

HOW DO CHILDREN WITH READING DIFFICULTIES LEARN TO  
READ IN FIRST CLASS?

by

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctorate in Education is entirely my own work 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.

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## Abstract

The rationale for the research derives from concern about the number of children with reading difficulties in Irish classrooms, despite the commitment to reading instruction in the schools. The purpose of the research was to investigate how children with reading difficulties were supported in learning to read in first class. It was conducted on seven children, who were identified as having difficulties in learning to read, in four primary schools. The children were observed in their learning support and mainstream classroom settings over a period of 12 weeks. An observation schedule was designed and coded to ensure that the observation of teaching and learning to read was standardised across learning support and classroom settings. The data from the schedule were triangulated with interviews of teachers, principals, parents/guardians and children, and with the policy and planning documents of the schools and teachers.

The research methodology was designed to capture the process of teaching and learning to read, using a case study approach. A thematic approach was used to analyse the research findings, which highlighted how learning support can be made more effective for struggling readers. Reading support was dominated by a separation between learning support and classroom instruction. The reading skills that the children learned in learning support were not transferring to classroom reading. This was an organisational rather than a structural issue. The main findings called for collaborative planning between teachers, updating of policies, the use of assessment as the driving force of reading instruction, and a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading. The importance of schools upskilling parents/guardians to

support their children to read at home was recognised. The importance of children being successful in learning to read in junior classes as an essential skill for later learning and development underlies the study.

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## Chapter One: Research Overview

### 1.1 Introduction

Learning to read is one of the most important accomplishments of a child's early experiences in school. Reading provides enjoyment for the child, it is a vehicle by which the child accesses other areas of learning and is an important life skill. Therefore, it is not surprising that much time and effort are spent in teaching reading in Irish schools. The *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) (1999) places an emphasis on developing the child's ability to read for functional and recreational purposes:

This will entail giving him/her experience of an appropriate range of narrative, expository and representational text that will extend as he/she matures as a reader. As reading and comprehension skills develop, the child should be given the opportunity to pursue personal interest. (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 8)

Reading is considered so fundamental that it is critical that appropriate early instruction is provided to children who experience difficulties in learning to read. The focus of the research is an investigation, using a case study approach, of how children with reading difficulties in the early years at school are supported in learning to read. Chapter One defines reading, gives a rationale for the research, states the research problem, outlines the theoretical perspective and concludes with an overview of the research. The subsequent chapters present the review of literature leading to the research questions (Two), the methodology underpinning the study (Three), the research findings (Four), analysis and discussion (Five), and conclusions and recommendations (Six).

## *1.2 Definition of Reading*

It is important to provide the definition of reading that underpins the research study. What is understood by the term reading has changed dramatically over the last forty years. During the 1960s, reading was viewed in terms of behavioural psychology in that readers responded to printed cues (Pearson & Stephens, 1994). In the 1980s, the new view advanced was that “reading was no longer a single product that varied according to properties inherent in a written text. Instead reading was now viewed by many as a process involving cognitive construction” (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr 2000, p.xi). In the 1990s, reading began to be characterised as a social and cultural activity. The vocabulary expanded and literacy, not just reading, became the object of study. “Literacy was seen to have a socio-political dimension, associated with its role within society and in the ways it was deployed for political, cultural and economic ends” (Venezky, 1991, p.46).

Friere’s (1970) central insight, that genuine literacy involves reading the word and the world, helped open the door to a broader understanding of the term literacy. He believed that literacy is an active phenomenon, deeply linked to personal and cultural identity. Its power lies not in a received ability to read and write, but rather in an individual’s capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. The essential function of literacy is to make it possible for individuals to engage as fully as possible with the knowledge and culture of society. In this sense, literacy is relative to social development. It cannot be reduced to a basic skill, it involves a rich process of engagement with the texts and what they represent.



Therefore, literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen to language in a way that allows people to communicate with each other and to make sense of the world. While this understanding of literacy underpins the research, the researcher focuses particularly on reading and how children who struggle to learn to read are supported. For the purpose of the research, reading is defined as a “complex, purposeful, socio-cultural, cognitive and linguistic process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning” (Kucer, 2005, p.5).

The perspective of reading that underlies the research is that reading is a taught-learned process. Reading follows on from language, it enriches language activity. Just as language is a social construct as a first encounter with the environment, so too is reading a social record and construct to enhance the children’s environment and their awareness of it. Reading is a complex rather than a simple process; it involves acquiring decoding skills and deriving meaning from text, and it is a vital link between language and the learning process.

### 1.3 *Rationale for the Research*

Teachers reported developing children’s literacy — reading and to a lesser extent writing — as their greatest success with the English Curriculum in the *Primary Curriculum Review Phase 1: Final Report* (NCCA, 2005a). While teachers are satisfied that they are successfully teaching children to read, this is not reflected in the findings of the Educational Research Centre’s (ERC) report, *The 2004 National*

*Assessment of English Reading (NAER)* (Eivers, Shiel, Perkins & Cosgrove, 2005a).

The NAER report stated that

the results of the assessment indicate that the mean scores obtained by Fifth class pupils in 1998 and 2004 assessments are almost identical. Further, scores on the three domains (narrative, expository and documents) vary little across the two assessments, indicating that no change in 'national reading standards' has occurred since 1998. (Eivers et al., 2005a, p. 163)

The *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners* report (DES, 2005a) also highlights that "fewer than half the children in middle and senior classes were able to read fluently and with understanding".

The incongruity between these research findings calls for further research, especially in light of the commitment that the Department of Education and Science (DES) has shown in recent years in developing policy in the area of literacy development (DES, 2002; 2003a; 2005b). The government has invested resources in this area by increasing the number of resource teachers and learning support teachers who are employed in schools, in order to ensure that the 2007 to 2016 National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) target of reducing the proportion of readers with reading difficulties from the current 27%-30% to less than 15% by 2016 (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006) is reached. This research explores the school-level supports and strategies that are in place for supporting children who struggle to learn to read in the research study schools.

Strickland (2002) argues that while many research efforts in recent years have been designed to describe the characteristics of exemplary class teachers and teaching, what is needed is an in-depth look at what teachers do to help the struggling

children in their classroom. Research documenting the work of the learning support teacher in Ireland is available. For example, Eivers, Shiel and Shortt (2004) report that learning support teachers, with reference to teaching English to children in first class, spend 18% of instructional time on engaging children in re-reading familiar texts, 26% of time revising and consolidating learning strategies, 27% teaching new learning strategies, 20% engaging children in reading new texts and 9% of time on other activities. A gap exists in the research in that the minute, day-to-day work of the learning support teachers, working on their own or in collaboration with class and school colleagues as they teach children in their caseload, is not documented. There is limited documented evidence of practice as observed in the field. This research aims to begin to fill the gap in line with Strickland's 2002 recommendation.

#### *1.4 Importance of Early Intervention*

It is important to define the children that the study addresses. Children who are in the lowest achieving group for reading in first class in the targeted schools are included in the study. The study focuses particularly on children in first class as the researcher advocates the importance of early intervention, that is, "programmes designed to positively influence the course of language and literacy development in children aged 0 to 8" (Strickland, 2002, p.70). Research evidence indicates that a pattern of school failure starts early and persists throughout the child's school career.

Longitudinal studies (Juel, 1988) show that there is an almost 90% chance that a child who is a poor reader at the end of grade 1 will be a poor reader at grade 4. These children grow to dislike reading and, therefore, read considerably less than good readers both in and out of school. This is an important finding, because time spent on reading is highly correlated with achievement in learning to read (Allington,

1980; Stanovich, 1986; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1998). (Strickland, 2002, p. 70)

Another factor influencing the decision to focus on children in first class is that although they come to school expecting to do well and “are enthused about school and academic tasks, expectations often diminish as they go through school. For academic motivation to remain high, children must be successful and perceive that they are successful” (Pressley, 2002, p. 290). Early intervention is a means of sustaining their enthusiasm. Children in first class generally have strong self-belief; even those who experience difficulties in learning to read understand that it is a difficult task, but confidence in their own competence to read remains high (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995). This offers a great opportunity for early intervention.

McEneaney, Lose and Schwartz (2006), referring to the kindergarten years, argue that a year of classroom instruction usually provides more than enough information to identify children who are at risk of continued learning difficulties (Juel, 1996; Schwartz, 2005), and that early intervention has the greatest likelihood of returning a child to a normal learning trajectory. Early intervention provides the opportunity to deal with difficulties before the cycle of failure begins for children who experience difficulty in learning to read (Clay, 1987; Fletcher & Lyon, 1998). The work of the learning support/resource teachers in providing supplementary teaching is important as children who experience reading difficulties in the early years of primary school rarely catch up without instructional interventions (Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz & Fletcher, 1996; Torgeson & Burgess, 1998).

## *1.5 Theoretical Perspective*

Kilbourn (2006) states that a “fundamental assumption for any academic research is that the phenomena (data) that we wish to understand are filtered through a point of view (a theoretical perspective)” (p.11). The theoretical perspective of the research is that of a special education practitioner who believes in the importance of early intervention, individualised according to the needs of the learner; she seeks to understand the meaning that the teaching and learning of reading has for the teachers and children who are involved in the study. This is the lens through which the interpretation of the data is filtered.

The philosophical stance that underpins the research is that knowledge is socially constructed. We impose meaning on the real world and these meanings are socially constructed. When reading is viewed as a means of constructing knowledge and learning, a richness of data can be expected from research. This belief is supported by the assumption that learners construct knowledge and understanding within a social context and that new learning is shaped by prior knowledge. The core theoretical assumptions of constructivism include that what is learned cannot be separated from the context in which it is learned, that the purposes/goals that the learner brings to the learning situation are central to what is learned, and that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through the processes of negotiation, evaluation and transformation (Cambourne, 2002).

## 1.6 Overview of Research

The problem that the research study addresses is how reading instruction is approached and implemented for children who experience difficulty in reading and how they respond to teaching. Both the teacher and the child are focused on in the learning support and classroom settings, thus the research is multilevel in nature (Sloane, 2005). The reading approaches and methods might be expected to encompass the use of explicit teaching that involves clear explanations, modelling and scaffolding; a focus on decoding skills, word recognition and comprehension; introducing appropriate reading texts for level and interest; and use of assessment to monitor progress by both learning support/resource teachers and class teachers. How the learning support/resource teachers and class teachers individualise reading instruction and collaborate in order to maximise the benefit for the children are also investigated. Therefore, the research study focuses primarily on the work of learning support/resource and class teachers within the context of a whole school policy with reference to supporting children who experience difficulty in learning to read as well as the children's response to such teaching.

The learning support/resource teachers and class teachers do not work in isolation when teaching children to read. In order to present as complete a description and analysis as possible of the support offered to children who have difficulties with learning to read, the roles of the principal, parents/guardians, and other school and community supports are investigated. In addition, the views of the children with regard to reading are researched.

Therefore, the research aims to investigate how children are supported in learning to read through observation, from discussion with the teachers and children, and from the analysis of school policies and teachers' planning. The context in which the children learn has an impact; therefore, the research will focus on the specific contexts in which they learn. The researcher's intent is to make sense of how children are supported in learning to read and to inductively develop patterns of meaning to explain the learning process.

Qualitative research methods are used. Qualitative research is a systematic approach to understanding qualities or the essential nature of a phenomenon within a certain context (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach & Richardson, 2005). An in-depth case study approach is adopted in the research to explore how children with reading difficulties are supported in learning to read.

### *1.7 Conclusion*

The chapter focused on the definition of reading that underpins the research, the rationale for the research, research on the importance of early intervention, the theoretical perspective from which the research stems and an overview of the research. The research is informed by Sloane's (2005) paradigm of reading which highlights the importance of multilevel reading research that links teacher and child behaviour in the settings in which teaching/learning occur; it honours both of these units and the linkages across them theoretically and empirically.

It is important to investigate the reading approaches and methods that learning support/resource and class teachers use to support children who struggle with reading in the early years in primary school. Ehri (2002) states that recent research has shocked us into realising that children who get off to a poor start in learning to read rarely catch up. The poor reader in first class continues to be a poor reader in subsequent classes. It is hoped that the research will have a positive effect on teachers and their approaches to reading instruction. The research is based on a thorough review of the relevant literature which is provided in Chapter Two. The various terms associated with the reading process are defined in the *Glossary of Terms* (Appendix 1).



## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1. *Introduction*

The literature review explores the school-level supports and strategies that are available to children who struggle with learning to read and how they respond to reading instruction in an Irish context. It draws on current research and findings which refer to effective reading instruction and interventions under five key themes, and it explores their relevance to the research study. The themes have been selected to provide a framework for reviewing the selected literature and they lead to the emergence of the research questions which the research study seeks to answer.

The first theme, *Policy in Ireland*, gives an overview of policy regarding the development of reading for children who struggle with learning to read within the context of the Irish education system. It focuses on the position of the DES and the development of policy to counteract difficulties in learning to read.

The complexity and multidimensionality of reading are tackled in the *Development of Reading and Nature of Reading Difficulties*. The theme presents various models of the reading process and theories that have been developed to explain the acquisition of reading. The thrust of the theme is to establish what assumptions and understandings underlie the models and theories, and to present the characteristics of struggling readers for the purpose of providing a research backdrop for the study.

The theme, *Effective Reading Instruction*, encompasses the components of and the factors that affect reading instruction. The theme also presents the role of instructional contexts, organisation of support and the role of parents in supporting their children. The importance of addressing this theme is to highlight the strong relationship between particular practices and higher reading attainment in children so as to provide a backdrop for the reading instruction that was observed to support the children in the research study. The *Review of Reading Instruction within the Context of Irish Education* presents the overall picture for reading relating to strategies and various school-level supports that are available to struggling readers in Irish schools.

The final theme, *Assessment*, is an important component required to complete the framework that underpins the research. Assessment is a process which is required to determine and regulate the successful teaching of reading for all children, but it is crucially important for those who struggle with learning to read, whose reading programme and progress need to be calibrated in an ongoing way according to their knowledge, skills and interests.

## 2.2. Policy in Ireland

### 2.2.1 Introduction

An overview of Irish policy regarding the development of reading for children who struggle with learning to read is important in order to contextualise how they are supported. It is also useful to understand how policy has developed and how this development is supported and affirmed by research. However, it must be remembered that policy implementation studies have often highlighted superficial enactments of

intended policy (Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Cohen & Ball, 1999); what occurs at the micro level of the educational system, the school, may not be what was intended when the policy was developed at the macro level by the policy makers, namely, the DES. With this caution in mind, the section explores how policy in Ireland facilitates and supports children with reading difficulties as they learn to read.

### 2.2.2 *Position of the Department of Education and Science*

The DES states its position in relation to the development of reading in the PSC (1999), particularly in the English Language Curriculum, and in the Learning Support Guidelines (2000). The importance of literacy is highlighted by the DES in its publication, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*<sup>1</sup> (2005c), which states that achievement in literacy is a crucial objective of education. Literacy is defined in the DEIS initiative as “the integration of reading and writing, listening and speaking” (DES, 2005c, p.34). It is realised that the impact of early literacy difficulties increases as children progress through their education. “Unless children reach adequate literacy standards, they cannot properly benefit from the literacy-based education system that is at the core of a modern developed society” (DES, 2005c, p.35). Therefore, policy development and implementation are working towards enabling schools to support all children in achieving adequate levels in oral language, reading and writing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)*: The DEIS action plan focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years). The action plan is grounded in the belief that every child and young person deserves an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education, that each person should have the opportunity to reach her/his full educational potential for personal, social and economic reasons and that education is a critical factor in promoting social inclusion and economic development. Staffing and financial supports are provided to schools, for example, maximum class sizes will be reduced to 20:1 in all junior classes (junior infants through 2<sup>nd</sup> class) and 24:1 in all senior classes (3<sup>rd</sup> class through 6<sup>th</sup> class) for the 150 urban/rural primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage.

### 2.2.3 *Development of Policy to Support Achievement in Reading*

This section deals with the development of policy in two stages: 1960s to 1990s and 1990s to present.

2.2.3.1 *1960s to 1990s: development of remedial education and emergence of withdrawal mode of support.*

Historically, the introduction and development of strategies to counteract reading difficulties have been a feature of educational policy in Ireland since the 1960s when the formal provision of remedial education resulted in priority being given to the systematic development of basic reading skills (Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 1994). Remedial education was defined as "a part of education which is concerned with the prevention, investigation and treatment of learning difficulties from whatever source they emanate and which hinder the normal development of the student" (National Association for Remedial Education (NARE), 1977, p.5). The first policy document that solely addressed the need to support children in mainstream schools to learn to read was the Department of Education's (DE) *Guidelines on Remedial Education* (1988). It set out the aims of remedial education and provided practical advice for schools.

The Guidelines played a significant role in the development and refinement of remedial education up to the late 1990s. They addressed issues such as the selection of children for remedial teaching and the development of school policies on prevention, diagnosis and remediation of learning difficulties. The remedial/resource role is defined in the document in two categories: firstly, activities directly involving

work with children, and, secondly, interaction with colleagues and others. "The allocation of time between these two categories of activities will depend on the circumstances of the school and on the relative emphasis placed on remediation and resource roles" (DE, 1988, p. 30). Though the Guidelines provided scope for the remedial teacher to interpret his/her role as both remedial and resource teacher, the reality is that the term remedial was adopted and became the norm. The definition of resource at this time was a teacher who could help colleagues through providing advice and support. It is fair to say that the resource role was to a large degree overlooked. What followed in Irish primary schools was an emphasis on a withdrawal mode of support for children; this became the dominant feature of the remedial teacher's role. Thus, the remedial teacher worked in isolation from the class teacher; this often resulted in sole responsibility for the development of reading for the children who experienced difficulties in a school being given to the designated remedial teacher. The problem appears to be that a policy promoted by the DE was implemented from the top down, that is, from department level, and assistance was not provided to teachers in implementing the recommendations in the Guidelines, which would have ensured that policy moved from written guidelines into classroom practice. Some professional training became available for remedial teachers with the provision of the one-year, part-time courses, sanctioned by the DES from 1994 onwards, but this was not available for class teachers and attendance was optional for remedial teachers.

However, while withdrawal has remained the dominant mode to this day in Irish primary schools, the importance of integrating classroom and supplementary support, wherever it is appropriate, is highlighted in the literature. It is evident that

providing support that uses the withdrawal mode alone affects the support service which is provided for children. Bean, Cooley, Eichelberger, Lazar and Zigmond (1991) highlight the loss of instructional time in the transition between the mainstream and remedial settings. Supporting children by using supplementary support outside the classroom can also lead to a lack of congruence with the work that is occurring in the class. According to Allington (1994), the lack of congruence and coordination creates difficulties for children who are struggling with reading as they deal with two programmes. Research by Bentum and Aaron (2003) supports this argument. They reported the results of a three year longitudinal study of the effects of resource room teaching on the reading achievement of 394 elementary-school children, starting in first grade, who were diagnosed as having learning disability and who were provided with resource room teaching as a result. Typically, instructional time in the resource room ranged from 40 to 120 minutes each for the children per week. The effects of the instruction in the resource room was studied by comparing pre- and post-test scores of the children on reading and intelligence tests. Teachers were interviewed with reference to the specific instructional strategy or method that they used to teach children with reading disability as well as the frequency with which children's progress was evaluated. The research found that the reading skills of the children were not improved as a result of resource room teaching. Over the period, the children failed to make significant gains in the areas of word recognition, reading comprehension and spelling. The study also examined the consequences of such resource room instruction on the cognitive level (IQ) of the children and found that they failed to make significant gains in measured intelligence (IQ). In fact, the research reported a decline in measured IQ in some of the children, which was consistent with the notion that the resource room approach had also led to an

impoverishment of other wider learning opportunities. However, as the instruction was not observed and, therefore, there is no information on the quality of the instruction, the findings must be treated with some caution.

Taylor, Pressley and Pearson (2002) support integrating reading support into mainstream classroom teaching. In their study of effective schools and accomplished teachers, they report that building collaboration between class and support teachers plays an important role in the delivery of reading instruction in all of the most effective schools. This includes the use of a collaborative model where special personnel, for example, reading tutors, go into the classroom for specified periods of the day to provide reading instruction for small, ability-based groups.

Flexibility regarding the provision of support seems to be the key. Providing supplementary support inside and outside of the classroom has had positive results. Cunningham, Hall and Defee (1998) reported high rates of success for low-achieving first and second grade children who received whole class instruction, with additional support given to struggling readers in the classrooms through flexible, heterogeneous, small-group activities. Unfortunately, as recently as 2005, NAER reports that learning support is still generally provided outside of children's' classrooms; 82.6% of teachers indicated that they never provided it in the children's own classroom (Eivers et al., 2005a). The context/setting of the learning support/resource teaching remains problematic in the Irish educational system at school level.

Issues already raised concerning the implementation of policy and the definition of the learning support/resource teacher's role contribute to the difficulty

regarding learning support/resource teaching. Curriculum congruence, that is, the similarity in rationale, methods and materials of reading instruction, also remains an issue when learning support and classroom teaching of reading are not connected. However, there have been policy developments aimed at counteracting these issues which will now be discussed.

#### *2.2.3.2 1990s to present: evolution of policy to incorporate inclusive education.*

In the past two decades, influential reports on the Irish education system have impacted on learning support policy, resulting in the extension of remedial education to all schools and supporting the implementation of policy. The *Special Education Review Committee* (SERC) (DE, 1993) made specific recommendations in relation to remedial education and addressed issues such as the extension of the remedial service to all primary schools, the selection of children for remedial teaching and the size of the remedial teachers' caseloads. In light of a recommendation by the SERC Report, the *Survey of Remedial Education in Primary Schools Report* (Shiel, Morgan & Larney, 1998) was commissioned by the DES to highlight how the *Guidelines on Remedial Education* and the recommendations of the SERC Report were being followed in practice in Irish schools. The *Survey of Remedial Education in Primary Schools Report* recommended that the 1988 *Guidelines on Remedial Education* should be revised in order to take into consideration developments in the education system and the impact they have had on the context of remedial education. It recommended that new guidelines should set out clearly the aims of remedial education. Another recommendation was that differences between the *Guidelines on*



*Remedial Education* and the SERC Report should be streamlined, particularly in relation to the criteria for selecting children for remedial teaching and the numbers of children who should receive remedial education. It was recommended that the principles of prevention and early intervention should underpin remedial education and that remedial teaching in English, whether in oral language, reading and/or writing, should be underway by the beginning of first class. The report stated that the DES “should examine the implications of broadening the work of the remedial teachers to include a stronger consultative role with regard to the provision of remedial services by addressing such issues as the selection and training of remedial teachers, the desired balance between teaching duties and consultative work, and the skills needed by class teachers and remedial teachers to sustain a consultative model of remedial teaching” (DES, 1998, p.43). The report highlighted that the links between remedial teachers and parents of children in receipt of remedial teaching were not sufficiently strong to maximise the effects of the work of the remedial teacher, and that class teachers should receive in-service training on the aims and objectives of remedial education and on the strategies for supporting children in receipt of remedial education in their ordinary classes on an ongoing basis.

The recommendation to streamline the differences between the *Guidelines on Remedial Education* and the SERC Report resulted in the development and publication of the *Learning Support Guidelines* (LSG) (DES, 2000). The LSG were pivotal in establishing learning support and the role of the learning support teacher. The term ‘remedial’ was replaced with that of ‘learning support’, reflecting a more inclusive understanding of the nature of learning support. The LSG provided guidance on the development and implementation of whole school policies with

regard to learning support. Significantly and in line with the research literature, the LSG promoted and emphasised the implementation of policies advocating the enhancement of classroom-based learning for all children, the prevention of learning difficulties and the provision of early intervention. To support this, the roles of principal teacher, class teacher and learning support teacher in providing learning support were defined. Similar to the role of the remedial teacher in the 1988 Guidelines, the learning support teacher has a dual role: that of teacher of children experiencing low achievement and/or learning difficulties and also supporter of and consultant with colleagues.

An important development in the role of the learning support/resource teacher, as defined in the LSG, required the learning support/resource teacher to be able to collaborate and communicate effectively with the other adults in the school, not only classroom teachers but also parents and other professionals. This is supported in the research literature (Scala, 2001; Dearman & Alber, 2005; DeVries Guth & Stephens Pettengill, 2005; Thibodeau, 2008). In their research, Bean, Swan and Knaub (2003) identify five broad roles in which reading specialists are involved. They include *being a resource to teachers*, for example, discussing and sharing ideas, holding collaborative planning sessions; *school and community liaison*, for example, working with parents and other professionals; *co-ordinator of reading programmes*, for example, coordinating literacy programmes; *contributor to assessment*, for example, conducting assessment on children; and *instructor*, for example, providing small group and individual supplementary teaching. These roles correspond to the roles outlined in the LSG for learning support/resource teachers as collaborators and consultants with principal teachers, class teachers and parents in selecting children for

and providing supplementary teaching and in conducting assessments. However, as yet, this is not reflected in the work of learning support/resource teachers in schools; NAER (2005) reported that learning support/resource teachers spend the maximum amount of their time in the role of instructor. "The majority of teachers' time (65.9%) was spent providing learning support for English to pupils, while 3.7% of their time was spent in contact with teachers regarding learning support for English" (Eivers et al., 2005a, p. 118-119). That so little time was given to consultation with their mainstream class-teacher colleagues by the learning support/resource teachers highlights an important difference between what the LSG lay down for collaborative planning and the reality of what is the practice in learning support. Such collaboration is a prerequisite for integrating learning support and class teaching of reading, and is an area that needs to be explored in the research study.

There is no ambiguity in the LSG around the issue of integrating learning support and class teaching. The LSG enhance the role of the class teachers, giving them first line responsibility for children who need additional support. The LSG differ from the 1988 Guidelines in that they stated firmly that learning support is a whole-school responsibility and they recommended whole-school strategies for planning and organising learning support. Furthermore, they provided a model for the implementation of supplementary teaching for a specified term, thirteen to twenty weeks, and additional indirect support for the other part of the school year. Unfortunately, the LSG do not go so far as to provide teachers with exemplars of how to provide this additional support.

In addition to placing a high priority on the enhancement of classroom-based learning and the provision of supplementary teaching to those children who need such intervention, the LSG called for developing and implementing an individual learning programme for each child in receipt of supplementary teaching. Such programmes are based on an assessment of needs and a specification of learning targets for the child. It is envisioned that the *Individual Profile and Learning Programmes* (IPLPs) are drawn up and implemented collaboratively by the child's class teacher, learning support teacher and parents/guardians in order to ensure that all involved concur with and support the intervention programme. This involvement of class teachers and parents/guardians marks a new understanding of the need for interventions to be holistic if they are to be successful. "The key to success is the extent to which regular classroom teaching and supplementary teaching provide a co-ordinated response to the individual needs of children" (DES, 2000, p.67). However, while the LSG appear to advocate the active role of parents/guardians in collaborating and sharing information with the school about their children, the role outlined for them is clearly that of a supporter of the school rather than an equal partner in their children's education. The LSG outline a role for parents in supporting the work of the school through participating in reading activities with their children in the home and in implementing the suggested home-based activities that are outlined in their child's IPLP. A role in communicating with the school by keeping the class teacher informed of the progress they observe in their child's learning and by attending meetings to discuss their child's progress is presented. However, they are not encouraged to initiate meetings or lead the discussion in relation to their child's progress.

In the past, one of the difficulties with the implementation of remedial education policy was the huge variation in the profiles of children receiving learning support in different schools, for example, children who received learning support in some schools would not be considered for supplementary support in schools experiencing a greater degree/range of disadvantage. This is attested to in the findings of the *Study of Remedial Education in Irish Primary Schools* (1998), which concluded that

the criteria used by schools to select pupils for remedial teaching differ from those recommended in the *Guidelines on Remedial Education* in that schools rely less on the performance of pupils in relation to national norms, and more on their performance relative to pupils within the school. (Shiel et al., 1998, p.40)

This illustrates Matland's Experimental Model of policy implementation which is characterised by high ambiguity and low conflict. In this model, outcomes depend largely on

which actors are active and most involved...Outcomes depend heavily on the resources and actors present in the micro implementing environment. These are likely to vary strongly from site to site, therefore broad variation in outcomes is likely. (Matland, 1995, p.166)

In the past, contextual issues which influenced eligibility for learning support in primary schools included the availability of learning support in the school and the understanding of what constituted reading difficulty, that is, the baseline the school used to identify and to select children for learning support. This baseline differed from school to school depending on different factors, for example, the school's catchment area. To counteract the difficulty with regard to the selection of children for learning support, the LSG specified that children at or below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on standardised reading tests are prioritised in all schools for supplementary support, provided the margin of error of the test scores has been taken into account. This

represents an attempt to introduce equity of provision for needy children in the system. With the specification of a percentile ranking at or below which children who receive learning support must fall, the DES was endeavouring to ensure implementation of the policy, as outlined in the LSG, the *Taskforce on Dyslexia* (DES, 2001) and by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), in the school system overall.

The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) solidified a child's entitlement to appropriate support if he/she is struggling with reading. Section 9 of the Act states that one of the functions of a school is to "ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for" (p.13). With the establishment of the combined role of learning support/resource teaching, learning support is now included under the term special education. A framework for the provision of needs for children with SEN is set out in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Schools experienced a new era of accountability regarding the education that they provided due to the legislation which established the legal basis for inclusion of all children, irrespective of their varying needs.

The increasing importance of special education was reflected in the number of DES circulars which related to Special Education. *Circular, SP Ed 08/99*, enabled mainstream primary schools to apply for resource teachers, who were allocated to meet the needs of children with SEN arising from a disability, provided the children were fully integrated into the schools. The term 'resource teacher' was now

understood in terms of a teacher working with children who were categorised as having disabilities after undergoing appropriate assessments, in accordance with *Circular, SP Ed 08/99*. This resulted in the provision of extra resources, including teaching hours. The role of the resource teacher included assessing and recording children's needs and progress; setting specific, time-related targets for each child and agreeing them with the class teacher and principal; direct teaching of the children, either in a separate room or within the mainstream class, and team-teaching so long as the children concerned were deriving benefit from it. The resource teachers worked in parallel with learning support teachers in schools. Resource teaching followed the pattern of learning support and withdrawal tended to become the dominant mode of organisation of support.

The introduction of resource teachers was a cause of much confusion in some schools as class teachers found themselves collaborating with a learning support teacher as well as with one or more resource teachers, depending on the profile of their class. From the researcher's interaction with teachers, she can affirm that teachers found collaborating very difficult in this situation as there was no means of allocating time for consultation with one teacher, let alone two. This situation was rectified to a degree in 2005/2006 by the *Circular, SP Ed 02/05*, which merged the roles of the resource and learning support teachers. As a result, the class teacher generally only collaborates with one other teacher. This makes the organisation of planning, developing and implementing IPLPs more manageable. However, the issue of when collaboration should occur is not explicated anywhere, either in the LSG or in the subsequent circulars. The DES has recognised that this is an area of difficulty

in schools and the *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners* report (DES, 2005a) recommends that

additional non-contact time is required in schools to support engagement in whole-school planning, collaboration, and review. It is therefore suggested that all the education partners should give consideration to ways in which time can be made available for essential collaborative planning in schools. (DES, 2005, p.64)

NAER (Eivers et al., 2005a) also makes a similar recommendation in relation to improving the co-ordination of learning support and classroom activities.

The increasing recognition of the importance of special education and learning support made demands on the infrastructure of the education system that were difficult to negotiate. Schools had to rapidly respond to the different circulars issued by the DES and revise their practices in light of a different profile of children. Other sections of the education system also encountered challenges. The National Education Psychology Service (NEPS) found itself continually assessing children for eligibility for resource hours to the detriment of its other functions. These issues were addressed by *Circular, SP Ed 24/03*; it outlined a staged approach to assessment, identification and programme implementation which was appropriate in the area of special needs. Far greater responsibility was devolved to schools in the identification of children with SEN and the allocation of resources for these children. This change in policy reflected similar policies in other jurisdictions, for example, the Response to Intervention (RTI) legislation (USA) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) and the Code of Practice (UK) (DfES, 2001), where schools have been given greater responsibility in terms of identifying and responding to children's needs.



*Circular SP Ed 24/03* impacted greatly on the learning support teachers' role. The circular outlined three stages. Stage I gives the class teacher responsibility to identify, assess, plan for and implement extra help for a child within the normal classroom setting. At stage II, the child is referred to the learning support teacher, with parental permission, for further diagnostic testing. If this diagnostic assessment indicates that supplementary teaching would be beneficial, then this is arranged. If significant concerns remain after a period of at least one school term, it is necessary to implement stage III. The school formally requests a consultation and, where it is appropriate, that an assessment of need is made by a specialist from outside the school, such as a psychologist. The purpose of the assessment is to plan support to meet the specified needs of a child. Children designated with low-incidence SEN, for example, those with physical disability, are ipso facto entitled to resource teaching support. The three-stage model is also recommended in the *Taskforce on Dyslexia* (DES, 2001) and by NEPS in their publication, *Special Education Needs: A Continuum of Support* (DES, 2007).

The devolution of further responsibility to schools came under *Circular, SP Ed 02/05*, which spelt out the principles of the General Allocation Scheme. This scheme was designed to ensure that all schools have enough resource teaching hours to meet the immediate needs of children who have high incidence SEN, and also those who require learning support. It reflects the fact that most schools have children with such needs. However, as children with low incidence SEN are not found in every school, individual resource applications for such children continue to be made. Schools are given the responsibility to allocate teachers to children in line with the children's needs, ensuring that those with the greatest need get the highest level of

support. It is up to the school to decide whether one-to-one or group teaching or a mix of both is the best type of support for each individual child, depending on the nature of his/her needs.

The circulars outlined above show the progression of the DES with regard to developing policy in the area of SEN. It is unfortunate that some of the developments may have resulted in confusion at school level. It is true that the developments acknowledge the role of contextual factors such as local priorities, individual beliefs and motivation in transforming policy into practice. However, a gap exists in that the balance between support and pressure to change was not fully addressed; schools and teachers have not received the professional development that is necessary to ensure confidence in implementing the new inclusive policies. McLaughlin (1987) states that there is a need to highlight individuals rather than institutions and to view the implementation of policy in terms of individual teachers' incentives, beliefs and capacity. Darling-Hammond (1990) supports this and argues that local leadership and motivations for change are critical to policy success; that local agencies must adapt policies rather than adopt them because local ideas and circumstances always vary, and "that teachers' and administrators' opportunities for continual learning, experimentation and decision-making during implementation determine whether policies will come alive in schools or fade away when the money or enforcement pressures end" (p.235).

Schools need to take their greater devolved responsibility for children who struggle with reading seriously and to make changes to better meet these children's needs. Research by Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan and Wasik (1992) and Slavin et

al. (1996) recommended that schools, where there are large numbers of children who have serious reading difficulties, should re-structure the provision of reading instruction and support services, particularly for children in the junior classes. This restructuring includes introducing cross-grade groups (for reading classes only) composed of children in senior infants to second class with similar levels of (regularly reviewed) reading achievement, and ensuring that reading groups are assigned to class and support teachers on a rotating basis so that most or all children have access to a support teacher for at least part of the school year. The researcher is aware from her research that a number of larger schools are implementing this restructuring of reading groups in line with one of the DES priorities for the year 2006/2007, that of supporting the delivery and expansion of Early Literacy Programmes.

Small-group differentiated reading instruction, based on instructionally relevant assessment, is another means of providing children with optimal reading instruction. The Small-Group Differentiated Reading Model “provides a systematic framework for teaching beginning and struggling readers. It takes into consideration the developmental stages through which readers progress, the critical strategies for reading success, and the time needed to develop these literacy foundations”(Tyner, 2004, p.4). By differentiating instruction for beginning readers, the teacher can address the diversity in reading levels that exists in classrooms. Differentiation means modifying instruction with reference to the reader’s readiness. The Small-Group Reading Model is differentiated in two important ways. First, the five stages in the beginning reading process, that is, emergent reader, beginning reader, fledgling reader, transitional reader and independent reader, are clearly differentiated as the

reader progresses toward independence. The instructional strategies, that is, re-reading, word banks, word study, writing and new read, are also differentiated. The model includes a variety of reading strategies based on the developmental needs of the child, not on his/her chronological age or grade level. It facilitates the teacher in providing quality-reading instruction that is worthwhile and matched to the child's instructional level. Implicit in the model is ongoing assessment that is directly linked to instruction and informs planning. Children are constantly evaluated and reshuffled in flexible groups to best meet their instructional needs and instruction is constantly adjusted to meet the needs of the child. "Differentiated reading takes into consideration the individual characteristics of children, capitalises on the strengths they have, and expands and challenges their abilities" (Tyner, 2004, p.12).

