influencing the development of the

situation. They suggest that action research is about testing the validity of improvement claims against the critical feedback of others. “So it becomes a cyclical process of improving practice, checking against other people’s critical feedback whether the practice has improved, and modifying practice in light of that feedback” (2009: 2).

My procedure and practice could be described as ‘a commitment to honesty’ and demonstrates ‘a respect for the dignity and privacy of those people who are the subjects of my research’ (Pring,2000:143). I am cognisant that this research will impact significantly on the quality of the working environment of staff as well as the quality of the educational experience of our pupils and will subscribe to an ethical code that precludes generating greater risks or harm to participants, inducing stress or being unnecessarily intrusive. Furthermore I contend that by rejuvenating processes and regenerating existing values our organization will be revitalized leading to the cultivation of sustainable and synergistic relationships in the school and wider local community where our pupils live, grow and learn.

Triangulation was used ‘as a more general method for bringing different kinds of evidence into some relationship with each other so that they can be compared and contrasted’ (Elliot, J.1997: 82). Marti and Villasante (2009) discuss quality in action research and suggest that a key criterion that distinguishes action research from other types of research is a clear focus on action. They identify five dimensions that require consideration: topics, participants, method, consequences and context. The author’s ambition for this research is long-term

A survey of children’s attitudes to reading was also employed to provide valuable insight into individual pupil’s level of engagement with books, and to build on the need for parents and pupils voices and attitudes deficient in other studies (McNamara and O’Hara, 2004). According to McNiff, the basic steps of an action research process for collaborative learning in the workplace constitute an action plan:

- a. To review our current practice
- b. Identify an aspect that we want to investigate
- c. Imagine a way forward
- d. Try it out, and take stock of what happens.

We modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right)

Monitor what we do

Review and evaluate the modified action

And so on...

(McNiff , 2002).

Actions will not follow a straightforward trajectory, it will be an action plan showing action reflection as a cycle of:

Identify an area of practice to be investigated

Imagine the solution

Implement the solution

Evaluate the solution

Change practice in light of the evaluation...

(McNiff , 2002).

Pre-Cycle

This research began with a staff meeting in June 2010. Assessment test results since the influx of foreign national pupils is the problem that needs to be solved. The ‘average’ child, the majority of pupils, are losing out to the intensity of the minority, because of political correctness and the capacity of these individuals and their parents to demand their rights. This is upsetting and incongruent with my personally held values and those of teachers in school that all children should be given the best start possible not just those in minority groups. In the knowledge that all pupils improve with daily individual teacher attention no matter how short. I chose this meeting to listen to all staff view points, to access the wealth of rich ‘insider’ knowledge, and to reach a consensus as to what the next step should be. This came in the form of a focus group.

Cycle 1

FOCUS GROUP 1- Consultation

The problem that needed to be addressed was literacy, to achieve open ended participation a focus group of all interested personnel was held. Focus groups are valuable when in-depth information is needed' about how people think about an issue, their reasoning about how things are as they are, why they hold the views they do' (Laws 2003:299). Focus Groups are a form of group interviewing or organized discussion (Kitzinger, 1995) involving a group of participants interested in a particular topic. They encourage discussion between the group and take the focus off the interviewer/facilitator. Focus Groups encourage open conversation, reflection and encourage objectivity and learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) asserted that "providing equal and improved opportunities to learn is at the heart of our efforts to improve both quality and equality in education". Staff indicated their need for support and professional development as an essential element in this process and identify the importance of 'ecological change' to the process. It was decided to look to PDST for further assistance.

Judith Bell describes Focus Groups as 'formal gatherings of a varied group who have a professional concern and knowledge of the issues involved (Judith Bell, 2010). Focus Groups are valuable when in-depth information is needed 'about how people think about an issue, their reasoning about how things are as they are, why they hold the views they do' (Laws, 2003: 209). Group dynamics is very important, as feelings of security are crucial for participants if the information gathered is to be authentic and of practical use in the classroom. According to Morgan:

Focus Group members share their experiences and thoughts, while also comparing their own contributions to what others have said. This process of sharing and comparing is especially useful for hearing and understanding a range of responses on a research topic. The best focus groups not only provide data on what participants think but also why they think the way they do.

(Morgan,

2006 : 121)

Cycle 2

Focus Group 2-PDST Co-ordinator

Following on from Focus group 1, a group of 9 staff members including 4 classteachers, one Reading Recovery teacher, one Learning Support teacher, one Resource teacher, our HSCL, PDST co-ordinators, and myself met to brainstorm our thoughts and change cycles to date. (see Appendices). This group proved an excellent vehicle for initiating the new study, and became a validation group throughout the research who could judge the quality of evidence and assess whether or not any claims to knowledge are true. (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). They helped me take a ‘balcony view’ (Linsky M. Grashow A. & Heifetz R., 2009), ‘to get into the helicopter and fly over the factory, offering critical theoretical analyses of what we have done, the significance of the research, and it’s potential to inform other helicopter factories and workplace practices in general’ (Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2009: 141). How else could a staff reach the stage of intuitive insight, to define the problem, as they grapple with it daily?

Critical Friend

This validation group chose ‘my critical friend’ to help me evaluate the quality and direction of the research. When the staff realized my purpose and intention that we would reflect on and transform their often expressed anxieties about our literacy standards they were immediately attentive and obviously energized. They understood the need to focus on information gathering with the view to generating context based theory and improvement. To quote Deepak Chopra “attention energises and intention transforms”. Whatever you take your attention away from on the other hand will wither, disintegrate and disappear’.

Junior staff members spoke openly and willingly, especially those that are usually quiet at whole staff meetings, and were particularly concerned about assessment results and looking for ‘sustainable solutions’ (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Their expressed concerns are easily dealt within the security of the smaller focus group.

‘While the main purpose of a validation group is to offer feedback about the validity of the research, the group by implication lend legitimacy to it, that is they show that they are taking it seriously, so it should be taken seriously by others and should be seen as holding significance for future practices and knowledge’

(Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2005, 95).

Cycle 3

Questionnaires to Parents/Guardians

A questionnaire to parents/guardians of infant children only to assess their impression of the changes made since our staff focus group meeting will assist us in our evaluation of infant literacy. The teachers will distribute with a covering letter and date of return included. It will be anonymous and confidential with the HSCL explaining to the non-national parents/guardians the purpose of the research.

Questionnaires are a useful method of gathering data and are frequently used in social research (Babbie, 2010). They consist of a well thought out list of questions in simple language related to the research study with each respondent answering an identical set of questions. Questionnaires gather information by asking people directly about issues concerned with the research (Denscombe, 2007).

Cycle 4

Pupil Survey

Surveys need to be clear and concise, easy to read, ask the appropriate questions, focused and not complicated. There are types of structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured ‘generate frequencies of response amenable to statistical treatment and analysis’ (Cohen et al., 2004: 247) which is important where measurement is sought. Semi-structured present a series of questions on which the respondent can comment in an open-minded manner, “setting the agenda but does not pre-suppose the nature of the response” (Cohen et al., 2004: 248). Piloting is important, as it can gather useful recommendations from participants that

could yield usable data (Bell, J. 2010) giving that ‘rich new knowledge’ we all seek in research.

Mixed methods approach of combining quantitative and qualitative data collection is often used by pragmatists who believe that ‘qualitative and quantitative research should not be seen as competing and contradictory, but should be used as complementary strategies appropriate to different types of research question’ (Ritchie & Lewis, M. 2006: 15). This consultative and iterative research approach will put an in-depth focus on literacy and how we teach reading in the early years, drawing on best practices already in our school and promoting the importance of early literacy instruction and parental input for 4-7 year olds. The data gathered will lead to an improvement plan with the voice of parents/guardians as part of the process. It is crucial that a whole school approach be used if we are able to succeed.

Cycle 5

Interviews

Data was collected by semi-structured interview. The author was conscious of the strengths and limitations of interview methodology from piloting and previous research. Comments like ‘interviews can be notoriously unreliable’ (Gronn, 2007) became less relevant as most means of data collection were in use over the 3 year period which culminated in terms of data collection with interviews of all staff involved. It was necessary to get into the minds of staff more formally to obtain experiential information after the changes had been made, to quote Mc Niff (2002)’ the process of asking questions is as important as finding answers’. During interviewing, participating individuals, in their own right, are accepted as significant commentators on their experience; it’s not the principal or chief community commentator who speaks for one and all, which happens too often in schools, but the experienced thoughts and feelings of like-minded, knowledgeable colleagues. Interviewing seems simple and self evident (Gumbrium & Holstein (2001), but in reality it takes planning, creativity and lots of time. Guba & Lincoln (1981 : 154) cited in Ribbins (2007 : 207) maintain that ‘of all the means of exchanging information and gathering data known to man...interviewing is perhaps the oldest and certainly one of the most respected tools that the inquirer can use’’. The interview itself according to Dexter (1970) quoted in Ribbins (2007 : 208) is a ‘conversation with a purpose’’. Silverman (2006 : 381) recognized that interview data is situated and

contextual. 'In studying accounts, we are studying displays of members' artful practices in assembling those particulars' (p. 114). This leads to the recognition that by 'analysing how people talk to one another, one is directly gaining access to a cultural universe and its content of moral assumptions' (Silverman, 1993 : 108). The purpose of most qualitative interviewing according to Gumbrium & Holstein is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk. (2001 : 83)

An intensive literature review was carried out to develop more focused questions (Yin, 2009), bearing in mind the criteria for interpreting the findings. Interviews became the main source of data collection 'overall, interviews are an essential source of case-study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs, or behavioural events', (Yin, 2009 : 108). Participants were informed about the study orally and in writing. General questions were given to each participant prior to the interview. Qualitative research is interpretative research, as such, the biases, values and judgement of the researcher are stated in the report (Cresswell, 1994), Glaser (1992) warns the researcher who is familiar with the area under study to resist the tendency to force the data. The Author appreciates the importance of putting her preconceptions to one side while continually reflecting during the research process. Dowling (2004) believes reflexivity to be a continuous process of reflection by the researcher regarding personal values, preconceptions, actions or presence and those of the participants which can affect the responses. The aim of most qualitative studies is to discover meaning and to uncover a multiple of realities. Cohen et al., (2000) point out that most universities and other institutions where research is conducted have established formal committees and protocols for reviewing research plans. The common principles of ethical research practice emphasise four underpinning codes of ethics: Informed consent; deception; anonymity and confidentiality; and accuracy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). First of all initial consent was obtained from the Board of Management (October, 2010).

