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'We all have to do our bit': literacy practice, perceptions and policy in Irish primary and post-primary schools

Patrick Burke 

School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Over a decade has passed since the publication and enactment of the first National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS; Department of Education and Skills. 2011. *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills). This paper provides insights into the reality of its enactment across a range of primary and post-primary settings. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews ($n=30$) and quantitative data from a survey ($n=455$) of primary and post-primary teachers, the paper charts commonalities and differences across these two sectors. Qualitative data indicated that the NLNS was successful in putting literacy on the agenda, with a range of consequent policy and practices reported by teachers. The teaching of literacy tended to be grounded in largely traditional conceptualisations of print-based reading and writing, with limited reference to digital or multimodal practices. Quantitative data highlighted the divergence of opinions between teachers from both sectors, particularly in relation to students' literacy skills on entry to post-primary school and in DEIS settings. As policymakers prepare for the enactment of a successor strategy (Government of Ireland. 2024a. *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024–2033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood*. Dublin: Government of Ireland), the paper concludes by addressing implications for the next decade of literacy-focussed policy in Irish schools.

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Introduction

Ahh ... literacy ... It is your ability to communicate. It is your ability to ... to read important documentation. It is your ability to answer emails, to answer letters ... if they still exist [*laughter*]. As I said it's, it's a huge part of everyday life.

The quote above, the words of a post-primary art teacher, capture the importance, the affordances and the complexities of literacy as an ever-changing construct. Considered

CONTACT Patrick Burke  patrick.j.burke@dcu.ie  School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, DCU St Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, D09 DY00, Ireland
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a ‘basic human right and a matter of social justice’ (International Literacy Association n.d.-b, para. 1), literacy is an important goal of education systems around the world and remains a core component of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. As a critical objective of any school system, literacy demands commensurate attention in educational policy. The current paper examines the practices and perceptions of primary and post-primary teachers at an advanced stage of implementing Ireland’s National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS; Department of Education and Skills 2023). Given the recent publication of the successor strategy (2024–2033; Government of Ireland 2024a), the paper provides a timely analysis. The paper addresses conceptualisations of literacy, its relationship with the broader curriculum and the major challenges and influences encountered in its teaching. Particular attention is afforded to the teaching and learning of literacy in the transition from primary to post-primary school, given the emphasis on ‘seamless’ literacy transitions throughout the education system (Department of Education and Skills 2023).

Literacy across the primary and post-primary school: conceptualisations and practices internationally

For some time, the view that literacy can be considered an ‘autonomous’ skill, realisable and observable *independently* of a particular culture, has come under considerable scrutiny (Street 1995), with theorists proposing, instead, that it should be considered as ‘a set of socially organised practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it’ (Scribner and Cole 1981, 236). The context-dependent and wide-ranging nature of literacy is recognised in the definitions employed by supra-national organisations. For example, UNESCO (n.d.) defines literacy as ‘the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts’. The pervasive impact of technology means that how we communicate continues to change with the advent of new platforms, devices and ways of interacting with print-based and multimodal texts (Coiro et al. 2008). The pluralisation of the term to *literacies*, acknowledges different manifestations in varying social circumstances and contexts (International Literacy Association n.d.-a). Literacy can be conceptualised in different ways and studied from multiple angles.

Despite the expansion of literacy beyond traditional print in much of the literature, foundational literacy skills continue to be crucial for children’s success. A very large focus has been placed on the skills associated with phonics and word recognition in recent years. The *science of reading* generally refers to robust interdisciplinary research findings on the teaching and learning of literacy (Goodwin and Jiménez 2021), but the term is subject to varied and contested interpretations. In the US, this movement has led to critical public commentary on literacy standards and pedagogical practice, particularly as it relates to word recognition (Hanford 2019; Mervosh 2023), leading to legislative intervention in some states (Schwartz 2022). This move mirrors similar developments in other English-speaking countries like Australia and the UK. Commentary in the Irish context has questioned the extent to which there is full alignment with the findings commonly highlighted in the science of reading literature, with notable negative appraisal of approaches such as Reading Recovery and Literacy Lift Off at primary level (Buckingham 2024; Horgan 2022). In their review to inform the successor NLNS strategy, Kennedy et al. (2023)

endorse the key tenets of the science of reading (e.g. systematic and structured literacy teaching) while underscoring the need for balance in the *range* of literacy skills taught.

Research on reading in the later years takes on different manifestations. Much of the literature on adolescent literacy has used somewhat alarmist language. Alexander and Fox (2010) surmised that the increased attention to adolescent literacy was due to a general concern for students at risk, with much of the literature focusing on ‘adolescents as endangered readers and, thus, endangered learners’ (p.157). This focus is not unique to the US, with similarly pressing missives appearing on this side of the Atlantic (e.g. ‘Adolescent Literacy in Europe – An Urgent Call for Action’; Sulkunen 1995). Of particular note for the current review is the recent interest in *disciplinary* literacy, which refers to the specialised ways in which reading, writing and oral language are used in disciplines such as science, history and English (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Research and theory in this area emphasise the importance of teaching the literacy skills needed to engage deeply with the subject matter and modes of inquiry unique to each discipline (Goldman et al. 2016). This conceptualisation of literacy is seen as an organic way of thinking about how literacy is practised by subject specialist teachers at post-primary level (Moje 2008). Consequently, disciplinary literacy is an important feature of literacy teaching for adolescents. However, teaching children to use literacy in the service of learning in subjects across the curriculum is not the sole reserve of the adolescent years. A growing body of research adopts a disciplinary framing for teaching literacy in earlier years (Wright and Gotwals 2017; Burke and Kennedy 2024).

What we mean by ‘literacy’ continues to change. How literacy is practised continues needs ongoing attention. The following section turns to these considerations at the national level.

From ‘black mark’ to ‘outlier’: literacy developments in the national sphere

Reporting on literacy achievement in Irish schools has taken something of a rollercoaster ride over the past fifteen years. On its face, the 2009 PISA report for Ireland suggested a substantial decline in teenagers’ reading achievement (Perkins et al. 2010). Labelled a ‘black mark’ by the soon-to-be Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn (Flynn 2010), the findings provided an impetus for the substantial changes encapsulated in the NLNS (Department of Education and Skills 2023). Conway (2013) argued that the 2009 PISA results caused a ‘cultural flashpoint’ that led to ‘the emergence of a teaching crisis discourse [as] a new feature in the politics of teaching and teacher education in Ireland’ (55). The scale and nature of subsequent changes were vigorously contested and debated in public commentary and scholarly outputs (Kennedy 2013). Indeed, the Strategy was highlighted as one of the most visible manifestations of not only political interference, but an increasing neoliberal influence in Irish education, given its association with a global policy actor (the OECD), its perceived narrow focus and its introduction of new accountability measures (Ball 2016; Mooney Simmie 2012). The Strategy itself captured some of the expanse of what is meant by ‘literacy’ (Department of Education and Skills 2023, 8), defining it as the ‘capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media’. However, its accountability measures focussed on the

centralised of standardised test results in only one of these modalities: print-based reading comprehension.

At primary level, in addition to the requirement to report aggregate standardised test results to the department for the first time, actions included a sustained focus on school improvement in literacy through the newly mandated School Self-Evaluation (SSE) guidelines (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate 2012). It also called for a re-allocation of curricular time to literacy. These actions were not welcomed by all. Ó Breacháin and O'Toole (2013) argued that the prioritisation of literacy (and numeracy) would undermine the 'broad and balanced' of the 1999 curriculum, while Dowling Long (2015) emphasised the 'threat' posed to arts in the curriculum by potential teaching to the test. Subsequent research has shown that the Strategy successfully placed literacy on the agenda in schools (Kavanagh et al. 2015), but its broader curricular impact has been less clear.