#### *2.2.4 Conclusion*

It is evident that policy regarding children who struggle to learn to read has developed considerably since the 1960s. Crucial elements of this development include the devolution of responsibility by the DES to schools and class teachers for providing children with the necessary support. Schools now manage their own resources. Structures are in place to allow schools the freedom to respond quickly to meet the needs of children who require additional support. What schools need now is professional development to enable them to support the children appropriately in order to ensure that reading standards show evidence of improvement and that progress is made toward achieving the 2007 to 2016 NAPS target of reducing the proportion of readers with reading difficulties to less than 15% by 2016. The characteristics of children who are directly affected by the learning support policy and the debate on what is effective literacy instruction are focused on next.

## *2.3. Development of Reading and Nature of Reading Difficulties*

### *2.3.1 Introduction*

As reading is complex and multidimensional, the literature supporting the teaching of reading is fraught with controversy and opinion. Models of the development of reading are used to represent what is regarded as important in the different approaches to reading instruction. They identify the ideological understandings of each perspective. Although it is unlikely that there will ever be total agreement about the best approach to the teaching and learning of reading, the main models of reading development, identified from the literature, are analysed in this section.

Until recently, two models of the reading process, which are directly opposed to each other, were dominant. The bottom-up and top-down models mirror the reality that the reading debate “has often been over polarised, especially in the light of the variety of strategies which children use in learning to read” (Beard, 1993, p.1). Bottom-up and top-down are terms which are taken from the literature on perception and they refer to whether an individual perceives a stimulus by noticing separate defining features of the stimulus and assembles them into a recognisable pattern (bottom-up), or perceives a stimulus by use of the context and what is already known about the situation (top-down) (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

The ‘great debate’ (Chall, 1967) referred to which aspect of language, syntax/semantics or phonology, plays the most important part in learning to read

(Riley, 1999). The two models have a different empirical basis. While empirical data within the top-down tradition relate to typical development in reading, that is, to the majority of children who quite easily break the alphabetic code, the argument favouring bottom-up models is most typically found in research on reading disabilities (Hagtvet, 1999).

Because reading has significant connections with readers' knowledge, strategic processing and motivation, models or theories based simply on bottom-up and top-down distinction are replaced by more complex, reciprocal models of reading development. Two approaches, the interactive model (Rumelhart, 1994) and the "balanced approach to literacy instruction" (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block & Morrow, 2001, p.25), represent attempts to mediate in a practical, instructional way between the two more theoretical models. There are also developmental theories of reading acquisition which propose the stages/phases through which children learn to read. However, the discussion would not be complete without reference to children who experience difficulties in learning to read. Therefore, the characteristics of children that are associated with reading difficulties are also explicated. The specifics of the aforementioned models of reading, developmental theories and characteristics of children who struggle with reading will now be outlined.

## 2.3.2 *Models of the Reading Process*

### 2.3.2.1 *The bottom-up model of reading development.*

“The bottom-up theories propose a sub-skills approach suggesting that reading is learned initially by manipulating the smallest units of language, that is, letters and words” (Riley, 1999, p.217). Chall (1983) called the bottom-up model of reading development the ‘code emphasis’ model, arising from its emphasis on the concept of reading as a set of code-breaking skills, which focus on the technical aspects of breaking the alphabetic code and automatising reading at the word and sub-word level (Hagtvet, 1999). Therefore, the model forms part of the overall view of reading as a psychological process, which describes reading as an activity “in which lower level or perceptual processes to do with letters and sounds precede the higher level meaning processes” (Smith & Elley, 1998, p.77).

Thus, according to the bottom-up model, reading is seen as a skills-based mechanical activity, which requires the reader to analyse a text into letters and words and match these to their oral equivalents in a process called ‘decoding’. Children’s attention is drawn to linking sounds with their letter forms through code-emphasis approaches, which characteristically focus first on the smallest unit (Clem, 1990). Growth and progress in the ability to decode mean children advance from initially decoding letters and letter patterns to reading whole words and progressing to read phrases and sentences, gradually working their way up to a point where they can read whole books (Gaines, 1993).

Advocates of the bottom-up theory claim that the translation of the visual aspects of print directly into sound and subsequently into meaning is at the core of the reading process. Adams (1991) reports that skilful readers are able to concentrate on meaning only because they have learned to process the words very quickly and nearly effortlessly. She argues that such automaticity “grows from a history of having read words, not from skipping, ignoring or guessing at them” (p. 42). The hierarchical sub-skills of this reading ability are continuously consolidated and applied to the act of reading itself, and are best learned systematically by teacher modelling, regular practice and subsequent integration (Weinberger, 1996; Browne, 1996).

As outlined, emphasis on the teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondence forms part of an overall approach to the teaching of reading within the bottom-up model, which broadly supports the phonic approach. Another approach consistent with the bottom-up model is the practice of whole-word or look-and-say approaches to word recognition. Here, children are taught to recognise whole words as complete units without reference to the phonic components of words. Children learn to read words by recognising visual patterns and distinctive shapes in words or by recognising the word from its sequence of letters. Thus, the emphasis is on building a core sight vocabulary of instantly recognisable words in order to develop automaticity.

The bottom-up model of reading development has been criticised for encouraging rote learning and not providing children with independent strategies for reading unfamiliar words and text. The understanding of the reading process has broadened considerably beyond considering reading as a simple activity that relies on



decoding and memory skills, and it is realised that the disembodied nature of many of the activities of the bottom-up model approaches denies the child the opportunity to draw upon the wealth of subconscious knowledge that he/she already brings to the reading process (Reid, 1993). The holistic nature of literacy needs to be factored in.

### *2.3.2.2 The top-down model of reading development.*

The core of the top-down model is that “the search for meaning is central from the outset and that the main strategies for decoding words are prediction and guessing” (Riley, 1999, p. 217). The model is consistent with the ‘whole language’ approach and the emphasis is on ‘meaning-making’ (Chall, 1967). This model draws on the theories of Goodman (1976), Goodman and Goodman (1979) and Smith (1971, 1973) regarding the psycholinguistic or meaning emphasis view of reading.

Proponents of this model advocate a whole-language approach to reading development, since it is believed that reading and writing are best acquired in the same means as listening and speaking skills, that is, naturally (Reid, 1993). Top-down theorists argue that “the key to fluent reading is not word recognition but the use of strategies such as forming ‘hypothesis’, predicting, guessing, anticipating, and the selection of maximally predictive cues to confirm meaning” (Reid, 1993, p.23). The deliberate, formal teaching of the basic elements of language, that is, letters, sounds, blends, words, which characterise the bottom-up model of reading development, merely fragments the reading process and is counter-productive since it distracts the child from extracting meaning when reading. In the top-down model, children are encouraged to focus on the larger units of language, stressing the importance of context and content (Clem, 1990). Therefore, the focus is on reading for meaning

from the outset, while the children are assumed to acquire their word attack skills incidentally.

The top-down model of reading development encompasses many distinct features. Active learner involvement, the child's innate capacity for learning and prior knowledge of the world are all emphasised in this model in order to enable the child make sense of printed text. However, criticism of the model focuses on the unstructured approach to reading development and the lack of emphasis on phonics and phonological awareness. The top-down model is especially criticised with regard to the children who struggle when learning to read (Stahl & Miller, 1989; Stahl, McKenna & Pagnucco, 1994). "Whole language has been found not to be effective in promoting development of phonemic awareness and word recognition skills, especially for children who are already at risk for difficulties in beginning reading" (Pressley, 2001, p.14). Furthermore, there is credible experimental evidence that casts doubt on some specific whole language practices in the case of struggling readers. They include natural approaches in learning to spell (Graham, 2000), developing word recognition skills through reading of predictable texts (Johnson, 2000) and stimulating vocabulary growth through incidental learning of words in text (Swanborn & DeGlopper, 1999). "Children will not automatically bloom by being immersed in a literacy hothouse rich with literacy events and activities. While these activities enrich children's literacy development, they are not sufficient for the children who are left behind" (Kame'enui, 1993, p.381). This finding has cogent implications for the child at risk of struggling with learning to read.

The Interactive Compensatory Model (Stanovich, 1980) suggests that poor readers use contextual information to compensate for weak recognition skills. The model has two major components: contextual facilitation of word perception and facilitation of comprehension. Contextual facilitation of word perception is not a usual part of skilled reading, in fact it would be a waste of cognitive capacity for good readers who read with ease to use this skill (Briggs, Austin, & Underwood, 1984). Contextual facilitation or facilitation of word perception is useful to poor readers to compensate for their difficulties in decoding. Good readers rely less on context cues than poor readers do because their decoding skills are so strong (Gough & Juel, 1991). In contrast, poor readers over rely on context to try to make meaning of text (Stanovich 1986; Nicholson, 1992). Implicit in this is the conclusion that direct instruction in phonic and graphic strategies would enable the poor reader to decode unfamiliar words with greater ease.

### *2.3.2.3 Instructional approaches to reading development.*

In response to the debate regarding the relative value of the top-down and bottom-up models, Rumelhart (1994) proposed the interactive model of reading while Pressley (2002) promoted a balanced approach to reading instruction. A balanced reading instruction of whole-language and skill components encompasses “the learning and use of word recognition and comprehension strategies, the effectiveness of strategies used depending, in part, on the reader’s prior knowledge about the world, including knowledge built up through reading” (Pressley, 2002, p. 333). The emphasis here is on getting the balance of the different perspectives between top-down and bottom-up right (Beard, 1993). The debate is now centred on which elements of the bottom-up and top-down models should inform reading development

rather than emphasising one approach in preference to the other. Adams (2004) maintains that meaning provides the whole process with purpose; it is the engine that drives the child to process the print. She argues that the effective learning of reading can only occur through systematic teaching that encompasses the development of all the contributing aspects of the whole process.

In the interactive model, reading is seen as “both a perceptual and a cognitive process” (Rumelhart, 2004, p.1149) that involves the reader’s own experiences and expectations of the text. Elements of both the top-down and bottom-up model of reading are incorporated in the interactive model. A basic starting point of the interactive model is an acceptance that reading comprises skills which are acquired and learned naturally, as well as skills that need to be explicitly taught (Lieberman & Liberman, 1992). The model accepts that a skilled reader uses sensory, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information when reading, and that these “various sources of information appear to interact in many complex ways during the process of reading” (Rumelhart, 2004, p.1149). The key to the interactive model is the coordination and cooperation of all processes involved in reading in line with the child’s own prior knowledge and experience. This model emphasises the importance of an early reading environment where the child is immersed in high interest, meaningful literacy tasks that involve regular reading, writing and language development.

The 1971 primary school curriculum promoted a bottom-up, skill-focused model of reading development, stating that reading in the primary school was focused on “the drills and mechanics of the various skills involved in and with the development of skill in comprehending what is read” (An Roinn Oideachais, 1971, p.

89). The PSC (1999) endorsed an interactive model of reading development by applying it to the teaching of reading in Irish schools through its emphasis on the language experience approach, phonological awareness, the development of the alphabetic principle, shared reading approach and the provision of a print-rich environment. The developmental theories of reading will be focused on next.

### 2.3.3 *Developmental Theories of Reading Acquisition*

#### 2.3.3.1 *Frith's developmental theory of reading acquisition.*

Frith (1985) proposed a three-phase theory of reading acquisition, each phase is characterised by a different type of reading strategy. In the *logographic* phase, children are able to recognise familiar words by attending to relevant graphic or written features, for example, the two circles in the middle of *look*, but they do not use phonology or letter sounds as a way to identify printed words. In the *alphabetic* phase, children sound out new words that they meet in print by attending to the sequential letter sounds in the words. In Frith's third or *orthographic* phase, children recognise new words instantly by attending to their distinctive orthographic or spelling patterns.

Frith has a problematic relationship with phonemic awareness. According to her three-phase model, phonemic awareness is absent in the logographic phase, but it is central in the alphabetic phase, because a child must be aware that words are composed of sounds. Frith maintains that phonemic awareness has outlived its developmental usefulness by the final orthographic stage and she asserts that

phonological processing is not required at this stage. However, it is clear that young readers cannot reach the orthographic phase without first going through the alphabetic phase where phonological processing is required, and they continue to use it to develop their reading at the orthographic phase.

In a longitudinal study of British infant school readers, Stuart and Coltheart (1988) challenged Frith's three-phase theory. They argued that beginning readers, from the start, use whatever phoneme awareness they possess. Thus, a child who has only beginning consonant awareness but possesses some letter-sound knowledge might read *cat* for *cub*. From Stuart and Coltheart's perspective, logographic reading may simply be a default strategy to be used when the beginner brings little or no phonological awareness to the task, and alphabetic or sequential decoding might be better conceptualised as the child, over time, is able to fill in missing pieces in a functional word recognition unit. The researcher concurs that there is a strong case for developing phonemic awareness in children who are beginning to learn to read.

#### *2.3.3.2 Ehri's model of word reading development.*

Ehri (1998) provides a comprehensive description of how word knowledge develops in the beginning reader. She draws on the work of Frith (1985) and Stuart and Coltheart (1988); developmental spelling theory (Henderson & Beers, 1980; Templeton & Bear, 1992), as well as evidence from her own research studies. Ehri's theory focuses on the decoding aspects of reading development and it acknowledges the important role of language, construction of meaning and fluency. Implicit in her model is the fact that certain cognitive and linguistic processes are central to the development of reading ability. For example, it is important to understand what sight-

word learning involves as teachers need to be aware how readers are able to look at printed words that they have read before and recognise them while bypassing the many other words stored in their memory, including words with very similar spellings or meanings. Ehri reports that the process at the heart of sight word learning is a connection-forming process. "Connections are formed that link the written forms of the words to their pronunciations and meanings. This information is stored in the reader's mental lexicon" (Ehri & Mc Cormick, 2004, p.367). Ehri's work (1992) suggests that rather than forming connections between the visual shapes of words and their meanings, readers learn sight words by forming connections between graphemes in the spellings and phonemes that underlie the pronunciation of individual words. These connections are formed out of readers' general knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that recur in many words. "Readers look at the spelling of a particular word, pronounce the word, and apply their graphophonic knowledge to analyse how letters symbolise individual phonemes detectable in the word's pronunciation" (Ehri & McCormick, 2004, p.368). To secure sight words in this way, readers must possess alphabetic knowledge, including letter shapes, how to segment pronunciations into phonemes, and which graphemes typically symbolise which phonemes (Ehri, 1997). The process of forming connections allows readers to remember how to read words containing conventional letter-sound correspondences and words that have less regular spellings.

Ehri proposed four phases of word recognition development. In the *pre-alphabetic* phase, so called because it occurs prior to any alphabetic knowledge, word identification does not involve making any letter-to-sound connections. This phase is similar to Frith's logographic phase as children remember how to read words by

connecting salient visual cues in the word with its pronunciation and meaning. This phase has also been called the selective-cue phase (Juel, 1991) because children attend to selected cues in remembering how to read words. Gough and Hillinger, (1980) labelled it the paired-associate stage to indicate that arbitrarily chosen associations are formed to link some feature of a written word to its spoken form or meaning. As there is no systematic letter-sound processing in this pre-alphabetic phase, the child's ability to commit new words to memory and to retain old words is taxed when visually similar words are confronted in text. Children have trouble learning to read words that are written without a context cue such as pictures or logos.

In Ehri's next *partial alphabetic* phase, beginning readers can read some letters in a word and then they attempt to pronounce it; the first and final letters are usually the most important. To enter the partial alphabetic phase, children must know some letter-sound correspondences and be able to segment either the initial or the initial and final sounds in words. For beginning readers, the obvious advantage of moving from the pre-alphabetic to the partial alphabetic phase is that instead of trying to remember printed words via idiosyncratic visual cues, they can now use a restricted and reliable system of letter-sound relationships to help process new words and retain them in memory.

With gains in phoneme awareness, beginning readers eventually progress to a *full alphabetic* phase where they remember how to read specific words by forming complete connections between the letters that are seen in the written word and the phonemes that are detected in its pronunciation. Therefore, the child is now able to form alphabetic connections and can also map graphemes to phonemes of sight



words. According to Ehri, this leads to more accurate reading. The full alphabetic phase has also been called the spelling-sound stage by Juel (1991) and the cipher-reading stage by Gough and Hillinger (1980) to convey that readers acquire and use orderly relationships for associating sounds to the letters that they see in words. Whereas the partial alphabetic readers' limited memory for letters may cause them to misread words, full alphabetic readers' representations eliminate confusion because their representations are sufficiently complete to distinguish similarly spelled words. Readers with full alphabetic skills are able to achieve more accuracy in their recognition, as they are now processing constituent letters and are able to read new words by blending the generated pronunciations. "The full alphabetic phase is an essential beginning point that enables readers to acquire the foundation for attaining mature reading skill in an alphabetic writing system. Mastery of this phase is essential for moving into the next phase" (Ehri & McCormick, 2004, p.378).

In Ehri's final *consolidated alphabetic* phase, which is equivalent to Frith's orthographic stage, recurring letter patterns become consolidated, that is, the beginning reader starts to notice multi-letter sequences that are common to many words that he or she has stored in memory. By consolidating these recurring letters into functional word recognition chunks, the child becomes more efficient in reading words and storing them in memory. Instead of processing each letter in a new word, the child can simply process the initial consonant and the following vowel pattern. As Ehri pointed out, such a chunking strategy is especially helpful when reading longer, multi-syllable words.

An important theme of Ehri's developmental theory is the progressive unfolding of phoneme awareness in reading acquisition. Phonemic awareness is a crucial precursor to the development of skill in processing grapheme-phoneme relations in words (Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1986; Share, Jorm, Maclean & Matthews, 1984) At first, beginning readers can only attend to the initial sound in a spoken word, later to the initial and ending sounds, and finally to all the sounds in the word. Increases in phoneme awareness can lead to more complete letter-sound processing, which in turn allows for a greater sight word memory. Ehri's model will be used to understand where the children in the research are situated in their reading development.

The implications of Ehri's theory of phases of reading development for teachers include the importance of children learning all the sounds and names of the letters and that they relate them to their own speech processes. By first class, teachers should help all children to achieve the full alphabetic phase. Ehri's phases clearly contain some important markers for learning to read for all children, but especially for those who struggle to learn to read.

#### *2.3.3.3 Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney's reading model.*

The Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax and Perney (2003) reading model allocates a definite timeline to the development of skills that are needed for learning to read. It extends from junior infants to first class but it is unclear how all children can progress their reading to meet the time line allocations. The researcher believes that it is more useful to look at Ehri's model and to locate the individual child in it, rather than

looking at the specified time and expecting children to be at the prescribed stage of reading development. The time phases and components of the model are outlined in Appendix 2.

#### *2.3.4 Characteristics of Children with Reading Difficulties*

Research indicates that good readers and children who struggle to learn to read are characteristically different. Poor readers tend to be tense, less concentrated and more anxious (Bryan & Bryan, 1990) and they typically show a poorly developed sensitivity to the sound structure of language (Ehri & Nunes, 2002). However, reading difficulties manifest themselves for many reasons. Individual, familial and demographic factors can influence whether a child will develop reading difficulties. Therefore, children who have reading difficulties exhibit a variety of characteristics, with the probability that no individual displays all of them. Thus, it is important to explore these characteristics.

Eivers et al. (2005a) report that gender, age, first language of the child and whether the child is a member of an ethnic minority are important considerations associated with reading achievement. This is particularly important in Irish schools today as teachers are more likely to teach in a multicultural classroom than their predecessors in the past.

The home literacy environment (HLE) is regarded as crucially important; whether literacy is valued in the home, if parents/guardians are involved in reading with their children, if reading material is available in the home, if opportunities for

verbal interaction occur in the home, and if parents/guardians convey expectations of success regarding reading to the child, can influence reading development (Hess & Holloway, 1984). Whether there is a family history of reading difficulties is also considered central (Gilger, Pennington & DeFries, 1991). Demographically, children with reading difficulty may live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and come from a low-income family. However, while many studies have found strong associations between family socio-economic status (SES) and reading achievement (Bowey, 1995; Hecht, Burgess, Torgesen, Wagner & Rashotte, 2000; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2001; Eivers et al., 2004; Cosgrove, Shiel, Sofroniou, Zastrutzki & Shortt, 2005), there is evidence that how parents/guardians interact with their children is as important, if not more important, than parental/guardian SES (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993).

The child's cognitive and sensory capabilities also affect their attainment in reading. "Of the many conditions that appear to contribute to successful reading by school children, among the most important are each child's intellectual and sensory capacities" (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998, p.100). A child's baseline in reading as shaped by their cognitive and sensory capabilities will determine how successfully they interact with print, and, therefore, influences how much support is needed when learning to read.

Many children with reading difficulties may have basic underlying language problems and given that spoken language and reading are elements of literacy, it is not surprising that language problems impact on learning to read. Problems in listening, vocabulary development, expressive and receptive language all affect the

development of a child's reading ability. Even if a child decodes the printed word successfully, comprehension of the connected text depends on the child's oral language abilities (Lerner, 2003).

Poor readers often have poor phonemic awareness (Bruck, 1992; Fawcett & Nicholson, 1995). Therefore, many children at risk for reading difficulties demonstrate deficits in phonological processing skills, including phonological awareness and rapid naming (Wagner, Torgesen & Rashotte, 1994; Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher & Lynn, 1996; Torgesen, 1996; Smith, Simmons & Kame'enui, 1998). Deficits in phonological awareness processing have been found to influence significantly early word-level reading skills (Wagner et al., 1997; Torgesen et al., 2001). For example, children with limited phonological awareness and rapid naming skills tend to have difficulty understanding the alphabetic principle or letter-sound relationships. This problem can lead to further difficulty with decoding and word recognition.

In many cases, problems in processing auditory and visual information are associated with difficulties in learning to read. Children can have impaired perception and short-term memory. This can result in poor reading readiness measures in the areas of alphabetic knowledge, letter recognition and concepts of print, which can impact on their ability to develop a sight vocabulary of words.

Children with reading difficulties may have poor decoding strategies; they often forget to use picture cues, fail to recognise words from previous experience and do not apply context cues. They tend to have difficulty gaining meaning from what

they read. A hallmark of children who have difficulty in reading is a lack of fluency, that is, they do not read smoothly, without hesitation, and with comprehension (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

Many of the previously mentioned characteristics associated with reading difficulties are found in an accentuated level in children who are diagnosed as having dyslexia. Children with reading difficulties who are receiving learning support intervention may or may not be assessed as having dyslexia. What children with dyslexia need is a structured approach to reading which is adapted to meet their individual needs. The *Report of the Taskforce on Dyslexia* (2001) highlights indicators of dyslexia for children of different age groups. Some of the indicators that a child between the ages five and seven has dyslexia include that the child is “slow to learn the connection between letters and sounds (alphabetic principle); has difficulty separating words into sounds and blending sounds to form words (phonemic awareness), ...and reading comprehension is below expectation due to poor accuracy, fluency and speed” (DES, 2001, pp.120-122).

It is stated in the report, *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools*, that “there is ample evidence of a link between attitudes to reading, motivation to read and reading achievement (Walberg & Tsai, 1985; Elley, 1992; Cosgrove, Kellaghan, Forde & Morgan, 2000)” (Eivers et al., 2004, p.17). Children with reading difficulties tend to have poor attitudes and motivation to read and, more over, they also tend to be poor school attenders, which only accentuates their reading problems further.

Concern has been expressed by educators that many children at risk of reading difficulties may not benefit from generally effective early literacy interventions. These children are described as non-responders (Torgesen, 2000). Al Otaiba and Fuchs (2006) researched what was known about non-responders that might lead to their early identification and effective support. From an examination of twenty-three studies, they found seven categories of child characteristics associated with non-responsiveness. They included deficiencies in phonological awareness, verbal memory, rapid naming, vocabulary, verbal ability and IQ, in addition to the children's behaviour, especially attention seeking behaviour, and home background, including SES. Many children who receive learning support for the duration of their time in primary school without achieving success in reading may fall into this category.

The concept of a continuum of reading ability to reading disability allows a range of reading difficulties to be considered, including children presenting with dyslexic type problems as well as non-responders (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2003). Therefore, there are a multitude of different characteristics that a child experiencing reading difficulty can present with, ranging from the specific to the more general, the short-term to the longer term. The complexity of the issue is further compounded by the many variants, including home and school factors, which can contribute to them. What is important is that each individual child's characteristics are factored into their reading programme in so far as possible. This is the challenge of supporting children successfully in learning to read.

### 2.3.5 Conclusion

The models of reading development, the developmental theories of reading acquisition as well as the characteristics of children who experience difficulty in learning to read pose a triad of elements which inform the complicated process of reading acquisition, especially for the individual child who struggles with learning to read. The next step to be addressed is how to support such children. This leads to an investigation of what constitutes effective reading instruction.

## 2.4. *Effective Reading Instruction*

### 2.4.1 *Introduction*

The researcher, who has a great interest in how children learn to read, agrees with Snow et al. (1998, p. 12) when they state that “children who struggle to read do not require instruction that is substantially different to their more successful peers; rather, they require a greater intensity of high-quality instruction”. The International Reading Association (US) (1999) states that there is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Indeed, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so that they can create the appropriate balance of methods that are needed for the children they teach.

However, research evidence has indicated strong relationships between particular practices and higher reading attainment in children. The section begins with an overview of the components of effective reading instruction. The role of



instructional contexts, the organisation of support, personnel involved in providing support and, finally, the important role that parents/guardians play are outlined.

#### *2.4.2 Components of Effective Reading Instruction*

It is important that reading instruction is geared to the needs of the individual child. Kame'enui (1993) states that children with reading difficulties need to be guided through a strategic sequence of teacher-directed and pupil-centred activities. Children in first class who are struggling with reading need programmes which emphasise and develop skills that are needed for beginning/emergent reading. Direct instructional support is needed at the beginning stages of reading from the teacher.

The reading process consists of four essential components: decoding, comprehension, metacognition and attention (Samuels, 2006). They are integral components of effective reading instruction. Decoding can be defined as the ability to generate a phonological (sound) representation of the printed word on the page. In the case of readers who struggle with the reading process, the word-recognition process is slow and they subvocalise the printed word, that is, say the word silently to themselves as they read. However, with high-speed fluent reading, subvocalising is no longer required. Comprehension is defined as taking the information that is on the page and combining that information with prior knowledge, and, in so doing, constructing a meaningful understanding of the text (Samuels, 2006). Comprehension is multifaceted and, for example, may comprise one or more of literal, critical or inferential comprehension. Metacognition refers to the active monitoring and regulation of one's reading. It involves self-awareness of whether or not one

understands the material in the text, and it involves knowledge of fix-up strategies to use during a comprehension breakdown. The metacognitive self-monitoring skills improve with practice and differentiate unskilled and skilled readers (Collins, Dickson, Simmons & Kame'enui, 2002). Finally, attention is defined as the cognitive effort that is used to process information (Kahneman, 1973).

Children need to develop fluency and comprehension in order to become competent readers. The reader must be able to decode words quickly and easily in order to achieve good comprehension. Slow reading has been highlighted as a real problem, because those who read slowly comprehend slowly (Vukovic, Wilson & Nash, 2004). Children who struggle with reading place a heavier burden on their short-term memory than fluent, more skilled readers. Therefore, they find it difficult to decode, comprehend and monitor comprehension at the same time because they are not able to give all three components enough attention. On the other hand, more fluent readers quickly decode the printed words and concentrate their effort in comprehending text and monitoring this understanding. In fact, decoding becomes automatic and so too do many of the skills used in metacognition. As a result, the fluent reader can channel most effort into the task of constructing meaning.

Fluency is essential to children's overall reading development (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Chard, Vaughn & Tyler, 2002; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003), and repeated reading practice has been shown to improve oral reading rate, accuracy and comprehension (Young, Bowers & MacKinnon, 1996). "Fluency is a developmental process that refers to efficient, effective decoding skills that permit a reader to comprehend text. There is a

reciprocal relationship between decoding and comprehension. Fluency, if manifested in accurate, rapid, expressive oral reading...makes possible silent reading comprehension" (Pikulski, 2006, p. 73).

The underlying language base of the child needs to be developed and expanded as it is early experiences in listening, talking and learning about the world which provide experience with language, thus allowing children to become familiar with sounds, develop phonological awareness, build vocabulary and awareness of sentence structure. These are the foundations for reading and are an important element in the PSC (1999).

A large part of a child's language experience is verbal and it is through oral language activity that much of his/her learning takes place, both in and out of school. The potential of oral language activity as a learning and teaching medium is acknowledged in the key role it is given throughout the curriculum. (NCCA, 1999, p.2)

The PSC highlights that a child's ability with oral language can be a determining factor in the speed and effectiveness with which he/she learns to read, just as his/her experience of reading can enrich his/her vocabulary.

Effective reading instruction highlights the importance of systematic phonics instruction. Research shows that some children who are at risk for reading failure, but who have not yet evidenced such failure, and who are provided with systematic phonics instruction in the early years of school, become almost as fluent in their reading in the senior classes as the general population of their peers (Torgesen, 2004). Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) report from their micro analysis of word recognition instruction in four first grade classrooms, conducted over a year, that children who entered with minimal reading skill seemed to have greatest success when teachers

modelled word recognition strategies by chunking words into component units such as syllables, onset/rimes, or finding little words in big ones, and when they also modelled and encouraged the sounding and blending of individual letters or phonemes in these chunks. Their findings, which were supported by classroom observation and use of assessment, are relevant to the research study, and their advice that “teachers’ instruction did not neatly fall into any easily definable method, strategy, or linguistic unit approach to word recognition” (p.488) has implications for the classroom observation.

A comprehensive systematic word study/phonics programme should be integrated into reading/writing instruction (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Clay, 1985). This should be underpinned by phonological awareness which plays an important role in developing the child’s ability to deal with the sound structure of the English language. The benefit of phonological training, incorporating phonological awareness, onset and rime and alliteration through nursery rhymes, is emphasised by Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1995), Goswami and Bryant (1990) and Cunningham (1988) as an essential pre-requisite for the learning of the alphabetic principle and for developing knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and, ultimately, for progress in reading.

Effective reading instruction in the early years at primary school needs to focus on word-recognition and the development of sight vocabulary. Catts, Hogan, Adlof and Barth (2003) assessed the word recognition, listening comprehension and reading comprehension skills of a group of readers when they were in second, fourth and eighth grades. Word recognition was much more predictive of reading

comprehension at grade two than at grade four, and more predictive at grade four than at grade eight when it accounted for a negligible portion of the variance in reading comprehension. The researchers also examined the weakest readers at each of the grade levels. Word-recognition difficulties were more prominently associated with poor reading when children were younger than when they were older. These findings are more predictable than surprising as laboured word recognition becomes more automatic with practice over the years, but they highlight the importance of developing sight vocabulary.

Sight vocabulary instruction can be enhanced by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a component of reading instruction. The question of whether children with reading difficulties can benefit from computer-based support has been addressed in the research on reading. The results have suggested that children who need support to learn to read can benefit from computer-based tuition of reading in a number of respects: motivation to read (Van Daal & Reitsma, 2000), attitudes towards reading (Wise et al., 1989), word reading (Olson, Wise, Ring & Johnson 1997; Wise et al., 1989; Nicholson, Fawcett & Nicholson, 2000), phonological awareness (Olson et al., 1997; Wise et al., 1989), spelling (Nicholson et al., 2000) and reading comprehension (Montali & Lewandowski, 1996).

However, much of this research centred on software that presented text in isolation from a story context, thus it could be argued that computer-based support emphasised the development of skills to the detriment of comprehension. Though there is a relative lack of research pertaining to the use and effectiveness of computer software for reading (Underwood, 2000; Wood, 2005), and though research is needed

into the most effective means of incorporating the use of ICT into reading programmes, ICT is an educational tool that appears to have promise for reading instruction.

A carefully graded programme, which includes time spent on early learning activities that involve developing language, phonological awareness, knowledge of alphabet, the alphabetic principle, sight vocabulary, concept of print, listening comprehension and text comprehension to name a few, should be incorporated into programmes for children in first class in order to help their progress through Ehri's (1988) phases of reading development. Overlearning and reviewing material have an important role to play in learning to read (Clay, 1985). High-quality literature should be used in the learning activities. However, provision of books alone is insufficient: "Children must be led to interact with them actively" (Smith & Elley, 1998, p.36). Wherever possible, story and information books should be used in preference to a basal reader as these books appear to be more effective than reading scheme books in terms of teaching phonics and sight vocabulary; they also provide greater enjoyment, satisfaction and extension of experience (Pressley et al., 2001).

No discussion about components of effective reading instruction would be complete without reference to the National Research Council Report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998) and the *National Reading Panel Report* (NRP) (2000). Both reports have been hugely influential in the area of reading research and their recommendations have had a major impact on the teaching of reading.

The reports concur that phonemic awareness instruction is effective in promoting early reading and spelling skills, and systematic phonics instruction improves reading and spelling and to a lesser extent comprehension. Guided oral reading and repeated reading of texts increase reading fluency in the elementary years. The use of a variety of vocabulary instruction methods impacts positively in reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies instruction improves comprehension and teaching children to use a small repertoire of effective strategies, for example, predicting, question generation, summarisation, drawing inferences, monitoring for coherence and misunderstanding, was important. The NRP also concluded that teacher professional development can change teachers' instruction of reading with a consequent impact on child achievement, and that computer technology has great potential for improving beginning reading achievement with particular reference to promoting word recognition, vocabulary development and comprehension.

In general, effective reading programmes should be developed as part of a child-centred approach which promotes the enjoyment that can be gained from reading, where there is abundant opportunity for experiencing authentic meaning, pleasure and gaining information. The motivation to succeed at reading is fostered by success. The child's self-esteem needs to be nourished through praise, success and recognition of personal progress. Success and motivation are reciprocal. They sustain and maintain the child's effort in learning to read.

### 2.4.3 *Factors Affecting Reading Instruction*

#### 2.4.3.1 *Effective classrooms.*

The effectiveness of reading instruction is influenced by how reading is taught in the classroom. Pressley (2006) found remarkable consistency with respect to reading instruction across the most effective classrooms that he and his colleagues documented in the US. They reported that there is a great deal of skills instruction in effective classrooms, with as many as twenty skills an hour covered, often in response to the needs of readers. Word recognition skills are explicitly taught with children instructed to sound out words using letter-sound associations, to make use of their knowledge of larger chunks of words and to read the whole word once it is known as a sight word. As these strategies are taught, children are instructed to coordinate their deployment, making sure the word sounded out makes sense, given the picture, story and syntactic cues.

Wharton-McDonald, Pressley and Hampston (1998), Rankin-Erickson and Pressley (2000), Pressley, Wharton-McDonald et al. (2001) reported that comprehension strategies are taught in effective classrooms. The teacher organises the teaching into whole group and small group instruction. Scaffolding by the teacher of new reading and writing skills is predominant, with the children working within their zone of proximal development where they are challenged but not frustrated. The repeating theme of a strong emphasis on the importance of motivating children was evident in effective classrooms. Though these descriptions of effective classrooms are somewhat generalised, they pertain to first class which is the target class for this research.



#### 2.4.3.2 *Effective teachers.*

While there is much research pertaining to the identification of effective programmes for teaching reading, Topping and Ferguson (2005) state that the effectiveness of such programmes can vary greatly depending on implementation integrity and preferred teaching styles. In their study of effective behaviours for teaching reading, they found that highly effective teachers tended to utilise similar teaching behaviours, for example, the use of open questions to solicit opinions or to cue strategy use, demonstrating strategies and techniques, and summarising. However, the teachers did not utilise all the behaviours thought to be associated with pupil achievement. Thus, it is important that the role of individual teachers is considered in this research, for example, their approach to the teaching of reading.