Each participant was selected and told about the study and its implications explained. They were informed of measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data and of their right to end the interview at any time (Appendix C). Approval was sought prior to the commencement of the interviewing process in order to ensure the preservation of participant's rights within the study. Since qualitative methods, such as interviews and observation are about human interaction there are potential risks involved including misunderstanding and conflicts of opinion and values (Vivar, 2005). Participants had plenty

of opportunity to ask for clarification and to raise any issues of concern prior to signing the consent form. A copy of each form was presented to the participants in order to remind them of their agreed conditions and their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure confidentiality all interviews which were conducted within a specific time frame were transcribed professionally and to ensure privacy each participant is given a number e.g C.T.1, is code for class teacher 1. The transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet with the audio files, signed consent forms contact information and a notebook containing notes and memos. The time frame for interviews was four months. All participants were interviewed in the Author's office, three chose not to be audio-taped and wrote their thoughts in their classrooms, which was satisfactory. In keeping with the spirit of action research the author felt that her approach was participant-centred, rather than research-centred, and used probing in the course of each interview to try to get the essence of what the teachers were saying. Many authors emphasise the importance of probing as an interview technique (Judge, 1997, Gumbrium, 2000) Probing is very useful for asking respondents to provide further clarification or to expand upon an incomplete answer. It needs to be used wisely however, and should never be used to intimidate or coerce respondents into revealing too much especially in more sensitive areas of study. Interviews in this case lasted between thirty and sixty five minutes and the process started by my thanking them for agreeing to the study.

Immediately after the interview I noted key points such as observations and reflections in her diary which proved a useful reflective tool during the analysis stage.

WSE/MLL Further Validating our Claims to Knowledge

Further timely validation of the research came during a pilot WSE/MML in the school in June 2013. (See Appendix). This external inspection commenced with a pre-evaluation meeting

between the inspectors and the whole school teaching staff. A school information form was completed by the principal in consultation with the chairperson of the board of management and returned to the reporting inspector via e-mail. A questionnaire was sent to parents and pupils from 3rd class to sixth. Teachers filled in an on-line survey and meetings were held with post holders, board of management and parents association members. All classteachers were inspected, this involves observing teaching and assessing learning across a range of curriculum areas, drawing on the teachers' normal weekly timetables, examining yearly schemes, monthly progress reports, including special education settings and aspects of the

pupils' work. The focus of the WSE/MML is on evaluating the quality of observed teaching and learning processes and management and leadership in the school. (DES, 2013). Accordingly, all management documents are reviewed from the perspective of the insight they give into the quality of education provision in classrooms/learning settings and in the school as a whole. In a letter to parents the DES describe the process as one 'designed to evaluate the work of the school and to promote school improvement'.

Conclusion

In this section I have presented the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings relevant to the theory of reflective practice and action research and its implications for practice are discussed. Furthermore, I have critically analysed and explored the works of philosophers such as Dewey, Polanyi and Ryle who are regarded as major influences within Donald Schon's classic work of reflective practice. I also addressed some of the central epistemology assumptions that underpin reflective practice such as technical rationality, artistry and tacit knowledge, reflection in and on action, and knowing how and knowing that.

While constantly drawing on the work of Mc Niff and Whitehead, whom I've used to structure the fieldwork, this chapter also provides a detailed account of the methodology used in this action research case study and provides a model to suit the many action research cycles taken. It outlines the rationale for choosing action research and both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data gathering is explained in detail, the main methods being; staff meetings; focus groups, questionnaires, analytical memos and semi-structured interviews. Each cycle dictated the next. Ethical considerations were identified and limitations outlined. The next chapter contains the findings of the study, and recommendations that accommodate the new data presented.

Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Presentation of Findings

A large volume of qualitative and some quantitative data was generated throughout this study. This multiple data perspective provides ‘thick description’ (2001) and while I engaged in a mixed methods approach, quantitative findings are secondary to qualitative findings, with a commitment to objectivity by acknowledging the effects of people’s biases (Robson, 2002).

A core element of data analysis is data reduction (Robson, 1993). Throughout the analysis data was reduced through reading and re-reading and gleaning meaning from it through editing, summarising and segmenting the data without removing it from its context (Punch, 2009), and constantly looking for consistencies. Data collected by means of focus groups, questionnaires, diaries or interviews mean very little until they are analyzed and evaluated (Bell, J. 2010). Raw data needs to be categorized and interpreted. Well prepared, small scale case-studies should inform, illuminate and provide a basis for policy decisions within the school. As such they can be invaluable. In this study data was continuously examined for meaning, common patterns and emerging concepts from the beginning of the data collection, from the first staff meeting to the questionnaires and finally the interviews. Data from each action research cycle was analysed and findings were reported prior to engaging in the next cycle.

As Elliott believed that a case study report of action research should adopt a historical format; telling the story as it unfolded over time (1991), I have included a timeframe consisting of the exact order to enable the reader.

Figure 1

Timeframe	Cycles	Method	Concern
June 2010	Pre-cycle Exploratory phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff meeting • Literature Review 	Literacy levels after Analysis of result
October 2010	Cycle 1 Consultation Phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group – select literacy readers • Board of Management permission • Initiate modifications in class • Literature review • Analytic memos 	How do we improve literacy?
February, 2011 June, 2011	Cycle 2 Pilot phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group PDST facilitator • Whole staff awareness meeting • Reading room • Questionnaire to parents/guardians 	What do parents/guardians think?
September, 2011	Cycle 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate integrated literacy plan • Sixth class booklet for parents/guardians of new infants • Focus Group PDST facilitator • Home School Liaison interventions • Literature Review 	Home school links
March 2012	Cycle 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review literacy plan for September 2012 • Pupil survey • Analytic memos • Literature Review 	What do pupils think?
March 2013 June 2013	Cycle 5 Monitoring evaluating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher interviews (inhibitors, facilitators, strategies and new initiatives for success in reading) 	What do teachers think?
June 2013	WSE/MML	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An evaluation of the overall work of teaching and learning in the school 	What does Dept. of Education Inspectorate think?

Negotiating and clearing qualitative material in this way is useful where the researcher is interactive and engaged rather than separate from the researched (Walker, 2002). While the interviews were concerned exclusively with the facilitators and inhibitors likely to affect change in the tailoring of learning to suit the diversity of our pupils, the focus groups, pupil survey and parent questionnaires (See appendices) gathered more general information and were used in the formulation of an improvement plan as well as focused specific interview questions.

The findings of the inspectorate further added positively to our evidence base and authenticated our data, demonstrating our meta-reflection and critical inquiry, influencing the whole staff in the future, and promoting long-term sustainable change that ‘has been effected through the power of one determined individual who succeeded in spite of overwhelming odds (Alder-Collins 2007; Whitehead 1993, 2008a, cited in Mc Niff & Whitehead, 2009).

The school implements a very effective early-intervention and emergent reading programme. Particular effective practice was observed in the teaching of literacy. The whole school approach to the writing genres is producing very good results. Analyses of test results in literacy and numeracy on a whole-school basis has been undertaken. The improvements over a number of years are very encouraging. The Principal is long established in the school. She is highly commended for her vision. Particularly adept at inspiring an enthusiasm for innovation.

(Inspection Report, 2013).

As a result of feedback from the school inspectors during a WSE/MML (2013), it was decided to use a qualitative data-management computer software programme QSR NVivo 10 to assist with the analysis of the interviews. Accordingly all audio recordings were sent to a professional agency to be transcribed and as soon as the transcripts were available they were exported into NVivo10 which facilitated collection and storage of all data in an organized manner under ‘tree nodes’.

While the software is invaluable for organizing data, linking common language and establishing frequency it cannot interpret the meaning of the language. From the beginning it was necessary to search for meaning and remain conscious that 'the strengths of qualitative data rest very centrally on the competence with which their analysis is carried out' (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 10). Codes, or nodes in this case are not predetermined (Bryman, 2004; Gray, 2004), constant comparative reading and analysis of interviews is first necessary, then refined, extended and cross referenced with the data as a whole to come up with themes. This type of research is referred to as 'inductive' research and is consistent with a subjective epistemology and an interpretivist understanding of participants' meanings, allowing the researcher to use an open-ended flexible approach.

Each word and each sentence in the interview texts were analysed to identify descriptive categories. Emerging concepts/themes from Memoing during the interview process were also included to ensure that impressions, ideas and reflections were not lost during the analysis. Memos according to McCann & Clark reflect the researcher's internal dialogue with the data at a point in time (2003). Glaser suggests memos are written reflections of thinking at the core stage in the process of generating theory. As all interviews were conducted by the same researcher, memos are the analyst's written records of the analytical process as they were also written during the process to ensure that the researcher's impressions, ideas and reflections were not lost during the analysis. It is in memos that hypotheses are recorded, compared, verified, modified, or changed as new data comes in (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). Glaser (1998) describes memos as the theorizing write-up ideas about codes and their relationships as they occur to the analyst while coding. Glaser (1978) suggests that the writing of theoretical memos, which are written reflections of thinking is the core stage in the process of generating theory, and that the analyst should not skip this stage by going directly from coding to sorting or to writing up. Field notes are kept throughout the research process to document the researcher's ideas, insights and observations about the data. Memoing began from the beginning with the use of the memo facility on the I-phone until the last interview. As well as recording interviews facial expressions and non-verbal communication was observed. The data from all interviews were coded by number for anonymity.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

This chapter presents an analysis of the data collected throughout the study. It examines how and why the school got involved in this research into infant literacy, its impact and critically its sustainability. The qualitative research draws on teachers' perceptions of 'learner outcomes' (SSE Framework) over the 3 years, the factors that facilitate and inhibit, as they are deemed highly significant if we are to sustain current new practices and standards (See WSW/MLL Report, 2013) .

In analyzing the interviews, I used Lewin's (1947) force-field analysis in which the driving and restraining forces likely to effect a proposed change in our school were identified. This model provided a wealth of rich raw data and a valuable vehicle to assist moving onto the next stage of analysis.



Figure 2

Lewin's Force-Field Theory

“Quasistationary Social Equilibria and the problem of Permanent Change”

Lewin, K. (1969) (The Planning of Change, New York, Bawnes et al).

4.3 Emerging Themes

During the course of research and data reduction, a number of emergent themes were highlighted on a recurring basis. These themes are arrived at from an examination of the data and informed by the literature review. Six themes in this research were considered most important when addressing positive change in our literacy context;

1. Teacher Expertise, experience and autonomy.
2. Early Intervention
3. Pupil motivation and Self-Esteem
4. Critical Collaborative Inquiry and Communications
5. Parental Input
6. Good Quality Resources

A conceptual framework of the themes is presented in **figure 3**.