The publication of the NLNS was a particularly important milestone for literacy teaching at post-primary level. Murphy (2018) contends that the Strategy was one of the first official policy documents to formally recognise that literacy learning is an endeavour that spans beyond the primary sector. The Strategy required an increased focus on literacy in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Through SSE (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate 2012), post-primary schools were to identify and implement targets for improved literacy teaching and learning across subject departments. This foregrounding of literacy would not be easily achieved. Data collected before the implementation of the Strategy revealed that post-primary teachers held relatively narrow conceptualisations of what literacy is, how it might be taught and who held responsibility for its teaching (Mac Mahon 2014). Notably, the literature on disciplinary literacy teaching in post-primary subjects left little trace on the Strategy's focus at this level.

The NLNS left a readily discernible mark on the pace and nature of curricular reform in both sectors. For example, in line with specific actions associated with the NLNS, the Primary Language Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills 2015b; 2019) was articulated as a set of *learning outcomes* for the first time and adopted ahead of the timeline for the broader review of the primary school curriculum. The Junior Cycle Framework (Department of Education and Skills 2015a) highlighted 'Being Literate' as a key skill to be embedded across all subject specifications. Though a formal review has yet to be carried out, research on the early enactment of the Primary Language Curriculum has highlighted implementation challenges (Mac Domhnaill and Nic an Bhaird 2022; McGarry 2017; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2018), which have been echoed in the early review of the Junior Cycle also (McGarr et al. 2022).

The impetus for whole-scale literacy reform can be reviewed with the benefit of hindsight and expanded research evidence. The 2009 'PISA Shock' turned out to be more of a short-lived surprise than a sustained summary of literacy teaching and learning in Irish schools. Technical analyses of PISA 2009 subsequently confirmed a drop in overall achievement, but underlined that the size of drop may have been overestimated due to statistical scaling procedures and the way in which non-attempts were treated (LaRoche and Cartwright 2023; Shiel et al. 2022). The ambitious goals for literacy achievement set out in the NLNS had been largely achieved by the time of the

interim review six years later (Department of Education and Skills 2017a). Irish 15 year olds returned to the higher rankings in subsequent rounds of PISA, with the 2009 Irish results being later labelled as an anomalous ‘outlier’ (Shiel et al. 2022). Performance on the most recent international assessment of reading literacy placed Irish students in the upper echelons of performance internationally (Delaney et al. 2023; Donohue et al. 2023). This is not to say that scope for further improvement does not exist, particularly when the achievement gap between children in disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools is examined (Delaney et al. 2023). Yet, at a headline level, the less-than-favourable public narrative around Irish students’ literacy achievement was flipped in a short period of time. That this crisis narrative was based on a likely over-extrapolation and under-interpretation of one set of international test results must be borne in mind when considering this perceived change in fortunes.

This period of reform demonstrates that conceptualising and operationalising literacy policy is a complex and contested process. The genesis of the NLNS demonstrates that the educational problem that any policy intends to ‘solve’ is one that is actively identified and framed by policy-makers and other policy actors (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Ball 2021). Studying policy requires consideration of far more than the text of the PDF that is launched by a minister, uploaded to the Department website and subsequently flagged in emails and social media posts. A non-linear relationship exists between policy and its enactment in a school or classroom; it is ‘made and remade’ by individuals and groups across many sites (Ball 2021, 12). Consequently, though policy can be considered as the ‘text’ published by a government department, policy also involves the ‘discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 3). The rest of this paper examines *how* teachers carried out this interpretation and enactment during the course of the NLNS.

Methodology

Data for the current paper were gathered as part of a larger, multi-phase, mixed methods doctoral study (Creswell 2014) of literacy across the curriculum and school sectors (Burke 2022). The portion of findings reported in this paper addresses the following research questions in particular:

1. How do primary and post-primary teachers conceptualise and teach literacy in their respective school sectors and the disciplines therein?
2. How has the focus on literacy in national policy influenced its relationship with the broader curriculum?

Two main data sources are used to answer these questions. First, qualitative data from in-depth interviews with primary and post-primary teachers are presented. This data set was generated as part of Phase 1 of the broader study. Second, data are presented from a targeted questionnaire containing a series of researcher-designed items. These questionnaire items were administered as part of a survey in Phase 2 of the broader study, informed by data gathered in Phase 1. Ethical permission for the research was sought and granted from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Phase 1: semi-structured Interviews

This phase of the study employed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to understand how teachers conceptualised and practised literacy in their classrooms.

To examine the transition from primary to post-primary school, a particular focus was placed on recruiting teachers of fifth and sixth class at primary level alongside teachers with experience of Junior Cycle teaching at post-primary level. Following the principles of stratified purposive sampling (Creswell 2014), teachers from a variety of settings and school sizes were recruited. In practice, participants for this phase were selected as follows:

1. Letters of invitation were sent to the principals of both primary and post-primary schools (representing a variety of school sizes/demographics) in the broader geographical location of the researcher. Principals were asked to share these letters with relevant teachers in their school, i.e. teachers of fifth and sixth classes at primary level and teachers of all subjects (not just English) at post-primary level.
2. Follow-up phone calls were placed to principals offering a further explanation of the study and seeking expressions of interest.
3. Individual teachers made direct contact with the researcher, or, where permitted, the researcher contacted teachers using details provided by the principal.

The above strategy alone left a dearth of participants from DEIS schools and an under-representation of post-primary teachers. Therefore, additional contact was made with post-primary teachers via a post-primary teacher support network housed in the researcher's institution and further invitations were issued via school contacts known professionally to the researcher. Demographic information for these teachers and identifying codes are detailed in Table 1 (primary teachers) and

Table 1. Phase 1 primary teacher demographics.

Code	Gender	Mode of ITE ^a	Further Qualifications	DEIS Status ^b	Years of experience	School Denomination	School Size ^c	% EAL ^d
P-1	Female	B.Ed		DEIS	3	Catholic	100–199	60
P-2	Female	B.Ed	M.Ed	DEIS	14	Catholic	200–299	60
P-3	Female	B.Ed	Cert / Diploma	DEIS	28	Catholic	200–299	5
P-4	Female	B.Ed	Cert / Diploma	DEIS	14	Catholic	200–299	0
P-5	Male	Dip/PME	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	7	Catholic	300–399	2
P-6	Female	B.Ed		Non-DEIS	21	Catholic	700–799	20
P-7	Female	B.Ed		Non-DEIS	10	Catholic	300–399	1
P-8	Male	Dip/PME		Non-DEIS	10	Catholic	300–399	3
P-9	Female	B.Ed	Cert / Diploma	Non-DEIS	17	Catholic	400–499	3
P-10	Male	B.Ed		Non-DEIS	6	Multi-denominational	400–499	80
P-11	Female	Dip/PME		Non-DEIS	7	Multi-denominational	400–499	80
P-12	Female	B.Ed		Non-DEIS	6	Multi-denominational	500–599	60
P-13	Female	Dip/PME		Non-DEIS	11	Catholic	200–299	10
P-14	Male	Dip/PME	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	14	Catholic	200–299	0
P-15	Female	B.Ed		Non-DEIS	4	Catholic	100–199	0

^aInitial Teacher Education.

^bDEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is the governmental scheme to address educational disadvantage.

^cProvided in categories as the actual number could identify the school.

^dEnglish as an Additional Language; this is an estimate provided by the teacher.

Table 2 (post-primary teachers). Qualitative data analysis for this phase adopted constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), assisted by the use of NVivo software.

Phase 2: survey

This phase of the research followed up on a select number of findings from Phase 1, following the principles of a sequential exploratory design (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). Though the broader survey (Burke 2022) also measured teachers' sense of efficacy for literacy instruction, the data reported in this paper focuses on teacher attitudes and perceptions. Broadly speaking, the survey design and dissemination drew on the tailored design method advised by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2012).