A review of the literature on the characteristics of successful teachers indicates that they take risks (Wilson & Ball, 1997), they are energetic (Faust & Kieffer, 1998), they teach with flexibility and understanding to meet individual children's needs (Ruddell, 1997), they are passionate about reading (Bruner 1986), they are committed to, care about and advocate for actions that improve their children's lives (Pressley et al., 2001), they develop highly effective instructional repertoires (Porter & Brophy, 1988), they scaffold frequently (Block & Mangieri, 1996), they support children in their first attempts to learn new concepts (Block & Mangieri, 1996), they maintain high expectations of themselves and their students (Block & Mangieri, 1996; Ruddell, 1997), they provide clear purposes and directions (Block & Mangieri, 1996; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Ruddell, 1997), they believe that all children can achieve literacy (International Reading Association, 2000), they assess children and relate progress to previous experiences (International Reading

Association, 2000), and they know how and when to combine methods that result in effective reading growth (International Reading Association, 2000). Thus, it is reported that a wide range of teacher characteristics can contribute to teaching children who struggle to learn to read.

The importance of the impact of the individual teacher is supported by Block, Hurt and Oakar (2002), who established that teaching abilities may have greater impact on children's attainment than specific programmes. From their study of identifying the qualities of teaching expertise that distinguished highly effective reading instruction at different grade levels, they reported that highly effective first-grade teachers are master encouragers and supporters. They are expert reteachers, reframers and reminders (Block, Hurt & Oakar, 2002). They distinguish themselves in their abilities to teach reading all day. They motivate children by varying the speed, breadth and depth of reading lessons. When children do not learn a concept on an initial attempt, they have exceptional talents for reviewing information, using varied content, modalities and texts. Their experience has demonstrated that through repeated instruction and versatile methods, first graders can become independent readers.

Hall and Harding's (2003) review of the evidence pertaining to effective reading instruction supports the findings of Block et al. (2002). They concluded that effective teachers had a wide and varied repertoire of teaching practices and approaches. The classrooms of effective teachers of reading were characterised by high levels of child engagement, on-task behaviour and child self-regulation. The teachers differentiated instruction, they had excellent classroom management skills

and they skilfully blended both together in different combinations according to the needs of individual children. They engaged in careful and frequent monitoring of children's progress and intervened in an adaptive manner, utilising scaffolding and coaching, and balancing direct teaching of skills with holistic and authentic reading activities. Hall and Harding (2003) came to the conclusion that many curriculum approaches and packages have been found both to work and to fail; what appears to be critical are the skills of the teacher. Hence, it is essential that the importance of the teacher is not underestimated in this research study.

#### 2.4.3.3 *Child's baseline.*

Other factors which influence effective reading instruction need to be considered in the research. The success of different approaches to teaching reading can depend on the baseline of strengths and needs that the child brings to the learning-to-read process, which should be taken into account when planning reading programmes. McDonald-Connor, Morrison and Petrella (2004) examined the effect of third grade language arts instruction on growth in children's reading comprehension skills and the degree to which the impact of instruction depended on the language and reading skills that children brought to the classroom. Some 73 children in 43 classrooms were observed three times over the course of a year with observers present in the classroom over the course of the school day, so as to obtain the best estimate of the average daily amount of time devoted to instruction. Both teacher and child behaviours were recorded using a timed narrative description of instructional activities that lasted at least one minute. The dimensions of the language arts instruction focused on included explicit versus implicit, teacher-managed versus child-managed, word level versus higher order and change in instruction over time.

The researchers found that children with lower entry skills achieved greater growth in classrooms when more time was spent on teacher-managed explicit instruction, which involved teacher-led predicting and questioning, whereas children with higher entry skills demonstrated greater growth in classrooms with more child-managed implicit instruction, which provided independent reading opportunities. The finding that children who struggle with reading benefit from more direct instruction will inform the classroom observation component of the research but the independent reading opportunities afforded children during the observation will also be observed and recorded.

#### 2.4.3.4 *Organisation of reading instruction.*

There is need to consider how support should be organised for children who experience difficulty in learning to read. Different researchers advocate different combinations of support (Morris, Shaw & Perney, 1990; Clay, 1991; Solity, 2002; Mathes et al., 2005, Nelson, Stage, Epstein & Pierce, 2005; Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006). The support can include mainstream class support by the class teacher, and supplementary support in-class and out-of-class by the learning support/resource teacher.

The *Early Reading Research Project* (Solity, 2002), which combines large-scale, classroom-based, experimental investigations and a series of smaller scale studies, was designed to identify the impact of instructional principles on children's learning. It explores the extent to which overall reading standards can be improved and difficulties prevented through early intervention. Some 370 children in six schools were taught to read through a reading framework based on psychological

principles of learning and teaching, for example, teaching phonics and sight vocabulary through 'real books'. The framework for teaching reading was developed to teach phonological skills alongside other literacy skills through clearly specified teaching methods. It links reading with writing, ensures that stories are read to children three times a day, requires that their progress is assessed on a regular basis and provides opportunities for children to read daily individually, in pairs or in groups. The framework enables children to generalise their phonological, phonic and sight vocabulary skills to a wide range of texts through showing them letters and words in as many different contexts as possible (Shillcock, McDonald, Hipwell & Lowe, 1998). Distinctive instructional principles were involved; children were taught using short periods, that is, distributed practice rather than a single concentrated period, termed massed practice (Baddeley, 1997). They were taught skills to high fluency levels (Solity & Bull, 1997), how to generalise skills (Carnine & Becker, 1982), and through a process known as interleaved learning, where new and old material are practised together, thereby, minimising forgetting (Brown, 1998).

Children were taught on a whole-class basis for up to twelve minutes three times a day, with each session covering synthesis skills, segmentation skills, phonic skills and sight vocabulary. Their progress was monitored over a two year period in the schools and compared to children in six similar schools who were taught through their schools' usual methods, using a range of normative and criterion referenced assessments. The researchers claim to have reduced the proportion of children needing extra help in reading in the research schools from 20% to 5%. The research findings suggest that the key to ensuring that children make progress is what and how they are taught rather than the availability of additional resources,

parental/guardian support or one-to-one teaching. It also suggests that lower achieving children are best taught by their class teacher for up to six brief daily teaching sessions, in groups where possible, using the same resources and teaching methods that are used to teach the other children. While this research project continues to be evaluated, the reported success to date could have implications for how children with reading difficulties are supported, particularly regarding the use of teaching groups in the classrooms and the length and frequency of reading sessions. It indicates that children's achievements in reading can be increased quite dramatically and difficulties prevented through appropriate instruction, and it points to the importance of congruence between class reading and supplementary reading.

Al Otaiba and Fuchs (2006) investigated child characteristics that reliably predict responsiveness and non-responsiveness to generally effective early reading interventions. They implemented an in-class first grade intervention programme, *First-Grade Peer Assisted Learning Strategies* (PALS), which the teacher conducted in twenty-minute sessions three times a week for twenty weeks. The lessons included phonological training, decoding and sight word training, as well as reading in connected texts with the children who experienced difficulty being helped by a peer. They concluded that a generally well-implemented, systematic, explicit, peer-mediated intervention, targeting phonological and alphabetic awareness and supplemented by teacher-directed phonological awareness training, can substantially reduce the number of children who have difficulty with learning to read. However, the findings of the PALS study evoke caution because the researchers did not observe classroom instruction systematically, and, therefore, the quality of classroom instruction is unknown in their study.

The effectiveness of combining enhanced classroom instruction and intense supplemental intervention for struggling readers in first grade was researched by Mathes et al. (2005). The research was conducted in six US schools over two years, involving 346 children. The researchers compared two supplemental interventions that were derived from distinctly different theoretical orientations, examining them in terms of effects on academic outcomes. The *Proactive Reading* intervention was associated with behavioural theory and was derived from the model of direct instruction. The *Responsive Reading* intervention was associated with cognitive theory and was derived from a cognitive-apprenticeship model. The interventions were provided to small groups of first-grade children who were at risk for reading difficulties. Children received enhanced classroom instruction and/or one of the two supplemental intervention programmes. Children were assessed on reading related measures associated with success in beginning reading, for example, word reading fluency, phonological awareness and passage reading fluency. The research found that children, who received supplemental instruction, scored higher on measures of reading and reading-related skills than those children who received only enhanced classroom instruction. Interestingly, the two interventions were found to be essentially equally effective even though they represented different instructional approaches. The proactive intervention placed greater emphasis on phonological awareness, sounding words in isolation and reading words in lists, while children in the responsive intervention spent relatively more of the lesson reading connected text. This would appear to suggest that it is the provision of supplemental interventions rather than the type of interventions that is more important.

Nelson, Stage, Epstein and Pierce (2005) also support the importance of uniting classroom instruction and supplemental intervention. They researched the effects of a pre-reading intervention on the literacy and social skills of kindergarten children. Some 63 kindergarten children who were at risk for behavioural disorders and reading difficulties were identified from 27 kindergarten classes in 10 schools in the US through a systematic screening process and assigned randomly to experimental or non-specific treatment conditions. Children assigned to the experimental conditions received one-to-one tutoring by trained tutors in pivotal pre-reading skills, that is, letter knowledge and phonemic awareness, using *Stepping Stones to Literacy* (Nelson, Cooper & Gonzalez, 2004), over 25 sessions in addition to the core kindergarten classroom literacy instruction. Children in the non-specific treatment condition received the core kindergarten literacy instruction only. The researchers found that children who received the intensive pre-reading intervention showed statistically and educationally significant gains in their beginning reading skills, that is, phonological awareness, word reading and letter naming skills compared to their counterparts in the non-specific treatment situation. These research findings are not surprising as one would expect children who receive intensive one-to-one instruction beyond the literacy instruction provided in the classroom to show improvements in their literacy skills. While the present research study is concerned with reading, it is interesting to note that in contrast to the literacy outcomes, children who received the pre-reading intervention failed to show improvements in their social behaviour relative to their counterparts in the non-specific treatment condition. The findings, related to reading, support the case for combining classroom instruction and intense supplemental intervention.



Collaboration has an important role to play when uniting classroom and supplementary instruction. Successful collaboration requires time, persistence, motivation and commitment on the part of all who are involved (Levin & Rock, 2003). Collaborative teaching plays an important role in facilitating effective support for children who struggle with reading (Vaughn, Klinger & Bryant, 2001). The sharing of common goals and responsibilities for outcomes are important components of effective teacher collaboration (Buckley, 2000; Murawski & Swanson, 2001).

One-to-one tutoring also plays a role in supporting children to learn to read. *Early Steps* is an intervention which uses one-to-one tutoring and has a particular emphasis on story reading, writing and phonological skills (Morris, Shaw & Perney, 1990; Santa, 1998). The programme incorporates principles of direct instruction with teacher explanations and demonstrations, which lead to the children gradually taking responsibility for their reading. The intervention improves children's spelling, sight word abilities and passage reading (Santa, 1998). What is important about the programme is that it is delivered in the early school years before children develop ineffective reading habits and psychological problems about their own learning adequacies. Santa and Høien (1999) report that *Early Steps* led to accelerated reading growth, particularly for children most at risk for not learning to read. Moreover, they report that these results were maintained over the summer after children had completed the programme, which though encouraging, is an outcome that would need to be replicated over longer periods by further studies.

#### *2.4.3.5 Role of parents/guardians.*

Children's experiences with reading do not begin with formal reading lessons in school; most children are aware that written print has a meaning through observing and participating in reading activities in the home. Blatchford (1990) found that children's reading-related knowledge when entering school at five correlated with their reading ability at both seven and eleven years of age. Extensive research shows the positive benefits of involving parents/guardians in their children's reading (Kaplan, Liu & Kaplan, 2001; Ortiz, 2001; Roberts, Jurgen & Burchinal, 2005). Burgess, Hecht and Lonigan (2002) involved 115 four and five year old children in a one year study to investigate how the home literacy environment (HLE) related to the development of reading-related abilities, and they concluded that HLE was statistically significantly related to oral language, phonological sensitivity and word decoding ability. In this study, HLE was characterised by the variety of resources and opportunities which were provided to the children as well as the parental skills, abilities, dispositions and resources that determined the opportunities for them. Therefore, the role that parents/guardians play in supporting their children in learning to read should not be overlooked. They can affect both the quality and quantity of children's reading experiences.

Parents/guardians can be involved in supporting their children in learning to read in a variety of ways. They include school-based involvement, home-school conferencing and home-based involvement (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000; Hill & Craft, 2003). School-based involvement includes parental/guardian activities that occur within the child's school environment. Home-school conferencing involves communication between parents/guardians and teachers or other school staff

regarding children's academic achievement, enjoyment of school and rate of progress. The third type of parental/guardian involvement, home-based involvement, involves parents/guardians actively encouraging children to engage in learning in the home setting and providing learning opportunities for them. Some examples of home-based involvement include reviewing a child's homework and spending time working with a child on reading and writing skills. However, providing parents/guardians with simple but specific techniques on coaching their children during their reading shows greater benefits for children at risk of reading failure than just providing parents/guardians with general information about how to encourage their children to read (Toomey, 1993). Shared book reading as well as listening to children read are two parent/guardian-child activities that can have positive effects. Fielding-Barnsley and Purdie (2003) assert that parents/guardians are usually willing partners in the process of teaching their children to read but that they benefit from knowing how to help their children. This conclusion appears to place responsibility on schools to provide opportunities for parents/guardians to acquire the skills and techniques to support their children in learning to read.

There is much research to show that parent/guardian involvement in supporting children as they learn to read has a positive impact from the infant classes onwards (Jordan, Snow & Porche, 2000; Kraft, Findlay, Major, Gilberts & Hofmeister, 2001). Parental/guardian involvement is effective for children who experience reading difficulties as it is for typically developing children. Therefore, parents/guardians should be actively involved in their child's reading programme. They should be active partners in the Individual Profile and Learning Programme

(IPLP) of their child by implementing the reading strategies outlined in the IPLP at home.

#### *2.4.4 Conclusion*

What constitutes an effective reading programme? The answer to this question contains many interrelated components. Some are dependent on school philosophy and organisation, some on teachers' expertise and professionalism and some on what the child brings to the instruction. This section of the literature review has focused on effective reading instruction, the many components that make up effective reading instruction as well as the factors that impact on how successfully children are taught to read. The teaching/learning of reading is indeed complex. It needs to bring together teachers and parents/guardians in a collaborative framework to help the child to attain his/her reading potential.

### *2.5. Review of Reading Instruction within the Context of Irish Education*

#### *2.5.1 Introduction*

The development of policy to support reading achievement among primary school children in Ireland, as discussed in the earlier section *Policy in Ireland*, provides a backdrop to how reading instruction is organised in schools. This section reviews how reading is organised and taught in Irish schools.

### 2.5.2 Reading Instruction in Irish Schools

Reading policy for the Irish education system is outlined in the PSC (1999). The curriculum provides a framework that informs the focus for teaching at each class level and details indicators for children's performance and attainments (DES, 2005a). Oral language, reading and writing are presented as integrated aspects of the language process. The importance of providing children with reading experiences that are appropriate to their needs and abilities is highlighted (PSC, 1999). The curriculum is presented in four different strands: receptiveness to language; competence and confidence in using language; developing cognitive abilities through language, and emotional and imaginative development through play. The following elements of reading are emphasised in the strands: developing concepts of language and print; developing reading skills and strategies; reading for pleasure and information; developing interests, attitudes, and the ability to think, and, finally, responding to text (DES, 2005a). The focus of the curriculum in junior and senior infants is on oral language, and the child is introduced to a variety of texts by a range of informal reading activities such as the teacher modelling the reading process, using a big-book format, and the language experience approach. A basic sight vocabulary is also developed as well as word identification strategies, for example, phonological and phonemic awareness. In first and second class the focus continues to be on developing strategies to identify word knowledge, for example, onset and rime, common word endings, and on encouraging children to use knowledge of letter-sound relationships, syntax and contextual cues to identify new words. A range of fiction and non-fiction books are used to encourage children to read for personal pleasure, to read for information and to develop a range of comprehension strategies.

At a macro and micro level in the Irish education system, the organisation of effective reading has also benefited from a multi-level model of assessment and instruction, that is, a multi-level means of identifying and providing intensive support for children. This has become dominant in recent years as it is realised that children who struggle with reading need more intensive instruction that is delivered quickly. This is reflected by *Circular, SP Ed 24/03*, which outlines a staged approach to assessment, identification and programme implementation that is appropriate in the area of special needs, and by *Circular, SP Ed 02/05*, which spells out the General Allocation Scheme for the allocation of resources and teachers. Therefore, children who are having difficulty with learning to read should be identified early and the appropriate resources channelled to meet their needs.

Eivers et al. (2005b) assessed current reading standards and described relationships between reading achievement and the school, the teacher, home background and the pupil among other factors. They recommended that “children at risk of reading difficulties should receive a greater amount of reading instruction... and should receive extensive additional support” (p.30). They also suggested that “teachers need to place greater emphasis on planning oral language, reading and writing activities” (p.28).

Other recent developments in the Irish context which are impacting on the delivery of effective reading instruction include the introduction of *First Steps*, a research-based approach to literacy development which includes professional development courses and support materials for primary teachers in disadvantaged schools under the DEIS initiative. There is an enhanced perception of the difficulties

experienced by growing numbers of children who are struggling with reading in Irish schools due to the policy of mainstreaming children with learning difficulties. The *First Steps* programme involves a whole school approach to the teaching of reading. The programme is to be used in conjunction with the English Language Programme (PSC, 1999) as a means of enabling children in disadvantaged schools to achieve adequate levels in oral language, reading and writing.

The *First Steps* initiative offers teachers an accurate means of assessing and monitoring children's competencies and progress in oral language, reading, writing and spelling. It links this assessment to appropriate classroom-based activities and strategies to ensure that steady progress is made and maintained throughout the primary school years. It is claimed that *First Steps* in Australia has had more success in changing teacher knowledge and behaviour in ways that are conducive to promoting child learning, especially for children who previously would have been classed at risk, than any other professional development programme (Deschamp, n.d.). However, this claim awaits validation in the Irish context by research studies.

*Reading Recovery* (RR), an internationally recognised early intervention programme to assist children who are having difficulty with learning to read and to write in first class, has also been introduced into selected Irish primary schools which are designated disadvantaged under the DEIS initiative. It is mainly based on a withdrawal model of reading support. "One-to-one teaching is at the heart of the RR approach and it helps to prevent literacy difficulties from becoming entrenched and having extensive and long-lasting negative effects that impact on children's educational, social and emotional development" (DES, 2005c). RR is designed to

accelerate reading and writing instruction for children who clearly demonstrate that they are at risk for continuing low achievement in literacy learning, so that they may catch up with their peers and succeed in the regular classroom programme (Clay, 2004). It involves classroom teaching and supplementary support for the target children. In addition to participating in their regular classroom literacy programmes, RR children receive individual instruction from a specially trained teacher for thirty minutes a day over a period of twelve to twenty weeks (thirty to fifty hours of teaching time) to develop effective reading and writing strategies that will enable them to become independent learners (Clay, 1991).

RR has many advocates as there is much international research evidence to support its effectiveness in helping children who have struggled to learn to read in the classroom context during their first year of school (Iversen & Tunmer, 1993; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk & Selter, 1994; Center, Wheldall, Freeman, Outhred & McNaught, 1995; Schwartz, 2005). RR has been described as a first net or safety net with the potential to reduce the need for special education referrals, retention and remedial services (Lyons, 1994; Lyons & Beaver, 1995; Pinnell, 1997). It is described as a secondary prevention strategy for children who did not respond well to good initial instruction such as quality preschools and effective classroom teaching (Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons & Pinnell, 2005). It is most importantly seen as a programme that prevents a cycle of reading failure by closing the gap early between the low-achieving children and their peers (Gomez-Bellenge, Rodgers & Wang, 2004). There is evidence to indicate that the RR intervention not only reduces retention in grade (Lyons & Beaver, 1995), but that gains made during the intervention are sustained in later grades (Pinnell, 1989; Rowe, 1995; Brown, Denton, Kelly & Neal, 1999; Askew



et al., 2002; Briggs & Young, 2003). The research demonstrates that trained teachers, working in a one-to-one context that provides contingent instruction for the most-at-risk children in first class, can return approximately eighty percent of these children to average levels of literacy performance in a short-term intervention, limited to a maximum of twenty weeks.

However, the RR programme has been challenged. Doubts about the effectiveness of RR have been raised as there is evidence that volunteers and parents can effectively tutor beginning readers in much the same way (Mudre & McCormack 1989; Baker, Gersten & Keating, 2000; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes & Moody, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2001). Other research indicates that the long-term positive effects of RR are not as great or as certain as enthusiasts would suggest (Hiebert, 1994; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Chapman, Tunmer & Prochnow, 2001). In essence, critics argue that the benefits of RR for children who struggle with reading can be accrued using similar, yet less resource intensive, interventions.

It can be said that one-to-one tutoring such as RR is effective when intervening with children who experience difficulties in learning to read. Whether it is appropriate to implement the RR programme in all Irish schools remains to be seen as limited research exists regarding the effectiveness of RR in an Irish context. Therefore, at present, we must rely on findings from abroad to justify the implementation of what is a costly initiative (Allington, 2004).

### 2.5.3 Conclusion

The review focused on recent initiatives in the teaching of reading in Irish schools, which encompass best practice from the wider research community, within an overall framework of policies and resources that are provided by the DES. The lacuna that exists regarding the validation of the effectiveness of *First Steps* and *RR* in Irish schools awaits further research.

## 2.6. Assessment and the Reading Process

### 2.6.1 Introduction

The PSC (1999) identifies assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning, emphasising both the process of learning and the outcome. The methods and tools of assessment that are recommended in the PSC with specific reference to English extend on a continuum from less structured informal methods, such as teacher observation, to more structured formal methods, such as the use of standardised tests and diagnostic tests. The PSC emphasises formative classroom-based assessment and its use in providing feedback to inform the next stages in children's learning. Formative assessment needs to be seen and used as information for guiding teaching and learning, and not just for early identification of children who are considered to be at risk in their learning at school.

Assessment is an important part of the successful teaching of reading for all children, but it becomes more crucial for those children who experience difficulty with learning to read as their reading instruction needs to be adjusted in an ongoing

way according to their progress, knowledge, skills and interests. Assessment helps teachers to identify developmentally appropriate instruction, select materials based on interest and difficulty, and to ensure that the children are challenged but not frustrated by the instruction. Reading assessment allows teachers to assess and understand the strengths and needs of children. Therefore, it is important to outline what is understood by assessment in relation to the research study, to set the policy context in which assessment has developed in Irish schools to date and to focus on the relevant forms of assessment that facilitate teachers to support children in first class who are struggling with learning to read.

### 2.6.2 *Defining Assessment*

It is important to define what is understood by the term assessment for the purpose of the research. The research uses the definition of assessment that is laid out by the NCCA in its draft document *Supporting Assessment in Schools 1* (2005b). Classroom assessment is defined as “the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using and communicating information about a child’s progress and achievement during his/her development of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes” (NCCA, 2005b, p. 3). The document sets out two principal functions of assessment: *assessment for learning* and *assessment of learning*. Assessment-for-learning emphasises the contribution that assessment can make to the day-to-day process of teaching and learning, while assessment-of-learning highlights the role assessment plays in helping to create a cumulative record of children’s progress and attainment.

The use of assessment to promote and improve children's learning, including learning to read, is strongly supported by educational research (Black & William, 1998; Black & Harrison, 2001; Barootchi & Keshavarez, 2002; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2002; Coffey, 2003; Lee & Gavine, 2003; Waddell, 2004). Different classroom assessment strategies and approaches are useful to teachers to enable them to interpret assessment data critically and to adjust reading instruction accordingly. However, it is the purpose of the assessment that informs the type of assessment procedure that is used. There are multiple evaluation strategies to assess the different aspects of reading. The strategies include both formal and informal assessment tools that determine children's strengths and weaknesses; they range from standardised tests to simple checklists. Informal assessment procedures that are effective for assessing reading of children in first class include teacher observation, anecdotal records, portfolios, self-report instruments, teacher/pupil conferences (interviews), scaffolding and questioning, running records, error analysis, reading profiles, teacher-designed tasks and performance assessment. Formal assessment procedures include standardised tests and non-standardised diagnostic tests. It is important to note that formal and informal assessments are not mutually exclusive; they combine under formative assessment not only to measure the progress of the child and to provide the teacher with feedback regarding the effectiveness of the support that is being given to the child, but also to inform how reading instruction is planned.

### *2.6.3 Assessment Policy in Ireland*

Assessment policy in Ireland at primary level has two distinct strands. The first is the focus on the use of informal assessment to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, and the second is centred on the issue of standardised

testing. Standardised testing was seen to be controversial in the education system until recently due to apprehension that it signalled the introduction of a system of formal testing at a national level, similar to what occurs in the UK (Flynn, 2005). Both strands are important in the Irish context but the use of informal assessment is of more relevance to this research study, as standardised testing of reading tends to occur towards the end of first class and the target children will not have experienced formal testing at the time when the research is conducted.

It is important to set the context of assessment policy. Assessment at primary level was enshrined in legislation for the first time in the Education Act (1998). The Act sets out that “the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for” (p. 11), which places an onus on schools to identify children with learning difficulties, including those who experience difficulty in learning to read, through assessment, and that class teachers, learning support/resource teachers and other professionals monitor children’s progress and attainment. It became a statutory requirement that every school must assess its children and report the results of the assessment to parents/guardians (NCCA, 2005b).

Assessment policy at the primary level seeks to enhance the quality of education that children receive, to inform parents about their children’s progress and to serve the needs of the system by providing information regarding national standards. The implementation outcomes are decided in the local context, that is, the school and individual classrooms. Different teachers use the different assessment methods in different ways. Some like to administer teacher-designed tests, while

others develop portfolios with their pupils. Hence, outcomes are hard to predict; they depend on the teachers' engagement with assessment and their level of participation in it. Therefore, the teachers play a very important role in the area of assessment and its applications.

#### 2.6.4 *Assessment Practices in First Class in Irish Primary Schools*

Reading assessment practices in first classes in Irish primary schools typically consist of the use of informal assessment practices such as teacher observation, performance assessments, running records and teachers' questions. Generally, diagnostic tests, for example, the *Middle Infants Screening Test* (Hannavy, 1993), are used to facilitate the early identification of children who may be experiencing difficulty. The tests tend to be administered to the children in senior infants. Children who are identified as a result of testing and of teacher observation are referred to the learning support/resource teacher for further in-depth diagnostic testing, with the permission of their parents. As stated previously, standardised tests are not administered until the end of first class.

The specific responsibility of the learning support/resource teachers in the area of assessment needs to be highlighted. They are charged with conducting a diagnostic assessment in line with the three stage model of assessment, outlined in the LSG and by NEPS, after a child has been identified as struggling with reading. In relation to reading, the LSG state that the objectives of the diagnostic assessment conducted by the learning support/ resource teacher are to identify aspects of English in which the child has either particular strengths or learning difficulties, and the

child's learning needs. The results of this diagnostic assessment should be recorded on an IPLP.

Diagnostic assessment, involving both formal and informal assessment, leads to programme planning and implementation. The clinical teaching process (Lerner, 2003) can be adapted to guide the work of the learning support/resource teacher. This is a continuing cycle of assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating a programme of reading. The clinical teaching process is in line with the model of *Supplementary Teaching: Selection and Implementation*, which is proposed in the LSG.

#### 2.6.5 Conclusion

As the type of assessment that is used depends on the purpose for which it is employed, teachers need to be knowledgeable about when and why to use the various tools available to them (Shepard, 2000). The primary purpose of reading assessment in first class is early intervention to prevent and to respond to difficulty in learning to read by planning instruction for children and, subsequently, to communicate with parents/guardians.

Assessment has a significant role to play in supporting children who experience difficulty with learning to read. Therefore, it is appropriate that the researcher will focus on it in discussions with teachers and in analysing documents. She will gauge the support the children receive as they learn to read and the role that

assessment plays in determining this support through intensive classroom observation.

### 2.7. Conclusion

Five themes provided a framework for reviewing the selected literature, namely, *Policy in Ireland, Development of Reading and Nature of Reading Difficulties, Effective Reading Instruction, Review of Reading Instruction within the Context of Irish Education and Assessment. Policy in Ireland* contextualised the development of reading for children who struggle with learning to read. It highlighted that the role of the learning support/resource teacher has been clarified and refined by policy changes that were made by the DES since 1988. Changes in the school context in which the class and learning support/resource teachers work have also been outlined. Special education, incorporating learning support, has become a key player on the school agenda and the school has far greater autonomy in how it allocates resources to ensure that children receive an education that is appropriate to their needs. With this autonomy comes greater responsibility on the part of the school and its personnel to the children, parents/guardians and ultimately to society. It is clear that reading achievement remains a crucial objective of school teaching and learning. The debate on literacy development and learning support in the mainstream school within the context of inclusion legislation needs not only to emphasise the establishment of system-level strategies and the development and modification of guidelines at a macro level, but also to take cognisance of the implementation of practices at a micro level regarding what is taught and how it is taught to the individual child in the school.



Reading instruction needs to be informed by relevant theory regarding the development of reading and to be influenced by findings from reading intervention research, especially the research which pertains to children who experience difficulty with learning to read. The theme *Development of Reading and Nature of Reading* highlighted that learning to read is comprised of different levels of skills. There are low level basic skills, comprising surface level decoding and recall of information, which combine with higher order critical thinking skills and the ability to personalise meanings to individual experience and to apply what is read to the real world (Strickland, 1999). Therefore, learning to read involves skills, which need to be explicitly taught, and skills which, though built on the explicitly taught ones, transcend them in an act of intelligence which yields meaning (Pearson & Raphael, 1999). A systematic programme of reading instruction needs to incorporate knowledge of what stage the child is at in the development of reading. It should, therefore, be influenced by the developmental theories of how children progress through different phases/stages in learning to read.

*Effective Reading Instruction* incorporates the understanding that all the lower and higher level skills interact with a child's unique past and present environment. The many components of reading instruction include the development of decoding, fluency, comprehension, metacognition and attention (Samuels, 2006). It also involves developing the child's underlying language base, alphabetic knowledge, his/her phonological awareness and phonic knowledge as well as sight vocabulary. What is needed is a systematic programme, which is individualised according to the reader's assessed needs.

The theme *Review of Reading Instruction within the Irish Context* outlined developments in the research literature which have been adopted in the Irish education system, in particular the introduction of First Steps and Reading Recovery in some schools that are designated as disadvantaged under the DEIS scheme. These programmes are used in conjunction with the PSC (1999), which directs the classroom teaching of reading under the English Language Programme in all Irish primary schools.

The *Assessment* theme underpins effective reading instruction for children who struggle to learn to read. It is an important component in developing effective reading instruction, which meets the needs of struggling readers. Assessment policy is linked with reading policy in that they are both crucial elements of successfully supporting children to learn to read.

The themes lead to the emergence of the research question and the subsidiary research questions.

### *2.7.1 Research Questions*

The research tracks seven children in first class who have reading difficulties, investigating the following research question and sub-questions. The backdrop to the research question relates to the literature on approaches/methods of teaching reading (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002). Schools and teachers are faced with a diverse range of approaches/methods to the teaching of reading. The approaches vary from a whole language approach to a skills based approach. There is no unanimity between teachers

in how they go about reading instruction (Taylor, Pressley & Pearson, 2002; Hall & Harding, 2003) even though researchers report long lists of approaches/methods of teaching reading (Snow et al., 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley 2006). It is to be acknowledged that reading policies tend to fragment into local versions of approaches at the school level (McLaughlin, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 1990). Given the paucity of research into how reading is taught at class levels (Strickland 2002), the research question was formulated to carry out research to investigate how reading is taught at this level with reference to children in first class who have difficulties with learning to read. Hence the research question was stated as follows:

What reading approaches and teaching methods are employed by the learning support/resource teachers and the class teachers when teaching children in first class who are deemed to be experiencing difficulty in learning to read?

The research question generated a number of sub-questions, which are designed to give a greater insight into and an understanding of the reading approaches/methods that are employed in the teaching of reading. The needs of children who have reading difficulties vary according to the individual child and this begs the question of how reading instruction is individualised for them. Hence the first sub-question is as follows:

How is the teaching of reading individualised to meet the needs of the child in first class who has reading difficulties?

The second sub-question concerns how learning support helps the struggling reader to learn to read. This question is at the heart of the efficacy of learning support reading interventions. The sub-question is formulated as follows:

In what ways does learning support intervention, including individualised and group programmes, enable a child, who is struggling with reading, to learn to read?

The manner in which teachers and children interact in the teaching/learning of reading is dealt with in the third sub-question. The teacher/child interaction brings teaching and learning into a process, the characteristics of which have an important influence on the outcome of the reading instruction. The sub-question reads as follows:

What are the characteristics of the interaction between the child and the learning support/resource teacher and/or class teacher in the learning-to-read process, which are defined within the instructional context?

While the majority of reported studies of reading instruction concentrate on what the teacher does, the fourth sub-question approaches the area from the child's responses to the instruction. It is formulated as follows:

What effect does reading instruction which results from learning support and class intervention have on the reading of the child as observed from the child's perspective?

The final sub-question asks about the reading support that struggling readers receive outside the learning support and classroom situations. The sub-question reads as follows:

How are children in first class who have reading difficulties influenced in learning to read by their parents/guardians and relevant school-based and community-based personnel?

It is timely that the support provided for a child with a reading difficulty in the Irish system is observed with reference to the teacher's actions and the reader's responses to what is taught and how it is taught. The research question followed by the series of sub-questions were formulated to achieve such a purpose.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

### 3.1. *Introduction*

The research methodology was designed to provide a qualitative insight into the teaching of reading and the children's responses to such teaching. Because qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and records, it was an appropriate method for the research study into the approaches, skills and methods that were used to teach reading to children, who had difficulties with learning to read, in first class. The case for a qualitative study is strengthened by a consideration of the research questions (Chapter Two). Furthermore, the choice to conduct qualitative research fitted a study of reading in that the basic meaning of the reading process derives from and enhances social interaction where meanings are constructed by children as they engage with the world that they are interpreting through reading (Crotty, 1998).

The strategy of inquiry that was adopted to collect qualitative data to answer the research questions is the case study approach. This case study approach is confined to a small number of children who were studied intensively over a defined period of time. Wilson (1977) advocates the use of unobtrusive, naturalistic, in-vivo observation of a process in its natural setting as a means of getting a more complete research picture. The aim was to use the case study approach to achieve such a complete picture of reading instruction and learning in the case of children who were struggling with reading in first class.

The chapter presents an overview of the design for the research study. Data collection strategies, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, are explicated and justified in the chapter. The research sample is outlined. Methods for gathering data, that is, documenting and recording data, and also methods for organising and analysing data, are described.

### *3.2. Overview of the Research*

A case study approach, distinguished by its concentration on the individual or micro elements, was used in the research. A case study approach involves the observation and analysis of elements of an individual unit and the investigation of phenomena therein. Verbal and non-verbal behaviour and the various processes of interaction are studied. Bromley (1986) reports that the case study approach requires the researcher by means of direct observation in a natural setting to gain access to the thoughts and feelings of the subject of interest. All such data facilitate the construction of a comprehensive picture of the individual unit and its social function. The particularistic, heuristic, inductive and descriptive nature of the case study approach makes it particularly applicable to education where it can provide an accurate account of a specific case of educational practice, such as the teaching and the learning of reading in this research (Bromley, 1986). For Merriam (1988, p.23), the case study approach in education “seeks to understand specific issues and problems of practice”.

However, a question mark hangs over the universal applicability of the findings of the case study approach since its data can be limited to a description of

one particular case or instance. Walker (1976) and Stake (1995) refute this criticism and argue that despite their diversity, individual classrooms and teachers share many common characteristics. Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that the study of the particular can be viewed to be a component of a study of the general or universal. No individual or case is ever just confined to the particular, but each case in turn is a part of a greater social experience or process. Therefore we can generalise, albeit subjectively, from a particular case in question to wider experience.

Schofield (1993) argues that qualitative researchers have redefined the concept of generalisability in recent years, stating that it “is best thought of as a matter of the ‘fit’ between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of the study” (p.109). The importance of incorporating thick descriptions in the research to allow for this cannot be over stated, as without such detail readers cannot make informed decisions about the issue of fit. By including rich detail in the study, by making ‘*what is*’ the target for generalisation, that is, studying the typical way that children were supported in schools which had been randomly chosen on the basis of typicality, and by conducting the research in a number of schools, it is hoped that the research findings would be more transferable to other similar situations.