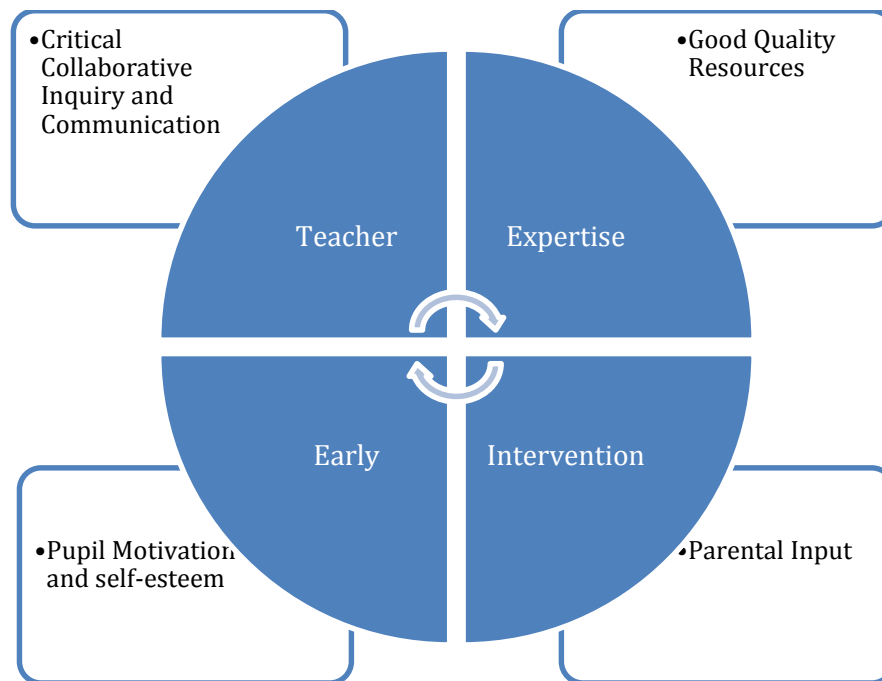


Figure 3.

The Interdependent Leadership Roundabout

While Leadership is at the core interlinking all themes, with the Principal as leader directing traffic on this educational roundabout, teacher expertise, coupled with years of experience and autonomy, aligned with critical collaborative inquiry and early infant intervention are the main facilitating themes highlighted during the interviews.

4.4 Teacher Expertise

Improving quality means ensuring highly qualified and trained teachers are put into infant classes. Infant classteachers need to be highly educated and well trained, involved in continuous professional development and specialized to work with young children. Only then can early childhood education make the required difference to life chances. Firstly effective teachers in this study provide a balanced literacy framework, are involved in on-site professional development since we became a DEIS school, are experts at class room management and use a multi-faceted approach to make it meaningful and increase the likelihood that it would lead to sustained change. Previous research also indicates that the professional development must be ongoing, on-site and specific to the needs of the teachers who must own the process and dictate the pace (Lipson, 2004)

When I think of the way we used to do a huge amount of daily news and copying down off the board and it was a useless exercise, ok as a handwriting exercise.
(CT. 1)

Berliner (2004) noted in his twenty years of novice-expert research on teaching, that expert or accomplished teachers' understanding and representation of classroom problems is very different from that of novices;

I would ditch the reading scheme immediately, we do a huge amount of phonics, but I would have been doing a lot of that anyway having worked in England. Phonics was the buzz word at the time. But to have phonics taught in a structured way, I think some of it can be quite haphazard. (CT.)

We got rid of the look and say method, I thought that was very inhibiting for teachers...all it did was lead kids into difficulties, they only had a small bank of vocabulary. (CT.2)

In this study expert experienced teachers are adept at knowing what is the right next step in their classroom context, use several assessment measures and the resulting data to differentiate their daily instruction in order to accommodate the range of learning needs in their classroom;

The methods we used in the past, this over prescriptive method of teaching where you get a set of words, the Look and Say approach, that was fine for the middle achievers or the high achievers, the lower achievers, no they didn't benefit from it which meant that the only thing they had really read in the classroom by the end of the year was 'look at me'' or one of the reading schemes that was hindering them. (CT. 3)

Kennedy noted in her study that some schools are more successful in raising literacy standards than others, even when their socio-economic profiles are broadly similar due to a range of school and classroom-level factors as well as differences between individual teachers (Kennedy, E. 2010). In this study which focused on narrowing the achievement among pupils, teachers are expert at identifying the student that is struggling and why;

There were a huge amount of foreign nationals in that class, results were way down. I think we knew that our standards were down and at that stage we did buy a lot of new library books but we didn't know how to use them, We were still sending them home and saying get someone to read them to you.....now we know that when the book goes home that they are able to read it and we know as well that they will get gradually more difficult ...but you know they are able for it when they move on ,you are not just throwing books at random. (CT. 1)

Effective teachers in this study also have very fast and accurate pattern recognition of classroom culture;

What I find is the large class size, because it inhibits you from monitoring and then of course the language barrier with some of the children inhibits their comprehension which then leads the child to be disinterested. (CT. 6)

The findings from this research provide clear evidence that **teacher autonomy** impacts on student learning, and their obvious commitment to their pupil's needs encouraged them to feel that the onus was on them to do something about it (Bubb and Earley, 2008; 19).

Another very significant and positive change is that they no longer work in isolation, in and out of each others classrooms, swapping advice and information gathering. They are finding this collaborative work sociable as well as beneficial and not unlike their students enjoyable, breathing new life into what could be a totally isolating career;

the network of teachers in the junior end is the success of the programme...and I think we should admire you for giving us the autonomy to do what was done, as well as that you had the initiative to question the parents, do you remember you sent out that questionnaire? (C.T. 2)

Anything that was inhibiting us we have lost there are still areas that we can change but it as you come up against stuff that you see that there are things that you are doing that you can change, even the following year. (CT. 1)

Teachers don't merely deliver the curriculum, they also develop, define and re-interpret it (Lauden, 1991). Teachers will reject what doesn't work when they trust that they are allowed the authority and classroom autonomy to do so;

If you asked me when we started two years ago, as a junior infant teacher at the time, I would have said that approach 'look and say' I could have told you who the weak reader in the class was, I couldn't have told you much about the in between, the weakest and the outstanding child, I would have told you very little. Now I can tell you where they are starting from, how they've progressed, what work we needed to do, where exactly their problem is, be it the high achiever, what they found difficult, where their strengths are I could tell you exactly now, you can look at the child's folder and see their whole journey. (C.T. 2)

and if it fails ditching it if not, trying to develop it further. Being open to new ideas...the resources we have are brilliant compared to ten years ago. (C.T.5)

Kennedy identified that a stable staff allied with strong internal leadership, provided by either the Principal or a teacher, a reading tutor in our case, was deemed vital in the first steps

towards change (Kennedy, E. 2010). Significantly our school is lucky to have a stable staff, teacher turnover is not an issue, indicating continuity and consistency in collaborative planning and teaching practices. It is the classteacher who recognizes ‘the uniqueness of the child’ (Introduction to Primary Curriculum 2000), charts individual growth, celebrates achievements that for some might be totally insignificant, but for others are giant steps. The concept of value-added (Rutter et al, 1979, Mortimore et al, 1988) makes most sense when it is grounded in the real world of what matters to pupils, parents and teachers. In a sense this research adds to the growing knowledge and recognition that it is the day-to-day interaction between the teacher and pupil that has the most impact;

It is what teachers think, what teachers believe, and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get. Growing appreciation of this fact is placing working with teachers and understanding teachers at the top of our research and improvement agendas (Hargreaves, A. 1994).

4.5 Emerging Leaders

Another key finding in this research was that there were a number of leaders with a specific interest in the area of literacy on the staff already.

...nothing happens overnight and you have to iron out the glitches as well ...and you see theoretically how it is going to work. (C.T. 11)

I have found their talents an excellent tool in successfully managing the change process and this research a most meaningful empowerment of teachers involved to chose practices that align with their values and pupils needs;

We have tailored the texts to suit them...the PM readers are quite diverse, especially as you go up the levels you encounter pupils with very different circumstances and we also have the Osborne series which are the novels. (C.T.7)

I think a lot of their interest stemmed from the books, prediction and the conversations about the book before they actually read the book, so they appreciate. (C.T. 2)

Instead of ignoring or trying to suppress these emergent leaders, who only have power if permitted to lead, I encouraged them both in their personal and professional development. So much so that two of them have started a Masters study programme this autumn (2013). Researching teachers, are noted for their questions, their deliberations, their debate and their admissions. Teachers engaged in action research can provide very rich text, as they did in this case study (See separate appendices) which is all the more relevant because it is coming from the practitioner.

I knew M. (teacher) would be good at it, she has years of experience and yet so dynamic...they are both equally affective, they work well together. (C.T. 10)

I have learned that a principal aspiring to be principal of an excellent school, needs to share power, encourage the professional involvement of staff, use their skills and show collective responsibility towards the pupils in our care. In the light of current educational trends, i.e. increased principals' workload, educational accountability and compliance, this study has implications for practicing principals seeking to renew or change an organization, they must lead but empower by constantly encouraging others to take initiatives, to think laterally and look critically at the present system before designing policies which respond effectively to pupil needs. This integrated approach is integral to this case study. It will ensure that the appropriate work is been prioritized and that practices, which no longer contribute to the achievement of clearly stated goals, can be discarded to allow higher priority work to be undertaken regarding school context and pupil population.

4.6 Early Intervention

Early childhood education matters when it comes to tackling child poverty and social inclusion. In educational terms it is central to meeting the challenge of underachievement among some groups in society ...and as everyone knows now and accepts there are substantial economic benefits to be made from investment in early childhood education

(Intouch , Irish National Teachers Organisation, Issue NO.142, March 2014) One impeding factor for providing children with metacognitive and strategic interventions is the lack of teacher preparation programmes that promote the content and pedagogical expertise necessary for teachers to deliver this instruction (Reid, 1999, King, 2012). Recent studies found teacher expertise is by far the single most important determinant of pupil performance, accounting for 40% of the difference in overall pupil performance (Darling-Hammond, 1998, King, 2012). Teachers need a greater understanding of instruction i.e. structure of the English language, development of reading strategies and early recognition of reading difficulties .

From this research I have found that the professional development undertaken by DEIS schools has had a tremendously positive impact on learner outcomes as well as teacher expertise and enthusiasm .

Our own training, we've had a huge amount since we became a DEIS school.

It comes down to experience, trying out new stuff. (C.T.5)

The literature review plus analysis of the data highlight the necessity for early intervention if all pupils are to succeed. Before this, screening began in first class;

Now...all our infants are tracked, junior infants as well as senior infants. (C.T.4)

Well in senior infants at the minute I send all the children out to the Reading Recovery teacher and it ensures that each child is reading at their own level and are reading every day. I think the focus on reading in the junior infant classroom promotes interest in reading in the child and I think that is very important. (C.T. 2).

...it would have been 4 children per day and for maybe a period of ten to twenty weeks, depending on how good or weak the child was, now we are actually taking thirty children a day, one day for reading and then the following day for writing and they are getting ten – fifteen minutes a day (C.T.3).

...that's indicative of where the class has come from so that shows that they are moving on. (C.T.4).

A study carried out by Baker, Herman and Yeh (1981) found that 'unstructured' use of time was negatively related to achievements in mathematics. There is evidence that after swinging too far towards the excesses of an unstructured, child-centred, whole language approach, language arts teaching is now moving back to a more structured approach (Adams, 1994, Zalud, Hoag and Wood, 1995). As Pressley observed;

experiencing more explicit instruction of reading skills and strategies in no way precludes the authentic reading and writing experiences emphasized in whole language. Rather, with earlier intervention and explicit instruction, at risk students participate more fully in literacy experiences' (Pressley, 1994; p. 211).