The questionnaire was formatted and distributed using Qualtrics software. Section 1 of the questionnaire gathered demographic information (e.g. school sector, gender, qualifications). Section 2 involved a limited number of Likert scale items that could be answered cross-sectorally, meaning both a primary and post-primary teacher could respond to the same item. Iterative rounds of piloting were conducted on the instrument with a panel of eight participants (four for each sector). The final ten items addressed teachers' opinions on the impact of curriculum and policy change on literacy, students' abilities to succeed in literacy, and how literacy is prioritised across both sectors. Primary teachers responded to one additional item regarding how often they exceed the allocated weekly time for literacy.

The survey was distributed by email to all public primary and post-primary schools listed on the Department of Education website. The school recipient (e.g. secretary, principal) was asked to share the link to the survey with relevant teachers; i.e. teachers of fifth and sixth class at primary level and teachers across the curriculum (i.e. not just *English* teachers) at post-primary level. A follow-up thank you/reminder email was distributed to schools one week later. Following data cleaning, the final included 455 participants, comprising 256 primary (56.26%) and 199 post-primary (43.73%) teachers. Most respondents taught in English medium schools ($n = 423$, 92.97%), which is in line with the distribution of teachers working through English in the 2020/2021 school year¹ (91.92%). The sample was predominantly female ($n = 362$, 79.56%), also in line with the profile of teachers reported by the Teaching Council nationally in 2019.² Teachers in DEIS schools numbered 138 (30.32%), which is also broadly in line with the teacher allocation to DEIS schools nationally³ (24.68%). A mix of qualification levels was represented, with the majority being qualified to bachelor's level ($n = 236$, 51.87%) and 163 (35.82%) qualified to master's level. These and other demographic figures are presented alongside a sectoral breakdown in **Table 3**.

Descriptive and inferential statistics for each item were computed and reported separately. Following a review of the distribution of responses for each item, and in line with the advice of Harpe (2015), non-parametric tests were adopted for inferential analysis. Data from mixed methods designs can be integrated in a variety of ways, including at the *design*, *methods* and *interpreting/reporting stages* (Fetters, Curry, and Creswell 2013). In the current study, the primary method of integration took place at the latter stage. This synthesis deliberately sought to focus not just on convergence in findings but what Bazeley (2018) refers to as 'dissonance and divergence': 'Perhaps the aim is not to produce a tidy picture, but to allow for the messiness and tensions that exist in social reality' (268).

Table 2. Phase 1 post-primary teacher demographics.

Code	Gender	Subject(s)	Mode of ITE ^a	Further Quals	DEIS Status ^b	Years of experience	School Denomination	School Size ^c	% EAL ^d
PP-A	Female	English	HDip/PME	MA	Non-DEIS	10	Catholic	800-900	0
PP-B	Male	History; Religion	HDip/PME		Non-DEIS	17	Catholic	700-799	0
PP-C	Female	Science; Biology; Maths	HDip/PME	Cert/ Diploma	Non-DEIS	35	Catholic	200-299	1
PP-D	Female	French; Geography	HDip/PME		Non-DEIS	20	Catholic	200-299	1
PP-E	Female	English; Religion	Undergrad.	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	14	Catholic	200-299	2
PP-F	Female	History; SPHE; CSPE	HDip/PME		Non-DEIS	6	Catholic	200-299	2
PP-G	Female	Art	HDip/PME		Non-DEIS	20	Catholic	200-299	2
PP-H	Female	English; Gaelige	HDip/PME		DEIS	24	Catholic	400-499	6
PP-I	Male	Art	HDip/PME		Non-DEIS	12	Catholic	700-799	0
PP-J	Female	English; Religion	HDip/PME	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	29	Multi-denominational	1000+	10
PP-K	Female	SET; History; CSPE	HDip/PME	Dip Special Ed	Non-DEIS	15	Multi-denominational	1000+	15
PP-L	Female	Maths; PE; SPHE	Undergrad.		Non-DEIS	19	Multi-denominational	1000+	15
PP-M	Female	French; English	HDip/PME	PhD	Non-DEIS	9	Catholic	600-699	2
PP-N	Female	English; Guidance	HDip/PME	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	34	Catholic	600-699	2
PP-O	Female	Science; Home Ec. Guidance	HDip/PME	M.Ed	Non-DEIS	31	Catholic	700-799	0

^aInitial Teacher Education; PME = Professional Master of Education; HDip = Higher Diploma in Education.

^bDEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is the governmental scheme to address educational disadvantage.

^cProvided in categories as the actual number could identify the school.

^dEnglish as an Additional Language; this is an estimate provided by the teacher.

Table 3. Profile of participants in Phase 2.

	Overall		Primary		Post-primary	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Medium of Instruction						
English	423	92.97	238	92.97	185	92.96
Irish	31	6.81	18	7.03	13	6.53
Not indicated	1	.22	0	0	1	.5
Gender						
Male	91	20	46	17.97	45	22.61
Female	362	79.56	210	82.03	152	76.38
Other / Not indicated	1	.22	0	0	1	.5
Highest Qualification Level						
Bachelor	238	51.87	155	60.55	81	40.7
Masters	163	35.82	70	27.34	93	46.73
Doctorate	8	1.76	4	1.56	4	2.01
Other (e.g. Diploma)	46	10.11	26	10.16	20	10.05
Not indicated	2	.44	1	.39	1	.5
Teaching in a DEIS school						
DEIS	138	30.33	69	26.95	69	34.67
Non-DEIS	317	69.67	187	73.05	130	65.33
EAL estimation						
<10%	331	72.75	181	70.7	150	75.38
10–50%	110	24.18	63	24.61	47	23.62
>50%	13	2.86	12	4.69	1	.5
Not indicated	1	.22	0	0	1	.5

Note: The percentages for primary and post-primary teachers are expressed as a percentage of the respective school sectors, not of the overall sample.

Interview findings

Conceptualising literacy

Teachers in this sample primarily viewed literacy in traditional terms. When asked directly to define literacy, it was often associated with print:

To me, it would be reading [...]. More or less reading books is what I would say ... (P-8)

Anything with the written word would be for me ... but basically it would be something with written down, words on a page or on a screen or in a book. (PP-C)

When speaking about literacy, it was clear from most teachers, particularly post-primary teachers, that they associate literacy with basic skills such as punctuation, grammar and spelling. Some teachers extended into the oral mode, referencing speaking, listening, oral expression, and ‘being articulate’ (PP-L), though these references usually *followed* references to reading and writing. Teachers’ conceptualisations of text were also, in the main, of the more traditional kind. The majority instanced examples of print-based resources, such as books and newspapers, or aspects of print-based resources, such as the ‘written word’ (PP-N). This typical pattern is illustrated in the following example: ‘I suppose I would think of a newspaper, I would think of a book, I would think of information, I would think of where you’ll find written text’ (P-9). A small number of teachers provided more expansive interpretations of literacy. For example, PP-A, an English teacher, extended her definition of literacy to include visual modes:

I think that it’s the ability to, to extract meaning or to decode meaning from, I suppose, I would have said the written word, but I’ve mentioned visual literacy to you so I think it’s far more than that

A degree of suspicion was evident when teachers commented on broader or more modern conceptions of literacy. For example, PP-J commented that ‘sometimes you can be a little bit cynical about how you know that word is becoming’, before going on to say, ‘what other kind of literacy are they going to introduce? You know ... it kind of dilutes the whole thing ...’

Teachers were very clear on the *importance* of literacy development. This was seen in the language used by many teachers when attesting to its significance, with many contributions on the matter being prefaced with terms like ‘absolutely’ (PP-J), ‘hugely’ (PP-H), ‘without a doubt’ (PP-O), ‘crucial’ (P-3) and ‘extremely important’ (P-6). This certainty was evident throughout the interviews with both primary and post-primary teachers. The fact that there was no difference in how teachers from both sectors valued literacy is noteworthy, given previous research suggests it is (or was) a low-level priority for post-primary teachers (Mac Mahon 2014; Murphy et al. 2014).