Further shortcomings have been identified in the case study method. There was a danger of selective reporting of evidence in order to support conclusions. Therefore, vigilance is required and the researcher needs to remain as objective, value-free and unbiased as possible. Wilson (1977) acknowledges the reality that all



methods of research are partial and pragmatically suggested that the researcher should accept the subjective nature of any research findings and alert the reader to such bias.

The research study investigated and documented the teaching approaches and methods of learning support/resource teachers and class teachers as they supported children who were experiencing reading difficulties. The study used classroom observations to collect open-ended, emerging data. Though Kennedy (1999) describes classroom observations as first-level approximations, indicators that estimate or approximate children's learning, it was important to complement observation by conducting discussions and interviews with the teachers and children so as to explore the thinking behind the different approaches to reading and the ensuing outcomes. The methods used therefore involved extended observation, discussion and interviews. Learning support/resource teachers, principals, class teachers, parents/guardians and the home school community liaison teacher (HSCL) were interviewed. The children were involved and asked to give their views on reading and how they learn to read. Document analysis was also used. The intention was to analyse the data from the various sources with a view to identifying themes from the data.

The researcher's position in the study needs to be clarified. Rather than believing it was possible to be neutral, distant and objective, she adopted the position that it was important to be explicit about personal positions and perspectives (Harry, 1996; Peshkin, 1988). Brantlinger et al. (2005) discuss the importance of researchers knowing their position in the research.

We clarify our theoretical or conceptual framework. We decide on the designs and techniques to address our research questions and problem conceptualisation. We typically collect our own data by observing in the field and/or interviewing participants. We find relevant documents to examine. We sort through data, reading manuscripts and field notes to make sense of information collected. Finally, we "tell the story" of our research enterprise; we write the report for dissemination. (p.197)

The researcher's interest in the area of reading stemmed from her background in classroom teaching and in learning support and resource teaching. This contributed to her understanding of the importance of enabling children to develop a secure base in the fundamental skill of reading. During the time she spent as mainstream teacher in junior classes, she realised the importance of the early identification of reading difficulties and the need to respond promptly to problems. She also came to comprehend the difficulty inherent in this when dealing with large classes, often over 30 pupils. Her current role of lecturer in Special Education working with learning support/resource teachers has heightened her research interest in the area of reading, but it is now focused specifically on how children are supported in learning to read, particularly when they are having difficulties in this area, and what that means in schools. It has led her to undertake the current research.

The researcher's position as lecturer in Special Education in a teacher education college placed her in a unique position in conducting the research; it afforded familiarity with the research area, namely, reading, learning support, special education and assessment. However, it also raised an ethical dilemma with which she had to deal. It could be perceived that she had a position of power which could influence teachers' responses in the research. Teachers may have completed courses under her guidance. They may have thought that she favoured certain approaches and methods when teaching reading. It was only by clarifying the nature of the research,

emphasising that she was a neutral observer, that she believes she was able to deal with this dilemma or at least show that she acknowledged its existence, even though it could never be fully overcome.

It was important that the researcher reveals the influences which contribute to her views on reading. She is an advocate of early intervention which is individualised according to the needs of the learner in question. This belief has influenced the design and implementation of the research. She also believes that dialogue with the participants of the research is foundational to all interpretations of meaning within the research context.

During the research study, the researcher learned to explore and reflect on her role as researcher. This role was iteratively defined through active dialogue with participants in the research sites. For example, she discussed the observation period with the teachers informally after observations. She had to reconcile her past roles with her current role as researcher. She resisted the temptation to provide suggestions or solutions to issues that were raised by the teachers until they had first explored their own thinking and decided upon their own solution. In this way, she learned to protect her research inquiry, that is, observing without influencing the teaching/learning reading process. She maintained a rapport with the research participants which was characterised by mutual sensitivity to the role, responsibilities, concerns and priorities of each of them (Rossman & Rallis, 1998; Lincoln 2001).

Qualitative research is inductive, that is, a process of reasoning from specific to general is used and certain contexts or small numbers of individuals are studied

before patterns and themes are developed. In the research, the focus was on seven children who were experiencing difficulty in learning to read. The learning-to-read process of the children was followed. The research establishes the learning support and class teachers' own understanding of how they approached reading for the children in their caseload, how they individualised instruction, how they collaborated with each other, how whole school policies regarding reading were implemented, and how other school personnel and parents/guardians were involved in the process. While it was envisioned that the involvement of the wider community would be explored, this did not transpire in the research study as the only member of the wider community who was involved in supporting the participant children was the HSCL teacher in one of the schools.

The research study was conducted over the course of twelve weeks. Access was gained to conduct classroom observation and interviews with all the relevant personnel inside and outside the school through the use of a plain language statement and signed letters of consent (Appendix 3).

### *3.3. Research Sample*

The research sample was drawn from the primary schools in the DES local inspectorate's catchment area for a district in the west of Ireland, which yielded a research population of 88 schools. The schools were clustered into the following categories: the rural schools with populations up to and including 50 pupils (N=28), 51 to 150 pupils (N=35), and over 150 pupils (N=8), whereas the urban schools were designated disadvantaged (N=5) and non-disadvantaged (N=12). Two random

samples of five schools according to cluster categories were drawn from the schools that were listed on the DES Excel spreadsheet. The schools were drawn randomly within their clusters, without replacement. The school samples are detailed in Table 3.1. The schools are designated by a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Table 3.1: Research Sample Schools and Substitute Sample Schools by Cluster Categories.

Cluster Category	Research Sample		Substitute Sample	
	School	Number of Pupils	School	Number of Pupils
Rural $\leq 50$	Scoil Rois	28	Scoil Bhríde	41
Rural ( $51 \leq 150$ )	Scoil Aine	85	Scoil Chaoimhin*	57
Rural $> 150$	Scoil Eoin	222	Scoil Phadraig	210
Urban/Non-disadvantaged	Scoil Naoise	161	Scoil Aoife	157
Urban/Disadvantaged	Scoil Chiarain*	518	Scoil Ghobhnait*	168

\* indicates that school is designated disadvantaged under the DEIS initiative.

Table 3.1 indicates a strong correspondence between the two cluster samples excepting the urban/disadvantaged category schools; Scoil Chiarain and Scoil Ghobhnait show a mis-match in respect of their populations which is not surprising since size is not controlled for urban schools. The research and substitute schools are all mixed schools compared with 93% mixed, 4% boys only and 3% girls only schools in the research population (N=88).

The five schools of the research sample cluster agreed to participate after the researcher had spoken to them personally. However, the Principal of Scoil Aine contacted her in September 2007 that the school no longer had a learning

support/resource teacher. The researcher contacted the replacement school, Scoil Chaoimhin, which declined to participate. She decided to contain the research sample at four schools. This proved a wise decision as the schedule for observations proved gruelling with only four schools in the sample.

The participating teachers were the learning support teachers and the class teachers of the selected children in the four research-sample schools. They are identified by pseudonym, role and school as follows: Ms. Sullivan (LS/RT/Scoil Rois) (learning support/resource teacher in Scoil Rois), Ms. Rooney (CT/Scoil Rois)(class teacher in Scoil Rois), Ms. White (LS/RT/Scoil Eoin), Ms. Boylan (CT/Scoil Eoin), Ms. Joyce (LS/RT/Scoil Naoise), Ms. Adams (CT/Scoil Naoise), Ms. Murphy (LS/RT/Scoil Chiarain) and Ms. Whelan (CT/Scoil Chiarain).

Up to two children from the learning support teachers' caseloads from first class were selected from each of the four research-sample schools for the purpose of observing the teaching/learning of reading. They are identified in the research as Mary (Scoil Rois), Ann and Patrick (Scoil Eoin), Emma and John (Scoil Naoise) and Kate and Ben (Scoil Chiarain). The children were chosen in consultation with the learning support and class teachers as it was important that the children in the research sample were children who were experiencing reading difficulties which did not stem from an underlying disability or any other recognised cause. It is to be noted that the researcher planned to target ten children in five schools originally; however, this number was reduced to seven in four schools when it became clear that there was only one suitable child in Scoil Rois. The children are profiled in Chapter Four.

The principals of the four schools also participated in the research. They are identified by role and school as follows: (P/Scoil Rois) (Principal/Scoil Rois), (P/Scoil Eoin), (P/Scoil Naoise) and (P/Scoil Chiarain). The parents/guardians of the children were also invited to participate. Interestingly, it was the mothers of all the children who became involved and they are identified as Mary's Mum, Ann's Mum, Patrick's Mum, John's Mum, Emma's Mum, Kate's Mum and Ben's Mum. The final participant in the research was the HSCL teacher in Scoil Chiarain, who is identified by role and school as HSCL/Scoil Chiarain. The participants in the research are detailed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Research Participants.

Schools	Children	School Personnel	Parents/Guardians
Scoil Rois	Mary	Principal Ms. Rooney (CT) Ms. Sullivan (LS/RT)	Mary's Mum
Scoil Eoin	Ann Patrick	Principal Ms. Boylan (CT) Ms. White (LS/RT)	Ann's Mum Patrick's Mum
Scoil Naoise	John Emma	Principal Ms. Adams (CT) Ms. Joyce (LS/RT)	John's Mum Emma's Mum
Scoil Chiarain	Kate Ben	Principal Ms. Whelan (CT) Ms. Murphy (LS/RT) HSCL teacher	Kate's Mum Ben's Mum

The research sample schools are now described.

### 3.3.1 *Research Sites*

#### 3.3.1.1 *Scoil Rois.*

Scoil Rois is a small rural two teacher school with a shared learning support/resource teacher who is in attendance twice a week. The school is situated on a quiet country lane and is a pleasant warm building with ample playground space around it. It consists of two classrooms, a corridor, boys' and girls' toilets and a small general-purpose office where a photocopier is housed; this is where the learning support/resource teacher teaches.

The school principal has a wealth of experience teaching in a multi-class setting; he has taught the four senior classes in the school for over sixteen years. The junior class teacher, Ms. Rooney, who is in her twenty-fifth year of teaching, has taught in the school for eight years. The learning support/resource teacher, Ms. Sullivan, has a wide range of teaching experience, in excess of thirty years in special and mainstream settings, and she has worked in Scoil Rois for over nine years.

#### 3.3.1.2 *Scoil Eoin.*

Scoil Eoin is a medium sized sixteen teacher rural school with an administrative principal, one learning support/resource teacher, two teachers working with children with low incidence SEN, two teachers who work with children from the travelling community and a part-time language support teacher. While the socio-economic background of the majority of the children in the school is middle to upper



middle class, the school has a large enrolment of children from the travelling community and newcomer children with English as an additional language need.

Scoil Eoin is a well maintained school, surrounded by landscaped gardens, and has ample playground and playing fields. The school consists of an older, traditional building and a new extension. The teacher of first class, Ms. Boylan, works in the older building and her classroom has been modernised to include in-class toilets for the children and a wet area.

Ms. Boylan has ten years teaching experience and has taught varied classes, concentrating on the junior classes of the school. The learning support/resource teacher, Ms. White, has fifteen years experience in the learning support/resource role.

### 3.3.1.3 *Scoil Naoise.*

Scoil Naoise is an urban school, located on the outskirts of a large town. It is an eleven teacher school with an administrative principal, one full-time learning support teacher, one part-time learning support teacher and one teacher who works with children with low incidence SEN. Children who are enrolled in the school come from mixed socio-economic backgrounds. The school caters for children from the travelling community as well as newcomer children with English as an additional language need. The Principal and the learning support/resource teacher believe that the school should qualify for disadvantaged status as there are considerable debilitating issues in the home environment of many of the enrolled children.

The school building is surrounded by a large concrete playground which provides ample space for the children to play. Though the classrooms are modern, they are cramped for the size of the classes in the school, which all contain approximately thirty children.

Ms. Adams, the teacher of first class, is in her second year of teaching. Ms. Joyce has been teaching for thirty-two years and is an experienced infant teacher. She has been in the learning support/resource teacher role for the past two years. She has a full-sized classroom as her learning support room.

#### 3.3.1.4 *Scoil Chiarain.*

Scoil Chiarain is a large urban school. It has an administrative principal, whose background is in learning support, eighteen mainstream teachers, eleven SEN teachers, one HSCL teacher and ten support staff including seven SNAs. The school is extremely well maintained with ample playground areas allocated to different class levels. This school is designated disadvantaged under the DEIS initiative. The majority of the children attending this school come from a disadvantaged background (Principal, 17/12/07). The HSCL teacher, in collaboration with the principal, tries to counteract this disadvantage by promoting partnership between the home and the school, and by involving parents/guardians so that they can support their children's education.

Scoil Chiarain has designated SEN teachers who support teachers and children in the allocated class levels. The classes from second up to sixth are restructured for

English and Mathematics according to the attainment of the children. The school also has a homework club and a breakfast club available for the children.

The teacher of first class, Ms. Whelan, is in her second year of teaching. Ms. Murphy, the learning support/resource teacher, has worked as a resource teacher in the school before taking on the role of learning support in the past two years. She is currently completing training as a Reading Recovery (RR) tutor.

In summary, the account of the research sample has described how it was drawn and later modified from five schools to four, and from ten children to seven. The research participants – teachers, principals, children, parents/guardians and the HSCL teacher – are presented, and the research sample/sites are described.

### *3.4. Data Collection Strategies*

#### *3.4.1 Observation*

The main strategy for collecting research data was classroom observation, which was conducted according to an observation schedule. Classroom observation of teachers working with children provided the opportunity to gather data from actual classroom situations. The researcher was given the opportunity to look at what was taking place *in situ* rather than at second hand (Patton, 1990). The research approach is supported by Pressley (2001).

Qualitative analyses of real reading instruction have produced many important insights about the complexities of teaching literacy...the many elements in effective instruction, how the elements can relate to

one another, and what should be measured to document the effects of instruction on young readers. (p.19)

#### 3.4.1.1 *Development of the observation schedule.*

The classroom observation schedule, *An Observation Schedule of Reading Approaches and Methods Used to Teach Children with Reading Difficulties* (OS) (Appendix 4), was drafted, piloted and developed according to the best practices that are outlined for conducting observation (Croll, 1986; Simpson & Tuson, 2003; Vaughn & Briggs, 2003; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001). The development of the OS was influenced by observation instruments such as the *Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories* (FIAC) (Flanders, 1970) as used by Croll (1986) in *A Study of Schooling*, the *Reading Lesson Observation Framework* (RLOF) (Henk, Moore, Marinak & Tomasetti, 2000), the *Instructional Content Emphasis Instrument* (ICE) (Edmonds & Briggs, 2003), and the *Literacy Initiative From Teachers Observation Schedule* (Hurry, Sylva & Riley, 1999) which is a modified version of the *Target Children Observation Schedule* (Sylva, Roy & Painter, 1977). The OS comprised a detailed analysis of organisational strategies, approaches and skills/methods of teaching reading. It was based on a thorough literature review of the reading process and its instructional approaches, methods, strategies and skills (Clay, 1985; Snow et al., 1998; Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Pressley, 2006a), the connection between reading, spelling and writing (Clarke, 1988; Richgels, 1995; Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi & Johnston, 1996; Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell & Mazzeo, 1999), the connection between reading fluency and independent reading (Berliner, 1981; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Guthrie & Greaney, 1991; Samuels, 2002), reading resources (Guthrie, Schafer, Von Secker & Alban., 2001), as well as the

transfer of reading skills from the learning support setting to the mainstream classroom (Nelson, Stage, Epstein & Pierce, 2005). The researcher's focus was on the child's interactions, involvement and response to reading, the transmission of information, questioning, strategies, resources and emphasis during the lesson. The individualisation of reading programmes, that is, developing programmes and interventions specifically geared to meet the children's reading needs, and collaboration between teachers in delivering planned programmes, were also observed.

The OS was arranged according to the *organisation of reading instruction* (p. 1) and the *approaches, skills and methods of teaching reading* (pp. 2-14). The *organisation of reading* was specified under seven categories: (1) withdrawal of children in small groups, (2) withdrawal of children on a one-to-one basis, (3) team/co-operative teaching, (4) whole class teaching, (5) small groups, (6) individual and (7) other. The categories were based on the organisation of teaching as recommended in the LSG, the researcher's experience of the organisation of learning and the input of teachers who acted as critical friends for the researcher. The itemised *approaches and skills/methods* of teaching reading were based on the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. By including the different areas which are important in the development of reading in the early school years, it was intended that most of the probable areas that might be encountered during the course of the observations were included. The research was observational in order to understand how children were being supported to learn how to read. It was not envisioned that it would incorporate assessing how well children achieved targeted outcomes. Therefore, reading outcomes were not formally assessed during classroom observations.

In order to explore the congruence between how the child was supported by the learning support/resource and class teachers, the OS was designed for use in both the learning support and mainstream classrooms in order to observe the level of continuity of reading instruction between the two settings. Therefore, the observation of the *organisation of reading instruction* categories was planned with reference to the learning support and mainstream classrooms, respectively. In the case of the *approaches, skills and methods of teaching reading*, the *overall approach to teaching of reading observed* was laid out for describing the observed approach/method, whereas the various *skills/methods of teaching reading* were observed under ten column headings: (a) child's interaction, involvement and response to teaching, (b) teacher's interaction with child, (c) teacher transmitting information, (d) questions, (e) strategies, (f) resources, (g) emphasis, (h) non-teaching, (i) other and (j) timing and sequence. The column headings were developed from the research of Sylva (1997) and Topping and Ferguson (2005). Their headings were adapted for use in the study as a result of piloting, discussion with critical friends and teachers who participated in the piloting of the OS, and the researcher's own experience of the teaching of reading as both a learning support and class teacher.

By way of summary, it is to be noted that Appendix 5 is devoted to the use of observation in research, the value of classroom observation and the types of observation. The appendix contains a literature review which helped to shape the OS. Every care was taken by the researcher to ensure that the spontaneous events of the children being observed as they were taught to read could be recorded with the aid of the OS, while minimising the opportunities and possibilities of inferences arising from any inadequacies in its design. Therefore, definitions were provided in the OS,

and, where it was appropriate, examples were included to clarify skill/method components. The OS is the principal and most important instrument on which the research study was founded.

#### 3.4.1.2 *Coding the observation schedule.*

Codes were developed in respect of eight of the ten column headings of the OS and they were abbreviated to facilitate the classroom observation (Appendix 6). The codes were designed to enable events which occurred in the teaching/learning intervention/classroom reading process to be recorded. The development of the codes was influenced by the research of Sylva (1997) and Topping and Ferguson (2005). It is to be noted that no codes were developed for two column headings: *other* and *timing and sequence*.

#### 3.4.1.3 *Piloting the observation schedule.*

Initial drafts of the OS were piloted in two schools outside the main study, and the researcher received feedback from her thesis committee. The OS was found to perform well in the learning support and classroom settings as a result of additions to the schedule and adjustments to the coding system. Two columns, *timing and sequence* and *other*, were added and *letter formation* was included under *reading/writing connection*. New codes were added to *child's interaction, involvement and response* to record when the teacher was not working with the child and when another child was helping the observed child. A code for repeating information was added under *teacher's interaction with child* and one for the

recording of encouraging use of a strategy under *teacher transmitting information*. Codes for revising/revisiting and recapping were added under *strategies* as were codes for use of workbooks/worksheets, materials and classroom resources under *resources*. The use of the same OS in both learning support and class settings ensured standardisation of observations between them. The full details of the piloting are given in Appendix 7.

#### 3.4.1.4 Organisation of observation.

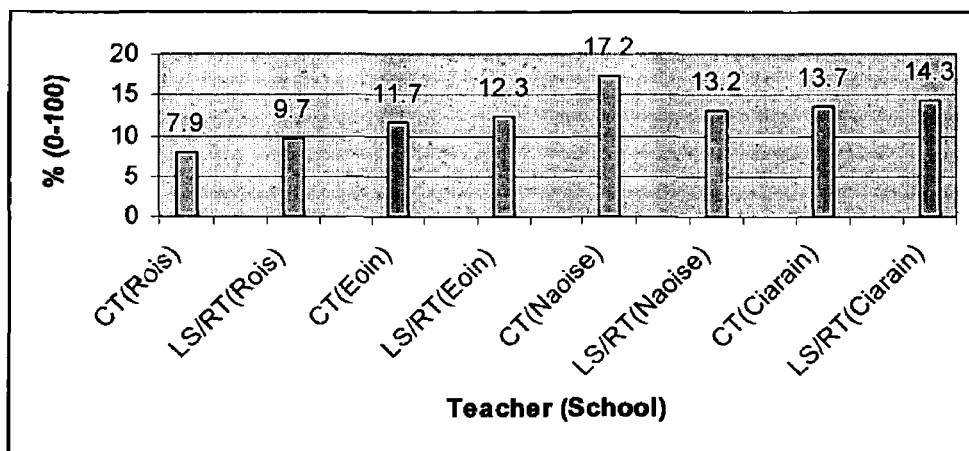
Data from classroom observation were gathered over a period of twelve weeks, September to December, 2007. A schedule of observation visits was negotiated with each teacher. Most children were observed twice in the mainstream classroom and twice in the learning support classroom every week during the period of the fieldwork. There were exceptions to this. Only one child in first class was selected for participation in the research in Scoil Rois as she was the only child being supported in learning to read by the learning support/resource teacher. As she was withdrawn on her own twice a week for two lengthy sessions, the researcher decided that it was more appropriate to observe her once a week in learning support and in the classroom. The observation conducted in the four schools was very intensive. A total of 5,118 minutes was spent observing over 142 sessions, giving an average of 36 minutes per visit. Table 3.3 and Figure 3.1 detail the class and learning support observations according to child, school and the teachers.



Table 3.3: Total of Timed Observations of Teaching Reading in Minutes, Specified According to (i) Child (School), (ii) Class Versus Learning Support/ Resource Teacher and (iii) Duration of Research in Weeks (Total Time: 5118 Minutes).

School	Class Teacher (CT)	Learning Support/Resource Teacher (LS/RT)	CT and LS/RT	Duration of Observation
	Total Observation (minutes)	Total Observation (minutes)	Total Observation (minutes)	Total (weeks)
Mary (Rois)	405 (7.9%)	495 (9.7%)	900 (17.6%)	12
Ann & Patrick (Eoin)	600 (11.7%)	630 (12.3%)	1230 (24.0%)	11
John & Emma (Naoise)	880 (17.2%)	675 (13.2%)	1555 (30.4%)	11
Kate & Ben (Ciarain)	700 (13.7%)	733 (14.3%)	1433 (28.0%)	10
All schools	2585 (50.5%)	2533 (49.5%)	5118 (100%) (85 hours, 18 minutes)	

Figure 3.1: Percentage Distribution of Timed Observation Totals for Teaching of Reading in Research Schools by Type of Teacher (Total Time: 5118 Minutes).



The total observation time of 85 hours 18 minutes was proportioned equally between the class and the learning support/resource teachers (Table 3.3), which was mirrored in the percentage timed distribution of observations between the types of teacher per school (Figure 3.1). Table 3.3 also indicates the even distribution of

observation across schools and children, bearing in mind that Scoil Rois at 17.6% of total timed observation referred to one child, Mary. The duration of the observation period was ten to twelve weeks.

The planned span of the observation period was intended to allow the usual, ongoing activities of the classroom setting to be maintained while providing the researcher with the opportunity to observe and record an authentic picture of the teaching and learning of reading. She positioned herself unobtrusively and avoided social interaction during the course of the observation time. The longer or more often she visited the classroom, the more her presence was taken for granted, which she believes diminished the chance that her presence had any significant influence on what was occurring in the classroom.

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) advice, a variety of observation recording techniques was used in conjunction with the OS. They included the making of ongoing notes *in situ* and a log of field experiences which was written up after each observation. The different recording techniques allowed the researcher "to capture the essence of the process and form an accurate basis for subsequent reflection" (Martin & Double, 1998, p.163). They had the advantage of flexibility, even though problems in their use included issues of selectivity that related to what should be noted and why. An observation is included in Appendix 8.

### 3.4.2 Interviews

Observation in research is not sufficient on its own. Core criticisms of systematic observation centre on its inability to provide data outside pre-determined categories (Hargreaves, 1972; Delamont, 1984). Its findings are thus considered incomplete since it “provides no direct evidence on the actions of participants which are not overt, or on their perceptions of their own or others’ actions” (McIntyre & MacLeod, 1994, p. 14). Applied to the teaching of reading, observation alone would not illuminate teachers’ attitudes or goals, nor would insight be gained into what teachers think about teaching reading. Therefore, observation needed to be supplemented with other means of data collection to adequately provide a comprehensive research picture.

The researcher must ensure that “each piece of information in a study should be expanded by at least one other source” (Erlandson, 1993, p. 38). Thus, interviews and discussions were used to explore the observed events of the teaching/learning reading process and to assist in establishing the validity of classroom observations. The value of the interview was its capability of eliciting data regarding participant meaning and, in doing so, substantiating previous observations (Merriam, 1988). Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) underpin this assertion, claiming that interviewing allows the researcher “to gain insights into others’ perspectives about the phenomena under study; it is particularly useful for ascertaining respondents’ thoughts, perceptions, feelings and retrospective account of events” (p.134).

The research study involved both formal semi-structured interviews and informal discussions. Formal related to interviews that were planned to take place at a specific time and usually for a specific purpose. Semi-structure encompassed topics and open-ended questions which, though planned in writing, did not need to be followed in the exact sequence with each interviewee. Informal referred to the occurrence of discussions on an ongoing manner at non-specified times.

Informal discussions were similar to informal interviews in that they were open-ended. The informal discussion approach was considered by Burroughs (1971) to be a complementary process to the observation procedure in that it affords the researcher a vital means of checking his/her account of the classroom situation against that of the teacher. Informal discussion with the teachers occurred regularly at the end of the specific observations.

The formal semi-structured interviews served to further illuminate the reality of the support that the children received to learn to read. They were used to interview the learning support/resource teachers, class teachers, principals, HSCL teacher, parents/guardians and the children themselves at the end of the period of observation. The interview schedules, detailed in Appendix 9, were supplied to the interviewees in advance. No written notes were taken at the time of the interviews but all comments were tape recorded and written up as soon as possible afterwards. It was thus possible to cross-reference what teachers said with what the researcher had previously observed in the classroom.

A list of issues was identified for the interviews. The issues are related to the research questions as well as to the research participants and their roles. Learning support and class teachers were asked to comment on teacher identity, the reading process, organisation of reading support, planning for the teaching of reading, assessment, perception of their own and other's roles, including the role of parents/guardians, the transfer of learning and reading interventions. Principals were interviewed with reference to school planning for reading instruction and the organisation of support for children who were experiencing difficulty with learning to read in their schools. Parents/guardians were questioned about the extent of their involvement in the planning of their children's reading interventions and how they supported them in their reading.

As children are the primary focus of the research, their perspectives, actions and attitudes to how they were supported when learning to read were examined. Group interviews were used to ask them to describe what they liked to read and how they worked out unknown words. Interviewing young children poses particular, practical and methodological problems. Problems of language, cognitive development and questions of data quality arise, as well as issues of confidentiality and ethics which become especially important when interviewing children. However, there is a consensus that less structured methods of interviewing are more appropriate for younger children and the use of in-depth group discussion of not more than eight children has been advocated as an effective means of investigating children's own understanding of an issue (Scott, 2000). This method was adapted in the research study; the target children in the particular schools were interviewed in pairs but Mary in Scoil Rois was interviewed on her own. In conducting informal interviews with

young children, the rapport between the researcher and the young children is acknowledged to be of prime importance (Roberts, 2000). Therefore, the interviews took place when the children were familiar with the researcher and with her presence in the classrooms. Trends in children's responses were noted and analysed at a later stage. The children's interview schedule and transcripts are included in Appendix 10. The interview audit in respect of the teachers, principals, children and parent/guardians is detailed in Appendix 11.

#### 3.4.2.1 *Piloting of the interview schedules.*

The interview schedules were piloted with personnel outside the research study. On the whole, the interview schedules proved satisfactory but areas for discussion were added, for example, *planning for the teaching of reading* in the teachers' schedules, and *issues* in the parents/guardians schedule. The researcher's concern around the children's interview schedule was allayed, as she found that it was pitched at a suitable level for them. The full details of the piloting of the interview schedules are given in Appendix 7.

#### 3.4.2.2 *Interviewing.*

The interview protocol was used in a flexible way. Rather than using a rigidly structured protocol in the same way with all interviewees, questions were modified or added to as preliminary evidence emerged. Therefore, the researcher was flexible in that she allowed the interviewees develop ideas and speak widely on the issues that were raised by her in order to establish what actually occurred in the classroom and in

the home. The interview schedules were supplied to the interviewees in advance of the interviews. Interviews were taped with the permission of the interviewees, which allowed the researcher to concentrate on the interview itself.

The researcher ensured that the interview component of the research included questions that were reasonable, relevant, clearly worded and appropriate, that interviewees were represented sensitively and fairly in the write-up of the interviews and that efficient measures were used to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality was guarded by coding the interview transcripts according to the research pseudonyms for the interviewees and schools. Further information on how the interviews were conducted is available in Appendix 12 and sample transcripts of interviews are given in Appendix 13.

### *3.4.3 Documentary Sources*

The examination of school documents, which underpinned and supported the teaching/learning of reading, was important to inform and to contextualise the research findings. Sources, including individual and group learning support programmes that were developed by the learning support/resource teachers, the teaching plans of the class teachers and the school policies on English, Learning Support and SEN, were investigated in the course of the research.

The relevant school authorities were approached for permission to access the section of the school plan containing the learning support policy and the policy dealing with the teaching of reading. The learning support/resource teachers were asked to grant access to the individual and group learning programmes of the research

children in their caseloads. Class teachers were asked for access to their planning regarding the teaching of reading. These documents were used to support and supplement data gathered from classroom observations and interviews. As such they were analysed as a package when the school observations were completed, though individual documents were available for reference during the observation period. The researcher found that schools were very open in giving her copies of their school policies for examination. While teachers were willing to show her their planning, it was clear that they did not want to give her samples of these documents. She respected their wishes and did not ask for them.

Figure 3.2 presents the documents which were examined in detail.

Figure 3.2: Document Analysis Audit.

Scoil Rois	Special Needs and Learning Support Policy
Scoil Rois	English Policy
Scoil Eoin	Policy on Learning Support
Scoil Naoise	Whole School Policy for Learning Support (Draft)
Scoil Chiarain	Special Educational Needs Policy
Scoil Chiarain	DEIS Whole School Review of Targets - November 2007
Scoil Chiarain	English Policy

The researcher used the audit documents according to their relevance to the research questions. They were accurately described and cited in the analysis, and she used effective measures to ensure confidentiality of all documents and all research data by coding them according to the pseudonyms which were allotted to the research participants and schools.



### 3.5. Data Analysis

During data analysis, it was important that results were sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way, that sufficient rationale was provided for what was or was not included in the dissertation, and that the documentation of methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility was clear. It was also important that reflection about the researcher's personal position and perspectives was provided, that conclusions were substantiated by sufficient quotations from participants, field notes of observations and the evidence of documentation, and that connections were made with related research.

The researcher used a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on the data from classroom observation, interviews, school policies and notes on the planning documents of teachers in the period after the completion of the school observation. Preparatory analysis had been ongoing on the classroom observation data during the observation period in that issues arising were coded and annotated on the individual observation write-ups. Such data was a pointer towards the researcher's sifting of data from the interview transcripts, policy and planning documents. She searched for themes and patterns across the entire data package, manually highlighting in colour issues as potential themes before integrating them under a collective heading when a pattern was established across the different sources. The thematic analysis stages of Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. She *familiarised herself with the data*, then she *generated initial codes*, *searched for themes*, *reviewed themes*, *defined and named the themes* before writing Chapter Four.

The researcher acknowledges her role in the analysis. She used her judgement to determine the themes that emerged from the research. A theme is defined as “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The themes were identified in an inductive or ‘bottom up’ way, that is, the thematic analysis was data-driven. They were identified at a semantic level, that is, they were identified within “the explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84). The researcher was not looking for anything beyond what she observed, what a participant said or what was written in the documents. The analytic process involved a progression from a descriptive level, where the data were simply organised to show patterns and themes in semantic content and summarised, to an interpretation level, where she attempted to theorise the significance of the themes and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990). A more detailed account of the thematic analysis is presented in Appendix 14.

Tables were developed to support and justify the themes. The OS was designed in a way that allowed the researcher to determine the amount of time that was spent on the different approaches, skills and methods of teaching reading, and so she was able to develop tables which highlighted the emphases observed during the observations. The tables are included in Chapter Four and in Appendix 15.

Finally, interpretation is a necessary stage of all qualitative work. It typically follows or occurs simultaneously with the description of findings and analysis of results. Nisbet and Watt (1984) suggested two guidelines which were adopted by the researcher. She dealt with the conclusions separately from the evidence, with only the

essential evidence included in the main text, and she balanced illustration with analysis and generalisation.

### 3.6 *Ethical Issues.*

The consideration of ethical issues when conducting research is very important. Researchers must be ethical in the collection of their data, in the process of analysing the data and in the dissemination of findings. The key principles which form the basis of ethical research include beneficence, respect, justice and a requirement to do good to those being studied. Because of the ethical issues involved in research, it is important that researchers reflect on research actions and apply rigorous checks before, during and after conducting research. "Ethical research depends on the integrity of the individual researcher and his or her values" (Neuman, 1997, p. 443).

The personal traits of the researcher are a significant issue in the ethics and research debate. His/her attitudes, values and emotions play an important role in the building of vital relationships with research participants (Bell, 1999). The researcher was forthright about her position and perspective in the research. She accepted the need for researcher reflexivity. Thus, she attempted to understand and self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, values and biases. Peer debriefing was used. A colleague, who is familiar with the teaching of reading and learning support, was asked to provide critical feedback on descriptions, analyses and interpretations, and to examine the research findings. Member checks were also used where participants were asked to review and confirm the accuracy or inaccuracy of observational field notes and interview transcriptions. This occurred at two levels. The first level involved taking transcriptions to participants prior to analysis

and interpretation of results. Participants were happy with the transcribed interviews when they were shown to them. The second level involved taking analyses and interpretations of data to participants for support/validation of the conclusions. The researcher visited each school and discussed the interpretation and themes with the participants in the autumn term of 2008.

A guiding principle of all research is that of informed consent, wherein participants are given information regarding the proposed research and their participation is freely undertaken. For example, the teachers whose classroom instruction was observed were fully informed as to the nature and purpose of the research. The participants' right to anonymity and to withdraw from the study were emphasised when they were giving their consent. They were made aware that the confidentiality of information could only be protected within the limitations of the law, that is, it is possible for data to be subject to a freedom of information request. An informed consent form was developed for participants to sign before they participated in the research. The letters of consent are detailed in Appendix 3.

Informed consent is a relatively uncomplicated issue when the research participants are adults, but an observational case study of young children is more problematic (Scott, 2000). Parental/guardian consent was obtained for all the children. The research was explained and clarified for them before their approval was sought. Only then were the children approached. A meaningful explanation of the research was provided for the children and they had a real and legitimate opportunity to say if they did not wish to take part. An appropriate plain language statement was developed which the researcher read aloud to the children. The children then

discussed the research with her and she answered any questions that they had. Fine and Sandstorm (1988) recommend that when children refuse to take part in research, they should not be questioned or involved. However, all the children were willing to participate in the research.

Questions of access to and acceptability within a research site are central to the research ethics' debate. Gaining permission to access the research site involved informing the appropriate school authorities, namely, the Principal, regarding the study, why the school was chosen, the extent of time it would take, the activities it would involve and the potential impact and outcomes of the study. For the purpose of observing actual classroom practice, it was also important that the learning support/resource teachers and class teachers were willing to grant access to their classrooms, and, as stated already, they were fully informed and comfortable with regard to their participation in the research.

Because the research methodology included the use of semi-structured interviews, there was a certain amount of intrusion into the lives of the interviewees. All interactions/interviews were conducted in an appropriate, non-stressful, non-threatening manner with respect for participants' time and effort, and it is the researcher's belief that no undue demands were placed on them.

Several ethical considerations surround the use of observation as a research tool. The presence of an observer was made more acceptable in a classroom by clearly outlining the nature and purpose of the research to the participants initially, and it was hoped that extending the observation over a number of months assisted in

countering/minimising any distortion of normal classroom practice that might occur due to the researcher's presence. Issues also emerged around the analysis and interpretation of data, which included the need to build in factors which protected the anonymity of individuals in the research. The coding of schools, teachers and children in the research and its write up was designed to deliver anonymity. Every effort was made through careful evaluation, alteration or deletion of identifying information to protect the identity of participants.