There is even evidence to support the view that early intervention in the pre-school period can have extremely beneficial outcomes in terms of higher success rates when the children begin formal schooling (Kemp, 1992, Campbell and Raney, 1994, Wasik and Karwent, 1994). In Finland there is an emphasis on identification of any difficulties before the child starts school. Multi-professional teams comprising a public-health nurse ,doctor, speech therapist and a psychologist, if necessary,do the evaluations(Inspection and Evaluation, Department of Education and Skills,2012:56).However it must be noted that Finland places a high value on education, as we do in Ireland, but all their primary school teachers are expected 'to have a Master's degree and are supported by appropriate training and development in order to learn the expertise to diagnose potential learning difficulties and knowledge of the appropriate intervention for individual pupils'(Department of Education and Skills,2012)

4.7 Pupil Motivation and Self-esteem

...an awful lot of this is about building confidence and their self esteem. (C.T. 8)

We all know that success leads to further success, the opposite is also true. Riddick discovered that '80% of mothers rated improvement in self –esteem as the most important outcome of their children's specialist assessment and support (1995). Enhancing self-esteem is seen as an essential part of working with pupils, and teachers play a critical role in the

development of self-esteem (INTO, 195; Lawrence, 1996; Jordan, 2003; Lerner, 2003; King, 2012). As a result of the consistent lack of success experienced by some pupils at school, parents, teachers classmates, even friends frequently accuse them of being stupid and lazy. The learning difficulty is disempowering in itself, but constant criticism and ridicule causes serious long-term self-esteem issues. This damages the child's sense of self-worth, so that many grow up angry, guilt-ridden and lacking in self-confidence. The indispensable element in a prevention-oriented strategy of helping students before they acquire a self-image of academic failure is an aggressive programme of literacy promotion, such as this case study. This presupposes a willingness on the part of teachers to learn more, to make a difference to the future lives of their pupils thus helping to end the vicious cycle of failure and frustration that damages the 10-20% (DES, 2002) of pupils and demotivated their parents before them;

I know when I go into senior infants I am just amazed at the enthusiasm for reading, all the books thrown around the tables ,even in first class Miss T. has to get cross with them to put away their reading and their books because she wants to get something else done. (C.T. 7)

Tom B. has read 175 books this year, the mother is amazed...he wouldn't have been a high achiever like his sister, because he is so laid back, but he doesn't realize the work he is doing himself, it's totally for pleasure and with enthusiasm. (C.T. 2)

Teachers become energized with success and animated by pupil achievement;

The way we are doing it now, they're able to break up the words and it just... they are able to approach text a lot better and unfamiliar texts and that works hand in hand with our first steps... because they are able to work independently on topics that interest them and they are able to do the first steps lesson such as report and procedures a lot more effectively. (CT. 3)

It is clear that early identification and understanding of learning difficulties helps; 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'. According to the learning support guidelines

The classteacher has primary responsibility for the progress of all pupils in his/her class, including those selected for supplementary teaching. A particular responsibility of the class teacher is to create a classroom environment in which learning difficulties can be prevented or at least alleviated. (DES, 2000)

It is essential that whatever approach a school takes that it has a clearly defined purpose and that this is matched to a genuine learning need in the children. Our ultimate goal is to develop, refine and sustain use of strategies that address pupils' diverse learning needs and capabilities, as stressed by Kohler et al (1997).

Every child is reading at their own ability, like even this year in junior infants we would still have a small group who would be reading at a very low level.....within the whole class at the moment there is huge diversity but they are all able to read, you are not tied to the reading scheme and trying to hammer it into them by the end of the year just so they can pick up a book and say they are able to read it. Each child is able to read whereas before, years ago they might have known the book off by heart and you would never be fully sure whether they were actually reading or not. (CT. 1)

Carroll maintained that the main focus has been on pupils' academic achievement to the detriment of their social and emotional needs (1999). Self esteem is the 'total evaluation a person makes of himself and the degree of respect with which he regards himself' (Maines and Robinson, 1998). The value a pupil places on himself is related to his understanding of himself. This value defines his self esteem or in this case her self esteem;

we took in one child for the new programme and she was in difficulty in the junior end...difficulty with her work and her peers, she was causing trouble on the yard, and in the classroom with her peers, but as she progressed in the reading programme we discovered that she had an inferiority complex, because she wasn't working at the standard they were, she was given the chance to work through it and her mother came in and said that the experience was life changing because she had isolated herself as they others were high achievers and now she is every bit as capable as any of them, had she been anywhere else she would not have got the chance. (C.T. 2)

Teachers know that reading is fundamental to most academic learning, they know that the ability to read is highly indicative of future school success, invariably leading to success in the workplace. They have developed personal strategies over the years to motivate pupils;

You just differentiate as much as possible and that is what we are doing, and you make sure...it's an awful thing to hand a child a book that he or she can't read. (CT. 2).

and again huge repetition ...how to decode the words, how to use the picture, how to use a book, the understanding of print has to be taught and practiced and then practiced. (CT. 1)

And like the children we teach, teachers flourish with 'external' positive praise;

Well the reading programme is a drastic initiative, there is no child going to leave senior infants or first class without an amazing foundation in reading. There is no child that isn't been given the optimum opportunity. (PDST Co-ordinator).

What you are basically saying to me is that you know where they are with reading because they are all leveled so you are tracking everybody aren't ya (PDST, Focus group 2)

And constructive advice;

You have all worked so hard over the last six or seven years on putting plans in place and getting first steps in, making great progress in literacy and numeracy and all the other areas as well. We still have to keep doing that but its no harm either even at this stage informing ourselves as to where we want to go by listening to voices, by hearing that school self evaluation is going to be a reality for us in the DEIS context as much as it is going to be for other schools, but not so much of a shell shock (PDST, Focus group 2)

4.8 Critical Collaborative Inquiry

Another key feature of successful schools in the international literature is the cohesion between classroom and support programmes. Logan et al., argued that effective collaboration among class and special education teachers, along with a weekly formal time for collaboration and planning of inclusive practices are the most important factors in achieving successful whole school inclusion (1994). However, despite the obvious benefits successful collaboration is not readily attainable or practiced in our schools. It demands time, persistence, motivation and commitment by all involved. Lack of congruence between classroom and support practices can make the learning process of reading confusing and complicated, especially for those with learning difficulties (Eivers et al., 2004, Kennedy, 2010, King, 2012). There was a great emphasis on collaboration between teachers, parents, pupils and relevant professionals (Lunt et al., 1994; Westwood, 1997; Lerner, 1993) in the 1990s. Clark et al., 1996 insist that collaboration is not merely people working together, rather an experience where all contribute, share conversations and understandings and both pupils and teachers benefit as a result. According to Abbott et al., collaboration aids in staff development, prevents ‘burn-out’ of teachers working in isolation and can be successful in bridging the gap between theory and practice in terms of research (Abbott et al., 1999; Buckley, 2000). This study also proves that when teachers are open to collaborative critique, both teachers and their pupils benefit.

I think the writing is as important as the reading and if that's not part of it, I know that it collapses and it is not as effective, I think they work hand in hand and becoming a good writer will reflect in their reading and vice versa.(C.T.2)

Recent research undertaken by Sabel et al., (2011) on the Finnish education system describes a shift from a culture of control to a culture of trust. Our staff have learned to trust each other, and enjoy regular collaboration, sharing and talking about classroom practice;

...and the people, because when you are trying out something different you have other people to help...its not just you as a classteacher on your own. (CT.2)
We have a great team effort here and we share our resources and ideas that work for us so that if one thing works we try it if it fails you move on (HSCL, Focus group 3)

Trust is massive ... she trusted what I was doing and she was confident that the kids were on their correct levels of literacy. (C.T. 3)

I have never seen any school to progress like this at infant's level and I did standardized testing in England with children of the same age. (CT. 4)

In this study the teachers want the best for all pupils and are open to change if they see it working in the classroom. Expert experienced teachers convincingly demonstrate that there are very significant differences in what is 'seen' of classroom life-daily, and what works. Nobody else has the same thorough observation opportunities;

Well the individualized programme facilitate you to actually teach ,to specifically teach reading... and the books we have in school are amazing and the fact that each set of books is leveled and that each child can read a book that is suitable for the level that they are at. They can progress with these books. (CT. 4)

We took the elements of reading recovery and we downscaled, so where a lesson in reading recovery would be half an hour up to forty minutes, we were able to downscale it to fifteen or even ten. we took the children in groups of two, we leveled them so that each group of two was on the same level and every second day we did reading with the group of two and the next day we would do writing...then phonics was brought into it. (CT. 3)

By collaboratively sharing common goals, teacher roles and responsibilities for outcomes, personalities and teacher attitudes are all important components of effective teacher collaboration (Thomas, 1992; INTO, 1993; Jordan, 1994; Buckley, 2000, Murawski and Swanson, 2001, King, 2010).

We have changed the way we teach reading, I think you gave us the power to change it and the fact that we had the autonomy, we have changed it and it will grow because it is consistently growing. (C.T. 2)

4.9 Parental Input

‘Irish people prioritise education above all else’ (The Irish Times, January, 24, 2013). A recent Vital Signs survey by a philanthropic group, Community Foundation for Ireland (CFI), providing a snapshot of trends and issues affecting the population of modern Ireland and noted that Irish parents are particularly interested in literacy levels and understand that literacy and future prospects for their children go hand in hand. As mentioned previously according to the DES 2002 figures, between 10-20% of all children in Irish classrooms have learning difficulties. These children are not mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed or physically handicapped. These children fail to learn to read and write or spell when taught in a mainstream class by standard classroom methods, and many of their parents have failed to notice as many of them found school difficult themselves. That was the reality in our DEIS Band 2 school before the influx of 15 other nationalities, with parents and pupils not having a spoken word of English, further adding to our literacy workload. This is the reality in many Irish schools and despite the many references in DES guidelines to creating links to the local community and all the parents, DES officials fail to recognize or appreciate the social change our school and many similar schools have experienced in the last decade. One cannot oversimplify the impact of years of relentless change on our local community and while the majority of parents are aware of school policies and that helping their child at home benefits their learning, it doesn’t happen in enough homes.

With our population they are not coming in like that, I mean a lot of our children probably have no books at home. (Voice 2, focus group 3).

I literally had to take them (parents) by the hand to bring them to see it(Reading Room) on parent teacher open day (Voice 2, Focus group 2)

We are delighted however to have added a Home School Liaison Officer to our staff since 2010 and with her input and growing knowledge hope to build on the support we do receive from parents who fully endorsed our work in the WSE/MML parent response questionnaires. (See Report).