Literacy and the broader curriculum

Across both sectors, teachers saw literacy as a capacity that *should* have close connections with learning in the broader curriculum. Primary teachers spoke about the benefits of integrating literacy, indicating that it ‘makes literacy more fun’ (P-15). They spoke about the use of literacy skills in subjects like history and geography as not only a natural occurrence but something that cannot be avoided: ‘it’s very hard to teach any other subject without integrating it with literacy’ (P-6). However, meaningful integration was seen to require extensive planning, as noted by P-13: ‘If you’re teaching something in history, and you’re explicitly teaching that, what literacy skill are you explicitly teaching in that as well? You need to be very organised, I think’.

Post-primary teachers also largely supported integrating literacy with subject-based learning, at least in principle. Most post-primary teachers indicated that resistance to the ‘every teacher a teacher of literacy’ stance had diminished significantly in recent years, in large part due to the NLNS:

... I think we all have to take ownership as well, because it underpins everything in every subject, so I think we all have to do our bit for it. It’s not just leave it to the English teacher or whoever. I think we all have to be part of it. (PP-O *Science/Home Ec/Guidance*)

However, these positive views were not universal. Though it was not representative of the majority of responses, the following quote from one post-primary teacher is nonetheless illuminating:

Researcher: So when the emphasis is put on we’ll say embedding literacy across all the different subjects, do you think that’s a good thing or not so good thing?
 PP-H: Not so good thing
 Researcher: Ok. And why?
 PP-H: I think that in secondary school it’s too late. I think they need to go back, back to the drawing board, go into the primary schools and put some kind of a programme in place.

This teacher’s thoughts were more in line with the findings of previous studies, such as that of Mac Mahon (2014), which found that post-primary teachers did not see literacy teaching as part of their role. However, it also sheds light on the genuine challenge

encountered by post-primary teachers in supporting children who have not acquired at least *basic* literacy proficiency before leaving primary school.

The importance of literacy was such that, for many primary teachers, it took precedence over other areas of learning in the curriculum. This is captured in stark terms in the following quotes:

I think some teachers feel really really pressured ... no no no no no. I have to start with Drama and work my way up the least priority lessons and Literacy and Maths and Irish are at the top and I have to get all those done and I don't drop, I drop from the bottom ... (P-12)

I don't do religion every day. Literacy versus the Holy Spirit ... That's a no brainer for me. (P-3)

The prioritisation of literacy was particularly true for primary teachers in DEIS schools, who spoke about the dominance of literacy in the curriculum: '... the way literacy has gone in a lot of schools now particularly DEIS ... Everything is about literacy. (P-2)'

The question of curricular priorities is inextricably linked with time allocations at primary level. Mirroring previous research (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2010), teachers regularly referred to the crowded nature of the curriculum. However, on the basis of this sample, literacy generally won out in the battle for instructional time. These findings add some empirical weight to the concerns about curricular integrity expressed previously (Ó Breacháin and O'Toole 2013).

Challenges and influences in teaching literacy

Inclusion

Both post-primary and primary teachers spoke at length about the challenges of providing inclusive teaching for students with varying literacy achievement levels. At post-primary level, this variation produced different challenges in different subjects. The common misconception that literacy skills are not needed in art gave rise to difficulties, as teacher PP-G illustrated:

in Junior Cycle they tend to put students who would be struggling in [to art], if you get me. So maybe a few weeks in you might get some new students in your class. Why? They're struggling with something else. They're not able for the 'academic'.

Most post-primary teachers indicated an awareness of students who had specific diagnoses that impacted literacy learning in their classrooms. Some teachers indicated specific ways in which they supported these students:

But for a student with dyslexia they're still going to struggle to read it. So that is a barrier to that kind of a task. But there's ways ... I mean the teacher can get around it with that student if they know that that's the case. You can give it to them in a different form like that's more visual or read it out loud with the class if it's a class where a lot of the students struggle like that. (PP-A)

Other practices that teachers cited included the employment of scribes for examinations (PP-C), reducing the amount of vocabulary to be learned (PP-O), providing extra support within the class (PP-O; PP-F) and varying questioning (PP-F). By far the greatest level of nuance in tailoring literacy instruction was demonstrated by PP-K, who had

experience as a SET teacher (alongside history and CSPE). Post-primary teachers tended to rely on ‘breaking things down’, or a variation of this phase, as their means of supporting diverse literacy learners. More specific forms of differentiation were largely absent. Primary teachers adopted more nuanced approaches to tailor their instruction to accommodate literacy needs. They spoke at length about school programmes such as small group literacy instruction and Literacy Lift Off, which, in their view, supported differentiated literacy teaching. Thus, there was something of a sectoral gap between the supports offered for students encountering literacy challenges, but the stark lack of differentiation identified in previous studies of post-primary schools (Murphy, Conway, and Murphy 2014; Mac Mahon 2014) was not replicated in the current study. It should be noted, however, that some of the differentiation practices commonly cited by primary teachers (e.g Literacy Lift Off; ability grouping) have come under considerable scrutiny in the more recent research literature (Buckingham 2024; McGillicuddy 2021).

The influence of state examinations

Post-primary teachers’ literacy considerations were driven by one principal factor: state examinations. Where literacy was necessary for success in an examination or assessment, it received considerable focus. This could be seen, for example, in the level of attention given to the use of visual language in art:

- PP-I: And they can’t use words like ‘the thing’ or the ‘yoke’ or ‘I did this’. They have to use the language given to them or they’re penalised. So it is, I think it is a step in the right direction in terms of literacy and it helps them engage ...
- Researcher: And when you’re saying that it’s being pushed or encouraged a lot, who is it that’s kind of ...
- PP-I: NCCA. The JCT. There are, there’s a percentage of marks going for their ability to use the visual art language.

Interestingly, exam considerations, rather than heightening disciplinary expertise, was a prime influence on practice. Previous exam papers drove a teacher’s focus in planning and teaching literacy. Teaching examination key words was an important enterprise for many of the post-primary teachers interviewed. In contrast, it appeared that in subjects where literacy skills were not rewarded with marks in the examination, it did not receive focus:

I will correct it [literacy mistakes] if I can and there’s times when I just don’t. You know what I mean? I don’t feel it’s my responsibility because I don’t feel it’s what the examiner is looking for and I suppose I am always exam-goal focused, like, which maybe I shouldn’t be. (PP-B; *History/Religion*)

It is noteworthy that though disciplines like history and science *do* have associated genres of writing and modes of creating arguments, these did not appear to receive any major consideration in the contributions of the post-primary teachers in this sample.

Technology

The influence that technology has on literacy development and teaching received widespread, regular and predominantly negative comment throughout all interviews at both primary and post-primary level. One of the primary concerns that teachers noted was the declining interest in, and volume of, reading that students were undertaking. Some

teachers indicated that the volume of technology use at home was such that it was having a negative impact on oral expression:

So I would say oral language probably to me, something that I've seen is gone backwards I would think a lot like from being maybe engrossed in screens, do you know what I mean? (P-8)

Others spoke with a great sense of concern about the impact technology is having on student attention span, and its consequent impact on literacy learning:

And that is very worrying with students who are so used to kind of, even in terms of attention, their attention span, so used to composing bite-sized chunks but also reading smaller amounts of texts that when it comes to being in class and having to read longer texts, I do kind of worry about that aspect of literacy. (PP-M)

Based on the researcher's experience of conducting the interviews and based on analysis of the transcripts, it was notable that some of the teachers' strongest statements were made while expounding on the negative impacts of technology.