### *3.7. Triangulation: Validity and Reliability of the Research*

Qualitative research must address the issue of validity, which is that the research measures what it purports to address. "Qualitative researchers have the task of ensuring that their empirical qualitative studies (involving actual collection of data in the field) are credible and trustworthy" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p.200). Triangulation involves the search for consistency among evidence that is gathered from multiple and varied data sources. In this research study, the search pertained to establishing conformity of data and trends which were derived from classroom observations, interviews of the participants and the analysed documents.

A triangulated approach that involved observation, interviews and document analysis was of immense value with reference to the validity of the research since it captured the richness and complexity of the teachers' and the children's behaviour and reality by viewing them from more than one standpoint. Furthermore, as children's learning situations could be seen to be highly complex, research methods, which attempt to portray as many dimensions as possible, were desirable.

Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) highlight the value of a triangulated approach to research in terms of the research findings. They report that “convergence can add to the credibility of findings, while divergence can serve to highlight surprises in the outcomes or additional areas in need of clarification or investigation” (p. 165). Thus, triangulation offers a unique validation type, where individual differences are picked up during the research and can be accommodated in the analysis, adding breadth and meaning to the findings.

Triangulation also facilitates the validation of higher forms of inference that are used during the process of analysing data. As these inferences move towards establishing causality, they rely on greater levels of interpretation by the observer/researcher, wherein judgments are made about the situation. The use of different methods of gathering data, such as the interview data and document analysis to provide corroboration and triangulation of what the researcher observed, helped her to ensure that valid inferences were reached.

A prolonged field engagement, involving repeated substantive observations, in-depth interviews, inspection of a range of relevant documents and dense accurate description, would appear to validate the research. An audit trail was kept of the dates and times of classroom observation and who was observed, the dates when interviews were conducted and the names of interviewees who were present. The audit, detailed in Appendix 11, is used to document and substantiate that sufficient time was spent in the field to claim dependable and confirmable results.

Apart from the judgement that the research yields valid results, its reliability must also be assessed. The reliability of qualitative research can be accommodated by the way the research methodology demands consistency in the conduct of the research over the period of the study. In the case of this research, reliability can be regarded as the fit between what the researcher recorded as data and what actually occurred in the classroom, that is, “the degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.48). The observation of the teaching of reading, which was controlled by the OS and the predetermined coding system, and which was conducted in the learning support settings and in the mainstream classrooms for the individual children over a sufficiently long period, demonstrates consistency in the conduct of the research. It adds to the reliability claim for the research that the OS as the principal research data gathering instrument was derived from a thorough review of the research literature by a researcher of established academic and practical expertise in reading and SEN. Furthermore, the research has been professionally supervised and scrutinised. The unavoidable subjective judgement factor in observation-based research is acknowledged by the researcher but every effort was made to set aside its influence in the conduct and analysis of the research.

### *3.8. Limitations of the Research Study*

This section presents limitations of the research that have not been highlighted heretofore in the chapter. The first is that it is to be borne in mind that qualitative research is not carried out for purposes of generalisation, but rather to produce evidence that is based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals. The place of the study of the particular in relation to the generalisation of



outcomes has been argued already in this chapter. Hamilton and Delamont (1974, p.14) state that “through the detailed study of one particular context, it is still possible to clarify relationships, pinpoint critical processes and identify common phenomena”. Doubts about the generalisability of the research study do not compromise its validity because every effort was made to see that “sufficiently rich data are provided so that the reader and users of the research can determine whether transferability is possible” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.316).

The research study is limited in that while every effort was made to observe all aspects of how children were supported as they learn to read, reading and learning to read permeate the school curriculum and it was not possible to observe every aspect of the support children received with their reading through out the school day. Another limitation to be considered is that the research focused only on the area of reading; it did not focus on the work of the learning support/resource and class teachers in other areas of literacy.

The inherent subjectivity in the observation, data recording and interpretation associated with this qualitative study has been discussed with reference to the reliability of the research. The design, piloting, reviewing and conduct of the research, complemented by the researcher’s professional awareness of coping with her role and responsibilities in the research environment, give credibility, consistency and a solid foundation for accepting the research to be as objective as can be expected from a qualitative study that depends to such a large extent on classroom observation.

As the teaching of reading cannot always be categorised neatly into separate approaches and skills/methods, limitations of the OS emerged during observation and analysis that were not encountered during piloting. During observation, the researcher had to include the component *single text instruction* under *overall approach to the teaching of reading observed* to allow her to reflect that class teachers concentrated their reading lessons around one class reader. She did not use *alphabetic principle* on its own as it was included as a component under *pre-reading skills*. The term *guided oral reading* was replaced by *oral reading guided by the teacher* under *reading fluency* in order to incorporate the elements of round robin reading that were observed. *Phonemic awareness* was integrated into *phonological awareness*. Other limitations surfaced in the analysis of the data as yielded by the OS. It became apparent that the use of *reading fluency* and *reading/writing connection* could give rise to confusion and misrepresent what was actually observed. Therefore, for the purpose of analysis and presentation of data, the researcher uses the terms *practice in oral reading* and *practice in writing*. It is important to note that the *Glossary of Terms* (Appendix 1) specifies what is understood by the terms included in the OS.

A final limitation was that the research was conducted in four schools, randomly chosen, in one specified region. This limitation can be considered to be offset by the evidence presented in the dissertation, which, it is hoped, will allow the reader to determine the transferability of the research.

### 3.9. *Conclusion* .

The research methodology involved classroom observation, interviewing participants, compiling field notes and a research log, and, finally, analysing school policies and notes from the teachers' plans. The sample was comprised of seven children from first class, who were struggling with learning to read, in four schools which were randomly chosen. The principal research instrument, an observation schedule, was thoroughly grounded in the research literature and was rigorously used by a researcher who was keenly aware that she had to take every care to offset any personal impact she might have on the conduct of the research. The claims for the validity and reliability of what was a qualitative research study rest with the design and the way the research methodology was implemented. The chapter lays out what had to be done to deliver valuable research outcomes while not ignoring the limitations associated with the methodology.

## Chapter Four: Research Findings

### 4.1. *Introduction*

This research investigated children who struggled with learning to read in first class through classroom observation, which was conducted with the aid of an *Observation Schedule of Reading Approaches and Methods Used to Teach Children with Reading Difficulties* (OS) (Appendix 4) as the main research instrument. The findings yielded by the classroom observation were complemented and enhanced by interviewing the research participants. Furthermore, the school plans with regard to special needs/learning support and English, as well as documents pertaining to planning which belonged to the class and learning support/resource teachers, were studied.

The chapter is organised in three sections: the first presents the main findings of the research, the second contains a complete profile and six summary profiles of the children's reading support/ interventions, that is, the support they were receiving during the course of the study, and the third outlines the patterns and themes that emerged from the research.

### 4.2 *Summary of Research Findings*

The research tracked seven children in first class who had reading difficulties, with the aim of investigating a primary research question and a series of sub-questions. The research was conducted in four schools over twelve weeks, September

to December 2007, and encompassed 142 reading instruction sessions amounting to 85 hours and 18 minutes of observation.

The primary research question reads: *What reading approaches and teaching methods are employed by the learning support/resource teachers and the class teachers when teaching children in first class who are deemed to be experiencing difficulty in learning to read?*

The response data were gathered with the aid of the OS, from discussion and interviews, especially with the teachers (Appendix 13), and from document analysis of school policies and the teachers' personal planning. The teaching of individual skills was the dominant approach favoured by the learning support/resource teachers and class teachers. The learning support/resource teachers used a range of approaches while the class teachers mainly used a single text approach, sometimes combining the teaching of individual skills with this approach.

The dominant skills/methods observed across all schools were practice in oral reading, which was composed mostly of oral reading with the teacher's guidance, and practice in writing, mainly involving completion of workbooks/worksheets and activities which integrated reading and writing, followed by phonics and sight vocabulary. Much less usage was made of oral language activities, confined to two schools only, phonological awareness and pre-reading skills. Little or no emphasis was observed in the case of reading comprehension or word attack skills other than phonics. One area was not observed at all: combining word-recognition cues.

Alphabetic principle was observed as a pre-reading skill and phonemic awareness was integrated into phonological awareness

### Sub-questions

The first sub-question, *How is the teaching of reading individualised to meet the needs of the child in first class who has reading difficulties?* dealt with how the teaching of reading was individualised to meet the needs of the children. Data were gathered to answer the question from the OS, interviews and document analysis. Table 4.1 details how reading instruction was individualised or differentiated with reference to the tables in Appendix 15 (Tables A.15.1 to 15.9 inclusive).

Table 4.1: Individualisation of Children’s Reading Programmes by School, Learning Support Setting and Mainstream Classroom.

Child	School	Learning support setting	Mainstream classroom
Mary	Scoil Rois	Mary was withdrawn on her own.	No evidence of individualisation of reading programme being implemented.
Ann	Scoil Eoin	Group programme implemented, based on the combined needs of the four children in the group. No differentiation within the group was evident.	No evidence of individualisation of reading programme being implemented.
Patrick	Scoil Eoin	Group programme implemented, based on the combined needs of the four children in the group. No differentiation within the group was evident.	No evidence of individualisation of reading programme being implemented.
Emma	Scoil Naoise	Group programme implemented, based on the combined needs of the three children in the group. No differentiation within the group was evident.	Some evidence of individualisation of reading programme being implemented.
John	Scoil	Group programme	Some evidence of

	Naoise	implemented, based on the combined needs of the three children in the group. No differentiation within the group was evident.	individualisation of reading programme being implemented.
Kate	Scoil Chiarain	Individualised programme (RR) being implemented, based on Kate's assessed needs.	No evidence of individualised reading programme being implemented.
Ben	Scoil Chiarain	Individualised programme (RR) being implemented, based on Ben's assessed needs.	No evidence of individualised reading programme being implemented.

While Scoil Rois and Scoil Chiarain implemented a system whereby children were withdrawn individually, the other schools withdrew children in small groups. The groups were organised so that children, whose needs were similar, were withdrawn at the same time, and, therefore, group programmes were devised and implemented according to the assessed needs of all the children in the group. In the research, it was to be noted that the two schools which implemented individual withdrawal of children had unique reasons for doing so. There was no other suitable child in Scoil Rois who could be withdrawn with Mary. Kate and Ben were both selected for the RR intervention in Scoil Chiarain, which calls for one-to-one reading intervention. Scoil Chiarain, a DEIS school, was more conscious of an individualised approach as a result of participating in the RR intervention programme. However, group withdrawal was the norm for the other children in first class in the school who were not selected for the RR intervention. The researcher determined from discussions with all the four participating learning support/resource teachers in the research that group programmes were the norm for supporting children in first class who were experiencing difficulty with learning to read.

The second sub-question, *In what ways does learning support intervention, including individualised and group programmes, enable a child, who is struggling with reading, to learn to read?* was concerned with how the children who participated in the research benefited from learning support reading instruction. Data that answered the question were derived from observation and were triangulated with discussions and interviews with the teachers.

There were two levels of outcome, the affective level and the reading progress level. The researcher was able to establish that the learning support intervention for the children resulted in them, irrespective of their difficulties and how they were coping with them, continuing to have positive attitudes to learning to read. This finding needs to be treated with caution because children of their age generally lack objectivity in assessing their own ability relative to others. The children's positive attitude towards reading was not lessened by the greater challenges that were posed by the mainstream classroom reading. Sustained by such motivation, learning support enabled the children to develop reading skills, with a considerable emphasis placed on developing phonic skills, sight vocabulary and practice in oral reading. Though withdrawing the children from the classroom was seen to be generally effective in teaching them reading in the learning support setting, it did not lead to equal and continued progress in the mainstream classroom.

Whereas reading instruction maintained the children's positive attitude to reading in the learning support setting and in the mainstream classroom, the skills instruction that benefited them in the learning support was not found to benefit them to the same degree in the mainstream classroom. This was influenced by the fact that



the children did not experience the same skills instruction in both settings and were reading more difficult texts in the mainstream classroom. This was exemplified in Scoil Eoin where the children focused exclusively in learning support on phonic decoding as a strategy, achieving considerable success when completing their worksheets, but they were not nearly as successful when faced with unknown or difficult words in the mainstream classroom. While both the learning support/resource and class teachers in this school focused on helping the children read cvc words, they used different approaches. The learning support/resource teacher emphasised decoding the initial, medial and final sounds of cvc words while the class teacher focused on onset and rime activities in her teaching. Therefore, the children did not use their developing decoding skills to maximum benefit in the classroom as they were presented with two different strategies by which to read cvc words.

All the children, possibly excepting Mary, improved their reading over the duration of the research period in that they had more skills and strategies to use when they encountered difficult texts, and the researcher judged them to have progressed in terms of Ehri's phases of reading development. In learning support, Mary was exposed to supplementary texts with an emphasis placed on developing her language skills through reading the books. She was also exposed to the use of games to develop vocabulary and worksheets to develop her receptive, expressive language and listening skills during her learning support. However, Mary's underlying needs in the area of language development and comprehension were not met strategically through focused, explicit targeting of these areas in either the learning support or classroom setting. Her reading support would have been more effective if she was provided with direct instruction of comprehension-fostering activities such as drawing and testing

predictions, and comprehension-monitoring strategies such as applying prior knowledge, developing graphic organisers, summarising and retelling stories.

Patrick's phonic decoding skills improved and he showed growing confidence in reading the class text over the course of the observation period. His bank of common sight words also expanded as a result of the emphasis placed on the Dolch list in the learning support setting. At the beginning of the observation, Patrick was weak at decoding words and reading words by analogy but as his working knowledge of the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences grew, he became more proficient at decoding the text and worksheets that he encountered during his learning support. Ann's phonic decoding skills also improved. At times she was observed to painstakingly decode words as a result of the emphasis on direct instruction in sequential decoding which she experienced in the learning support setting. Her text reading was quite slow and laborious at the beginning of the observation period; this was improving somewhat towards the end of observation.

Both John and Emma's alphabetic knowledge, sight word vocabulary and their ability to sound out cvc words improved over the course of the observation period as a result of the support that they received in the learning support setting. However, Emma's progress was hampered by her frequent absenteeism. Unfortunately, the classroom reading activities were generally too difficult for the two children and there was little to no connection between what occurred in the two settings. Therefore, the children did not get to use their newly developing strategies and skills in the classroom, except when the class teacher gave them worksheets that were based on the learning support teacher's work for homework. Their confidence in

their reading ability was not fostered in the classroom as a result of the level of difficulty that they generally encountered there. Nevertheless, both children were judged by the researcher to progress in that they were moving toward the partial alphabetic phase (Ehri, 1998), where they could use some letters combined with context cues to guess words.

Kate was observed to make progress during the observation period and was judged by the researcher to be moving toward the full alphabetic phase (Ehri, 1998) by the end of the observation period. She was the one child who was observed using the skills developed in the RR intervention when reading in the classroom. She was observed chunking words when reading in the classroom as she was encouraged to do by her RR teacher. There was a noticeable improvement in her ability to engage with classroom activities, for example, the spelling activities in which the class engaged. This was affected by and impacted on her confidence when reading in a positive manner. Ben also made progress as a result of his reading support. He engaged readily with the RR intervention activities and showed less reluctance to attempt tasks with which he did not feel confident in the classroom towards the end of the observation period. His reading improved because his confidence increased as a result of the emphasis on reading and independent writing in the RR intervention.

However, all the children's reading progress was hampered due to the lack of transfer of reading strategies and skills between the settings. The researcher believes that this occurred because of the lack of connection that was observed between the settings in relation to reading strategies, skills and teaching methods. The children

would have made greater progress had there been a more strategic, focused reading support in place over the two settings.

The third sub-question, *What are the characteristics of the interaction between the child and the learning support/resource teacher and/or class teacher in the learning-to-read process, which are defined within the instructional context?* was focused how the children and their teachers interacted in the teaching and learning of reading. Data that answered this question were obtained from observation and were triangulated with discussions and interviews with teachers.

In general, the characteristics of the interaction between the children and their teachers, defined within the instructional context, were observed to be encouraging and positive for the children, though they were affected by the different conditions encountered in the learning support and mainstream classrooms. The learning support/resource teachers were observed to be more affirming and reassuring in their interactions with the children in the small group/individual settings than their counterparts in the mainstream classrooms. It was observed that the class teachers did not have the time to affirm and support children to the same degree though they were very encouraging toward the children of the research study.

However, the greater support that the children received in learning support was not without its downside. It appeared to encourage them to become very dependent on the teacher for positive affirmation that they had decoded words accurately or that they had completed worksheets correctly. They tended to wait for the teacher to check their work before moving onto the next item on the worksheet,

rather than attempting it themselves without prompts from their teacher. The same degree of support and assistance was not available to them in the mainstream classroom and they tended to sit for long periods of time waiting for assistance.

The fourth sub-question, *What effect does reading instruction which results from learning support and class intervention have on the reading of the child as observed from the child's perspective?* involved observing the effects of reading instruction on the child from his/her own perspective. Data gleaned from observation were triangulated with the children's interviews to answer the question.

The effect of the reading instruction on the children's reading from their perspective was that they reflected the strategies and skills emphasised in their reading support when describing how they learned to read and what they did when they could not read a word. Patrick and Ann emphasised the use of phonic decoding skills, while Kate and Ben referred to the chunking strategy. John and Emma focused on alphabetic knowledge. Reading instruction observed in the learning support setting was generally perceived to have a positive effect on the children; the researcher observed that they generally appeared happy on entering the learning support room and they did not appear to mind leaving the classroom to attend learning support. A very positive outcome, which may have resulted from the reading support/interventions, was that the children showed awareness of the importance of reading and reported a positive attitude toward reading.

The fifth and final sub-question, *How are children in first class who have reading difficulties influenced in learning to read by their parents/guardians and*

*relevant school-based and community-based personnel?* related to the role of parents/guardians and other significant school and community personnel in helping the children to learn to read. Data were gathered from observation and interviews with children and parents/guardians in order to answer this question.

The hugely significant role of parents/guardians in influencing their children in learning to read was confirmed in the research. Not only did the children find reading with their parents enjoyable but the parents were aware of the importance of their role. The research highlighted a need for more effective communication measures between the home and the school, and it indicated that parents would benefit from training in how to more effectively support their children in their learning to read at home. There were no community personnel, other than the HSCL teacher in Scoil Chiarain, who were involved in helping the children in the research with their reading.

### *4.3. Profiles of Children's Reading Support/Interventions*

There is one full profile of Patrick (Scoil Eoin) and summary profiles of the other six children who participated in the research. Patrick was randomly chosen.

#### *4.3.1 Profile of Patrick's Reading Support/Intervention*

##### *4.3.1.1 Introduction.*

The profile gives a general introduction to Patrick, it outlines the reading instruction that he received from the class teacher and from his learning

support/resource teacher, and it summarises the support he received for reading. The purpose of the profile is to present a picture of the reading instruction received by Patrick.

#### 4.3.1.2 Introduction to Patrick.

Patrick was an engaging, bright child whose main area of concern was concentration, which affected his learning to read in the infant classes.

Patrick finishes sentences quickly each time. While he knows he is next to be asked to read, he does not prepare the sentence until the teacher reminds him by saying, “*Patrick you are next.*” He then begins to prepare. Patrick writes *I like going to The pool* but he does not check work or pick up mistake. (LS observation, SE, 19/11/07)

Table 4.2 details the assessment information which was available for Patrick.

Table 4.2: Patrick’s Assessment Profile (October, 2007)

Test	Result	Date of Testing:
<b>Middle Infants Screening Test</b> (Hannavy, 1993a): <i>(Listening Skills: Cut off point: 10</i> <i>Letter Sounds: Cut off point: 20</i> <i>Written Vocabulary: Cut off point: At least six words required</i> <i>Three Phoneme Words: Cut off point: 15</i> <i>Cut off point indicates that a child scoring below these scores needs extra support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening Skills: 15</li> <li>• Letter Sounds: 22</li> <li>• Written Vocabulary: 6</li> <li>• Three Phoneme Words: 20</li> </ul>	4/3/07
<b>The Infant Reading Test</b> (Educational Evaluation Enterprises, 1989): <i>(Scale 1-7: 1,2 – probable weakness; 3,4 - possible weakness, and 5,6,7 -</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading Test 1 (Word Recognition): 7</li> <li>• Reading Test 2 (Sentence Completion): 4</li> <li>• Reading Test 3 (Reading Comprehension): 3</li> </ul>	24/4/07

<i>mastery)</i>		
<b>Non Reading Intelligence Test (NRIT) (Young, 1989)</b>	Result: 97 ( <i>This is in the average range</i> )	9/10/07

Patrick's assessment results indicate that he has good word recognition skills but there is a possible area of weakness regarding reading comprehension. This result may have been influenced by Patrick's concentration or lack there of.

Patrick gets very preoccupied by events or occurrences that he notices and finds it difficult to concentrate on the task that he is supposed to be doing.

Patrick supplies words for D (*another child in group*) but easily distracted and concentrates on a crack he has noticed in front of him in the table. He misreads title of passage because of this distraction and has to be directed to focus on the middle and end of words. Patrick remains distracted by crack in table for the majority of the session. (LS observation, SE, 14/11/07)

Both Ms. White and Ms. Boylan are very aware of his tendency to focus on peripheral events and they were observed ensuring that he remained on task.

Patrick not engaged during reading, he is looking around, the teacher brings him back on track by asking him a question, he is well able to answer and begins to play with small toy after answering question. Patrick continues to look around; however, when encouraged by teacher to follow reading with his finger, he focused on lesson and became engaged for one third of this activity. (Class observation, SE, 22/10/07)

Patrick was also observed to be preoccupied by the need to provide answers for another child in the learning support group who was experiencing difficulties. Whenever this child was absent, Patrick was observed to be far more on task.



D is absent from LS group today. Patrick and Ann engaged and attentive throughout session – Patrick more alert and engaged than I have seen in a while. (LS observation, SE, 26/11/07)

#### 4.3.1.3 Patrick's classroom support.

The support Patrick received in the mainstream class consisted of an emphasis on phonological awareness, in particular, onset and rime.

*"Today we are doing the words that will end in an, think of the alphabet, can anyone give me a word?"* Patrick suggested *nan*, he had to sound it out and explain it which he did by saying *gran*. Ms. Boylan said: *"Well done, that is another word."* The children are asked to say the word, sound it out and explain it if it is an unusual word. Words provided by the children included, *nan, fan, man, ran, van, pan, can, Dan, tan, than, Gran*. Patrick very attentive, he has his hand up, looking at whiteboard, and he focused on the child who is supplying/explaining a word. *"Have we all the words? I think that there might be one left"*. The class identify *ban*. Ms. Boylan recaps on all the words and makes a sentence using a few of the words. The children also make sentences; Patrick said, *"Nan came to my house."* (Class observation, SE, 17/10/07)

A structured phonic programme was also followed, focusing on long and short vowels. It was based on the school policy in English and consisted of a combination of different commercial material, including *Prim-Ed* (Prim Ed, 2002) and *Easy Learn* (Easy Learn, 2000). Ms. Boylan concentrated on revising the five short vowel sounds by using words like *bad, big, beg, bog, bug*. (Class observation, SE, 17/10/07)

Practice in oral reading, in particular, oral reading guided by the teacher in a whole class teaching setting, where all the children were on the same page of the class reader, was the preferred method.

The lesson begins by Ms. Boylan directing the children to the contents page saying, *"We are going to read the last story, called Monster*

*Bubbles, on page 31.*” A discussion on bubbles follows and the class are attentive as Ms. Boylan gets a child to describe how to make bubbles. “*Where else would you find bubbles?*” Patrick said, “*In the toy room.*” Other children suggested the bathroom, in the kitchen sink and the dishwasher. Individual children read a page of the story at a time. Patrick attentive at first but at one point, he has to be reminded to turn the page. Ms. Boylan supplies words and strategies where necessary. The six page story is read to the end. Patrick is not asked to read. (Class observation, SE, 3/12/07)

However, some guided oral reading, where Ms. Boylan combined reading with strategy instruction that helped the children learn to read, was also observed.

Practice in writing was also focused on. Patrick was observed responding to a text in his own words, completing workbooks/worksheets and integrating reading and writing.

Ms Boylan asked the class to respond to the story they had read in their own words. They had to write the sentence *Buster likes to play with me* and draw a picture of a game that they would play with Buster in their copies. The researcher glanced at Patrick’s work, he was writing the sentence as requested. (Class observation, SE, 3/10/07)

A limited time was spent on pre-reading skills, in particular, familiarity with books.

Ms. Boylan directed the class to look at the front cover of the book and they discussed the name of the book, who published it, the author and the illustrator as well as the picture of Buster on the cover. The children also discussed the contents page and the title page of the first story: *Here comes Buster!* This included a discussion around the use of the exclamation mark in the title of the story. (Class observation, SE, 1/10/07)

A very limited time was spent on reading comprehension which focused on comprehension monitoring.

The class read page one and page two of the class reader in unison and Ms. Boylan asked them questions based on the text that they had just read. "*Tell me two things that you know about Buster?*" She scaffolded by saying, "*things he likes and things he does not like.*" She repeats the information after children. Patrick's contribution was "*His best friend is Penny Pigeon.*" (Class observation, SE, 8/10/07)

The strategies that the researcher observed Ms. Boylan using included stating the purpose of the activity at the outset and using modelling and scaffolding strategies when teaching. Encouragement and corrective feedback were used to motivate Patrick, who was supported in risk taking. Patrick was provided with the opportunity to practise his reading skills. Ms Boylan used explicit teaching strategies that involved clear explanations; she revised, revisited and recapped on work that was covered previously.

Ms. Boylan asked mainly closed questions, recalling information. Some open questions were asked, where Patrick was asked to give an opinion, for example, *What do you think a super hero looks like?* Ms. Boylan's interaction with Patrick was positive and encouraging. She accepted, used and built on his ideas. At times, she encouraged him to generalise his learning by asking him to use it in different contexts. Ms. Boylan repeated information and modelled the phonological awareness strategies that were previously taught. Ms. Boylan had to ensure Patrick was listening and attentive as concentration was highlighted as an area of concern.

Ms. Boylan effectively keeps Patrick on task, "*I hope Patrick is thinking because I am going to ask him to tell me a word soon.*" (Class observation, SE, 17/10/07)

Observation by the teacher was the only assessment strategy that the researcher observed. Resources included the use of teacher-made worksheets, the reading programme, *Starways Reader* (Fallons), and the use of classroom resources, for example, a traditional whiteboard.

#### 4.3.1.4 Patrick's learning support.

The support Patrick received in the learning support setting was comprised of a strong emphasis on phonics, in particular, short vowel sounds. The *Phonic Blending* series was followed and this was supported by various worksheets from different programmes, for example, *Alpha to Omega* (Hornsby & Pool, 1980), *Easy Learn* (Easy Learn, 2000) and *Quest* (Robertson, Henderson, Robertson, Fisher & Gibson, 1991).

Ms. White gave the group a worksheet (*from Quest*) consisting of cvc words. It was a cloze type sentence exercise, for example, *The dog sat up to (bed, beg, bet)* where the children had to read the sentence and select the correct word. Ms. White sounded words for children where necessary and also provided words, for example, she provided the word *egg* and *draws* for Patrick. The children took turns to answer and then all fill in sheet. All four children were able for exercise and it boosted their confidence. (LS observation, 21/11/07)

There was also a focus on sight vocabulary in the teaching of common sight words, using the Dolch list (Dolch, 1948).

Common sight words: *be by brown big away after are around as at and call*. Patrick engaged. Ms. White stated what the children were going to do and why they were doing it. She praised them as she observed them taking turns saying the word that was shown to them on the flashcard and she then repeated the word after them. (LS observation, SE 1/10/07)

Oral reading was supported: Patrick was provided the opportunity to read independently, to re-read and to participate in oral reading which was guided by the teacher.

This session consisted of the opportunity to read independently as well as the completion of a commercial worksheet based on an *Alpha to Omega* worksheet, encompassing a written comprehension passage entitled *Tom and Ned and the Fox*. Individual children read two/three sentences at a time. Ms. White checked comprehension by asking questions about what had just been read. The children used the pictures to answer the questions. They saw in the picture that the fox has a sore leg and decided that it is broken. Patrick reads fluently when it is his turn. He misread *run* instead of *rug* but self-corrects after a prompt from Ms. White that that was not the correct word. (LS observation, SE, 26.11.07)

The emphasis on phonics was supported by the completion of commercial worksheets and copywork.

Ms White worked through the worksheet step by step and the children filled it in. Ms. White supplied hard words that she felt children would not know, for example, *lip*. She modelled sounding the initial, medial vowel and end sounds of the word. (LS observation, SE, 3/10/07)

A limited amount of time was spent on oral language activities, where the focus was on listening skills; the children were asked to retell stories/sentences that the teacher told them. Some pre-reading skills were taught, which focused on knowledge of the alphabet, in particular, commonly confused letters such as *b/d*.

Ms. White used the following strategies when supporting Patrick during the observed sessions. She stated the purpose of the activity at the outset and she used modelling and scaffolding strategies when teaching. She used encouragement and corrective feedback to motivate Patrick and she provided him with the opportunity to

practise reading skills, mainly in worksheets. Ms. White used explicit teaching strategies that involved clear explanations and she supported Patrick in taking risks. She revised, revisited and recapped on work that was covered in the lessons. Patrick was withdrawn for learning support in a small group of four and Ms. White developed a group programme to meet the needs of the children in the group. The emphasis of the programme was on developing phonic skills.

Ms. White asked mainly closed questions where Patrick was asked to recall information or to decode words. Ms. White noted children’s difficulties as she observed them during sessions, but teacher observation was the only assessment mode observed. Resources included the use of *Phonic Blending* series and a supplementary reading programme, *Snap Dragon* (Oxford Reading Tree), as well as the use of worksheets from *Easy Learn* and *Alpha to Omega*.

#### 4.3.1.5 Summary of Patrick’s reading support/intervention.

The support which Patrick received in the mainstream classroom and in the learning support setting is detailed in Table 4.3. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.3: Patrick’s Support: 41 Observations Amounting to 1,230 Minutes.

Patrick’s support	CT 20 sessions	LS/RT 21 sessions
<b>Oral Language Activities</b>		<b>11 mins (0.9%)*</b>
• Listening skills		11 mins (0.9%)

<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiarity with books</li> <li>• Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>	<b>5 mins (0.4%)</b> 5 mins (0.4%)	<b>10 mins (0.8%)</b> 10 mins (0.8%)
<b>Phonological Awareness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Onset and rime</li> </ul>	<b>120 mins(9.8%)</b> 120 mins (9.8%)	
<b>Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following a structured phonic programme, emphasis on long and short vowel sounds</li> <li>• Following a structured phonic programme, emphasis on short vowel sounds</li> </ul>	<b>210 mins (17.1%)</b> 210 mins (17.1%)	<b>183 mins (14.9%)</b> 183 mins (14.9%)
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common sight words</li> </ul>		<b>54 mins (4.4%)</b> 54 mins (4.4%)
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>• Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>• Re-reading</li> </ul>	<b>197 mins (16.0%)</b> 197 mins (16.0%)	<b>39 mins (3.1%)</b> 10 mins (0.7%) 12 mins (1.0%) 17 mins (1.4%)
<b>Reading Comprehension</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehension monitoring</li> </ul>	<b>7 mins (0.6%)</b> 7 mins (0.6%)	
<b>Practice in Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response to text in child's own words</li> <li>• Completion of teacher-made/commercial worksheets/workbooks</li> <li>• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> </ul>	<b>61 mins (5.0%)</b> 6 mins (0.5%) 35 mins (2.8%) 20 mins (1.7%)	<b>333 mins (27.0%)</b> 300 mins (24.3%) 33 mins (2.7%)

\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

Patrick's progress at reading benefited from the fact that his teachers were very aware of the need to keep him on task and that they expected a high standard of work from him. At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Patrick to be at the *partial alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998) and that he was moving to

the *full alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period. He was becoming more accurate in his reading as he processed constituent letters and was able to blend words. This enabled him to read the class reader and to generally participate with some difficulty in the mainstream class reading lesson.

#### 4.3.2 *Summary Profiles of the Other Children's Reading Support/Interventions*

##### 4.3.2.1 *Mary.*

Mary (Scoil Rois) is a friendly, smiling, pleasant child who appeared older than her age of seven. She had attended learning support for the past year, having been identified in senior infants as struggling with reading. Mary's language was causing concern to both Ms. Sullivan (LS/RT) and Ms. Rooney (CT). As a result, she was referred for assessment by a speech and language therapist during the course of the observation period. The resultant report commented that her expressive and receptive language skills were depressed for her age level.

Mary was very positive in her class setting and interacted naturally with her peers in first class and the other classes in the room. Overtly, she did not appear to have any problems either with reading or language and she engaged with the curriculum alongside her peers. However, she had coping strategies that masked her reading and language difficulties. For example, she did not volunteer information unless she was directly asked. At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Mary to be at Ehri's (1998) *full alphabetic phase* and that she was moving somewhat towards the *consolidated alphabetic phase* by the end of the observation period.



The support which Mary received in the mainstream classroom and in learning support is detailed in Table 4.4. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.4: Mary's Support: 24 Observations Amounting to 900 Minutes.

Mary's support	CT 12 sessions	LS/RT 12 sessions
<b>Oral Language Activities</b>	<b>30 mins (3.3%)*</b>	<b>197 mins (21.9%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary development</li> <li>Receptive language</li> <li>Expressive language</li> <li>Listening skills</li> </ul>	30 mins (3.3%)	65 mins (7.2%) 35 mins (3.9%) 47 mins (5.2%) 50 mins (5.6%)
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b>	<b>13 mins (1.4%)</b>	<b>16 mins (1.8%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visual perception</li> <li>Familiarity with books</li> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>	13 mins (1.4%)	12 mins (1.4%) 4 mins (0.4%)
<b>Phonological Awareness</b>		<b>21 mins (2.3%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Syllabic awareness</li> </ul>		21 mins (2.3%)
<b>Phonics</b>	<b>35 mins (3.9%)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics in isolation based on workbook activity</li> </ul>	35 mins (3.9%)	
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b>	<b>224 mins (24.9%)</b>	<b>242 mins (26.9%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> </ul>	224 mins (24.9%)	242 mins (26.9%)
<b>Reading Comprehension</b>	<b>5 mins (0.6%)</b>	<b>11 mins (1.2%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing thinking processes</li> <li>Question answering</li> </ul>	5 mins (0.6%)	11 mins (1.2%)
<b>Practice in Writing</b>	<b>98 mins (10.9%)</b>	<b>8 mins (0.9%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spelling as a window into phonic knowledge</li> <li>Completion of teacher-made/commercial worksheets/workbook</li> </ul>	8 mins (0.9%) 40 mins (4.4%)	5 mins (0.6%)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> </ul>	<p>50 mins (5.6%)</p>	<p>3 mins (0.3%)</p>
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\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area.

Mary's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on practice in oral reading, practice in writing, phonics, oral language activities, and, to a lesser extent, pre-reading skills and reading comprehension. The support Mary received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on practice in oral reading, oral language activities, phonological awareness, pre-reading skills, and, to a lesser extent, reading comprehension and developing practice in writing. A detailed profile of Mary is included in Appendix 16.

4.3.2.2 *Ann.*

Ann (Scoil Eoin) was a pleasant, petite child who was extremely responsive to both Ms. Boylan (CT) and Ms. White (LS/RT). She was particularly conscientious about her schoolwork and was observed to be engaged and attentive for the majority of the observation sessions. Ann took learning to read very seriously and completed all tasks that were asked of her dutifully. She only put her hand up to answer questions when she was sure that she knew the answer; otherwise, she focused on the teacher or the child who was answering the question. She was selected for learning support by her teacher in senior infants who recommended that she needed extra help in reading. At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Ann to be at the *partial alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998) and that she was moving to the *full alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period. She was observed achieving greater accuracy in her recognition of words as she developed her ability to

process the constituent letters in words, which was a result of the emphasis that was placed on developing phonic decoding skills in the learning support setting.

The support which Ann received in the mainstream classroom and in learning support is detailed in Table 4.5. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.5: Ann's Support: 41 Observations Amounting to 1,230 Minutes.