I had a parent in this morning who has a bright child in fourth class and she has a little boy in senior infants, she says she cannot get over the difference in the

way the two of them are being taught to read . She said while her daughter is a brilliant avid reader he s better and he s in senior infants because of this new method and you know how bright Mary is. She held me outside because her brother is involved in Mary Immaculate College in Limerick and he wants to know what we are doing. (CT.6)

Kennedy in her research found that poor parental involvement impacted negatively on achievement in designated disadvantaged schools (Kennedy, E.2010). Teachers in this study are astute at analyzing parent dynamics;

We need to get the parents on board, some of them can be very negative because of their own negative experiences and because they don't see the value in education and the purpose of it all. They seem to think it stops with the school and it stops at three o' clock....they don't see themselves as the primary educators of their children, a lot of them ,or the meaning behind working or giving time to their children at home (HSCL, Focus group1)

How many didn't even know we had the reading room after all the times we asked them to look in. (CT. 7)

In the beginning they weren't exactly sure what we were doing, not everyone would understand what we are trying to do. (CT. 4)

In our diverse context, proper parental support is paramount. In the past we have involved parents by explaining ways in which their input can be an advantage to their children, by communicating openly and informing them what is happening in the school homework diary and through the school newsletter, but in the past few years many of our parents don't and won't learn to speak English, this has been a huge challenge for the school.

Especially parents who refuse to speak the English language outside of school hours. They will speak their own language the minute they pick up their children and their children will tell you it is it is only being spoken at home. Yet they expect them to learn English here and to be good readers but they won't do it at home with them so that can be a huge problem for us (HSCL , Focus group1).

We are aware that key to quality service provision is delivering those services in a way that meets the needs of parents and are finding in recent years through our Home School Liaison, that it is becoming easier, but we still have ‘more to do’.

Yes, absolutely because they have come on board. When we did the stories workshop last year with junior infants, which involved bringing the story to life in an informal manner and those parents were so proud of themselves and their work was brought into the school and those children who don't always get top of the class were so proud of their mummies and daddies work. They were saying this is mine and that was such a confidence booster. (C.T. 6)

I will have a meeting at the beginning of each year with the new parents to tell them very simple things that they may not realize are important about allocating time to home work, allocating a clean, quiet environment and spending a little quality time one to one with a parent (HSCL, Focus group 2).

There is a great emphasis on parental involvement in Irish Education at the present time. The Department of Education has acknowledged the need for parents to receive information by issuing many recent directives to schools regarding the availability of department circulars to parents. Parents are recognized as central to the education process with an obligation on ‘schools to adopt a range of measures aimed at fostering active parental partnership in schools’ (Department of Education, 1995 (a) (p.139). Parents are considered to have a ‘range of talents, abilities and skills that have the potential to enrich and extend the educational opportunities provided by a school’ (I.N.T.O. 2007). Further research into parental attitudes would be beneficial.

Macbeath would say within this there is a challenge for us’ to ask for and listen to a multiplicity of perspectives’...we need to hear the pupil voice and also the parental voice....one of the ways that we can hear the pupil voice ties in nicely with the whole area of self assessment (Voice 1, Focus group 2)

4.10 Good Quality Resources

Bjorkman and Olofsson's (2009) argument that alignment between teachers' and principals' priorities is a key driving force, providing resources as well as strong supportive pre-conditions for capacity building for change is evident throughout the research. Despite teacher's motivation and willingness to sustain improvement and change practices, it is not possible without leadership support. Pupil individual needs are met by devising new approaches to existing tasks and using existing resources with new methods of working together in a planned, structured way. Knowing that not all pupils learn at the same rate, our infant teachers had a discretionary budget for purchasing classroom supplies and supplementary instructional materials, graded in order to accommodate the pupils' varying reading abilities, and supplemented by the local library when attainment levels improve. Towards this end self-correction rather than teacher's correction was emphasized, building the pupil's confidence to self-evaluate and read independently.

Miss T. said her books are too easy for her first class, she wants second class books in her room now. (Voice 3, Focus group 3)

Department guidelines envisage a collaborative pro-active approach between the learning support team and classteachers, with the learning support teacher in the capacity of advisor and consultant in her support of the class teacher and parents

We are providing resources, workshops, literacy and numeracy even Irish classes for the non national parents, there would be few attending, but we can't force them to attend (HSCL, Focus group 2)

...there are a wide range of cross curricular texts that allows the teacher to facilitate reading across the curriculum. (C.T. 9)

Reading Room

As an activity or pastime for children, reading has a lot of competition these days. Sophisticated gaming devices, numerous TV channels, mobile phones, music, computers, Ipads and every toy imaginable, all vie for children's time and attention. It was found during research that an investment in 'a special place' for reading would help, so with the support of the Board of Management a spare classroom was decorated and the Parent's Association gave the sum of 4,000 to stock it, plus a discretionary budget in 2014 for computer software, which as yet we are reluctant to introduce for fear of upsetting our haven of tranquility for both boys and girls. By developing the reading room, we have created a unique quiet, bright, airy and totally child-friendly space for pupils to enjoy their new found love of books. It is furnished creatively and colourfully, designed by senior pupils, with the floor design incorporating the 'First Steps Clown', the 5 vowels, and phonic blends that the children can play hopscotch and literacy games on, mostly of their own imaginative creation. In a world full of distractions, our 'Reading Room' simply seeks to encourage pupils to rediscover the magic of reading. Parents and pupils love this room and as a staff we are convinced that the pleasure and enjoyment of reading is evident daily there. The school culture of reading for fun is unconsciously reinforced. When an adult enters the room children are oblivious to their presence, preferring to continue reading, dragging parents, grandparents and visitors to see their print rich 'Reading Room'. If this action research case study achieved nothing else, this room on its own is enough.

it is amazing, it is so interesting, you would wonder how we ever taught reading before. (CT. 6)

The fact that we have books that will appeal to every child (HSCL, Focus group 2)

The little ones in senior infants are loving the non-fiction. (CT. 7)

4.11 Future Sustainability

Interestingly when an intervention works well, particularly in infant classrooms it isn't always recognized by anyone other than the teachers, principal and thankfully parents. To quote Marie Clay;

‘when early intervention does its job well, it is not clear to new leaders in education that there is any reason to support the successful endeavour. By its own efficiency it makes the problem invisible. As a result, the problem rapidly slips down on the agenda and risks falling into oblivion’ (2005).

As principal I was greatly heartened when the inspectors acknowledged our success in early intervention and emergent reading. (See report);

The school implements a very effective early-intervention and emergent reading programme.

This research provides clear evidence that focused, infant teachers are the most important factor for infant literacy success in the future.

I suppose we have still room for improvement, we are still reading high frequency words that they know, so to get them out of their comfort zone again and move them on even using different tenses, a lot of books would be in the present tense so even to get them into books that are in the past tense or non-fiction. (C.T.1)

In terms of future developments top priority must be a firm focus on providing quality early childhood education in our primary schools. By harnessing the professionalism and intellectual capacity of staff as well as the high degree of trust and confidence of our parent body, primary schools must face this challenge through planning, resourcing, and open collaborative communication to meet the needs of all our stakeholders .As sustainability of practices is necessary for school improvement and Principals have a key role in developing and sustaining teachers’ professional learning I will place early

intervention high on future agenda by creating conditions in which we continue to collaborate and learn from each other.

...the lady in the library mentioned how amazing our children are, they mentioned before about the increase in children visiting the library. (C.T. 3)

As classteachers are the mediators of change it is important that our existing expansive support system be maintained;

Yes but you need personnel. I mean if you have a class of thirty and you have foreign nationals and children who are just weak and you have bright kids and travellers there is no way one person can get them to the level that you have them now if you don't have help in the (infant) classroom. (CT.1)

An optimum learning environment will be created throughout the whole school that will suit teacher as well as pupil needs, enabling them all to reach an effective, sustainable, critical level of practice;

you can't just say it's a closed book . Now we know what we are doing, you have to open discuss ion on it at regular intervals throughout the year to see that it is working well and Something really worth looking at for ye as a staff that ye will organize. Everyone is leveled up to second class, so it's very important to look from third to sixth classes (PDST Focus Group 3)

Focused class teachers at all levels will be our future goal, enhancing pupils' learning outcomes and school improvement processes; encompassing a bottom-up approach with top down support; sustaining our culture of autonomy and trust; a model of collective responsibility in line with the recommendations of the DES Inspectorate's report (See Appendices) ;

‘A process whereby all teachers are motivated to act collaboratively, under the leadership of the Principal’

This research highlights that driving forces are seldom based on one initiative but a combination of collaborative practices in a cooperative and trusting context where communities have the chance to reach provisional consensus (Taysum, A. 2010), providing support for all infant teachers and subsequently their pupils with a view to extending this support to all classteachers and pupils in the future. These actions will also make for better quality policy formulation and collective decision making at whole staff level.

We know that we are at a certain level in the school but you have to make sure that it continues on as well to maintain it. (CT. 1)

It could be all summed up by teacher 7

We cannot ever go back to the old ways

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this case study the area of concern was literacy and the context a DEIS, Band 2 school of diverse, multicultural pupil population. Through this case study and combining our cumulative years of experience and expertise we have evaluated and subsequently changed the way we teach reading to infant classes in our school, we have generated our own ‘living theory of practice’ (Whitehead, 2001) from within our school.

The review of literature is reported on two ways, initially in the literature review section and subsequently connections with appropriate literature are made throughout the remainder of the thesis. In the context of this research relevant literature includes works on literacy, action research and reflective practice, school self evaluation, educational leadership and organizational effectiveness.

By using an action research approach to change and improvement from the individual to the collective (McNamara & ‘Hara, 2000) we have conducted an evaluation of infant literacy challenging the debate that action research is ‘very much in the realm of the personal and the individual and perhaps had little to say in the context of changing, leading and managing organisations’ noted by Mc Namara & O’Hara at the *Action Research and the politics of Educational Knowledge* conference (2000).

The attractiveness of action research for education is the role of the researcher and the intent of the research. Unlike other research methods, the teacher/principal as researcher must be an active participant in both the research and the change process, collaboratively evaluating at each stage. The study of teachers’ experiences is increasingly being seen as central to the study of teachers’ thinking, culture, and behavior. Exponents argue that it is crucial to understand teachers’ perspectives if current efforts at improvements and reform are effective. For too long teachers voices have been excluded from the international debate on educational reform, competent teachers were assumed to be self-sufficient, certain of their role and independent. This longitudinal study was about engaging with evidence informed leadership, leading, changing and managing. ‘Understanding and respecting tolerance while working within ethical frameworks, building relationships of trust and opportunity for cooperative dialogue for civic work’(Taysum, A. 2010). Thus providing teachers with opportunity to be heard in a meaningful, and considered debate about the evaluation of their practice. It could be described as a ‘fait accompli’ in the context of our school. Moreover while I am cognizant

of the limitations of an action research case study located within a single institution I am confident at this stage that it could transfer to other similar schools.

The stringent scrutiny of our recent WSE/MLL, as well as the views of the validation group, critical friend, pupils, parents and teachers support any claims to new knowledge, leading me to recommend that other schools consider this model of critical collaborative inquiry and reflection, resulting in teaching approaches appropriate to their school context.

School self-evaluation, school inspection and the relationship between them are important themes in current educational policy debates nationally and internationally. There is increased evidence internationally of a shift from dictatorial or confrontational styles of school evaluation to an approach more focused on capacity team building and continuous professional development. In Finland this shift in emphasis coincided with the dismantling of the inspection system and the elimination of all forms of central control of teachers' work (Sabel et al., 2011:25). Decentralisation of authority and accountability contributed to greater levels of experimentation in schools according to Sabel, where teachers increasingly collaborated with other local professionals as well as with other teachers and researchers around the country to experiment, share information and learn about new research findings and practical tools for school improvement.