National policy

At a policy level, the significant influence of the NLNS was evidenced in the experiences recounted by all teachers at both levels. At post-primary level, specific changes in practice were attributed to the Strategy, with the most notable approach being the presentation of key-words and the use of word walls. The research on disciplinary literacy was not well reflected in their accounts of practice, with a tendency for generic approaches such as reading programmes like 'Book in the Bag' or 'Drop Everything and Read'. The impetus provided by the Strategy was reinforced by School Self-Evaluation (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate 2012) measures, with some teachers talking about the two initiatives in tandem:

There has been a huge drive for literacy and numeracy across every subject in the school. It's become a huge part of the school self-evaluation so they are putting it in everywhere. (PP-G)

Participants gave the impression that the introduction of the NLNS led to significant efforts in the initial stages. Post-primary teachers *generally* spoke in positive terms about the new focus on literacy that the NLNS brought about. This shift in attitudes is exemplified in the following quote:

I suppose maybe six or seven years ago a geography teacher or a maths teacher or they might have said, or a Home Ec. teacher might have said 'Sure what's the point? Sure that doesn't have any bearing on my subject. That's just a waste of time for me. Like I have to get through my curriculum. This is rubbish'. But I suppose it filtered through the idea that reading will improve all subject areas (PP-K)

However, the move to emphasise literacy across subjects other than English was not a universally positive or welcome shift. The Strategy brought about challenges:

we were bamboozled with all these new techniques and there was a booklet of forty odd pages, all different techniques on each page. There was so much there you really went 'oh my god'. So you picked a couple and you tried to implement them into your classroom to push up the literacy (PP-D)

Despite these efforts, whether the Strategy continued to receive the same levels of genuine attention and engagement was openly queried by some teachers:

If I'm honest, we talk about it. We put it in a plan, but, and people do pay lip service and there is no doubt if there is an inspection coming, we'll be teaching it and all of a sudden there will be a big ... you know, it is just trying to balance it. (PP-J)

Furthermore, the notion that changes in practice were attributable to accountability measures, rather than an intrinsic and inherent motivation to improve literacy skills was not uncommon or without complaint:

But it's just when you're on the ground and these directives come. 'This is what's going to happen'. And then they send in an inspector but they don't give the resources. (PP-H)

Thus, while post-primary teachers were generally open to the main thrust of the NLNS, a certain level of scepticism about the ongoing and continued impact in their schools was also evident. Their accounts provide a striking example of how policy is reinterpreted, recast and in some cases, resisted, by individual teachers and schools (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012).

Primary teachers spoke in different ways about the influence of the NLNS. When talking specifically about the Strategy, most of the contributions focused on its influence on *time allocations*. While there was variation in how the extra time allocation for literacy was provided, most teachers indicated that they had individual discretion in its application. School-level policy informed initiatives such as team teaching or the approach to teaching genres but did not dictate whether the additional time should come from integration, reduction to discretionary time or the reduction in time allocated to other subjects. This being said, it was apparent that some teachers were not clear about the detail of the Strategy or how it was to be implemented at the school level, leading to some ad-hoc decision-making:

Not that I'm aware of, but it is my first year in the school, so there could have been a policy that I was unaware of, I don't think there was. I think integration is the way that the other teachers go, so that's what I go with as well. It would be integrated with other subjects. (P-15)

Despite the autonomy in timetabling that most teachers reported, some indicated a sense of weariness regarding how they might account for their literacy time allocations. When talking about how literacy is integrated, one teacher explained that the counting of time for literacy is linked with a heightened sense of accountability:

But it's very hard to know in September how I'm going to integrate literacy into a topic I'm doing next June so when you've to write a timetable for an inspector and the principal and they want to see how you have incorporated literacy or how have you timetabled literacy for the year on your timetables? How many hours have you got there? (P-12)

In sum, primary teachers had less of a change to make, though the sense of accountability invoked by post-primary teachers was also present.

Perceived gaps in practice across sectors

Data analysis exposed some key differences in perceptions and practice across sectors. In most cases, there was a sense of considerable uncertainty about what was expected on either side of the sixth class – first year transition. Primary teachers commented that they had not really thought about *how* their students would use literacy skills in first

year: 'I think, and again this is me supposing, I don't know what level is expected of them when they go in ... The great unknown really' (P-6). The transition between sectors was one that teachers saw as posing significant challenges for some students. Most primary teachers had concerns about how well these students would cope with the literacy demands of post-primary school. While there was some uncertainty around *exactly* what would be expected of students, there was a general sense that the volume of reading and writing would increase. Primary teachers frequently indicated that the support that was available for students with literacy difficulties would not be available at post-primary level, and that these students would struggle as a result:

And I suppose how teaching is done in secondary is so different, and what they're prepared to spend time on in secondary school is so different, and again as I said the level of scaffolding and support, both the emotional and the actual curricular is very different. There's a sense that yeah, 'You're on your own now', which is awful. Do you know? (P-3)

Contributions from some post-primary teachers confirmed that primary teachers' concerns about the availability of support were not necessarily unwarranted:

You know and I suppose in primary school, I don't know what way they do it but they might have maybe the whole morning to do English and you know and the teacher is going around and she's making sure everybody's ok and if this little one isn't able for it, she'll help her with it. You know? But here it's totally different. [*change of tone*] It's like 'Get on with it. I've a course to do. Do it right and if you have a problem come up to me at the end'. (PP-H)

Teachers regularly contrasted the approach to teaching (in literacy and more generally) at their respective level with the alternate level, sometimes casting a less than positive light on the alternate sector. For example, some post-primary teachers indicated that the lack of independence shown by first year students could be attributed to practice at primary level:

there is a big adjustment that from primary to secondary and it's us as teachers, you know, we haven't quite realised that this is the model that is in primary school whereas when you come into my class, 'Sit down. Stop talking. Take out your books and listen'. (PP-J)

The data suggests that greater communication between sectors would likely support literacy learning and learning more broadly for students.

In summary, the qualitative data capture a sense of relative unity from teachers across sectors on the *importance* of literacy for learning within and beyond the walls of the school. Similarity in attitudes was clear when it came to external influences on literacy development, with particular negative comment on the role of technology. However, the demands of each school sector also produced variation in practice and perception, indicating potential divergence in the experience of students on either side of the transition.

Survey findings

This section describes responses to key questions relating to influences on literacy policy and practice across sectors. To address the specific research questions of this paper, findings are presented on a sector-by-sector (primary *v* post-primary) basis, and in the case of two items, on the basis of DEIS status. Inferential test results are presented to illuminate significant differences in opinion across sectors. Given the number of tests needed

Table 4. Responses on individual Likert items.

			Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Not familiar
Recent curriculum changes have had a beneficial impact on the teaching of literacy. (N = 454)	P	n	21	50	56	118	11	N/A
		%	8.2	19.53	21.88	46.09	4.3	
	PP	n	31	44	32	79	12	N/A
		%	15.6	22.1	16.1	39.7	6.0	
In my experience, students' literacy skills are generally sufficient for them to succeed in school. (N = 455)	P	n	6	55	17	156	22	N/A
		%	2.34	21.48	6.64	60.94	8.59	
	PP	n	30	79	12	72	6	N/A
		%	15.1	39.7	6.0	36.2	3.0	
The development of literacy skills should be a priority for PRIMARY schools. (N = 453)	P	n	5	4	2	47	196	N/A
		%	1.97	1.57	0.79	18.5	77.17	
	PP	n	5	1	3	28	162	N/A
		%	2.5	0.5	1.5	14.1	81.4	
The development of literacy skills should be a priority for POST-PRIMARY schools. (N = 454)	P	n	6	4	19	106	121	N/A
		%	2.34	1.56	7.42	41.41	47.27	
	PP	n	5	12	11	50	120	N/A
		%	2.5	6.0	5.5	25.1	60.3	
The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) has had a beneficial impact on literacy standards. (N = 453)	P	n	4	15	51	129	34	21
		%	1.57	5.91	20.08	50.79	13.39	8.27
	PP	n	12	23	41	92	16	15
		%	6.0	11.6	20.6	46.2	8.0	7.5
The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) continues to be a major focus for teaching and learning in my school. (N = 454)	P	n	11	24	32	101	66	21
		%	4.31	9.41	12.55	39.61	25.88	8.24
	PP	n	13	22	20	82	46	16
		%	6.5	11.1	10.1	41.2	23.1	8.0
On entry to post-primary school, most children have adequate literacy skills for engaging with the curriculum. (N = 455)	P	n	4	41	16	147	48	N/A
		%	1.56	16.02	6.25	57.42	18.75	
	PP	n	30	74	7	80	8	N/A
		%	15.1	37.2	3.5	40.2	4.0	
Technology has a beneficial impact on students' literacy skills. (N = 455)	P	n	15	64	42	111	24	N/A
		%	5.86	25.00	16.47	43.36	9.38	
	PP	n	42	68	28	44	17	N/A
		%	21.1	34.2	14.1	22.1	8.5	
The subject textbook is the most important text used in my classroom. (N = 454)	P	n	69	95	38	37	16	N/A
		%	27.06	37.25	14.9	14.51	6.27	
	PP	n	31	48	33	56	31	N/A
		%	15.6	24.1	16.6	28.1	15.6	

to make these comparisons, the Bonferroni correction was applied to the interpretation of alpha levels (a p value below 0.004 was considered significant, to account for the 12 specific inferential comparisons made). Full details of distributions can be found in Table 4.

Influence of national policy and curriculum

Teachers held mixed opinions on whether recent national curricular changes had positively impacted the teaching of literacy. As shown in Figure 1, roughly half of respondents across sectors agreed with the statement 'Recent curriculum changes have had a beneficial impact on the teaching of literacy', while roughly half held a negative or neutral sentiment. Responses were distributed similarly at primary ($Md = 4.0$) and post-primary ($Md = 3.0$); $U = 23,217.5$, $z = -1.62$, $p = .11$, $r = -0.08$.

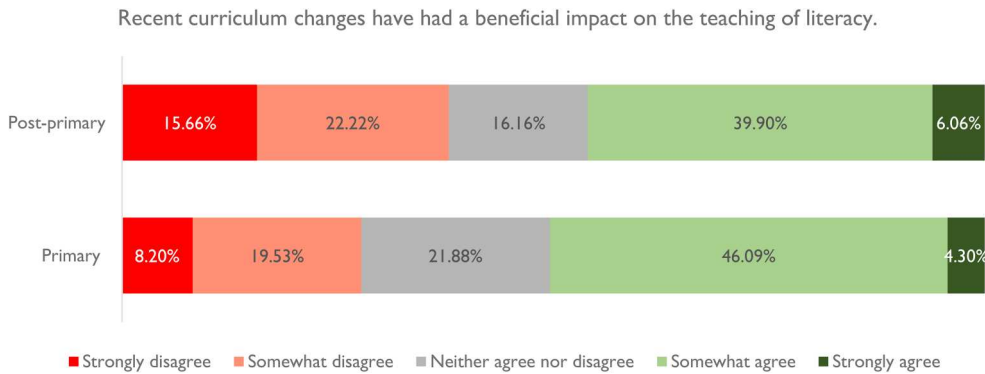


Figure 1. Opinions on the impact of recent curriculum changes on the teaching of literacy.

When asked more specifically about national policy relating to literacy, i.e. the NLNS (Department of Education and Skills 2023), the distribution of responses was slightly more positive. A small number of teachers overall (7.95%) were unfamiliar with the Strategy. Of those who *were* familiar with it, a majority of teachers (64.99%) agreed that the Strategy had had a beneficial impact on literacy standards in schools. When compared sector by sector, a significant difference was found in the distribution of responses to this item⁴; Primary: $Md = 4.0$, Post-Primary: $Md = 4.0$; $U = 17,943$, $z = -3.123$, $p = .002$, $r = -0.15$. A slightly smaller proportion of post-primary teachers (58.7%) agreed than primary teachers (69.95%). This is represented in Figure 2.

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 3, most teachers indicated that the NLNS continued to be a major focus for teaching and learning in their school, with no significant difference between sectors; Primary: $Md = 4.0$, Post-Primary: $Md = 4.0$; $U = 20,697$, $z = -.717$, $p = .474$, $r = -0.04$.

Literacy as a priority in schools

Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the teaching of literacy skills should be a priority for *primary* schools, with no difference between sectors; Primary: $Md = 5.0$, Post-Primary: Md

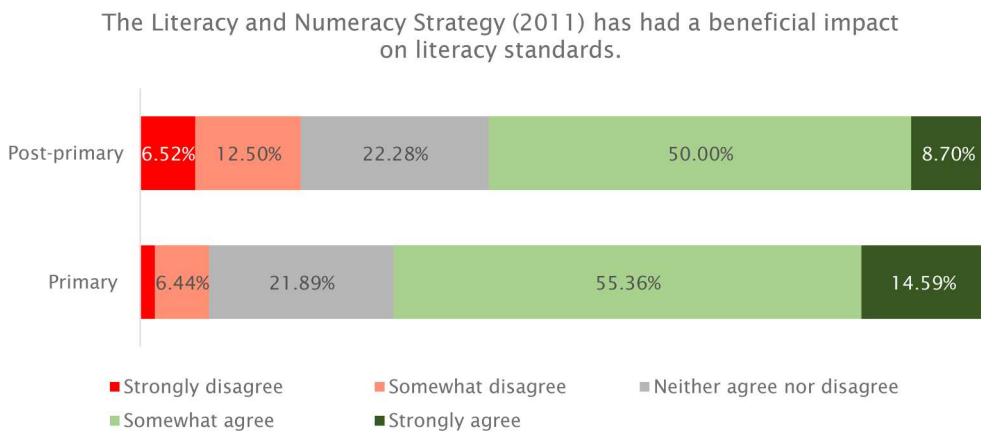


Figure 2. Opinions on the influence of the NLNS on literacy standards.

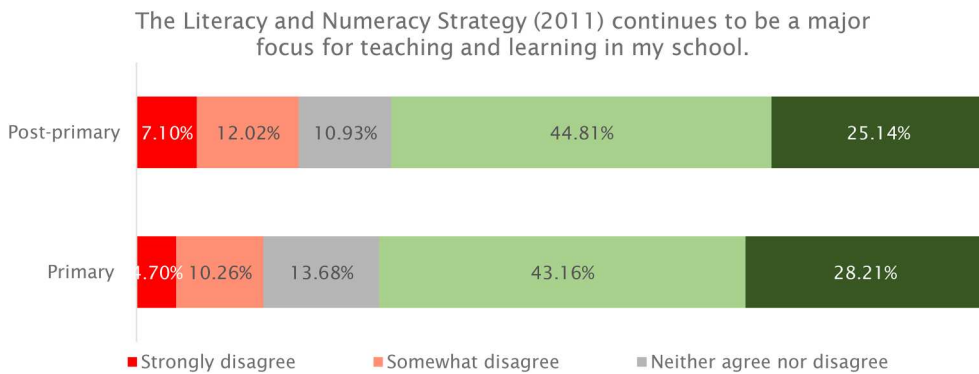


Figure 3. Opinions on the ongoing status of the NLNS in schools.

= 5.0; $U = 24,258.5$, $z = -1.04$, $p = .3$, $r = -0.05$. Figure 4 demonstrates that over 90% of teachers at primary and post-primary level agreed with the given statement. Responses were distributed differently for the corresponding statement on whether literacy should be a priority for *post-primary* schools, with teachers less likely to strongly agree. Again, there was no significant difference in groups when the Bonferroni correction was considered; Primary: $Md = 4.0$, Post-Primary, $Md = 5.0$; $U = 22,802.5$, $z = -2.04$, $p = .04$, $r = -0.1$. Responses indicate that, on the whole, teachers across sectors see that post-primary schooling has a strong role to play in the development of literacy skills (see Figure 5), though to a slightly lesser extent than at primary level.