Ann's support	CT 20 sessions	LS/RT 21 sessions
<b>Oral Language Activities</b>		<b>11 mins (0.9%)*</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening skills</li> </ul>		11 mins (0.9%)
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b>	<b>5 mins (0.4%)</b>	<b>10 mins (0.8%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiarity with books</li> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>	5 mins (0.4%)	10 mins (0.8%)
<b>Phonological Awareness</b>	<b>120 mins (9.8%)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Onset and rime</li> </ul>	120 mins (9.8%)	
<b>Phonics</b>	<b>210 mins (17.1%)</b>	<b>183 mins (14.9%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Following a structured phonic programme, emphasis on long and short vowel sounds</li> <li>Following a structured phonic programme, emphasis on short vowel sounds</li> </ul>	210 mins (17.1%)	183 mins (14.9%)
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b>		<b>54 mins (4.4%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common sight words</li> </ul>		54 mins (4.4%)
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b>	<b>197 mins (16.0%)</b>	<b>39 mins (3.1%)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>Re-reading</li> </ul>	197 mins (16.0%)	10 mins (0.7%)  12 mins (1.0%)  17 mins (1.4%)
<b>Reading Comprehension</b>	<b>7 mins (0.6%)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension</li> </ul>	7 mins (0.6%)	

monitoring		
<b>Practice in Writing</b>	<b>61 mins (5.0%)</b>	<b>333 mins (27.0%)</b>
• Response to text in child's own words	6 mins (0.5%)	
• Completion of teacher-made/commercial worksheets/workbooks	35 mins (2.8%)	300 mins (24.3%)
• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)	20 mins (1.7%)	33 mins (2.7%)

\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

Ann's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on phonics, practice in oral reading, phonological awareness, practice in writing, and, to a lesser extent, reading comprehension and pre-reading skills. The support Ann received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on practice in writing, phonics, sight vocabulary, practice in oral reading, and, to a lesser extent, oral language activities and pre-reading skills. A detailed profile of Ann is included in Appendix 16.

#### 4.3.2.3 John.

John was a friendly boy whose immaturity had affected his progress in learning to read. Both his infant teachers found that he was very babyish in their classes and that this hindered his progress (Ms. Joyce, 24/11/07). John thrived on praise and experiencing success, but failure set him back and he stopped concentrating and listening when this occurred. During observation, it was noted that John was determined to complete the workbook activities that his classmates were doing in the mainstream class, even though he could not read the words on the page. John used strategies such as copying from his neighbour and asking the teacher what went in a particular space as a means of ensuring that his page of the workbook was

filled in, even if it was done incorrectly. John flourished in the small group environment of the learning support room, but seemed to struggle in the mainstream classroom.

At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged John to be at the *pre-alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998), and that he was moving to the *partial alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period. The support which John received is set out in Table 4.6. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.6: John's Support: 43 Observations Amounting to 1,555 Minutes.

John's support	CT 21 sessions	LS/RT 22 sessions
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>		<b>31 mins (2.0%)*</b> 31 mins (2.0%)
<b>Phonological Awareness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Onset and rime</li> </ul>	<b>5 mins (0.3%)</b> 5 mins (0.3%)	
<b>Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics in isolation based on a workbook activity on digraphs</li> <li>Following a structured phonic programme, The Newell Literacy Programme, teaching initial names and sounds, short vowel sounds and cvc words</li> </ul>	<b>35 mins (2.3%)</b> 35 mins (2.3%)	<b>184 mins (11.9%)</b>  184 mins (11.9%)
<b>Word Attack Skills Other than Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of structural analysis</li> </ul>	<b>8 mins (0.5%)</b> 8 mins (0.5%)	
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary from text</li> <li>Common sight words</li> </ul>	<b>139 mins (8.9%)</b> 139 mins (8.9%)	<b>220 mins (14.1%)</b> 217 mins (14.0%) 3 mins (0.1%)
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b>	<b>231 mins (14.9%)</b>	<b>70 mins (4.5%)</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>• Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>• Re-reading</li> </ul>	226 mins (14.6%)  5 mins (0.3%)	55 mins (3.5%)  15 mins (1.0%)
<b>Practice in Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of teacher-made/commercial worksheets/workbooks</li> <li>• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> <li>• Letter formation</li> </ul>	<b>462 mins (29.7%)</b> 257 mins (16.5%)  205 mins (13.2%)	<b>170 mins (10.9%)</b> 125 mins (8.0%)  30 mins (1.9%)  15 mins (1.0%)

\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

John's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on practice in writing, practice in oral reading, sight vocabulary, phonics, and, to a lesser extent, word attack skills other than phonics and phonological awareness. The support John received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on sight vocabulary, phonics, practice in writing, practice in oral reading and pre-reading skills. There was no evidence of process writing/writing genres observed. A detailed profile of John is included in Appendix 16.

#### 4.3.2.4 Emma.

Emma (Scoil Naoise) was a pleasant, bubbly, smiley girl whose difficulties regarding reading were attributed partly to her chronic absenteeism from school (Ms Joyce, SN, 24/11/07). She missed fifty school days in senior infants and had missed twenty-five days of school in first class by the time the observation ended on 14 December, 2007. At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Emma to be at the *pre-alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998), and that she was moving to the *partial alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period.

When Emma was at school, she participated in class activities and she thrived in the small group situation in the learning support room. As Emma was a very articulate child, the gaps in her knowledge were not obvious at first glance, but over the observation period they became very apparent. For example, she did not know all the letter names of the alphabet and her lack of sight vocabulary hindered her attempts to read learning support and class texts. Emma tended to try to avoid attention in the mainstream classroom, especially when the level of work was beyond her. She was very skilful at not drawing attention to herself and could sit unnoticed for a considerable length of time doing nothing.

The support which Emma received in the mainstream classroom and in learning support is detailed in Table 4.7. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.7: Emma's Support: 24 Observations Amounting to 885 Minutes.

Emma's support	CT 13 sessions	LS/RT 11 sessions
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>		<b>18 mins (2.0%)*</b> 18 mins (2.0%)
<b>Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics in isolation based on a workbook activity on digraphs</li> <li>Following a structured phonic programme, The Newell Literacy Programme, teaching initial names and sounds, short vowel sounds and cvc words</li> </ul>	<b>35 mins (4.0%)</b> 35 mins (4.0%)	<b>89 mins (10.1%)</b>  89 mins (10.1%)
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary from text</li> </ul>	<b>93 mins (10.5%)</b> 93 mins (10.5%)	<b>101 mins (11.3%)</b> 101 mins (11.3%)

<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>• Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>• Re-reading</li> </ul>	<b>121 mins (13.7%)</b> 116 mins (13.1%)  5 mins (0.6%)	<b>30 mins (3.4%)</b> 15 mins (1.7%)  15 mins (1.7%)
<b>Practice in Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of teacher-made/commercial worksheets/workbooks</li> <li>• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> <li>• Letter formation</li> </ul>	<b>301 mins (34.0%)</b> 202 mins (22.8%)  99 mins (11.2%)	<b>97 mins (11.0%)</b> 80 mins (9.1%)  10 mins (1.1%)  7 mins (0.8%)

\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

Emma's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on practice in writing, practice in oral reading, sight vocabulary and phonics. The support Emma received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on sight vocabulary, practice in writing, phonics, practice in oral reading and pre-reading skills. A detailed profile of Emma is included in Appendix 16.

#### 4.3.2.5 Kate.

Kate (Scoil Chiarain) was a pleasant, reserved, slightly serious child who participated fully at all times in both mainstream and RR lessons. The RR intervention was fully supported by her parents who completed the homework with her every night. Kate was quite independent. She never needed to be reminded that it was time to go to RR; rather, she slipped out of the class quietly with her folder and went to Ms. Murphy's room. During mainstream classroom observations, the researcher noted that Kate did not like to be distracted by the children beside her when she was listening to her teacher; she would tell them crossly to be quiet. At the



beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Kate to be at the *pre-alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998) and that she was moving to the *full alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period.

The support which Kate received in the mainstream classroom and in learning support is detailed in Table 4.8. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.8: Kate's Support: 25 Observations Amounting to 1060 Minutes.

Kate's support	CT 16 sessions	LS/RT 9 sessions
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>		<b>9 mins (0.8%)*</b> 9 mins (0.8%)
<b>Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics in isolation, teaching long and short vowel sounds</li> <li>Phonics in context, based on text Kate was reading</li> </ul>	<b>140 mins (13.2%)</b> 140 mins (13.2%)	<b>16 mins (1.5%)</b>  16 mins (1.5%)
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary from text</li> <li>Common sight words</li> </ul>	<b>91 mins (8.6%)</b> 56 mins (5.3%)  35 mins (3.3%)	<b>28 mins (2.6%)</b>  28 mins (2.6%)
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>Re-reading</li> </ul>	<b>181 mins (17.1%)</b> 126 mins (11.9%)  17 mins (1.6%)  38 mins (3.6%)	<b>219 mins (20.7%)</b> 116 mins (10.9%)  25 mins (2.4%)  78 mins (7.4%)
<b>Practice in Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spelling as a window into phonic knowledge</li> </ul>	<b>288 mins (27.2%)</b>  173 mins (16.4%)	<b>88 mins (8.3%)</b>  88 mins (8.3%)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> </ul>	<p>115 mins (10.8%)</p>	
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\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

Kate's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on practice in writing, practice in oral reading, phonics and sight vocabulary. The support Kate received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on practice in oral reading, practice in writing, sight vocabulary, phonics, and, to a lesser extent, pre-reading skills. A detailed profile of Kate is included in Appendix 16.

#### 4.3.2.6 Ben.

Ben (Scoil Chiarain) is a friendly, open child who engaged with his teachers. Ben's mum supported the RR programme and read with him in the evening as requested by Ms. Murphy. Ben listened well in class and participated in the different lessons. However, the researcher observed that Ben was not a risk taker and he seemed to have a fear of failure; he never put his hand up in class or attempted tasks unless he was certain that he knew the answer and then this confidence was apparent in his expression. At the beginning of the observation period, the researcher judged Ben to be at the *pre-alphabetic phase* (Ehri, 1998) and that he was moving to the *partial alphabetic phase* towards the end of the observation period.

Table 4.9 details the support that Ben received in the mainstream classroom and in learning support. The percentages are based on the overall observed time across learning support and mainstream classes.

Table 4.9: Ben's Support: 25 Observations Amounting to 1073 Minutes.

Ben's support	CT 16 sessions	LS/RT 9 sessions
<b>Pre-Reading Skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of the alphabet</li> </ul>		<b>6 mins (0.6%)*</b> 6 mins (0.6%)
<b>Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics in isolation, teaching long and short vowel sounds</li> <li>Phonics in context, based on text Ben was reading</li> </ul>	<b>140 mins (13.0%)</b> 140 mins (13.0%)	<b>18 mins (1.7%)</b>  18 mins (1.7%)
<b>Word Attack Skills Other than Phonics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of structural analysis</li> </ul>		<b>10 mins (0.9%)</b> 10 mins (0.9%)
<b>Sight Vocabulary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocabulary from text</li> <li>Common sight words</li> </ul>	<b>91 mins (8.5%)</b> 56 mins (5.2%)  35 mins (3.3%)	<b>31 mins (2.9%)</b>  31 mins (2.9%)
<b>Practice in Oral Reading</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oral reading guided by the teacher</li> <li>Provision of opportunity to read independently</li> <li>Re-reading</li> </ul>	<b>181 mins (16.9%)</b> 126 mins (11.8%)  17 mins (1.6%)  38 mins (3.5%)	<b>210 mins (19.6%)</b> 113 mins (10.6%)  13 mins (1.2%)  84 mins (7.8%)
<b>Practice in Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spelling as a window into phonic knowledge</li> <li>Reading and writing integrated (text as a source for child's writing opportunities)</li> </ul>	<b>288 mins (26.8%)</b> 173 mins (16.1%)  115 mins (10.7%)	<b>98 mins (9.1%)</b>  98 mins (9.1%)

\*Numbers highlighted in bold indicate total time observed for the particular area

Ben's reading support in the classroom consisted of an emphasis on practice in writing, practice in oral reading, phonics and sight vocabulary. The support Ben received in the learning support setting was comprised of an emphasis on practice in oral reading, practice in writing, sight vocabulary, phonics, and, to a lesser extent, word attack skills other than phonics and pre-reading skills. A detailed profile of Ben is included in Appendix 16.

By way of summary, Ann and Patrick (Scoil Eoin) were in the withdrawal group for learning support and, therefore, they were observed receiving the same support. Their classroom support was also the same. Emma received the same support in the learning support setting as John for the sessions that she attended. She also received the same classroom support as John when she was present. Whereas Kate and Ben received the same classroom support, they received individual RR interventions separately in the learning support setting.

#### *4.4. Patterns and Themes*

##### *4.4.1 Introduction*

This section discusses the patterns and themes which emerged from the research. A thematic analytic approach yielded the following grouping of patterns and themes: children's engagement with reading support; organisation and planning of reading instruction; approaches and strategies in teaching reading; factors relating to reading instruction; and, finally, role perceptions of principals, teachers and parents/guardians.

#### 4.4.2 Patterns and Themes: Background Tables

The various patterns and themes are foreshadowed by a set of tables that are derived from the information coded from 5118 minutes of observing reading instruction. The researcher made 142 school visits involving 73 to learning support and 69 to mainstream classrooms. The visit unit/session was used in tables 4.10 and 4.11 to detail how reading was organised according to children (schools) and types of teacher.

Table 4.10: Numbers of Learning Support Sessions Observed by Child (School) and Organisational Format.

Organisation of reading instruction	Mary (Rois) LS/RT	Ann & Patrick (Eoin) LS/RT	John & Emma* (Naoise) LS/RT	Kate (Ciarain) LS/RT	Ben (Ciarain) LS/RT	Total Observed Sessions
Withdrawal of children in small groups		21	22			43
Withdrawal of children on a one-to-one basis	12			9	9	30
Team/co-operative teaching						
Whole class teaching						
Small groups (flexible groups – interest/ability)						
Individual (instruction/independent)						
Other						
Total Observed Sessions	12	21	22	9	9	73

\* Emma was present for 11 learning support observations only

Table 4.11: Numbers of Class Reading Lessons Observed by Child (School) and Organisational Format.

Organisation of reading instruction	Mary (Rois) CT	Ann & Patrick (Eoin) CT	John & Emma* (Naoise) CT	Kate & Ben (Ciarain) CT	Total Observed Sessions
Withdrawal of children in small groups					
Withdrawal of children on a one-to-one basis					
Team/co-operative teaching					
Whole class teaching	12	20	21	16	69
Small groups (flexible groups – interest/ability)					
Individual (instruction/independent)					
Other					
Total Observed Sessions	12	20	21	16	69

\*Emma was present for 13 mainstream classroom observations only.

The learning support/resource teachers organised reading instruction by withdrawing children in small groups 59% of observed sessions (N=73) and 41% were individual withdrawals, whereas the class teachers relied 100% on whole class instruction (N=69 sessions). No other form of organising reading instruction was observed, although John's and Emma's class teacher was observed differentiating the level of support the children received in some of the whole class sessions.

The master table of observed classroom skills/methods of teaching reading in the research schools, timed in minutes according to children, schools and types of teacher, is detailed in Table 4.12. All the skills/methods listed in Table 4.12 are

further explicated in Appendix 15, where tables for them, which detail the timed observation of their components, are available.

Table 4.12: Observed Timed Distribution of Skills/Methods of Teaching Reading by Class Versus Learning Support/Resource Teacher per School in Respect of Each Child (N = 5118 minutes).

	Rois		Eoin				Naoise				Ciarain				Total
	Mary		Ann		Patrick		John		Emma		Kate		Ben		
	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	CT	LS/RT	
Oral Language Activities	30 (0.6%)	197 (3.8%)		11 (0.2%)		11 (0.2%)									238 (4.6%)
Pre-Reading Skills	13 (0.2%)	16 (0.3%)	5 (0.1%)	10 (0.2%)	5 (0.1%)	10 (0.2%)		31 (0.6%)		18 (0.4%)		9 (0.2%)		6 (0.1%)	90 (1.7%)
Phonological Awareness		21 (0.4%)	120 (2.3%)		120 (2.3%)		5 (0.1%)								146 (2.8%)
* Phonemic Awareness															
** Alphabetic Principle															
Phonics	35 (0.7%)		210 (4.1%)	183 (3.6%)	210 (4.1%)	183 (3.6%)	35 (0.7%)	184 (3.6%)	35 (0.7%)	89 (1.7%)	140 (2.8%)	16 (0.3%)	140 (2.8%)	18 (0.4%)	821 (16.2%)
Word Attack Skills Other than Phonics							8 (0.2%)							10 (0.2%)	18 (0.4%)
Sight Vocabulary				54 (1.1%)		54 (1.1%)	139 (2.8%)	220 (4.3%)	93 (1.8%)	101 (2.0%)	91 (1.8%)	28 (0.5%)	91 (1.8%)	31 (0.6%)	563 (11.1%)
** Combining Word Recognition Cues															
*** Practice in Oral Reading	224 (4.4%)	242 (4.7%)	197 (3.8%)	39 (0.8%)	197 (3.8%)	39 (0.8%)	231 (4.5%)	70 (1.4%)	121 (2.4%)	30 (0.6%)	181 (3.5%)	219 (4.3%)	181 (3.5%)	210 (4.1%)	1613 (31.5%)
Reading Comprehension	5 (0.1%)	11 (0.2%)	7 (0.1%)		7 (0.1%)										23 (0.4%)
*** Practice in Writing	98 (1.9%)	8 (0.2%)	61 (1.2%)	333 (6.5%)	61 (1.2%)	333 (6.5%)	462 (9.0%)	170 (3.3%)	301 (5.9%)	97 (1.9%)	288 (5.6%)	88 (1.7%)	288 (5.6%)	98 (1.9%)	1606 (31.3%)
Total	405 (7.9%)	495 (9.7%)	600 (11.7%)	630 (12.4%)	600 (11.6%)	630 (12.4%)	880 (17.3%)	675 (13.2%)	550 (10.8%)	335 (6.6%)	700 (13.7%)	360 (7%)	700 (13.7%)	373 (7.1%)	5118 (100%)

Notes which clarify the table are detailed on the next page.



## Notes on Table 4.12

1. The equation for calculating the total time of 5118 minutes of reading instruction in the schools aggregates the CT's and LS/RT's time for (i) Mary (Scoil Rois), (ii) either Ann or Patrick (Scoil Eoin), (iii) John (Scoil Naoise), (iv) the CT's time with either Kate or Ben (Scoil Chiarain) and (v) the LS/RT's time for both Kate and Ben. Therefore the aggregate equation is  $(CT + LS/RT) [Mary (Scoil Rois) + (Ann or Patrick) (Scoil Eoin) + John (Scoil Naoise)] + CT [(Kate or Ben) (Scoil Chiarain)] + LS/RT [(Kate + Ben) (Scoil Chiarain)] = 5118$  minutes. 2. Percentages are based on overall observed time of 5118 minutes. 3 Ann and Patrick were observed receiving the same reading support/intervention in the mainstream classroom. They were also observed receiving the same reading support/intervention in the learning support setting. 4 John and Emma should have received the same reading support/intervention in the learning support setting, except that Emma was absent for many of the sessions. They should also have received the same reading support/intervention in the mainstream classroom, but again Emma was absent for many of the sessions. 5 Kate's and Ben's reading intervention differed for the learning support setting. However, they were observed receiving the same support in the mainstream classroom. \*Phonemic awareness was included in the OS as a separate skill/method; however, it was not distinguished from phonological awareness during observation \*\*Some skills/methods included in the OS were not observed to be taught as distinct skills/methods, for example, alphabetic principle/knowledge of the alphabet was observed to be taught as a pre-reading skill rather than as an independent skill. Combining word recognition cues was not observed in the schools. \*\*\* Practice in oral reading replaces the skill/method designated reading fluency in the OS. Practice in writing replaces the skill/method designated reading/writing connection in the OS.

The timed distribution of the skills/methods of reading instruction, detailed in Table 4.12, is summarised in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13: Summary of Observed Timed Distribution of Skills/Methods of Reading Instruction for Class and Learning Support/Resource Teachers.

Area	Total Time/Minutes	Total Percentage	Class Teacher (time and percentage)	Learning Support /Resource Teacher (time and percentage)
Oral Language Activities	238	4.7	30 (0.6%)	208 (4.1%)
Pre-Reading Skills	90	1.8	18 (0.4%)	72 (1.4%)
Phonological Awareness	146	2.9	125 (2.4%)	21 (0.5%)
Phonemic Awareness				
Alphabetic Principle				
Phonics	821	16.0	420 (8.2%)	401 (7.8%)
Word Attack Skills Other than Phonics	18	0.3	8 (0.1%)	10 (0.2%)
Sight Vocabulary	563	11.0	230 (4.5%)	333 (6.5%)
Combining Word-Recognition Cues				
Practice in Oral Reading	1,613	31.5	833 (16.3%)	780 (15.2%)
Reading Comprehension	23	0.4	12 (0.2%)	11 (0.2%)
Practice in Writing	1,606	31.4	909 (17.8%)	697 (13.6%)
Total time/minutes	5,118	100%	2585 (50.5%)	2533 (49.5%)

Overall, the learning support/resource and class teachers spent 15.2% and 16.3%, respectively, of the total observed time (N=5118) on practice in oral reading, and

13.6% and 17.8%, respectively, on practice in writing. The use of phonics was observed at 7.8% versus 8.2% and sight vocabulary for 6.5% versus 4.5% for their respective instructional setting. The remaining areas were observed at 4.7% in the case of oral language activities, 2.9% for phonological awareness, 1.8% for pre-reading skills, 0.4% for reading comprehension and 0.3% for word attack skills other than phonics in respect of both learning support and class teachers.

#### *4.4.3 Children's Engagement with Reading Support*

This section focuses on how the children engaged with reading support. It relies strongly on the children's interviews. It deals with the influence of the reading support setting/context, the teachers' skill at keeping the children on task, the strategies that were used to teach them to read, their attitudes to reading and to those who helped them to read in school and at home.

During the observation, different levels of engagement were observed on the part of the children, which were supported by data collated from their interviews. They tended to remain attentive and on task in the small group of the learning support/resource setting, more so than in the mainstream classroom. A number of factors influenced the children's level of engagement or disengagement. Leaving the different contexts of the learning support and classroom settings aside, the children's ability to stay on task and attend, their predisposition to focus on events other than learning, as well as the level of difficulty of the work that was presented to them

influenced their level of engagement. The contrast between Ann and Patrick was a case to point.

Ann very engaged and attentive and following other children as they read. Patrick easily distracted. Patrick misreads title of passage and has to be directed to focus on the middle and end of words. (Class observation, SE, 7/11/07)

The teacher's skill at keeping the children on task also played a role in determining their level of engagement.

John moved from being engaged to disengaged during this section of the lesson. Ms. Adams did not work with him except to check his work at the end when she discovered that he had copied words into his copy without unscrambling them. (Class observation, SN, 25/09/07)

Ms. Whelan keeps children on task. She moves another child who is inattentive, saying that she knows he cannot see the chart well from his seat. Another time she comments to Ben: "*Good boy, I heard you sounding it out.*" Ms. Whelan uses humour to keep children on task. (Class observation, SC, 12/10/07)

The children across the schools reported a positive attitude towards reading:

It helps you learn to read. (Kate, SC, 17/12/07)

You don't get bored. (Ben, SC, 17/12/07)

It is very good fun. (John, SN, 26/11/07)

It's good because it is good to learn. (Emma, SN, 26/11/07)

The children realised the importance of reading in relation to their own lives.

When you are in second class or in third class, you will know how to read. If you don't read, you won't know how to read. (Kate, SC, 17/12/07)

You nearly have to read for everything. (Patrick, SE, 28/11/07)

The strategies which the children employed when they were reading reflected what was emphasised in the support that they received. Kate and Ben referred to the chunking strategy taught by Ms. Murphy during RR and to the spelling strategy taught by Ms. Whelan in the mainstream class. Ben even demonstrated confusion between reading and spelling strategies.

Put up your hand and ask the teacher or block them and see what word it is and then put them all together. (Kate, SC, 17/12/07)

The same thing, do that thing, block the letters and then you spell it. (Ben, SC, 17/12/07)

The reported strategies for John and Emma reflected the inclusion of letter knowledge in their learning support sessions.

We learn and learn and we have to do, we have to learn our letters. You just have to think of it in your head, so if you know it you can tell people how you know it. (John, SN, 26/11/07)

Like what John said, learning our letters. And you go back on it if you know it, you go back and you say it and you do the letters of the words. (Emma, SN, 26/11/07)

The emphasis on phonics observed in Scoil Eoin was reflected in the strategies that Ann and Patrick reported using.

Well it is the sounding out. And if you want to read, you need to sound them out really good and if you don't sound them out properly, you mightn't even be able to know the word. (Ann, SE, 28/11/07)

You sound it out and try to do the word. (Patrick, SE, 28/11/07)

When asked what they like to read, the children's answers varied from the class reader, worksheets, Bratz books to alphabet books and comics.

High school musical, Bratz and all different ones. (Kate, SC, 17/12/07)

My one is I like Sonic X books and I love the alphabet book and the Strike of the Matrix. (John, SN, 26/11/07)

The Broken Sleigh, Put Me in the Zoo and Pixie. I have some reading books at home. (Mary, SR, 22/11/07)

All the children reported that their teachers and their parents/guardians helped them to learn to read.

Well our teachers mostly and our mums and dads. (Ann, SE, 28/11/07)

My mum and dad; if I am stuck on a word they help me and Ms. Sullivan reads the part first and we have to take turns reading and Ms. Rooney does it different because we just have to read each line. (Mary, SR, 22/11/07)

There was some evidence that reading extended from the school environment to the home.

Well I read at school and at home. I read every day when my brother is watching TV. I read sometimes at home on my own, I read sometimes with my mum and dad and sometimes I don't want to read them. (John, SN, 26/11/07)

I read after my homework or else if my mum and dad have gone out, I bring reading books down to my Nan's and then I could read them. (Mary, SR, 22/11/07)

What can be considered to be important from the children's engagement with reading support was that they maintained a very positive attitude to reading, irrespective of the difficulties that they encountered in the differing learning support and mainstream classroom settings. They reported that knowing the letters, sounding them and chunking them so as to read words were important for reading. They recognised that their teachers and parents/guardians helped them to read, and there was clear evidence of the parents/guardians' involvement in helping them to read at home.

#### *4.4.4 Organisation and Planning of Reading Instruction*

This section deals with how schools and teachers organised and planned support for the children. The backdrop is the LSG policy of early identification and intervention, and how schools implemented it at a planning level and in practice at the teaching level. Finally, the teachers' views on how the children should be supported in learning to read are dealt with.

The commitment of the research schools to the policy of early identification, outlined in the LSG, was evidenced by the way children in first class were prioritised, and, where it was possible, they were supported by the learning support/resource teacher on a daily basis. Schools were working toward identifying and intervening with the children as early as possible. All schools administered the MIST test in senior infants and all schools, excepting Scoil Naoise, intervened in senior infants.

I certainly think it is the time to get them; you don't want them to get past first class without intervention. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

Scoil Naoise, which had identified more children with literacy and numeracy needs in the school than their resources allowed, responded to this difficulty by prioritising literacy over numeracy and junior classes over senior classes. However, the school did not target the infant classes, which was reported as an issue that staff have to address.

Well, we are going to have to change the early intervention strategies here in the school, I think the end of senior infants is very late to identify children needing help. They should be coming out from the September of senior infants – that is when you should be getting in there. (Ms. Joyce, SN, 24/11/07)

The other three schools in the research sample targeted the infant classes for literacy support.

Now, in senior infants, the learning support teacher goes into the classroom and does the phonic programme in the class with the help of the teacher...Some of the weakest children in senior infants would go out if they are having lots of difficulties, say with sight words or what ever, they would go out for small sessions to the learning support teacher. (P, SC, 17/12/07)



Organisation of support is discussed at the school level and at individual teacher level. At school level, withdrawal of children was the preferred method of organising learning support. The following table summarises the organisation of learning support in the schools.

Table 4.14: Organisation of Learning Support in Research Schools (N = 4).

School	Children	Amount of Support	Organisation of Learning Support	Type of Support (withdrawal/in-class)
Scoil Rois	Mary	2 hours a week on a one-to-one basis	One hour on a Tuesday and one hour on Thursday	Withdrawal
Scoil Eoin	Ann Patrick	2 ½ hours a week in a group of four	30 minutes on each day of the week	Withdrawal
Scoil Naoise	Emma John	2 ½ hours a week in a group of three	30 minutes on each day of the week – this varied and on some days the children received more than 30 minutes	Withdrawal
Scoil Chiarain	Ben Kate	3 hours 20 minutes a week each on a one-to-one basis (approx.)	40 minutes each a day for RR (approx.)	Withdrawal

The review of school policy documents outlined a mixture of withdrawal and in-class support. For example, Scoil Rois highlighted that the role of the learning support/resource teacher included 'direct teaching of the children either in a separate room or within the mainstream class, and team teaching as long as the children

concerned are deriving benefit from it' (SEN Policy, SR). The learning support teacher commented when she was interviewed:

It is withdrawal with Mary. It is not ideal removing her from the classroom where there is lots of wonderful learning going on and taking her out here. (Ms. Sullivan, SR, 22/11/07)

Scoil Chiarain's SEN policy did not highlight the issue of where supplementary support would occur and only referred to withdrawal. However, this issue was raised by the learning support/resource teacher when she was interviewed.

I am hoping there will be more collaboration after Christmas. There has not been, I am not aware of what is going on in the classroom and they are not aware of what is going on here really. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The learning support policy in Scoil Eoin addressed the issue of the organisation of reading, but it acknowledged that withdrawal was the prominent mode of organisation.

Children above senior infants are withdrawn for both literacy and numeracy. Children in either junior or senior infants are visited by the learning support/resource teacher in the infants' classroom. If deemed beneficial, this model may be extended to include first class (Learning Support Policy, Scoil Eoin).

The reality is that at the moment it is withdrawal, though there are exceptions in every case, and we are moving towards the teacher actually going into the classrooms. (P, SE, 28/11/07)

Principals and teachers referred to DES policy when discussing the organisation of support for children who struggle to learn to read.

The three stage process is also in operation in this school. Each year has a link teacher – that link teacher is a learning support or a resource teacher. Once the class teacher is experiencing difficulties in the class, she first of all has to have her own plan around the child; if that is not working, she then contacts the link teacher who knows exactly who will help her to a degree and she will know who among the staff has the expertise to help. (P, SC, 17/12/07)

The mainstream class teachers also discussed how they organised the way they taught and supported children who were struggling to learn to read.

I don't actually group this class, I have my group of learning support children who have different books that they are doing, but I still bring them all with us on the class reader because I think it is good for them. (Ms. Whelan, SC, 30/11/07)

With regard to first class, I do individual reading still, but at the start of the year we start kind of on a level... I would be aware of the children going to learning support, but I still start them off on the same level; I give them out a word-sheet at the start of the year and we start with that...you can see the gap then in terms of what they are able to cope with, so I individualise them then. You know, some child might only be able for two new words a night, the good children are getting seven/eight new words a night. (Ms. Boylan, SE, 28/11/07)

The children received support in the small group learning support setting, while class teachers included them in the whole class lessons.

Well I make out lesson plans on Friday afternoons. I go back over what we have done the previous week. If I feel I can move on to the next step, then I will look at, for example, the Newell programme and see what is next. Sometimes, I would not, but I will tailor-make the next week based on last week's successes or what ever. I plan it out, very small steps, week by week; sometimes we don't move on from what we did last week. (Ms. Joyce, LS/RT, SN, 24/11/07)

We have the reading scheme in the school and they are all using the one reader for the work at home and, obviously, there are different abilities and those children would be working at a slower pace to other children. (Ms. Adams, CT, SN, 26/11/07)

Principals indicated varying degrees of familiarity with the teachers' planning, for example:

To be honest, I don't know, but I would like to think we have similar strategies in that we use the same curriculum; we are bound by the revised curriculum and we do focus in on the methodologies in that curriculum. (P. SE, 28/11/07)

The section has disclosed important issues relating to policy implementation and school-level practice. Where children at risk to reading difficulties were identified in infant classes, they received in-infant class reading support/intervention. However, the practice in first class was dominated totally by withdrawal of children for learning support. Even though such withdrawal practice benefited the children in their reading, it may be at the cost of denying them other important classroom learning opportunities. It would appear that the teachers, especially the learning support/resource teachers, favoured some combination of withdrawal and in-class support for the children.

#### *4.4.5 Approaches and Strategies in Teaching Reading*

This section concentrates on four approaches of teaching reading in the learning support and mainstream classroom settings, the skills that are used to teach the children

to learn to read and a range of issues that include the role of assessment, comprehension and differentiation, and the transfer of skills.

The teachers and the principals were clear on the reason they expended so much time and energy on the teaching of reading.

We are teaching reading so the child can cope, so that they will be able to handle and grapple with all aspects of the curriculum and that leads to life strategies too. (P, SR, 16/11/07)

If we are teaching reading effectively to children, we are opening up the entire curriculum. If they are failing in reading, it is closing gaps and making barriers to the curriculum. To me success is if you can bring them to a literate level to function in society. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The various approaches of teaching reading in terms of observed sessions are specified for the children and the types of teachers in Table 4.15.

Table 4.15: Approaches of Teaching Reading by Observed Sessions, Specified for (i) Children (School) and (ii) Class Versus Learning Support/Resource Teachers (N=142 Sessions).

Overall approach to the teaching of reading observed	Scoil Rois CT Mary	Scoil Rois LS/RT Mary	Scoil Eoin CT Ann & Patrick	Scoil Eoin LS/RT Ann & Patrick	Scoil Naoise CT John Emma	Scoil Naoise LS/RT John Emma	Scoil Chiarain CT Kate & Ben	Scoil Chiarain LS/RT Kate Ben	Total observed sessions
Individual skills instruction			10	19	12 (J) 8 (E)	22 (J) 11 (E)	8		71 (50%)
Whole language approach		12						9 (K) 9 (B)	30 (21.1%)

Single text reading*	11		10		1 (J)				22 (15.5%)
Combination of skills and single text approach	1			2	8 (J) 5 (E)		8		19 (13.4%)
Total observed sessions	12 (8.4%)	12 (8.4%)	20 (14.1%)	21 (14.8%)	21** (14.8%)	22** (15.5%)	16 (11.3%)	18 (12.7%)	142 (100%)

\* Single text reading was observed in some of the classes. This category was not included in the OS.

\*\* The equation for calculating the total observed sessions for John and Emma (Scoil Naoise) involved considering John's total only, as Emma was absent for many of the observed sessions. The two children were observed receiving the same support in the learning support setting and similarly in the mainstream classroom.

It is important to distinguish how individual skills instruction differed from a whole language approach. A whole language lesson involved immersing children in books and providing them with opportunities to read and to write with reference to what they were reading. Skills were taught in the context of the reading or writing that was occurring at the time. On the other hand, a skills-based lesson related to teaching and developing a number of particular competences in isolation from reading. The competences tended to follow a logical order, for example, the children were taught the initial and final letter sounds before they were introduced to medial vowel sounds.

Individual skills instruction was the dominant approach in 50% of the observed sessions (N=142), followed by whole language teaching (21.1%), single text reading (15.5%) and the combination of skills and single text approach (13.4%) (Table 4.15). The learning support/resource teachers tended to concentrate on either individual skills or a whole language approach. Though the sessionally observed approaches to reading

instruction were recorded with reference to four approaches, there was a common core of skills' acquisition permeating them. Teachers reported that ensuring the children experienced success at reading, developed oral language and practice in oral reading, learned phonics, phonological awareness and word attack skills other than phonics, were important elements of their teaching of reading.

I always try to let the child experience success. They are at the learning state with the class reader and to give them fluency I give them something they can read ...When I was trained phonics was not a big thing, the emphasis was on look and say, and language approach. I do teach phonics but in my heart of hearts I feel that the language approach is the best. (Ms. Sullivan, SR, 22/11/07)

It varies greatly, whatever is needed to meet the child's needs; a lot of phonics, blending and segmentation, developing word attack skills and helping children to take meaning from what they read from an early stage. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

Principals talked about the elements that were emphasised in the school policy, for example, phonological awareness and decoding skills, but they stated that each teacher had the freedom to use the approach that she considered to be appropriate with the class/child.