As school self-evaluation is a major initiative in Irish schools at present that hopes to build on good practice while creating preconditions for positive capacity building (Bjorkman & Olofsson, 2009) this study is timely. A shift from a culture of control to one of trust and empathic connections with staff and students needs an emotionally intelligent responsive leader. As a result of this action research or 'action learning approach' (Irish Management Institute, 2013) where we applied our learning to real life organizational challenges- I believe it has to be principal led. There is overwhelming evidence that the leadership style of the school principal has a major impact on the effectiveness of the school and that 'initiating and sustaining change is challenging, takes commitment, hard work and strategic action' (McNiff and Whitehead, 2005).

In setting the scene, 'fostering critical engagement, reflection and reflexivity' (Taysum, A. 2010), providing the many necessary resources and creating the conditions for professional development and dialogue, Principals are in the business of shaping and working within their

school context and culture, creating the structure necessary for sustainable change. In true management terms we as practicing teachers, have undertaken a comprehensive audit of our learning processes, evaluated current practices against results, made prioritized recommendations for change and delivered significant return for our organization i.e. significant success for our pupils. One main message emerging from this study is that those who work day-to-day in classrooms should play a major role in evaluating and determining their classroom practices, their classroom experiences, their successes and future priorities. Teachers are intensely practical, they should be allowed the autonomy necessary to tailor a flexible timeframe combining their unique blend of academic qualifications and knowledge of real life classroom dynamics to create best practice tools and techniques to face current challenges in education. Who else is in that position? Who else can best serve the interests of their local community? Who else knows the needs of pupils and teachers? Who else knows their context and daily reality? However ,as noted by McNamara & O'Hara 'while the rhetoric of self evaluative capacity building has been key to the emerging system the lack of meaningful structural response within schools means that this has remained aspirational' (G McNamara, & O'Hara, J. 2012).

This research emphasizes the need for teachers and school principals with work based experience to talk about their perspectives on teaching in their own words as part of the current debate on school-self evaluation which greatly affects, among others, the teachers and leaders themselves. To quote Altrichter in his introduction to 'Images of Educational Change', 'human beings make their history-and their organisations-not independently of all external contingencies, but knowing their history and their organisations in relationship to their knowledge.(2000)'. Local community and school context matters .Our local knowledge adds to the potential value of school self-evaluation .Our ability to critically assess strengths and weaknesses, to improve and change for the greater good of local communities in educational settings will be lost if we are to become passive practitioners and lose autonomy to external agencies.

Collective action research is a methodology of change similar to SSE. This much talked about SSE framework recently introduced to primary schools (2012) to test effectiveness 'has become increasingly common in most countries in the developed world' (McNamara, & O'Hara, 2008). Schools cannot avoid or procrastinate we are expected to be professional and self –evaluate for the further development of all aspects of teaching and learning in our

schools. To quote (Mc Niff, 1013) it is more of a 'paradigmatic attitude than a methodology' we need to "give ourselves up to action research, and change our perceptions of its relationship with us" (p. 205). Promoting any new endeavor is difficult (Mc Namara, & O'Hara, 2000) trying to get all staff to engage openly takes energy creativity and dynamism. In our school we had no choice, change was necessary, as a staff we weren't happy, and knew that in the absence of external assistance we needed to develop our own 'educational theory' as we felt that not all pupils were getting a fair chance, we needed to work together, to trust each other, become self critical in order to respond to the challenge.

By engaging in action research we contributed to the process of managing change in our organization. Through reflexive critique (awareness of the transformation of your thinking), dialectical critique (awareness of the influences acting on you) and my capacity as leader to influence other people's thinking (agency) we have shared a process of deep learning (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009 : 142), and succeeded in changing our thinking and our practices. It has been a challenge but a great learning curve, with both pupils and participants benefiting.

As Principal and researcher I found that both the students and teachers required a safe environment that was open, honest and trusting to develop reflective practice. As a trained life-coach I cultivated a culture of courage and confidence to evaluate daily teaching practices, gain clarity, optimize adult and as a result, student learning, to develop a 'community of learners' (King, F, 2012). By leading with experience, wisdom and passion not just ambition and power, we have challenged the theory practice gap and the delivery of literacy lessons to multicultural infant classes. We created a culture of learning to suit our context, which can feed into current and future reading programmes nationally and internationally. Culture and work environment played a significant role in the participant's engagement with reflection. As teachers our values were clarified in the course of their emergence and formed into living standards of judgment (Mc Niff, 2009) and daily practices.

From this research I have learned that for the greater good of all children in our care, it is preferable for schools to use their 'thinking tools and collective intelligence'(Taysum,A.2010), to self-evaluate, rather than it been imposed externally. But we need help to think about different modes of knowledge. To date teachers are not provided with adequate support to undertake this complex task. To quote McNamara & O'Hara

‘substantial skills acquisition not necessarily closely aligned to teaching skills is required on the part of the teacher practitioner if the research is to be academically validated’ (2000). Every teacher and principal has a unique perspective on his/her school, are engaging in planning and identifying school needs, but genuinely do not fully understand the concept of school self-evaluation. Gathering evidence is no simple task, it takes time, training, organization and tremendous creativity, and when did we become competent in data analysis? Now that all teachers are expected to engage in SSE the DES must put in place the relevant techniques and training as soon as possible before schools ‘walk away from the challenge’ (Matthews, 2010).

Schon’s (1983, 1988, 1995) concept of the reflective practitioner and the popularity of action research as a methodology has resulted in much greater emphasis in pre-service and in-service teacher education on methodological competence, but little effective training for the daily practitioners. I agree whole-heartedly with Mc Namara & O’Hara when they contend that with the correct assistance, practitioners quickly come to see immense developmental potential and possibilities of empowerment through the process of investigating their own practice (2008: 203). Without specific training and school-based management support the present framework is in practice, very difficult and will end up on the shelf gathering dust like many other guidelines. The guidelines will become ‘more praised by policy makers than liked or used by schools’ (Meuret & Morlaix, 2003 : 54) more aspired to, than acted upon.

Ruairi Quinn has complimented the way we have embraced our challenges and achieved improvements in test results for our pupils. (Irish Principal’s Consultative Conference, 2013). The DES should resist the global education reform movement and continue with the strong tradition of supporting and respecting teachers. I believe that supported teacher autonomy, empowerment and capacity building impact more significantly on the quality of student learning than externally imposed inspections. This school is used to self-research, teachers feel empowered and accept that action research has improved learning for both pupils and teachers. They are not afraid to be creative or act autonomously. They are encouraged to think outside the box. They are masters of their own classrooms, doing their own action research, looking for answers to their own questions, not imposed by me. For now we are happy with our achievements over the last 3 years, and have succeeded in producing a school report which displays the high standards achieved through action research, team work and

commitment. It has to be added that DEIS schools are more confident than non-DEIS schools when it comes to planning as we have engaged in internal review for 6 years at this stage, as part of our contribution in addressing the complex question of underachievement in literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged areas of diverse pupil population.

‘There are three main areas in which DEIS differs from ,or goes beyond pre-existing approaches .First ,the focus on the development of a school action plan has been more intensive than in previous programmes. Planning for DEIS was supported by input from the PDST, and schools were encouraged to set clear targets, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy .Second, DEIS is the first programme of its kind to provide literacy and numeracy programmes to participants. Third, along with the establishment of the planning process and making literacy and numeracy programmes available to schools, a system of supports was put in place to assist schools with their planning and with their implementation of the programmes ‘(A Report on the First Phase of the Evaluation of DEIS: Summary Report/Susan Weir,2011)

It must be said that all schools not just those designated as disadvantaged need support when they are ‘working for change in their educational communities which might include enhancing community and civic responsibility’ (Taysum, A. 2010). Many Principals, have not studied since their degree and teaching principals are overwhelmed with the recent demands for school self evaluation, literacy and numeracy strategies, on top of the constant demand for school development planning. As it was part of my studies I was informed and up to date on all the relevant reading and critique required. McNamara & O’Hara in their paper on ‘Action research for organizational change’ (2000) conclude that there is a need for a ‘state of change readiness’ in an organization and of the potential of action research in enabling change. I agree wholeheartedly. They suggest that schools need to prepare deliberately ‘in terms of adopting the principles of the learning organization and that only in this context can an action research methodology become an appropriate and effective element in the management of change’ (2008). In this study teachers incorporated change in their classrooms as they assimilated and integrated new understandings into their knowledge base.

I would concur with their notion of the Principal as a ‘conduit’ for practitioner/led evaluation (2008) and feel that there is an immediate need for clear definitions of concepts, roles and outcomes, to develop and support schools’ capacity to engage in sustained school

improvement. Clarity is lacking, discussion among education partners is discouraged, principals voices ignored, and as a result confusion reigns. A combination of practical training followed by external evaluation for whole staffs not just principals is necessary. Janssens and Van Amelsvoort, reporting on research in 7 E.U. countries, entitled SYN EVA, showed a striking convergence toward models emphasizing internal self-evaluation (Scheider, P. Rebuzzi T. and MC Ginn, 2006). They suggest that 'optimal outcomes can be achieved if inspectors provided guidelines, instructions and examples to schools' and suggest that training in School Self Evaluation should be given to 'enhance the self evaluation documents produced by schools' (2008, 16). Without specific targeted training and consultation, school self evaluation at this higher order level of critical thinking, is neither practical nor sustainable and needs more than the allowed one day annual facilitation by PDST (Primary Professional Development Service). The Finnish system, is seen as one of the best in the world, especially at primary level. School self-evaluation is an integral part of each school's development. Sabel et al note that their shift in emphasis towards self evaluation coincided with the dismantling of their inspection system and the elimination of all forms of central control of teachers' work (Sabel et al., 2011:25). Is this the future for the Irish school system?

What cannot be denied is that the inspectorate are out in force investigating SSE in schools where Principals have had a two seminar days and whole staffs two hours training. This despite the growing debate regarding the 'appropriate extent of such evaluation particularly as research increasingly shows that external monitoring of an intrusive kind can damage the autonomy and morale of professionals and organizations (Hansson, 2006)'. In schools that are achieving, teachers and principals should be trained to promote evaluation and learning not inspectors to investigate. "Invasion never did anything to win over the hearts and minds of those whose country was been invaded" (Mc Niff, 2013: 10). Policy makers, administrators and department officials need to realize that for any self evaluation to work principals hold the key. As educational leaders with their classteachers, they play the pivotal role, together not separately, and would appreciate whole school support in examining their practice and promoting effective worthwhile self-evaluation. In acknowledging the need to be accountable I believe the way forward is in being proactive, where school needs are concerned, rather than reactive to external influences and inspections. We should, I believe be encouraged to embrace the central and practical position we hold to create learning

communities through trust, collaborative inquiry, shared purpose and continuous sustainable improvement, not inspection and investigation.