This prioritisation of literacy was further analysed in items relating to time allocation. The data indicated that, overall, teachers felt that the time allocated to literacy either needed to be maintained or increased. As seen in Figure 6, only a very small minority (2.42%) indicated that the time for literacy should be decreased. Sectoral differences were also apparent in responses to this item, with post-primary teachers being twice as likely to indicate that the time for literacy at their school level should be increased. Fisher’s exact test indicated that there was a statistically significant association between sector and responses to this question ($p < .001$).

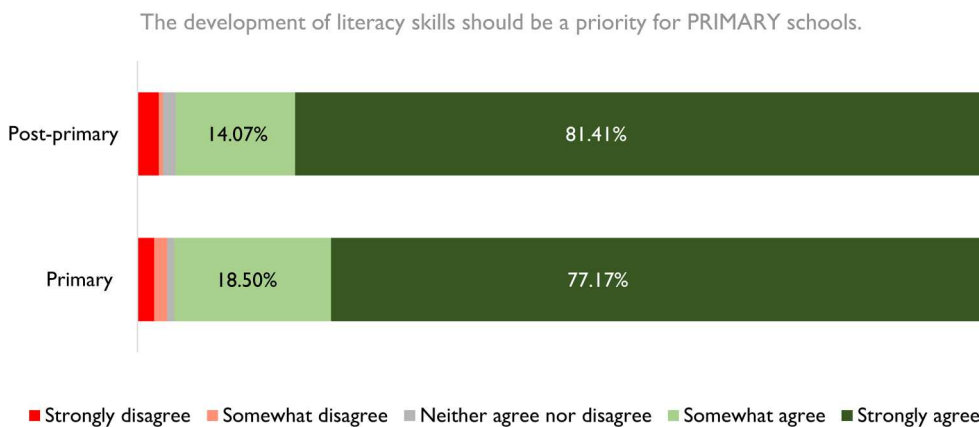


Figure 4. Opinions on whether literacy should be a priority for primary schools.

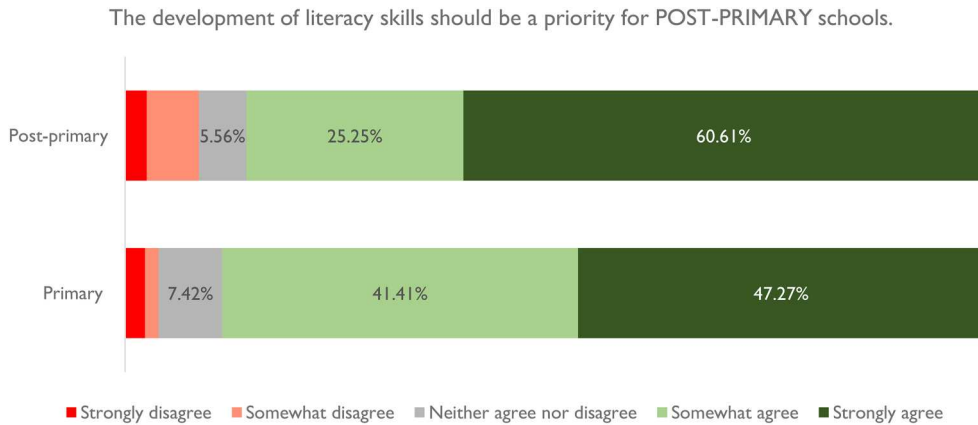


Figure 5. Opinions on whether literacy should be a priority for post-primary schools.

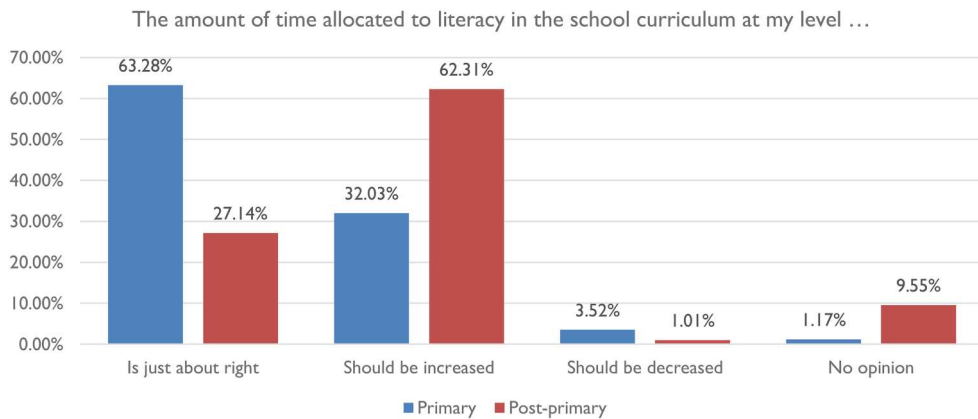


Figure 6. Opinions on time allocations for literacy.

One question was posed to primary teachers only, and related to the amount of time they spent on literacy instruction. The results indicated that primary teachers very regularly spend more than the allocated time for their class level on literacy instruction, with 24.71% indicating that they exceed this time every week, 40.78% exceeding it most weeks, and 32.16% exceeding it some weeks. Only 2.35% indicated that they never exceeded the recommended time allocation. These data are displayed in [Figure 7](#).

Though this study is unable to draw comparisons between teacher opinions prior to and after the implementation of the NLNS, the findings suggest that its vision for a concerted focus on literacy across sectors was enacted in this sample. These add detail to the broader constellation of reports and data (Department of Education and Skills 2017b; Shiel et al. 2022), suggesting that the Strategy successfully promoted literacy as a core consideration for teachers.

Opinions on student literacy skills

Despite the concerted focus on literacy *teaching* outlined in the previous section, responses to other items painted a less positive picture. Two items targeted teacher

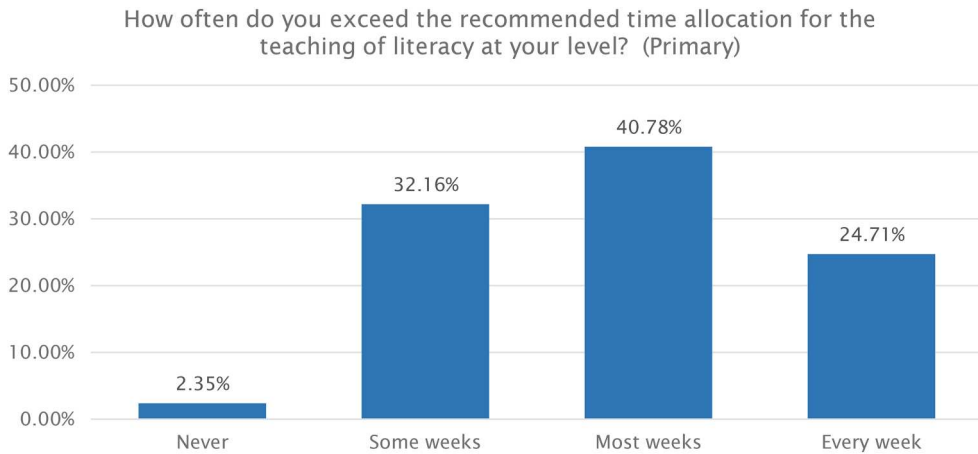


Figure 7. Frequency with which literacy time is exceeded at primary level.