There are many different approaches in the school. I do know we put a lot of emphasis on phonological awareness and word attack and that sort of thing but I do know that the teachers have their own ways of doing that, many different ways depending too on the children and the ability of the children that they are teaching. (P, SE, 28/11/07)

Teacher observation of children at their reading was the main form of assessment that was noted during the observation period. However, the learning support/resource teachers had administered diagnostic tests, for example, *Quest*, *MIST* and *Aston Index*, on the children prior to the commencement of the observation and the results from these tests influenced the programmes that the teachers developed for the children. While the use of assessment was not always visibly obvious during the classroom observation, teachers emphasised in discussion the importance of assessment in supporting children as they learn to read. Teachers made a distinction between formal and informal assessment, and they were all very aware and up to date on the staged approach outlined in the DES circulars. Assessment was integrated into the school policy documents that were analysed.

Formal assessment is very important in that it shows if children are failing.... We use Aston Index, Quest, Jackson Phonics, Sound Linkage, Neale Analysis and Dyslexia Screening, it varies. They are all useful; we use different ones for different children. Informal assessment is very important because class teachers can spot the difficulties before they become problems. On-going assessment goes on maybe on an informal basis; in learning support the progress can be slow, it would be a bit discouraging if you were assessing too often. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

The use of on-going assessment, well you know you are constantly changing your own approach to the lesson and what it is that you are going to teach the next day; what is the point of taking the next step if you have slipped on the last one. (Ms. Whelan, SC, 30/11/07)

The researcher recorded the use of various teaching strategies when observing the class and learning support/resource teachers. All teachers employed explicit teaching strategies that involved clear explanations, modelling and scaffolding, and



they provided the opportunity for children to practise reading skills. The teachers' modelling and scaffolding of reading skills disposed the children to attempt new reading tasks. All but one of the teachers were observed using encouraging and corrective feedback to motivate children and to support risk taking. Revising/revisiting and recapping of previously taught information and skills were also observed in three of the four research schools.

Very structured programme being observed, the emphasis on over-learning, revising and recapping of work. Huge amount of support offered to children to take them step-by-step through activities and worksheets. Very affirming environment. Ms. Joyce supporting children in every step and praising them. Corrective feedback and encouragement used. Each activity during the LS lesson is short, the children may move to a different part of the room and they are always kept on task by Ms. Joyce and so remained engaged in the lesson. (LS observation, SN, 2/10/07)

Ms. White is very affirming and provides a high level of support for children – step by step – encourages strategy use, checking work after each sentence has been written. (LS observation, SE, 24/10/07)

The development of individualised structured programmes, which were designed according to the needs of the particular child in the context of the RR programme, was observed in only one school, Scoil Chiarain. The learning support teacher in Scoil Rois indicated at her interview that this was an area where she felt she needed help.

Maybe if I can be more focused and if I have a programme which is more in line with what Mary needs to work on... I feel at the moment I am not quite meeting her needs, I am doing bits and pieces but I am not quite meeting her needs. (Ms. Sullivan, SR, 22/11/07)

The areas of problem solving and comprehension were seldom and hardly ever mentioned explicitly in the teachers' interviews. While some teachers incorporated comprehension development into reading lessons, this was generally in the form of questions that involved recall of information from the text that had just been read. Some open questions that focused on inferential comprehension and questions where the children were required to give an opinion were also observed.

Each child in first class gets a chance to read and answer questions on what is read. Mary read her page very fluently. Ms. Rooney praised her and asked her to tell what happened. Mary responded: "*When she went into fix it, she should have put it up and she didn't, the car-sun roof.*" Ms. Rooney recapped on what Mary said and asked her what happened next, supplying the word *sunroof*. (Class observation, SR, 16/10/07)

Differentiation is about adapting materials, curriculum, support and tasks to the abilities of the learner. There was little evidence of differentiation observed in the learning support setting and less in the mainstream classroom. There was a marked difference in the level of the material, support and the tasks in which the children engaged in the two settings. The difference is exemplified in the following observations.

The worksheets are quite easy, based on *Fuzzbuzz* vocabulary. John needed the teacher's support to fill in the worksheet, which he received in a step by step manner. (LS observation, SN, 23/10/07)

While most of the class was probably not challenged by this lesson, John filled in workbook incorrectly. He was not able to do the writing on the birthday card as there was too much information on the whiteboard, and he was not receiving the support he needed to complete the activity. (Class observation, SN, 2/10/07)

Some evidence of differentiation was observed in the mainstream class setting in Scoil Naoise and Scoil Chiarain.

Children are going to fill in a workbook or worksheet about a poster of a film they like – differentiated work; children with greater ability are filling in a worksheet that the class teacher designed for them; John and Emma and about ten others are filling in their workbook – page 23. John is moved to the table next to where Emma sits to complete work. Teacher encourages constructed spelling. John does not start workbook activity even though he is up at new table; Emma works away and constructs Bratz spelling; John asks for spelling and told to sit down, waits for Ms. Adams and then puts hand up – needs step by step help. He is writing Superman and does not realise it is on his pencil case. Teacher helps John and Emma individually. John challenged by task; has ideas, but needs scaffolds of spellings, not willing to try on his own and only completes two words on page. (Class observation, SN, 7/11/07)

During the observation period, the researcher noted that there were no structured systems in place to facilitate the children to transfer their learned reading skills from one setting to another within the school or outside the school environment. When asked to discuss this issue at interview, teachers were unsure in their replies as many of them had not considered the issue previously.

It is very difficult to establish the connection when you are not in the class; all you can do is try to talk to the teacher and discuss where he/she is at. When my RR children leave this room, that is it - I have no further dealings with them the way the system is at the moment; this is really not the best system in terms of their learning. The teachers have no sense of the cues the children are using or the strategies I am teaching so that they could back them up – that is crucial I suppose. And as well as that then, because the teacher is using a different approach in the class, if she was aware of what I have been encouraging and instructing the children to do, she could back that up. I mean what's to say that the children are not getting confused. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

However, it was acknowledged that transfer of learning was an important issue.

You need to make the connection and it is important that the children can see that it (reading) is not just a school activity; it is a whole key to life-learning. (Principal, SN, 7/12/07)

Some strategies that encourage reading beyond the classroom /school are in place in some schools, for example, encouraging children to read in the local church.

We would also have the children reading in the church, so they would be focusing towards that as an end...The seniors make little books for the junior infants, so they are developing their reading right across the board. (P, SC, 17/12/07)

The hierarchy of approaches to teaching reading was established with reference to the observed teaching sessions in the schools as individual skills instruction, whole language approach, single text reading and a combination of skills and single text approach. What they had in common was that the acquisition of skills permeated all of them. Teachers stressed oral language development, practice in oral reading, phonics, phonological awareness and word attack/decoding skills as their priority in teaching the children to read. Though the teachers acknowledged the importance of assessment in their planning and teaching of reading, the researcher was not aware that there was any structured system of assessment in use. There was clear evidence of diagnostic assessing of children which had its influence in selecting children for learning support in first class, but structured use of assessment was not integral to the observed teaching. It must be a concern that the development of individualised structured programmes, which were designed according to the needs of the particular child, was observed in

only one school. There was little evidence of comprehension in the reading instruction, nor did it feature in the teachers' interviews. Differentiation of teaching and materials was more evident in learning support than in class teaching, which raised issues about integrating struggling readers successfully into classroom instruction. Perhaps, one of the most significant issues that the research highlighted was the lack of any structured system to facilitate the children to transfer their reading skills from learning support to the mainstream classroom.

#### *4.4.6 Factors Relating to Reading Instruction*

This section deals with a series of factors that relate to reading instruction. They include the positive factor of the schools giving priority to providing and resourcing reading instruction for struggling readers, and a number of factors that give rise to contention, such as timetabling withdrawal, an in-class role for the learning support/resource teacher, connection between learning support and classroom reading instruction and collaboration between the respective teachers, and, finally, collaboration of teachers with other relevant professionals.

Schools had developed their resources for supporting children who experienced difficulty with learning to read in terms of personnel and materials. Principals stated that they prioritised learning support and special needs when it came to budgeting, and this was reflected in the materials that the learning support/resource teachers and class teachers had available to them.

We invest a lot of resources in terms of personnel and finance in reading. Only in the last couple of days we got a grant of thirty three thousand euro from the dormant accounts to upgrade our library, so we do invest a lot but, here, when books go home to disadvantaged homes we often don't get them back. So it does cost a lot of money to keep it going but still I think it is better that the children have the books in their hands. (P, SC, 17/12/07)

We have a variety of different reading schemes in the school, programmes, software, word-building, any thing that ever came in that we thought we could use we have got. We are not stuck for money and I would always make sure if we were, that resources for the children get priority. (P, SE, 28/11/07)

Children tended to become very dependent on the teacher's help, especially in the learning support setting. The levels of support that were observed in learning support and in class were very different. The children got used to the learning support/resource teacher checking every word/sentence and tended to sit waiting for similar help in the mainstream classroom.

John is a very careful worker. He matched the words, but he waited for the teacher to come to him before he filled in the words and he filled them in under the teacher's instruction. (LS observation, SN, 23/10/07)

Children have to complete activity independently. Children who need help most are seated near Ms. Adams and she spends most of her time there helping them fill in the workbook page line by line. Emma watches neighbour's work. John more interested in new neighbour's pencil case, the teacher moves close to him and he refocuses. Today, the researcher observes that John is very dependent on teacher's help, five minutes pass and he does not attempt a simple exercise of dividing the words into smaller words: *sleepyhead, toothbrush, everybody, popcorn, birthday, forget*. John waits for teacher to come and help him: in fact all the children at the table are observed waiting for the teacher to help them, they do not try the activity on their own. John and Emma should be able to attempt some of the activity as they know four of the six words –the

researcher observed them being taught and revised in learning support sessions. (Class observation, SN, 16/11/07)

Timetabling was an issue in some schools where children constantly tended to miss out on English lessons, specifically spelling or reading, due to withdrawal. In Scoil Naoise, the class teacher's timetable for English reading clashed with the times that John and Emma were at learning support, and, therefore, they missed at least four out of the five English lessons in the week.

When negotiating the observation visit schedule with the class teacher, it became apparent that she schedules her English lessons for the time that John and Emma are at learning support. (Fieldnotes, SN, 25/09/07)

However, the SEN policy in Scoil Chiaran dealt with this issue. It stated that 'an effort is made to ensure that pupils do not miss out on the same curricular area each time they are withdrawn for support, and that it is desirable to adopt a flexible approach to timetabling while at the same time ensuring that class disruption is minimised' (SEN Policy, Scoil Chiarain). In Scoil Eoin, there was a policy that all children receiving additional support were withdrawn at the same time to the different learning support/resource teachers in order to minimise disruption.

Resource, learning support and traveller children all go out of the class at the same time; we try and have the timetable the same just to cut down on interruptions and preserve teaching time. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

Schools were considering alternative models to that of withdrawal when it came to supporting children to learn to read. There was a realisation that though withdrawal had its place, it needed to be used in conjunction with in-class support.

Now the other thing I have been asked to think about is going in and working with the teachers in the classroom. I did it last year with two teachers, working with maths but whether now... I mentioned it this year but nobody took me up on the offer of going in and working in the classroom but, again, it is something that has to be discussed with the staff. (Ms. Joyce, SN, 24/11/07)

Collaboration can be defined as two or more teachers with useful knowledge working together to devise appropriate school level and class level interventions (Westwood, 2004). Collaboration is an important element of successfully supporting children to learn to read and this was reflected in some of the schools' learning support policies. Scoil Eoin's learning support policy referred to collaboration with reference to a whole school approach and to the role of the learning support teacher. 'The level of collaboration between the learning support teachers and the class teachers is crucial, as is the impact that the overall learning support intervention has on the day-to-day teaching and learning activities in the classroom' (Learning Support Policy, Scoil Eoin). Scoil Naoise's draft Learning Support Policy listed five aims, one of which was 'to promote collaboration among teachers in the implementation of whole-school policies on learning support' (p.4). The SEN Policy in Scoil Chiarain stated that 'time for consultation and collaboration is essential for all personnel involved in special education support' (p. 2). While it recognised that informal daily contact was of value, it stated that regular meetings would have to be arranged by organising relief for the



class teacher to allow her to liaise with the learning support/resource teacher. Collaboration was not mentioned in Scoil Rois's special needs and learning support policy. This was reflected in comments made by the Principal that the learning support teacher worked on her own and that he would not be aware of what she was doing.

I would not be aware, no, left to her discretion; I would not have the physical time to check with her what she has done or with the children what they have done with her. (P, SR, 16/11/07)

Connection and collaboration between learning support/resource and class teachers were observed but they were neither structured nor frequent. For example, in Scoil Naoise the class teacher was observed asking the children what sight vocabulary the learning support/resource teacher was teaching, and she based the homework for these children on the work of the learning support/resource teacher. However, no progression was observed in the level of homework that was set over the course of the observation period even though John and Emma were progressing in the learning support setting. In this school in November, the learning support teacher started to teach sight vocabulary from the class reader, which was additional to the supplementary sight vocabulary she was already teaching, when she realised how frustrated John and Emma were in the mainstream classroom by their inability to participate in the class lessons. Differentiation of reading material was not observed in the mainstream classroom in this school.

Learning support/resource teacher observed conferring with class teacher during observation, when she gave the class teacher homework for learning support children which was based on the *Fuzzbuzz* sight

vocabulary and which was similar to the worksheets the group had filled in in the learning support room. (Class observation, SN, 3/10/12)

Class teacher preparing worksheets based on the learning support work for the children attending learning support, for example, matching words based on *Fuzzbuzz* and practising letter formation. (Class observation, SN. 7/11/07)

It was evident in all the schools that the observed collaboration was unstructured.

Connection between learning support and class evident. Kate told by learning support teacher that she will tell her class teacher about the new word (*panda*) and the class teacher may ask her to spell it – Kate walks down corridor spelling word to herself. (LS observation, SC, 9/10/07)

Learning support teacher came into classroom and gave class teacher a photocopy of the notes she had made for the parent/teacher meeting on the RR children. (Class observation, SC, 22/11/07)

Despite these two observed collaborations, the class and learning support teachers confirmed during discussions that they considered collaboration to be unstructured.

Collaboration with class teachers, in my opinion, it is not the ideal here. There has not been any formal collaboration around the RR apart from the odd informal 'she is doing really well', 'she is here, she is there'. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

There is no formal time set aside when we would meet about the children. It happens incidentally, I would meet Ms. White in the corridor and we would have a chat about so and so, in the staff room and all that, but she is following a phonic programme suitable for the children who are going up to her and I suppose I am doing the class one back in the classroom. (Ms. Boylan, SE, 28/11/07)

Teachers supported the idea of developing better collaboration and connection with their colleagues, highlighting the need for formal meetings and the role of in-class support.

I think it just has to be the way forward that we as learning support teachers go into the class and try and support these children through a different medium, if they are not getting what the teacher is saying, which a lot of them won't, and you could kind of row in, having done their profile. If you were in the classroom and could see where the child was, you could sort of row in there, rather than this withdrawal where everything is segregated and nobody knows what is going on in all these rooms – that would be my main concern around reading. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The issue of collaboration with other professionals was also highlighted by the teachers.

In my experience from dealing with children down through the years, there is not enough collaboration with these professionals. (Ms. Boylan, SE, 28/11/07)

Our NEPS psychologist is excellent and if you are ever trying to get in contact she will get back to you, great support; she will look at any dyslexia screening test or any other testing you do and give advice. Speech and language therapists, they are also very good for keeping contact and sending the work they are at and keeping in touch. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

However, only one example of the implementation of such collaboration was observed when 'worksheets which were provided by speech and language therapist were used by the LS teacher' (LS observation, SR, 4/12/07).

A number of significant factors have surfaced in the research with reference to learning support reading instruction. No one doubts that timetabling withdrawal of children from their classroom for learning support is not only for their good, it is most times necessary, but it amounts to depriving the child of classroom instruction. It was clear that withdrawal as a practice must be finely balanced with reference to supporting the child's reading needs and minimising his/her absence from the classroom. Therefore, the extending of learning support into the classroom must be considered, giving the learning support teacher an *in-class reading role*. The researcher did not observe anything like a structured connection between the learning support and classroom settings, nor any form of structured collaboration between the teachers. On the positive side, the school policies championed connection and collaboration and the teachers' interviews confirmed that they recognised the need for same. However, the gap between school policy, teacher aspirations and implementing the solution was not addressed.

#### *4.4.7 Role Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and Parents/Guardians*

This section outlines how the principals, teachers and parents/guardians view their own roles and each other's roles with reference to supporting the children to learn to read. It also deals with the relationship between the school and the parents/guardians.

The principals viewed their role as one of facilitator, resourcer, organiser and promoter of reading strategies and initiatives.

My role as Principal in relation to reading is in promoting and leading and developing strategies through out the school for reading and organising our special needs area to take special note of struggling readers, and bringing in as many things as we can to address the reading and bringing in reading initiatives as well in the school. (P, SC, 17/11/07)

Learning support/resource teachers perceived their role as supporting children to achieve certain standards that were based on screening and testing.

I see my role as a teacher of reading in the broader context of overseeing screening and standardised testing in reading and ensuring all the children are reaching a certain standard in all areas of reading and, if they are failing to do so, that they get the help needed. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

I am only there in a support capacity and to try and maybe offer whatever expertise I have. (Ms. Murphy, SC 17/12/07)

Class teachers sought to develop fluency and a love of reading. They saw themselves as providing a platform for teaching the basics of reading, but they did not always include comprehension. So it was in the case of Ms. Adams:

The teacher is there to provide the basics and the platform. I think of it as a springboard for the children, I am here to give them the basics of their phonics and their blending and their sight vocabulary, but I am just there for the basics. (Ms. Adams, SN, 26/11/07)

The role of the HSCL teacher was to support parents/guardians to complement the work of the school in the teaching of reading.

My role is to support parents around reading; literacy and numeracy are part of my agenda.... My aim is to enable the parents to support their children more effectively in terms of homework, to facilitate them in their relationship with the school and to help them realise the importance of their role. (HSCL, SC, 13/12/07)

The learning support/ resource teachers agreed with the LSG that the primary responsibility for reading rested with the class teacher.

Oh, I think that they do all the fundamentals, they work through it. I do more reading skills and the class teacher will discuss the picture and the book, encourage them by questioning. I think the class teacher has a huge role in teaching reading. (Ms. White, SE, 28/11/07)

The class teacher has absolutely and entirely the responsibility for getting these children to read; I am only there in a support capacity. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The class teachers viewed learning support as concentrating on and alleviating the children's areas of reading difficulty.

My perception is that they would be there as a support to the child, that they would be able to hone in on the very specific little difficulties that an individual child would have and they would be able to help them step over that gap. (Ms. Whelan, SC, 30/11/07)

All the schools valued the role that parents/guardians played in supporting their children as they learned to read. The parents/guardians in Scoil Naoise were met by the principal before the children entered the school and were encouraged to make the home environment print rich and book rich (P, SN, 7/12/07). Only one school, Scoil Chiarain, actually entered into partnership with parents/guardians regarding this role.

Before our infants come into school now, we would try and start back as far as there. Our enrolment would be in March each year, and in the month of May we invite the parents in and we do a little checklist with the parents – just if there are any problems with their hearing, sight or anything like that, or if there is anything that they need to tell us. And, on that day, we have made out our own little book of nursery rhymes – it includes about twenty nursery rhymes and coloring as well - and we encourage the parents to say the rhymes and give them a little box of crayons for the children to colour and they will use this book in Junior infants. We also have a book called *Stepping Stones to our Primary School* and we have all the things that we would like the parents to introduce their children to before they come to school; you know, can they put on their coat, the different parts of their bodies, their favourite stories, jigsaws they make, various things like that. (P, SC, 17/12/07)

The parents/guardians, whose children were observed in first class in Scoil Chiarain, were encouraged to play a large role in their children's support.

We emphasise to the parents that the RR programme will not work unless the children are exposed to books at home. The parent teacher meetings fell into place mid intervention and I found that very, very helpful, particularly with Kate's mother because I just explained to her and showed her exactly the books and the strategies I would use and that at that point I was concerned about Kate's intonation and her monotone and all that, and all of a sudden about a week later she just flew. We just, I suppose, met up and discussed where she was at at that point and because the Mum is so much on board, it just made a huge, huge difference. So parents play a huge role. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The partnership with parents/guardians was not without its difficulties.

Unfortunately, we are a disadvantaged school and parents not getting involved is part and parcel of disadvantage, and a lot of it is the parents' feelings of inadequacy within themselves and low levels of literacy within themselves and you just simply have to take that into account. (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07)

The three other schools in the research sample - Scoil Rois, Scoil Eoin and Scoil Naoise - referred to parent/teacher meetings and shared reading when discussing the role of parents/guardians.

We are just after having our parent/teacher meetings and that is a great learning thing. It is good to have them this early in the year so we can pinpoint any problems parents are having with the kids at home. We find parents very, very supportive any time we have done any little project like six week slots of one-to-one paired reading at home. (P, SE, 28/11/07)

Parents have a huge role in reading their child a story. We have parent teacher meetings once a year but I would regularly send for some of the parents to come into me, and I would always say that my door is always open. I really feel that whatever you do here, it is not going to work if you have not got the total support of home. (Ms. Joyce, SN, 24/11/07)

Parents/guardians appeared to be aware of the importance of their role in supporting their children to learn to read to varying degrees.

We have a huge role; from day one when we realised that Mary was having difficulty, we realised that we had a huge role; we reinforce work covered, complete worksheets, we read all the time and go over the phonic sounds. We watch the level of the work that Mary is doing, for example, some of the work was too advanced for Mary and was frustrating her, so I contacted the teacher and she pulled back on the work and now Mary is still progressing but much happier. (Mary's Mum, 05/12/07)

I read with him every night and ask him questions to see if he liked the book and what he thinks of it. I get him to look at the stories and pictures. (Ben's Mum, 18/12/07)



All the mothers referred to how they were involved in helping the children to read, but they appeared to be unaware of the strategies that were in use in the school and were dependent on their child to inform them. There was no sense of partnership with the schools that was obvious from their comments.

I read with John. We always do the homework and he looks at comics going to bed. I am not a reader myself, so I don't really read in front of him. I am teaching John his letters and the other teacher, Ms. Joyce, is doing a great job too. We also draw a line down the middle of words if they are hard so that John works out one part and then the other. I follow whatever John comes home with and do the same thing that he tells me the teacher does, as best I can. (John's Mum, 7/12/07)

While parents/guardians saw their role as helping their children with homework, they showed insight and understanding of their needs, and, when it was required, they were prepared to act as their advocates with the teachers.

My role is to help John with his homework, read books and do the shared reading. (John's Mum, 7/12/07)

Well, I hear her read and I do her homework with her. I had to contact the school in October because she could not do the homework at all, she could not read any of it, it was far too hard and I went up to the school and complained and I am glad to say that it is better now and she is well able for the homework – she gets sheets of writing and reading and maths. They send home readers and they are far too hard but I read them to her or one of her older brothers and sister read with her. (Emma's Mum, 7/12/07)

Parents/guardians discussed how they thought their child was progressing with reading and in general they reported that they were happy with the progress being made.

She is grand now but I would say that she will never be a book reader. I think that the teachers are very good and they are doing everything possible that they can do and it has been very helpful. She is doing very well. (Ann's Mum, 5/12/07)

The parents/guardians identified the parent/teacher meeting as the principal means by which they communicated with teachers and were involved with the school.

I met the teacher at the parent/teacher meeting in senior infants and I told her that I felt John needed help with his reading. I was very unhappy with the Letterland scheme that they were using in junior infants and senior infants; it did not suit John at all and he did not know his alphabet at the end of senior infants. (John's Mum, 7/12/07)

Parents/guardians reported some issues regarding their involvement in supporting their children to learn to read. They wanted the school to ensure that appropriate homework was set, and that better lines of communication were established between home and school.

The school needs to make sure that the child is able for homework and it is their job to make sure that children can read and write. (Emma's Mum, 7/12/07)

Communication can be an issue. John came home with a book to read and I thought it was far too hard and for two weeks I fought with him to read it- it was actually part of the shared reading – but other parents in the estate thought the same thing and were pushing their children too. Anyway, it turned out, when one parent approached the teacher about it, that we were supposed to be reading the book for the children, not getting the children to read the book for us. (John's Mum, 7/12/07)

The principals defined their role as one of resourcing and facilitating strategies and initiatives for the teaching of reading in their schools. The LSG appeared to shape

the individual and mutual role perceptions of the learning support/resource teachers and the class teachers. The former viewed their role in terms of meeting the specific needs of children who have difficulties with learning to read, whereas the latter took responsibility for teaching the basics of reading to enable children to read fluently and independently. The other major outcome of the research was the school/parent/guardian relationship. Though the role of the parents/guardians in supporting their children's reading at home was very highly valued by the schools, they did not form effective partnerships with them, excepting Scoil Chiarain. Though the parents/guardians were very supportive of their children's reading, they were not aware of the strategies that the schools were using to support their children to read. There is clearly a great need for better lines of communication between the parents/guardians and the schools with all that that may lead to.

#### *4.5. Conclusion*

The research findings provided a comprehensive picture of how the children in first class, who had difficulties with reading, were supported in learning to read. A summary of the findings that answered the research questions was presented. The reading support/intervention profiles of the children were detailed. Data, gathered from classroom observation, interviews and document analysis, yielded patterns and themes that related to how reading was planned, organised and taught, and how the children responded to instruction, over a period of twelve weeks. It was apparent that there was a dominant emphasis on teaching and acquisition of reading skills without sufficient

reference to comprehension. The dilemma over the withdrawal of children for learning support, when it deprives them of mainstream classroom instruction, surfaced in relation to timetabling. The gap between reading instruction that was delivered in the learning support and in the mainstream classroom settings became apparent to the researcher. There was a need for connection between the settings and for collaboration between the teachers. The LSG recommend connection and collaboration, but they were not evident at school level. Though there was some formal assessment in the schools, the researcher failed to observe structured use of assessment as a driver of reading support/intervention programmes, excepting the RR programme. There was a marked absence of process writing/writing genres observed, and the research indicated that writing in the schools at the level of first class was conceptualised in terms of workbook completion. The planning and delivery of programmes to support oral language development or vocabulary development were not observed. The research also highlighted what appeared to be an essential relationship of partnership between schools and the parents/guardians to extend the school support for the child to the home. It is left to Chapter Five, *Discussion of Findings*, to explore, analyse and synthesise the variety of pattern and theme outcomes.

## Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

### 5.1 *Introduction*

The research study investigated how seven children with reading difficulties were supported in learning to read in first class, within the context of a whole school approach, in four primary schools. The patterns of support that were provided for the children to learn to read (Chapter Four) are discussed with reference to the more relevant aspects of the research study against a backdrop of the LSG (DES, 2000).

The chapter is organised in three sections: the first discusses the organisation and planning of reading instruction; the second reflects on approaches and strategies that were used in teaching reading; and the third looks at the issue of partnership in the teaching of reading. Each will be addressed against the LSG as an interpretive framework.

### 5.2 *Organisation and Planning of Reading Instruction*

The LSG provide guidelines for the development of learning support policy in the context of the school plan; they emphasise the need for the learning support programme to be “fully integrated into the general organisation of the school and its activities” (p.20). Issues such as developing and implementing policy, early intervention and the role of supplementary teaching are detailed. The need for a high level of purposeful

collaboration is emphasised. The research study found that the LSG influence on policy was evident in school planning documents, and that teachers were familiar with the policy, which was confirmed by discussions and interviews. However, the policy was not fully implemented at the level of school and classroom practice. It became apparent that the LSG provided policy and recommendations that were necessary for supporting children to learn to read, but the reality that the LSG were developed and disseminated from the top-down rather than grounded in classroom level practice, impacted on their implementation.

The research study found that three of the four schools had developed a school policy on learning support and/or SEN, and that the remaining school (Scoil Naoise) was in the process of developing their policy. The policies were implemented in the schools according to the climate and ethos of the individual schools. This implementation was generally governed by two principles: firstly, schools organised and planned reading instruction and learning support intervention according to their available resources, personnel and materials; and, secondly, literacy was given priority over numeracy in the organisation of support/interventions.

The schools identified how children were selected for learning support in line with DES policy. They implemented a staged approach to assessment, identification and programme implementation (Circular Sp. Ed. 24/03). The class teachers had primary responsibility for teaching the children how to read (LSG, 2000) but the learning support/resource teacher came on board to support those who were diagnosed

with reading difficulties, and, if it was required, the child was referred for further assessment to an appropriate professional.

All the schools highlighted the LSG policy of early identification of children at risk in their learning to read. However, early implementation of learning support was found to vary in the four schools. Two schools did so in junior infants, two other schools at the end of senior infants, and some of them offered in-class learning support for the children in the infant classes. Children in Scoil Chiarain had experienced in-class support in junior infants when a learning support/resource teacher supported the class teacher in developing phonological awareness. The researcher believes that learning support should begin as soon as a child displays signs of struggling with emergent literacy, whether that is in junior infants or senior infants, and that in-class support is a useful mode of enabling young children to access the support that they need to learn to read. Denton, Ciancio and Fletcher (2006) confirm this assertion; they claim that when young children who are at risk for reading difficulties receive effective classroom reading instruction, along with supplemental intervention when it is needed, most of them can learn to read successfully.

The research study reported that schools prioritised first class for organising reading support/intervention for children with difficulties in learning to read. Research highlights that this is an important developmental period for children. Children from infants to second class have a positive self-belief in their own ability to learn, irrespective of their level of success (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995). They are undaunted

by their learning difficulties because they do not differentiate between effort and ability; they typically believe that they can succeed in a task by trying hard (Nicholls, 1990). Early intervention benefits from their enthusiasm. The researcher found that the children in first class were generally sustained by a strong self-belief, despite their difficulties in learning to read. This was evident in the manner in which they discussed reading with the researcher. Ann (Scoil Eoin) reported: "I like learning the worksheet because we get to sound them out and teacher tells us if we get them wrong or right" (28/11/07). That is not to say that the children did not develop coping strategies, some good and some not so helpful, when they were faced with difficulties in the reading process. Emma (Scoil Naoise) tended to avoid attention in order to hide her difficulties in reading, while Ben (Scoil Chiarain) avoided trying tasks which he did not feel confident about, for example, spelling unknown words despite the emphasis that was placed on this in the RR reading intervention he received.

The implementation of aspects of learning support policy at school level was observed to be at variance with DES policy (LSG, 2000; Circular Sp. Ed. 24/03; Circular Sp. Ed. 02/05), which recommended an appropriate balance between in-class and withdrawal modes of supporting children to learn to read. The LSG advocate that serious consideration must "be given to the planned implementation of shared teaching approaches, involving the class teacher and the learning support teacher, in the pupil's regular classroom" (p. 46). Though the LSG envisage a role for the learning support/resource teacher in supporting children in their own classrooms, the research study found that the learning support that was organised for the children in first class



was by a withdrawal mode only. The withdrawal of children for reading support is endorsed in the research literature. Withdrawal provides children who struggle with reading with a safe setting in which to learn and to take risks in reading, which can be very important for them in acquiring reading skills while sustaining a high level of motivation (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994). It facilitates diagnostic assessment, targeted observation and monitoring of children's progress (DES, 2001). Harris and Sipay (1990) point out that withdrawal is extremely important for children, who struggle to concentrate sufficiently in busy classrooms, to enable them to acquire vital skills and knowledge.

In the research study, withdrawal facilitated the learning support/resource teacher to enable children to acquire a range of reading skills, for example, phonic decoding skills, and to monitor and to correct the work of the children in a step-by-step manner, thus ensuring that they experienced success. However, it was evident that withdrawal lost some of its value as it was implemented too frequently or on a daily basis without sufficient connection being established between the support the children received in the learning support and in the classroom settings. Working exclusively on a withdrawal basis was observed to lead to the fragmentation of instruction and to separated teaching programmes for the children in receipt of support compared with the programmes that were taught to their peers in the mainstream classroom. Clearly, withdrawal needs to be planned to minimise on the child losing out on what is being taught in the mainstream classroom.

It is clear from the LSG that children are expected to receive appropriate classroom instruction as well as learning support, and that children are grouped for reading (p.43). Providing children with appropriate classroom instruction in reading is not easy. Class teachers are faced with the challenge of providing “simultaneous reading development among the multiple reading proficiency levels” that are found in the classroom (Poole, 2008, p.228). However, this challenge was not eased by what the researcher observed; the class teachers engaged in whole class teaching using a single text and classroom instruction was not connected with the learning support instruction. It is fair to say that the use of whole class teaching was not meeting the needs of the children in the research study, and the children’s progress was further hampered by the lack of connection between learning support and classroom instruction. This was evident in the difficulty that John and Emma experienced when completing a workbook exercise on the red squirrel (Treasury: Core Skills in English, Folens, 2004).

Ms. Adams tells class what they are going to do during lesson. The class discuss title of story and one child is asked to read the first line of text. The class then read the first line in unison; Emma reads but John does not...The passage is far too difficult for either John or Emma. Both switched off and disengaged during lesson. (Class observation, SN, 3/10/07)

This passage was too difficult for the children and bore no relation to the material being used in the learning support setting. Furthermore, the workbook exercise demanded that the children were able to answer literal comprehension questions about the passage. John and Emma were not ready for this level of work as they were concentrating on building up sight vocabulary and completing simple cloze type worksheets in the

learning support setting. The challenge that the learning support and class teachers face is to plan together to provide children with reading activities that are anchored in the strategies and skills which they are developing while reflecting and complementing the teaching methods each other is using. The inherent difficulty is to meet this challenge in a class of up to 30 children who have varying reading levels.

It was clear that teaching reading in the classroom needed to benefit from employing alternative modes of instruction such as grouping readers and cooperative learning. Grouping presents its own challenges. Children can be grouped according to reading ability/proficiency levels by way of homogenous ability groups or mixed ability/heterogeneous groups. Concerns have been raised in the past over reading-group placements, for example, it was reported that once a child was placed in a low-ability reading group, that it was likely that he/she would always be placed in a low-ability reading group (Juel, 1990). Furthermore, it was reported that lower-ability groups tended to receive an inferior form of instruction that was characterised by more skills-based and decoding activities and a lesser emphasis on meaning and critical thinking (Wilcox, 1982; Allington, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Collins, 1986; Díaz, Moll & Mehan, 1988; Sanacore, 1992; Wheelock, 1994). On the more positive side, it was reported that mixed ability/heterogeneous groups allowed “poorer readers develop their skills by observing and interacting with more effective readers” (Elbaum, Schumm & Vaughn, 1997, p. 477), while the stronger readers became more cognisant of their thinking processes (Keegan & Shrake, 1991). However, Poole (2008) reports that struggling readers in mixed ability groups may encounter the same problems that are often

associated with their placement in homogeneous ability groups. They often read less and are interrupted more often than the other children in the mixed ability groups. Recently, differentiated small group reading instruction has been shown to successfully meet the needs of struggling readers within the mainstream classroom context (Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Tyner, 2004). Differentiated small-group reading instruction is underpinned by the teacher teaching the small reading group according to where each reader falls on the reading continuum and he/she uses appropriate teaching strategies to meet their needs.

The grouping of readers on its own may not enable teachers to overcome the challenge of meeting the reading needs of the children in their class. Cooperative learning is another form of class instruction that can assist teachers to overcome the challenge of varying reading ability/proficiency levels in the class. It involves mixed ability grouping of children who are given specific roles to perform as they work together to read a text or to reach a collective goal (Crosby & Owens, 1993). Flexible grouping can be used in conjunction with cooperative learning (Allington, 1992; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Castle, Deniz & Tortora, 2005); it allows frequent changes to be made in the membership of the groups.

The LSG highlight that differentiating or adapting learning materials for lower achieving children is one of the ways by which class teachers can alleviate reading difficulties. The purpose of differentiation is to ensure that children receive reading instruction through which they can experience success (Quicke, 1995; Tomlinson,

2004). Despite the fact that the schools were equipped with sufficient reading schemes to facilitate differentiation of reading material and tasks, the only evidence of differentiation that was observed in regular classrooms by the researcher was in Scoil Naoise when the class teacher differentiated workbook tasks (Class observation, SN, 7/11/07). It is important that the level of the reading material, the support and the tasks in reading instruction are differentiated so that children gain maximum benefit from learning to read in the classroom.