From experience and consultation with colleagues in other schools since the roll out of school self-evaluation and inspections have become increasingly common, there is evidence of classrooms and staffrooms morphing into defensiveness with increased paperwork added to their workload. This can be to the detriment of the quality of the working environment of all staff involved because of anticipatory anxiety and negative past experiences. Over regulation, compliance, and bureaucratization (Ferdinand Von Prondzynski, 2014) seems to be becoming the norm with little discussion of school context and local needs. Common templates are expected, with cut, copy and paste the preferred practice. Target setting and the opposite of teacher autonomy, is becoming the pre-inspection reality, not the creative tension deemed by Senge needed to encourage schools to change their practice (2006). Something more sinister, neither beneficial to pupils or staff, is coming into being, as noted by the past President of DCU when recently writing about the creation of elaborate processes in Irish universities in which innovation and change are seen as risky. 'It's all part of the spirit of the age, in which innovation is often equated with recklessness and in which regulation is seen as the guarantor of good practices' (Ferdinand Von Prondzynski, The Irish Times, March, 6th, 2014)

Notwithstanding the necessity for the process, present WSE/MLL practice focuses on rigid guidelines and accountability. Should it continue I feel it likely that teacher autonomy will become a thing of the past. We are aware of what is happening in the UK since over regulation of classroom practices became the norm there. When ticking boxes takes precedence, practice changes and the focus shifts from pupils to profiles. While acknowledging the benefits of checklists at times to provide valuable evidence and results I believe that education cannot be totally templated, context is crucial. The role of Inspectors seems to be changing too. Their role too may be in a state of flux, but the question has to be asked, is Irish education suffering?

Imposing similar recommendations in every school regardless of pupil intake does not make sense. Background dictates so much, particularly in primary education. The unwillingness of Department officials to listen to practitioner voices is unsettling? Do they not believe we have practical knowledge to offer after much uncertainty, mature reflection and insight? Will this attitude to practitioners improve practice? I do not believe it will, not in the way that

action research can. Our experience to date has shown that self research can provide the ‘ground for new beginnings’ (Mc Niff, 2013 p.6), the much sought after new knowledge and personal mastery (Senge, 2006), at team level.

Our WSE/MML process not report, sadly mirrored the experience of McNamara and O’Hara who write of the ‘tendency’ to eliminate or limit the professional autonomy of teachers which they feel may lead to “the deskilling and dis-empowerment of teachers who are being increasingly cast in the role of mechanics implementing ‘teacher proof’ curricula’ (2004).

Principals should be encouraged to use their positive power and position to lead concerned staff through school and educational change instead of feeling under siege during this inauthentic process. Why are we afraid to speak out? Why are our voices not been heard when we do ask questions? Why are we so willing to conform? In 2014 this is our reality as evidenced by the obsession with uniformity, conformity, accountability and standards echoing Slavins (2002) concerns with ‘preset and supposedly easily measured attainment standards’ (cited in McNamara & O Hara, 2004).

Matthews an inspector herself reported in her recent study that ‘WSE is deemed by some to have a negative impact on schools taking initiatives and risks’. Rather than empowering teachers to experiment and take risks, members of LDS (Leadership Development Service) who have worked with DEIS schools draw attention to some schools’ caution about taking risks and being adventurous because they fear that inspectors will object to such innovation’ (Matthews, D., 2010). While it is not wise to generalize or assume, it is evident from speaking to colleagues, that external inspections disempower the most professional and highly qualified of teachers, while adding to stress levels and creating a false existence for at least a week with time for fallout and a delayed return to normality thereafter.

Of particular interest and consistent with previous research in the Irish context (McNamara & O’Hara, 2008), is the view that schools are being placed with the added responsibility to follow up on recommendations, ‘clean up their own act’ as it were. Without external supports in the follow-up period there is no guarantee of improvement (Matthews and Sammons, 2004), particularly in schools where performance is poor. Paradoxically principals astutely may use inspector’s reports as ‘a lever to engineer change in their schools’

(McNamara, 2008). From recent experience I can see how and why that could happen but feel that while it may solve short term issues these won't be sustainable long term.

I agree with Dr. Hislop (May, 2010) when he suggests that it is not possible for principals, senior management and boards of management to deal with under-performing schools. Let that be the future role of the inspectorate. Failing schools need inspectorate assistance to operate satisfactorily. Self-regulation in such circumstances is not possible. Intervention that is tailored to the particular circumstances and contexts of failing schools has to be initiated by the DES inspectorate in order for improvement and change to be effective. Schools that are doing well should be encouraged to work in partnership with inspectors as they evaluate together.

External evaluation should follow internal evaluation as expressed by Matthews where 'all groups consider that external evaluation should validate the internal evaluation of schools' (2010), and accept the view of Nevo that 'internal and external evaluation should co-exist' (2002). Schools need to be taught how to build capacity, to engage in action research and self-evaluation. We are all at different stages of self evaluation and deserve credit for getting this far practically un-aided, but it has to be acknowledged that the ability to engage in this level of thinking should not happen without training and support especially where schools serving areas of disadvantage are concerned. This applies particularly where they confront challenges in differentiating curricular programmes to meet the challenging needs of their particular student cohort.

Future research to produce evidence of the true impact of inspections would be very interesting and relevant. Ehren and Visscher (2006) maintain that school factors, such as attitude to change and competence in implementing innovation following inspection, influences the impact of inspection on school improvement. Leung (2005) notes that evaluation for improvement requires that mechanisms are available to support school improvement after external evaluation. There are limits to the levels of trust 'outsiders' promote in schools currently. The obvious question here is what underperforming principal/school is going to ask for a return visit from the inspectorate? This could be a future role of the PDST. The co-ordinators could provide clear definitions of concepts, processes and outcomes when introducing new initiatives and clarity about 'the meaning and

expectations suggested by the terms School Self Evaluation and Whole School Evaluation ‘(Matthews, 2010) as well as the more recent Management Leadership and Learning model.

Action research in this area of education would be most interesting. Personality type is so important. Some ‘outsiders’ do not recognize the complexity and value-laden nature of teaching and learning, but I’d like to think there are those that do. There are those who build a trusting and collaborative climate within schools, advocated by Silins et al (2002), and who encourage teachers to engage in collaborative practices deemed important for school improvement (Lodge & Reed, 2003), as well as initiating a change in culture and in learning organisations and communities (Collinson & Cook, 2007, Dufour, 2004). According to Bennis (2000) cited in Ruth (2006 : 56) the creation of a sense of empowerment among other people in the organization is a consequence of good leadership. The empowerment can have a ‘persuasive feeling that what you are doing has meaning and is significant’ (Ruth, 2006 : 56), that what matters is learning from each other and past mistakes. This type of leader imbibes a sense of unity, community, teamwork and excitement about their work with a sense of ‘challenge, stimulation and fun’ (56).

This was achieved during our research, but compromised during ‘external’ inspection. Ruairi Quinn believes that ‘inspectorate’s evaluations of schools strike a balance between improvement and accountability. They affirm good practice when it is identified in schools and seek to encourage improvement’. (Ruairi Quinn, IPPN Conference, 2014). Four days does not give a true reflection of a school as a workplace or community of learners. While happy with the final report and having full regard for the job of inspectors and that schools should be held accountable it must be added here that when looking at effective school systems such as those in Finland, Canada and Japan, teacher autonomy and systematic investment in improving equity within their systems are the reasons for success. Schools that have already engaged in self-evaluation to improve, as it is not yet common nor preferred practice, need to be applauded for doing so if they are to sustain and improve evaluation as a practice in itself. Trusting teachers and encouraging whole schools should be a priority if all education partners want SSE to work. Without trust schools will lose confidence and withdraw or worse pay lip service to the process, holding onto the tried and tested and not altering behaviour. Trust takes time and openness that leads to meaningful engagement and dialogue, providing shared insights into daily difficulties and issues related to school improvement and change. Changing how teachers think means altering habitual behaviours.

Instilling a change culture is a tough challenge. The present inspection model's main focus should be teaching and learning, not Management and Leadership if whole staffs are to be encouraged to self-evaluate, change, improve and take on research into new knowledge and skills. At this revolutionary time of transition and as we are in the early stages all voices need to be heard regarding the process. Reflection and open communication would provide clarity, promote the creation of a culture of learning and individual responsibility, critically using data available in all schools to assist in sustainable school improvement.

These are extraordinary times in Irish education with schools being asked to do more with less resources, McNamara is, I believe, correct in his assertion that resolving conflicting demands in a worldwide debate as to the balance that can be achieved between accountability and professional autonomy has become a major burden on school leaders. Most Principals have a vision for their school, for their pupils in their context, and this cannot be sacrificed to a 'neo-liberalism which seeks to apply the values of the market to the public sector' (Mc Namara, 2008).

If reflection by action is required to convert facts into usable knowledge it is important that schools are supported through adequate training, not by the 'growing emphasis on the application of business techniques such as targets, benchmarks, standards, performance management, and inspection and evaluation, to the public sector and particularly to education' (Mc Namara, 2011). McNamara recognizes that school inspection, and school self-evaluation are linked and are important themes in current educational policy debates. He believes there is increased evidence of a shift from confrontational forms of self-evaluation primarily concerned with external accountability towards internal systems more focused on capacity building and professional development. I agree but like learning to read, learning to self-evaluate will not happen by osmosis. In the future as with the research in 7 EU countries, carried out by Junsens and Van Amelsvoort 'optimal outcomes can be achieved if the inspectors provide guidelines, instructions and give samples to schools, to enhance control over the self-evaluation documents produced by schools' (2008, 16). More clarity and training is necessary for success of this initiative with 'light-touch' external inspections to facilitate.

This case study represents a very meaningful empowerment of a disadvantaged rural school under the leadership of the principal in a community ravaged by emigration and immigration as we change the present to shape our future. It is an in-depth exploration of current

evaluation practice, in the area of infant literacy, providing rich data and insights useful in gaining deep understanding and knowledge at local school level. One cannot generalize the outcomes of all leaders but the themes that emerged resonate with the literature as well as the external inspection, and should influence change and development at policy level within the system and nationally. We have shown that from our research nothing will replace teacher expertise and experience. Couple that with resourceful value-laden leadership, critical collaborative inquiry, early intervention, and positive parental input and ‘no child could possibly be left behind’ or demotivated.

It sounds simple but it takes passion, intuition, spontaneity and above all resilience on the part of the whole school team involved. The principal demonstrated vision, commitment, efficiency, and inspired enthusiasm for innovation. (See Report). This coupled with teachers that are conscientious and display a strong work ethic, using well planned lessons and a wide range of methodologies will provide particularly effective practice in the teaching of literacy (See WES/MLL Report). These nurtured strengths lead to a school which cultivates synergistic relationships and sustainable solutions. This case study reflects an institution where pupils grow to learn and develop in a safe, dynamic, disciplined way (See summary statistics for pupils) and parents indicate a high level of satisfaction with the way the school is run (see summary statistics for parents) and yet felt ‘invaded’ during the WSE/MML pilot.

In conclusion, while subject to rules and regulations and the subsequent constraints of a modern bureaucratic state, my wish is that school principals and class leaders regain their confidence ‘with attitude’ (Mc Niff 2013 : 208), and make their own of their chosen profession, regardless of external inspections and imposed templates and timeframes. If workable sustainable innovation has to take place it must be principal and teacher-led, and it has to come from within the school. Specific areas have to be identified, prioritized and challenged. In this study that area was literacy and the results for our learners are far reaching. We need to demand conditions of service that encourage freedom of thought, where ‘concepts may transform into practices, acorns into oak trees’ (Mc Niff 2013, p.15), the school then a place where autonomy is the order of the day and thinking outside the box the norm.

This action research inquiry has demonstrated that in order to give all our pupils a head start in an ever-changing disjointed world, we, as practitioners, must be at the heart of self-

evaluation .While working as agents of change with the learner at the centre in any curricular area with reference to context and local community, and also demonstrating resilience and passion for pupils and their individual learning needs, we will determine the future life chances of our pupils as well as affecting true societal cohesion.

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Dr. Gerry McNamara
School of Education Studies

16th May 2012

REC Reference: DCUREC/2012/071

Proposal Title: Improving Infant Literacy in a DEIS school through a Model of Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection

Applicants: Dr. Gerry McNamara, Ms. Sinead Mangan

Dear Gerry

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal. Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Donal O'Mathuna'.

Dr. Donal O'Mathuna
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



Office of the Vice-President
for Research

Dublin City University,
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000
F +353 1 700 8002
E research@dcu.ie
www.dcu.ie



**An tSeirbhís
Náisiúnta
Síceolaíochta Oideachais**

Oifig an Rialtais
Bothar an Chlochair
Roscómain
Co. Roscómain

**National
Educational
Psychological Service**

Government Buildings
Convent Road
Roscommon
Co. Roscommon

Dear Sineád,

I was both inspired and excited to read your report of the cutting edge literacy initiative that is being implemented in St Attracta's National School.

I have had the pleasure of listening to your pupils talk with joy and pride about their experience of learning to read in the school and it was wonderful to read the full account of your work.

Mel Anisow (1989) defines Inclusion as "the presence, participation and achievement of all pupils". St Attracta's ensures that diversity is celebrated and supported through individualisation and differentiation of literacy activity so that all teachers are purposeful, goal directed and energised in their teaching.

Your literature review covers all areas of literacy development leaving no stone uncovered. I was delighted to read of the multidimensional inclusion of vocabulary. As Wittgenstein, 1953 stated, "The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for".

I look forward to reading the evaluation of outcomes from this excellent intervention and commend you for your visionary leadership as you steer your team on this journey.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle McCarthy

Michelle McCarthy

Educational Psychologist, NEPS

BA (Hons), MSc Child Dev., Cert Ed., MSc Educational Psychology.



Reading Recovery,
Galway Education Centre,
Cluain Mhuire,
Wellpark, Galway.
e-mail: hdiviney@eircom.net
Phone: 087 1211450



Dear Sinéad,

Congratulations on all you have done in documenting the excellent work on early literacy being done in St. Attracta's National School. I was reminded of your school recently when I read an unpublished article by Michael Fullan. In it he says "The research has been clear and consistent for over 30 years – collaborative cultures in which teachers focus on improving their teaching practice, learn from each other, and are well led and supported by school principals result in better learning for students." (Learning is the work 2011). You have certainly facilitated a collaborative culture in your school.

You supported your Reading Recovery teacher in sharing what she had learned with other members of staff and as a result the children in Junior and Senior Infants are getting excellent first teaching in early reading and writing. You have come to recognise that even with good class teaching and withdrawal in groups there are some children who still need intensive one to one teaching for a specific period of time and so are now training a new Reading Recovery teacher to replace the teacher who has returned to class teaching.








Fullan states that there are three big ideas that underpin Professional Learning Communities: (1) That the "purpose of schools is to ensure that all students as distinct from all students should be taught. (2) "helping all students learn requires a collaborative and collective effort." (3) "all schools will be unable to monitor their effectiveness unless they create a results orientation." My understanding is that all three are present in your school. I look forward to reading the documentation of them in your dissertation.

Your enthusiasm for your work in school is contagious. I wish you all the best in the future.

Le gach dea ghui,

Sr.Helen Diviney

Reading Recovery Teacher Leader

e	 Sources	References
view Questions	0	0
2.1 Factors that facilitate the teaching of reading	10	58
2.2 Factors that inhibit pupil success in reading	8	36
2.3. Strategies that inhibit progress in reading	7	11
2.6 Possibility of tailoring learning to suit pupils' diversity	7	19
2.4 Initiatives in reading	7	29
2.5 Changes that you would like to see in the teaching of reading	8	20
2.7 Further comments	6	22
Themes	0	0
 Teacher Expertise and Enthusiasm	10	255
 Pupil Motivation and Self-Esteem	9	81
 Critical Collaborative Inquiry and Communications	9	100
 Poor Parental Input	10	85
 Good Quality Resources	10	73
 Early Intervention	9	69

Literacy Questionnaire to Parents :

1 Are you aware that we are researching the area of literacy in St .Attracta's ? Yes... No...

2. How confident do you feel helping your child to read?

3 How would you describe your child's attitude to books? Please tick the appropriate box.

Fair... Poor... Excellent ...

4 How long, in minutes, does your child spend reading at home?..... minutes each evening.

5 Who usually helps? Mother... Father.... Doesn't need help....

6 If you are a parent of older children do you notice a change in how we are teaching the infant pupils this year?

7 Is it helping?

8. How in your opinion can we improve on what we are already doing?

9 .Do you know we have a new reading room?

10 Do you think it is a help? Yes... No... Why?

11 Any other comments specifically related to our new approach to reading?

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning Report

Introduction

A Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE - MLL) was undertaken in St Attracta's National School in June 2013. This report is based on a selection of lessons observed in a range of learning settings in the school, interaction with pupils and review of their work, meetings with the principal and with board and parent representatives, completed parent and pupil questionnaires, and a selection of school documents.

St Attracta's NS is a co-educational school in ~~Wicklow~~ Wicklow with an enrolment of 239 pupils who represent seventeen nationalities. It has DEIS Band 2 status. Enrolment in the school is steady.

The school has **strengths** in the following areas:

- The overall quality of teaching and learning is very good, with some exemplary practice observed.
- The school implements a very effective early-intervention and emergent reading programme.
- Pupils achieve very good standards in both English and Mathematics.
- The school has a hard-working, conscientious staff led by a committed principal.
- The whole-school approach to writing which enables the pupils to write in a wide range of genres is very successful.
- The school's engagement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, particularly those relating to music, is very praiseworthy.

The following areas require improvement:

- Teachers should consider implementing structured differentiated programmes in literacy and Mathematics in all classes to accommodate pupils of different abilities.
- The school needs to carry out a full review of its provision for pupils with special educational needs; this needs to include arriving at a shared understanding of the specific roles of the learning-support and resource teachers and examining the effectiveness of the practice and approaches in place.
- Teachers should implement a system of recording assessment data at class level to ensure that the ongoing progress of individual pupils can be tracked.
- The school's reliance on textbooks, particularly for written activities, should be reviewed.

Findings

1. Learning achievements of the pupils.

- The overall learning achievements of the pupils are very good. Literacy and numeracy achievements are very good, as reflected in pupil performance in standardised tests. There has been significant progress at school level in such attainments over the past ten years. *Tá caighdeán na Gaeilge go maith ar an iomlán. The overall standard of Irish is good.* Pupils engaged well in the lessons observed and displayed a good level of knowledge when questioned during the evaluation.
- At present, many teachers do not record assessment data for individual pupils at class level. This is necessary to ensure that the ongoing progress of pupils can be tracked and it is recommended that it be done.

2. Quality of teaching

- Teaching in the school is very good overall, with some exemplary practice observed. Teachers are conscientious and display a strong work ethic. All teachers were well prepared for the lessons they taught although there was variance in their approaches to teacher planning. Lessons were generally very well structured and paced.
- A wide range of methodologies was observed across the school. Particularly effective practice was observed in the teaching of literacy. The whole-school approach to the

development of writing genres is producing very good results. Teachers should share their individual teaching practices, some of which could be adopted at whole-school level. There is highly effective use of technology in some classrooms. There is, however, a tendency towards an over-reliance on lower-order textbook activities in many classes. This practice should be reviewed.

3. How well pupils are cared for and supported

- Pupil management is very good, both in classrooms and in the yard. Teachers demonstrate a high level of commitment to the pupils in their care. Pupil responses to the questionnaires administered indicated that almost all pupils are happy at school and consider this to be a good school. School reports are issued annually. There is a need to include the results of standardised tests in these reports.
- Parental involvement is encouraged through the home-school-community liaison co-ordinator and through the parents' association. Parents' involvement in the development of Story Sacks is particularly noteworthy. Parental responses to the questionnaires administered during the evaluation indicated a very high level of satisfaction with the way the school is run. Nevertheless, there is a need to increase channels of communication to parents to ensure that they are regularly informed about key policies and procedures. The school should consider the development of a regular newsletter to parents for this purpose.
- The school's provision of support for pupils with special educational needs requires full review. There is evidence of some very good practices and these should be retained. However, overall, there are a number of areas that should be addressed. The roles and responsibilities of support teachers should be discussed to ensure a shared understanding of service provision. There is an urgent need to implement a whole-school approach to the development of individual education plans (IEPs) which ensure pupils' priority learning needs are adequately addressed. When an IEP is developed, parents should get a copy. The use of class textbooks in support settings is inappropriate. The staged approach should be implemented in a more visible manner by all teachers.
- Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

4. Leadership and Management

- The board of management has been very effective in providing good quality resources and facilities on an ongoing basis. Its commitment to school maintenance is commended. The board is informed of the school's attainment in literacy and Mathematics and is involved in the school self-evaluation process.
- The principal is long established in the school. She is highly commended for her vision. She is particularly adept at inspiring an enthusiasm for innovation. Members of the in-school management team are experienced, hard-working teachers who undertake a range of duties to support the work of the principal. Their work in organisational matters is undertaken with due diligence. This team should further their work by discussing and leading matters relating to teaching and learning.

5. School Self-evaluation

- The school staff has been involved in school self-evaluation for many years through the DEIS initiative. Analysis of test results in literacy and numeracy on a whole-school basis has been undertaken. The improvements over a number of years are very encouraging.
- Teachers should consider the comparison of individual pupils' ability scores with their performance in literacy and numeracy as a further element in their evidence base. An agreed template for monthly progress records would assist in collating evidence around the taught curriculum.

NRIT

Conclusion

The school's capacity to make the necessary improvements is very good. Most teachers engaged very openly with the evaluation process and displayed an enthusiasm for innovation and the further development of teaching and learning in their classrooms. A process whereby all teachers are motivated to act collaboratively on the recommendations of this report, under the leadership of the principal, is now needed. It can be expected that initiating and sustaining this will present challenges but, with the commitment they demonstrate, the personnel involved have the capacity to overcome these.