The organisation of learning support was by way of withdrawing children in small groups in two schools in the research study and would have been similarly organised in the other two schools were it not for the prevailing circumstances. One school had only one child for reading support/intervention and the other was implementing RR, a one-to-one reading programme. It is understandable why schools favoured small group interventions as they are an efficient means of maximising the resources available to them. According to the research literature on the effects of group size on children's reading instruction, small group settings seem to offer as many opportunities for adult-child interaction as individual settings (Morrow, 1988, 1990; Morrow & Smith 1990). However, it is the purpose of reading support/intervention to meet the needs of the individual child (LSG, 2000), which establishes individualised learning support as the desired goal whether the child is supported through one-to-one or group interventions. "Supplementary teaching sessions in English should be planned individually for each pupil so that the activities in each lesson meet the pupil's individual learning needs" (p.77) Though the teachers reported that the children who

were participating in the learning support group had been assessed to have similar needs in reading, the researcher questions whether the group reading support was meeting the unique individualised needs of each child. For example, John's (Scoil Naoise) apparent helplessness in completing his workbook (Class observation, SN, 7/11/07) indicated that he should have been taught to use constructed/invented spelling as part of his learning support reading intervention, so that he could draw on this skill in the classroom. Patrick's group learning support/intervention (Scoil Eoin) consisted of an emphasis on developing phonic skills, indicating that his individual needs, for example, developing comprehension skills, were not being prioritised in the support that he was receiving. It remains that group reading support needs to be crafted carefully so that the individual child's specific needs are not overlooked. It must be emphasised that, in this respect, RR differed from the more traditional small group withdrawal that was observed in three of the four schools in that assessment and individualisation were central features of the observed RR sessions.

The timetabling of learning support withdrawal was also an issue that was raised in the research study. The LSG emphasise that the school plan should indicate when supplementary teaching can be provided, that the supplementary teaching that children receive should be in addition to their regular class programme in English and that children should not miss out on the same curricular area each time they receive supplementary teaching. However, the research study highlighted that supplementary withdrawal sessions were scheduled for the children in the different schools for the same times each week, and, therefore, the children tended to miss the same classroom

activity. It was disturbing in the case of John and Emma (Scoil Naoise) that their scheduled times for learning support clashed with their English time. Therefore, they were missing classroom instruction despite the fact that they were expected to read the class text for homework and to complete workbook activities that were based on it. This could partly explain why Emma's mother complained about the difficulty of the homework that Emma was bringing home.

The overall aim of learning support is to enable the struggling reader to overcome his/her difficulties so as to benefit from classroom learning to the greatest extent possible. Education is a holistic process rather than a series of disconnected stages. What occurs in the withdrawal setting must be connected to and reflect what is occurring in the classroom. The research study found that enough is not being done to establish links between classrooms and learning support instruction, and, therefore, the benefits of learning support are not maximised. For example, Patrick's (Scoil Eoin) support in the mainstream class consisted of an emphasis on phonological awareness, particularly onset and rime. However, his assessment results indicated that his phonic skills were good. It would appear that assessment information was not shared with the class teacher who was planning her teaching around the school's policy for teaching English rather than the assessed needs of the child. Though a connection between school-level planning and teacher planning was observed in the case of Scoil Eoin, it was the only example of such a connection. The research study highlighted the need for flexibility on the part of teachers so as to implement the school plan in a manner that is sensitive to the needs of individual children.

The outcome of the discussion on the organisation and planning of reading instruction points to a lack of effective connection between school-level planning and teacher-level planning. What was observed was a lack of effective connection between the school policy, teachers' planning and classroom practice in the schools. Each school advocated a whole school approach that involved the principal, the class teacher and the learning support/resource teacher in supporting the children as they learn to read. While all of them contributed to the support the children received, a collaborative effect was lacking.

The planning of reading instruction at the school policy level was done in an apparently standardised manner but it splintered at teacher level into varying programmes, some more structured than others. The observed reading support was quite fragmented. The learning support/resource teachers and the mainstream class teachers appeared to work independently on their own reading programmes and the researcher noted very little to no overlap between their programmes, even though both types of teacher voiced the desirability of collaboration. For example, the learning support teacher in Scoil Naoise focused on developing emergent literacy skills in the children, building up their knowledge of initial sounds and basic sight vocabulary, while the class teacher concentrated on the class reader (Sunny Street Friends, Dowling, Herron & Kelly, 2000a) with an emphasis on completing the associated workbook activities.



The lack of connection can be sourced to a number of factors which include the lack of collaborative planning between teachers as they implement whole-school policy, the lack of organisational structures within the schools to facilitate such planning, for example, setting time for it, and the role perceptions of the teachers in relation to their responsibilities with regard to the teaching of reading. These factors are further discussed in the next sections. The overall need is to strengthen the connection between school policies, teacher planning and classroom practice.

### *5.3 Approaches and Strategies used in Teaching Reading*

The LSG advocate the importance of diagnostic assessment, planning and the use of the IPLP to facilitate the teaching of reading. Assessment as a strategy plays an important role in supporting children who struggle to learn to read. It ensures that the child's individual learning needs are recognised and planned for. The research study found evidence of the use of formal instruments of assessment to identify the children with reading difficulties as early as the infant classes in that the MIST (Hannavy, 1993a) was administered. Children were screened, using diagnostic tests, before their learning support began, and this screening and diagnostic testing informed the development of their group reading programmes to a degree. However, while assessment is central to the process of teaching and learning (PSC, 1999), a limited use of formally structured assessment was observed to inform the day-to-day teaching and learning process in the schools. The teachers' plans did not contain records of children's progress, except in the case of the RR reading intervention support in Scoil

Chiarain and the learning support/resource teacher in Scoil Naoise. This is not to deny that some assessment of the reading needs of individual children was evident in the various teaching settings. Such forms of assessment are inherent in any teaching setting and some teachers referred to assessment information, gleaned from their observation, when they discussed the children with the researcher. Ms White (Scoil Naoise), for example, noted children's difficulties that she observed during the course of learning support sessions.

The researcher cannot be satisfied that what she encountered in the course of observation resulted from an organised scheme which generated consistent and ongoing assessment of the children's reading progress. She did not come across ongoing documented outcomes of formative assessment or the consistent use of IPLPs. An assessment scheme is the link between the planning and implementation of reading instruction to meet the individual needs of a child. Such an assessment scheme needs to be an element of collaborative planning and teaching that are prepared and implemented by learning support/resource and class teachers. The insight provided by on-going formative assessment enables effective teaching to occur so that independent reading can be promoted, and that the children are grouped and/or regrouped appropriately for the purpose of teaching reading. Assessment for reading is a work-in-progress schedule of planning, implementing and evaluating, which leads to modified plans. Effective use of the IPLP, as recommended in the LSG, facilitates systematic and connected teaching to occur. It is clear that the individualisation of a child's reading

needs is not possible without an effective assessment scheme (Linn & Gronlund, 2000), and this is an area in which teachers need to be highly skilled.

The LSG recommend that learning support should incorporate the development of strategies and skills of reading. The understanding of reading strategies in this research is that they are deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and to modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words and to construct meanings of text (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). Reading skills are automatic actions that result in decoding and in comprehending with speed, efficiency and fluency, and they usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved (Afflerbach et al., 2008). In looking at a reader's actions, it is important to determine if they are automatic or deliberate; that is the key difference between a skill and a strategy. With practice, reading strategies require less deliberate attention and eventually become effortless and automatic and in so doing become reading skills. There was evidence from the research study that the development of reading strategies needed to be focused on to a far greater degree, which impacted on the progress of the children in learning to read. For example, the reading support that Mary (Scoil Rois) received did not incorporate strategies to enable her to monitor her understanding of the language and ideas that she was reading.

A balanced approach to reading instruction, encompassing both word recognition skills and comprehension strategies (Pressley, 2002), is in line with what is recommended in the LSG. The PSC (1999) recommends the systematic and the direct

teaching of the bottom-up skills of reading and the top-down cues to comprehend text. The research study, however, came up with an ordered list of the approaches to teaching reading: individual skills, whole language, single text and a combination of skills and single text. This list does not reflect a balanced approach to the teaching of reading. The learning support/resource teachers favoured either a skills-based or a whole language approach, while the majority of the class teachers preferred to combine skills with single text. The research study indicates that there is a need for teachers in the four schools to embrace a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading to ensure that children are supported appropriately in all areas of learning to read.

The LSG advocate the development of oral language, emergent literacy skills, developing phonemic awareness, word-identification skills, reading comprehension strategies, linking reading and writing and engaging children in reading continuous text, but this was not exactly what was observed during the research study. The research study came up with an ordered list of skills/methods to teach reading: practice in oral reading and practice in writing as the dominant skills/methods, followed by phonics, sight vocabulary, oral language activities, with a lesser emphasis on phonological awareness, pre-reading skills, reading comprehension and word attack skills other than phonics.

*Practice in reading* was composed mainly of oral reading, guided by the teacher, where the children read the same pages of class readers during reading lessons with the teacher providing feedback, strategy instruction and encouragement at intervals.

Practice in oral reading has been shown to be more effective when it is accompanied by feedback and guidance (NICHD, 2000), and reading instruction in the classrooms, guided by the teacher, provided the children with guided practice in applying phonics and other reading skills. By supporting children during oral reading, the teachers helped them to improve their accuracy and speed of reading. Fluent reading depends on automatic recognition of high frequency sight words and the skilled sounding out of less frequent words (Compton, Appleton & Hosp, 2004) and these were evident in both the learning support and class settings to a extent, but to a stronger degree in the learning support setting. The researcher concluded that building up the children's phonic knowledge, combined with oral reading guided by the teacher, was a useful strategy for supporting children who have difficulties with learning to read.

A strong emphasis was also observed in the research on *practice in writing* in the support that the children received. This is important because writing is a key path to word analysis skills, spelling and self-expression (PSC, 1999). Writing is a major key to understanding the relationship between oral language and print, especially as young writers struggle to encode the sounds of spoken language into permanent marks. If they are successful, they have mastered the alphabetic principle (Riley, 1999). The ideal context for establishing a relationship between reading and writing involves children writing to strengthen their decoding skills and to extend their knowledge of texts, while their reading offers them models of writing and opportunities to apply their developing skills (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald & Hampston, 1998). This is not what the researcher observed. The children engaged in a lot of writing activities that were based

on commercial workbooks and teacher-made/commercial worksheets, which emphasised the skills of writing rather than extending the children's knowledge through the process of writing. There is a lot to be done by teachers to render reading and writing reciprocal processes. It is important that writing tasks organised for children are of value and assist them in learning to read. Instruction in reading and writing should be linked and taught so that both processes are used skilfully, strategically and reciprocally (LSG, 2000).

The research literature highlights that *phonological awareness* and *systematic phonics instruction* play an important role in learning to read (Cunningham, 1988; Lundberg & Høien, 1989; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Stanovich, 1991; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995; Juel & Minden-Cupp, 2000; Torgesen, 2004). The researcher observed that a considerable amount of time was spent on phonics whereas more time was needed to be spent developing phonological awareness, especially in the case of John and Emma (Scoil Naoise) as they were only developing a basic level of awareness. While it is difficult to generalise on the provision of reading support because the individual needs of any two or more readers vary, it is unquestionably important that the strategies and skills taught are those which are the most appropriate and useful for the children to progress in learning to read.

Reading extends beyond decoding words. It involves decoding the words and then comprehending them in the case of children who struggle to learn to read, whereas proficient readers decode so rapidly that their reading is dominated by comprehending

the text (Stanovich, 1988). *Fluency* and *comprehension* are interdependent. All readers from the beginning of reading instruction should be taught comprehension strategies, even when they are not yet fluent readers (Pressley, Gaskins & Fingeret, 2006). A small repertoire of comprehension strategies should be taught through modelling, explanation and scaffolded practice. The comprehension strategies include opportunities for children to engage in predicting, questioning, activating prior knowledge, self-monitoring, visualising, seeking clarification and summarisation. While comprehension skills may have been focused on at other times in the school day in the mainstream classroom, the researcher failed to observe them with any great frequency in either the learning support or classroom settings for English. The reviewed research is emphatic about the fluency-comprehension connection. Children who struggle with reading become better readers if they are taught comprehension strategies (Anderson, 1992; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Schuder, 1996). It is important that the development of comprehension strategies and their transfer in reading in different settings are incorporated into the support that children receive as they learn to read.

The research study highlighted other gaps in the approaches and strategies that were used to teach reading to the children. The observed lack of emphasis on comprehension in the research study was linked with a lack of emphasis on metacognition in all areas of reading. Metacognition is important because it consists of a set of skills/internal processes that children use to select, control and monitor what they are reading (Torgesen, 1994). The teachers were not observed to emphasise metacognition in the reading instruction that they provided the children. For example,

children in first class need to be encouraged to make their thoughts audible and say what they are thinking as they decode and read. The think-aloud strategy assists them to detect errors in their reading and to attempt self-correction (Baumann, Seifert-Kessel & Jones, 1992). The teaching of reading needs to incorporate metacognition into the strategy instruction that children receive.

A general lack of opportunities for the children to read independently was observed in the research study. This was disturbing, given the fact that all the schools were observed to have levelled reading schemes in their classrooms. It was also apparent that the textbooks in use by the children were not at appropriate levels of difficulty. This was exemplified by the use of the class reader in all the classrooms.

The research study did not find positive evidence relating to the transfer of reading strategies and skills, which is an important issue in the teaching of reading. The LSG did not anticipate this issue. The lack of transfer is linked to the observed lack of collaboration in the planning and teaching of reading. The importance of being able to use what has been learned in new situations should never be underestimated (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). Such transfer of knowledge and its use in new situations depends on whether the child truly understands what has been taught, and learning is more likely to transfer if the learner has the opportunity to practise with a variety of applications when learning (Bransford, 1979). Therefore, the observed emphasis on revisiting material, revising, recapping and over learning, which was observed in the reading instruction, is to be much approved. However, it is disappointing that the



children were not afforded opportunities to apply their newly acquired skills across the different reading settings. The failure of these skills to transfer was noticed in the mainstream classroom, which pointed to the importance of improving the connection between the reading intervention/instruction that was provided in the learning support and classroom settings.

The lack of transfer of reading is linked to the need to develop robust understandings rather than fragile understandings (Shepard, 1997). In the case of the latter, children appear to know a concept in one context but do not know it when asked in another way or in another setting (Burns, 1993). Fragility of learning can occur because the child is still in the process of learning and needs more time and support to master the particular concept, and because the same scaffolds, clues and supports, needed to consolidate the concept, are not available in all settings. This was the experience of the researcher; many of the supports provided by the learning support/resource teachers, such as teaching aids or posters on which the child still relied, were not available in the mainstream classrooms. What was particularly observed during the research was that the mastery of concepts, especially phonics, which appeared certain in the learning support setting, did not travel to the mainstream classroom setting. It is the belief of the researcher that the reason for this was that the children had mastered the surface skills involved, for example, completing worksheets based on the phonic area, but not the underlying concepts. Children with reading difficulties need to be resourced by collaborative planning of strategies and teaching

methods to enable them to transfer their reading skills from the learning support setting to the mainstream classroom and vice versa.

Research on transfer of reading strategies and skills shows that transfer is not automatic for children but must be supported by instruction (Derry, 1990; Wong, 1994). Instruction and practice in applying a recently learned reading skill to new contexts enable children to decontextualise or generalise the skill beyond the characteristics of the specific type of content or problem in which it was originally encountered (Rosenshine, 1997). Children need explicit guidance and instruction in how to adapt strategies and transfer skills. This instruction should include modelling and practice of the reading strategy/skill in different settings, using different genres and different purposes for the reading task. Embedded instruction, which typically results from the use of modelling, guided practice and independent practice, facilitates the transfer of reading skills. Helping children to generalise the circumstances when it is appropriate to apply a skill, and making explicit principles for applying it, facilitates the transfer of a skill to new contexts (Perkins & Salomon, 1988; Nickerson, 1989).

The literature on transfer suggests that varied types of practice in reading are critical to enable children to transfer their reading strategies and skills (Bridge & Tierney, 1981; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). The researcher observed the children reading the class text in the mainstream classroom, and some supplementary readers, which were storybooks only, in the learning support setting, rather than incorporating other genres of text. In addition, some reading strategies transfer readily across settings

and areas of the curriculum and children should be encouraged to use their strategies in the different curriculum areas. For example, prediction works well for reading, mathematics and social studies in the primary school classes. However, teachers tend to concentrate their use of strategy instruction on their teaching of reading without referring to other areas of the curriculum (Marks et al., 1993). Incorporating targeted strategy use throughout the school day would enable children to solidify and transfer their use of strategies in their reading and beyond.

The lack of transfer of reading strategies and skills that was observed during the research cannot be totally explained by the increased reading challenge posed by the difficulty or types of texts that were encountered in the classroom. The way reading was taught, using a whole class approach, impacted on the lack of transfer of reading strategies and skills. Anderson et al. (2001) report that social interaction is helpful in enabling children to develop and to transfer learning. Group discussion appears to facilitate transfer of knowledge to other contexts (Anderson et al., 2001; Reznitskaya et al., 2001). This implies that the use of small group reading instruction, incorporating discussion and the use of group activities, is a useful means of facilitating children to transfer knowledge. Differentiated small group reading instruction that focuses on the transfer of specific strategies and skills of reading should be promoted in the mainstream classroom. Collaborative planning between learning support/resource and classroom teachers is needed to underpin this instruction. The focus of the collaborative planning should be the reading strategies and skills and the teaching methods to be used to develop them in the two settings.

One of the unforeseen results of the manner in which the LSG were interpreted and implemented in the schools was that children tended to become dependent on their teachers in learning support and in the mainstream classroom. Despite all the good that learning support can achieve with struggling readers, it can impair their progress in becoming independent learners. There is a danger about a learning environment that offers immediate attention, correction, encouragement and affirmation of children's learning activities; it can foster a dependency on praise and attention. Struggling readers do not have any greater emotional need for attention, encouragement and affirmation than other children, but the observed learning support environments appeared to foster a dependency on extrinsic praise rather than developing intrinsic reading motivation. What the researcher observed in this respect was that the learning support/resource teachers tended to praise and affirm the children for every small step, and that they tended to intervene very quickly when the children made mistakes or were unable to read a word. The children responded by waiting for them to come to their assistance. All of this led to a dependency on extrinsic praise rather than intrinsic reading motivation. Intrinsic reading motivation is characterised by a disposition to read (Ryan, Connell & Grolnick, 1992) and refers to a child's enjoyment of reading activities that are performed for their own sake (Deci, 1992).

An effective way to counter reading behaviour which is characterised by a dependency on the teacher is to provide children with lots of opportunity to develop self-monitoring skills and strategies (Samuels, 2002; Kuhn, 2004, 2005). Children are less likely to become dependent learners if they are learning in their zone of proximal

development (Vygotsky, 1978), if they have the aid of scaffold support and if they experience the gradual release of responsibility for mastering specific tasks of the learning-to-read process, for example, phonic decoding. The RR intervention in Scoil Chairain provided the children with these supports and Kate was observed to progress towards independence. For example, she was observed using the chunking strategy, taught in the RR setting, when she was reading in the mainstream classroom. Reading support/interventions need to foster initiative, risk taking and independence in children.

The research debate on the issues of learning support withdrawal and dependency has highlighted the need for connection between learning support and the mainstream classroom, whereas the debate about transfer of reading skills and assessment points to the need for collaboration between learning support/resource and class teachers. Connection and collaboration coalesce around collaborative planning/teaching. The LSG state that a key element of successful intervention is a high level of consultation between the class teacher and the learning support/resource teacher. "Central to this consultation is the development, implementation and review of the IPLP" (p.43). Collaborative teaching is characterised in the research literature by the mainstream class teacher and the learning support/resource teacher working together, at times teaching together in the same classroom, and most importantly co-planning together to ensure collaboration (Levin & Rock, 2003). The research study has given rise to concern about how DES policy and resourcing of learning support can be made to work more effectively at the classroom level. Collaborative planning for reading support/intervention is a core integrative strategy to channel policy and

resourcing into effective teaching of reading for all children, but, especially, for those with difficulties.

There are many benefits which flow from collaborative planning. It employs assessment in a schedule of planning, implementing and evaluating how the individual needs of children are currently being met and how they will be served in future as each child's reading progress continues to be assessed on an on-going basis. Collaborative planning feeds into the child's IPLP, making it a work-in-progress document. Such co-planning needs to be formally structured into the school's teaching arrangements. It should ensure that the respective learning support/resource and classroom teachers complement each other's reading instruction, which should cater effectively for the children's individual reading needs, thus leading them to progress in learning to read. The assessment component facilitates the differentiation of reading material in learning support and in the classroom to suit the children and also the transfer of reading skills to the classroom. It is important to stress what is envisaged is a structured and scheduled collaborative planning that is based on assessment of children's reading needs. It does not rule out other forms of teacher collaboration such as interpersonal encounters/conferences that occur from time to time in the school day/week.

Collaborative planning is an organisational answer to the lack of connection between learning support and the classroom, which requires some structural changes at school level. It cannot operate without timetabled changes to facilitate the scheduled planning meetings, and classroom relief needs to be provided to allow class teachers to

engage in the exercise. These are small changes to ensure educational benefits for the children, the teachers, and, ultimately, for society. Collaborative planning is an integrative force, which can make an important contribution to raising reading standards within a school.

#### *5.4 Partnership in the Teaching of Reading*

Partnership in the provision of learning support is emphasised in the LSG. The roles that the principal teacher, class teacher, learning support/resource teacher, parents/guardians and children play in the process of teaching and learning to read are highlighted. The principal has overall responsibility for the school's learning support programme and is entrusted with the co-ordination of learning support and SEN services in the school in addition to supporting the teachers in their work. The class teacher has overall responsibility for the progress of all the children in his/her class, and has a particular responsibility to create a classroom environment in which learning difficulties can be alleviated or prevented. The main focus of the learning support/resource teacher is the provision of supplementary teaching to children either in their own classroom or in the learning support setting, and collaborating and consulting with principals, class teachers and parents/guardians. A role for children is envisioned in planning and monitoring their own learning in the LSG. It is envisaged that this will enable the children to become more independent as learners.

The research study investigated the role perceptions of the principals, teachers, parents/guardians and the children themselves in respect of the process of learning to read. In general, it was found that there was a need for greater understanding by the teachers of how the other teachers contributed to the support that the children were receiving. The views of learning support/resource and class teachers of each other's roles reflected a fragmentation in the overall support that they provided to the children. They saw themselves as having two very distinct roles, which did not necessarily overlap. In the researcher's opinion, this disparity can be linked to the LSG which gave the class teacher first line responsibility for teaching reading while consigning a support role for struggling readers to the learning support/resource teacher. The teachers had clearly endorsed these roles separately, without paying due heed to the need to connect and to collaborate.

The teachers viewed the parents/guardians to be supportive of the school's reading support/interventions for their children in the home. An issue arose that concerned how schools communicated with parents/guardians, who reported that they were unaware of the strategies that were used by the schools to teach their children. This contrasted with the recommendation of the LSG, which states that collaboration and sharing of relevant information between teachers and parents/guardians have been shown to be of critical importance, particularly when a child requires support in learning to read. The need for better communication between the school and the home is an area that the research study has highlighted.



The general view among teachers in the study schools was that parents/guardians play a vital role in helping their children to learn to read. The research literature shows a clear consensus that children's experiences at home profoundly influence their chances of success in school (Hess & Holloway, 1984; Epstein, 1996). Parents/guardians not only influence how much experience children have with books and other reading material, but also their familiarity with letters and sounds, the vocabulary they develop, and the reading and writing habits, opportunities and experiences that they have in and out of school (Goldenberg, 2004). The research study exemplified the importance of parents/guardians in the case of the RR programme, where they had signed up for the programme and they were very involved in supporting the child's reading at home. The learning support/resource teacher considered the parent/guardian's involvement in the RR reading programme to be fundamental to its success (Ms. Murphy, SC, 17/12/07). Given the acknowledgement of the vital role that parents/guardians play in supporting their children in learning to read, the challenge is how can schools include them in reading instruction, especially in the instruction of children who struggle to learn to read.

Intervention programmes that targeted specific strategies for parents/guardians to use with their children in areas of reading and writing have been shown to be effective in improving their children's reading achievement at school (Purcell-Gates, 2000; Senechal, 2006). One of the schools in the research (Scoil Chiarain) had a HSCL teacher who facilitated family reading initiatives, which encouraged parents and children to read together, and this was considered in the school to be of great benefit.

Such schemes could formalise parental/guardian involvement in partnerships that benefit children and support the work of the school. However, in the research study, the parent/guardian/school relationship, like that between the learning support/resource teacher and classroom teacher, was generally characterised by a lack of connection and needed to move to one of more collaboration.

Partnerships between schools/parents/guardians can lead to the education and upskilling of parents/guardians, and can enable them to support the child's reading in the home in a manner that complements the work being done in the school. It is worth noting that some parents/guardians may not be willing collaborators, bearing in mind that schools find it difficult to get the parents/guardians of some of the children who are most at risk of reading failure to come to parent/guardian/teacher meetings. Schools need to be creative within their own particular contexts in the manner in which they deal with this issue. The challenge that schools face in establishing the partnerships is not to be underestimated, but it promises much by way of optimising parental/guardian involvement in helping their children to learn to read.

It is advocated in the LSG that reading instruction should encourage children to take ownership of their reading skills and strategies and to contribute to the evaluation of their progress by participating in appropriate assessment activities. Children are to become "stakeholders in the learning process" (p.54). There was no observed emphasis on the children identifying with these roles in either the learning support or class setting, but they were reading books other than the class reader as well as reading at

home with their parents/guardians. Though the children in the research study were observed to maintain a very positive attitude to reading, this might have been enhanced if they had a greater involvement and contribution in their learning to read, giving them ownership of the process.

### *5.5. Conclusion*

Significant ideas to chart the future provision of learning support for struggling readers in first class emerged from the discussion of the research findings. The discussion would appear to suggest that Matland's (1995) experimental implementation model (Chapter Two) reflects how the schools implemented policy in supporting struggling readers to learn to read. "The central principle driving this type of implementation is that contextual conditions dominate the process. Outcomes depend heavily on the resources and actors present in the micro implementing environment" (Matland, 1995, p.166). In these situations, circumstantial factors, such as the availability of existing policy solutions and the presence of certain actors at a particular time and place, namely, principals and teachers, heavily influence the implementation process. Therefore, the emphasis in the conclusions/recommendations of the research needs to focus on how principals and teachers can be enabled to implement reading support policy more effectively.

The main outcomes which emerged for the discussion of the research findings are the need for greater connection between DES policy and implementation of school

planning, between planning and implementation of class and learning support teaching programmes, and between the support that the child receives in the school and in the home. A collaborative teaching approach is a core element in promoting effective reading support/intervention for struggling readers. The need to place assessment firmly at the centre of the collaborative teaching process was highlighted. Assessment is necessary to ensure that reading support is individualised to meet the needs of the child. Collaboration, assessment and individualisation are important factors which facilitate the transfer of reading skills across settings and enable children to become independent readers. The research also recognised that the schools valued the parents/guardians as a resource in supporting their children to read at home, but that their involvement would be enhanced by schools developing stronger school/parent/guardian partnerships.

The dominant skills/methods of reading instruction in the research study were practice in oral reading and practice in writing. There is a need to implement a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading. From the very beginning of learning to read, the child should be taught comprehension strategies and skills, and metacognition should be incorporated into all the areas of reading as needed.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 *Introduction*

The research study identified collaborative planning and teaching of reading by the learning support/resource and classroom teachers as a primary requirement if DES policy is to be implemented more effectively to support struggling readers in first class. The backdrop to the research conclusions is to be found in DES policy, especially as laid out in the LSG (2000), and in the availability of resources in the schools to deliver effective reading support/intervention for struggling readers. The research study has, however, identified weaknesses in aspects of policy implementation that need to be addressed if the delivery of reading support to the struggling readers is to be more effective. The conclusions of the research study focus on providing more guidance to schools to establish greater connection between the reading support that the children receive in learning support and in the classroom. Teachers need to be upskilled in the areas of collaborative planning and teaching to develop this connection. The recommended upskilling of the teachers includes the use of ongoing formative assessment to inform and to guide the teaching of reading so as to ensure that individual needs of children are reflected in the support that they receive. The conclusions also focus on the need for teachers to present important strategies and skills in additional aspects of reading, including metacognition and comprehension, and for schools to develop partnerships with the parents/guardians to help the children read at home. Hence, the research yields five recommendations.

## *6.2 Research Conclusions and Recommendations*

The research study established that the DES policy regarding learning support, outlined in the LSG (DES, 2000), is accepted at whole-school planning level and that teachers implemented it in a broad sense. However, issues arose in connection with the policy, which only emerged in its implementation at class level during the extensive observation. There was an over-emphasis on the withdrawal mode for supplementary teaching by the learning support/resource teacher, and a reliance on small group reading support which may not meet the individual needs of the child. The withdrawal of the children in small groups tended to foster a dependency culture on the teacher. There was an overall observed lack of connection between the work of the learning support/resource and class teachers, which affected the transfer of reading strategies and skills by the children from one setting to another, and the transfer of knowledge about the children's reading programmes and progress between the teachers.

The content, focus and purpose of the LSG are not in question. It is the way that schools have given priority to what they consider to be an effective means of organising learning support, namely, withdrawal, that must be addressed. The observed emphasis on providing learning support in isolation from classroom instruction works against the LSG concept of a support programme that is integrated in terms of approaches to teaching reading and provision of appropriate texts and activities. In over emphasising withdrawal and by failing to establish strong connections between learning support and the classroom, the schools have not provided the children with a holistic, connected

experience of reading support. Some updating of policy in terms of guiding schools and teachers to tackle the lack of connection in reading support at school level is required. Furthermore, this guidance needs to be disseminated at school level for all members of the school community, and the Principal needs to take responsibility for ensuring that the connection is established. Therefore, recommendation one states that *the DES needs to update its policies to provide schools, learning support/resource teachers and class teachers with further guidelines and guidance to enable them to successfully support children who struggle to learn to read. Professional development and a range of practical examples need to be provided with reference to implementing the guidelines at class level. Areas to be addressed should emphasise the connected nature of reading support, alternative classroom teaching arrangements to support struggling readers, for example, flexible co-operative grouping and team teaching models, and also teaching methodologies such as differentiation.*

The first recommendation is underpinned by three factors: collaboration, assessment and individualisation. They combine in a collaborative planning/teaching approach, which uses assessment to ensure individualisation of the reading support to meet the needs of the child. The LSG support collaborative planning: “The level of collaboration between the learning support teacher and the class teacher is crucial” (p.46). Collaboration provides the connection between policy and implementation at the class level. It is needed to replace the observed separation of teaching roles of the learning support/resource and class teachers, which can be explained by the interpretation/misinterpretation of their respective roles with regard to the teaching of

reading. It was never the intention of the LSG to have the teachers adopt distinctively different and separated teaching roles. The lack of connection between the work of the class teacher and the learning support/resource teacher has emerged from this interpretation/misinterpretation.

The second recommendation proposes to promote collaborative planning and teaching of reading. Such collaboration has many benefits for the teaching/learning of reading, one of which is to facilitate the transfer of reading strategies and skills between learning support and the classroom. Hence, recommendation two states that *the connection between learning support and mainstream class settings in supporting children as they learn to read needs to be clarified and strengthened. To this end, school practice at classroom level needs to reflect the collaborative practices between the learning support/resource teachers and class teachers that are recommended in the LSG, and guidance needs to be provided for learning support/resource and class teachers to enable them to develop and to sustain collaborative practices. These practices need to be incorporated into the updating of policy documents. Collaborative planning (and, sometimes, teaching) should focus on the specific areas of reading to be targeted and the teaching methods to be employed by the learning support/resource and class teachers. This planning should aim to ensure that reading strategies and skills transfer effectively between instructional settings, specifying opportunities and contexts in which children are expected to demonstrate the transfer of their reading strategies and skills.*



The use of ongoing, documented, formative assessment of children's reading is needed to ensure that the collaborative planning/teaching approach leads to the individualisation of reading support to meet their needs. The approach is intended to implement an assessment cycle of planning, implementing and evaluating the children's progress in learning to read (Lerner, 2003). Assessment enables collaborative planning and teaching to implement individualised reading instruction programmes that are appropriate for each child within the particular teaching context, be it one-to-one, small group or whole class teaching. It becomes an integral part of the child's IPLP. It is evident from the research study that assessment is clearly an area in which professional development, based on the *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* document (NCCA, 2007), would benefit teachers by improving their competence in assessing children's ongoing reading needs. Therefore, recommendation three states that *assessment as a teaching strategy should be used in reading instruction with reference to the importance of individualising the support that children receive to meet their unique needs. Furthermore, formal and informal assessment should be systematically incorporated and documented in the teaching/learning reading process by the learning support/resource and class teachers, thus providing more effective support for the children who struggle to learn to read. The teachers should avail of professional development in the formal and informal assessment of children's reading needs.*

The research study was about the learning-to-read process. It was identified that a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading is necessary in order to support not

only children who have difficulties with learning to read but also children of all abilities. The children in learning support learned more skills than strategies for reading, accompanied by what appeared to be an insufficient emphasis on comprehension and on developing metacognition in all the areas of reading. Though comprehension and metacognition are as much a part of learning to read as are the more basic reading skills, their near omission by some learning support/resource and class teachers may have been born out of a concern that the children acquire the basic word-level skills first. It may indicate a serial rather than a holistic understanding of reading development. The need to broaden teachers' understanding of the process of teaching reading with reference to a balanced approach to reading (Pressley, 2002) is highlighted by the research findings, and should be addressed at the pre-service teacher education level and at professional development courses. Therefore, recommendation four states that *the learning support/resource and class teachers should employ a balanced approach in the teaching of reading to children of all abilities. Furthermore, the approach that is used to support children in first class should reflect the children's individual reading needs and should incorporate the acquisition of word attack skills, phonological awareness, phonics, sight vocabulary along with the development of reading fluency, the integration of reading/writing, comprehension and metacognition.*

The LSG support the implementation of school/parent/guardian partnership to enable schools to benefit from the involvement of parents/guardians in the reading support that is provided for their children. An important factor in ensuring the effectiveness of such partnership is the informing and upskilling of parents/guardians

by schools, so that they can support their children learning to read in the home in a manner which complements how the schools teach reading. Therefore, recommendation five states that *schools need to develop school/parent/guardian partnership to expand support for the school reading programmes to the children's homes. Such partnership should operate under whole-school policies and involve upskilling the parents/guardians to complement school reading instruction at home.*

The recommendations are listed in Appendix 17.

### 6.3 Conclusion

The research study of how children with reading difficulties learned to read in first class encompassed over 85 hours of teaching/learning observation. Though conducted on a group of seven struggling readers in four schools, it has implications for how more effective reading support can be provided, planned and taught on a wide scale because what the researcher observed may be applicable to other schools. It made practical recommendations about improving the implementation of DES reading support policy at the teaching level. Based on the practices that were observed in the schools, a proposal for greater collaborative planning and teaching of reading instruction was made to ensure more effective reading support for the children.

The research study demonstrated the usefulness of classroom observation to gain insight into how children who struggle with learning to read were taught in

learning support and in classroom settings. The observation data were triangulated with interviews and document analysis, and they were subject to objective analysis and professional interpretation. The research captured the process of teaching and learning reading.

Sufficiently rich data have been provided to allow schools to judge whether the research findings are transferable to their own contexts. The research study can be used as a platform for further research in such areas as investigating the building of effective collaborative planning and teaching models of reading in schools, strengthening the teaching of comprehension and metacognition in reading for beginning and emergent readers, the effective use of assessment in reading instruction, countering the development of a dependency culture in learning support reading instruction, promoting strategies for individualising reading instruction in mainstream classrooms, and, finally, developing effective school/parent/guardian partnerships.

The research has enriched the researcher and added to her understanding and insight into reading and reading support. The process of completing the research dissertation has been characterised by a vast amount of learning, professional development and personal growth for the researcher, and it has resulted in a great sense of satisfaction and achievement.

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