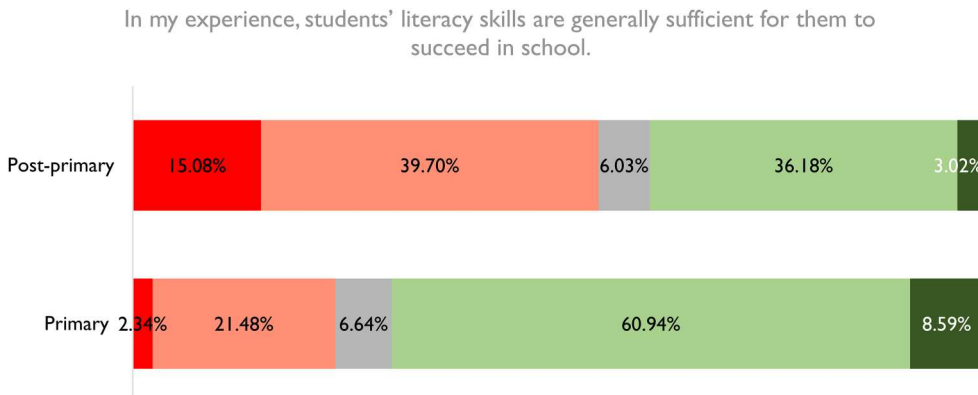


Figure 8. Opinions on students' literacy skills and their success in school.

opinions of student literacy skills. The first such question ascertained teachers' opinions on the statement, 'In my experience, students' literacy skills are generally sufficient for them to succeed in school'. Analysis of the distributions indicated a significant difference between primary ($Md = 4.0$) and post-primary ($Md = 2.0$) teachers' opinions on this item; $U = 16,272.5$, $z = -7.18$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.34$. As Figure 8 illustrates, post-primary teachers were far less likely to indicate that student literacy skills were at a sufficient standard to enable success in school. While 69.53% of primary teachers agreed with the statement, the corresponding percentage for post-primary teachers was only 39.2%. Given the interest in student literacy achievement in DEIS schools, a further comparison was made on this item on the basis of DEIS status. Primary and post-primary teachers in DEIS schools were less likely to agree with this statement ($Md = 2.0$) than teachers in non-DEIS schools ($Md = 4.0$; $U = 17,983$, $z = -3.91$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.18$). Sectoral differences in opinion also emerged when teachers were asked about students' literacy skills upon entry to post-primary school. A majority of post-primary teachers disagreed that most students have adequate literacy skills on entry to post-primary school ($Md = 2.0$),

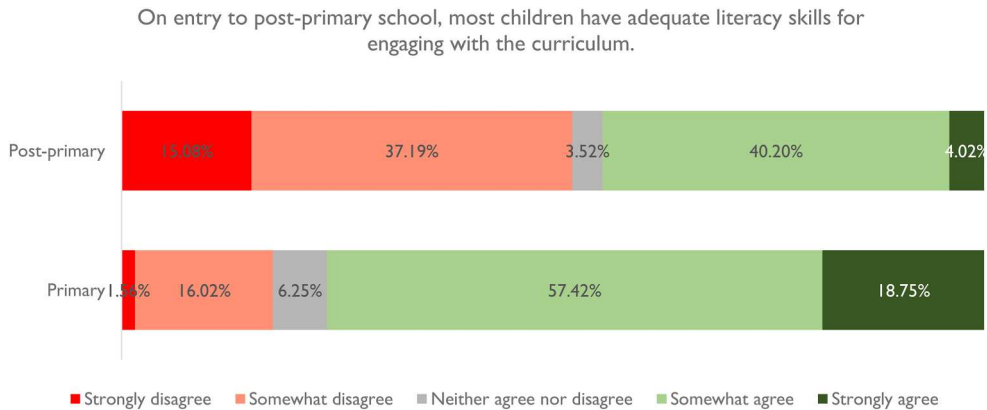


Figure 9. Opinions on literacy skills on entry to post-primary school.

compared to a large majority of primary school teachers who *agreed* that they did ($Md = 4.0$) (see Figure 9). This difference in the distribution of responses was statistically significant; $U = 14,860$, $z = -8.238$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.39$. A DEIS ($Md = 4.0$) versus non-DEIS ($Md = 4.0$) comparison also indicated differences on this item, $U = 17,843.5$, $z = -4.01$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.19$. These two items indicate relatively substantial differences in how teachers perceive students' literacy skills, depending on the sector (primary *v.* post-primary) and participation in the DEIS programme.

Technology and textbooks

Two other items in the questionnaire sought opinions on textbooks and technology. Opinions on the importance of the textbook diverged. While 64.31% of primary teachers disagreed with the statement that '*the subject textbook is the most important text used in my classroom*', the equivalent figure for post-primary teachers was 39.7% (see Figure 10). This difference in distribution was significant; Primary: $Md = 2.0$, Post-Primary: $Md = 3.0$; $U = 18,039.5$, $z = -5.44$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.26$. Teacher opinions on the impact of

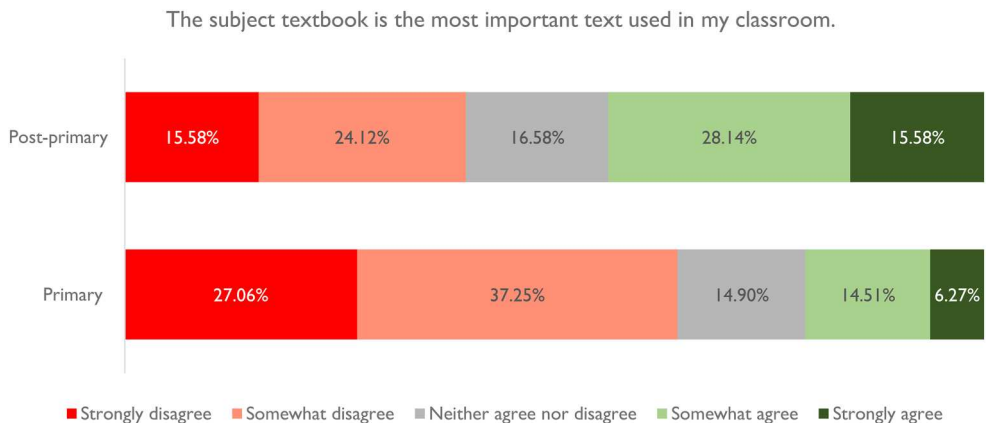


Figure 10. Opinions on textbook use.

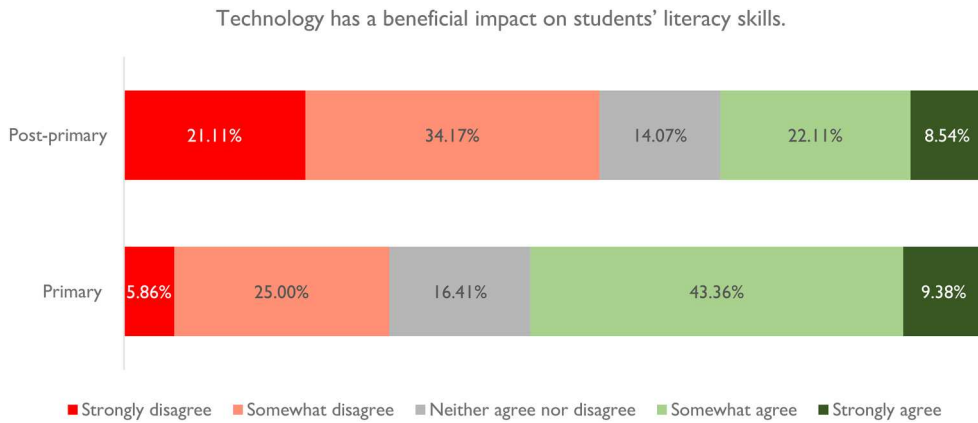


Figure 11. Opinions on the impact of technology on literacy skills.

technology on literacy skills were split (See [Figure 11](#)). Post-primary teachers ($Md = 2.0$) also held a less favourable view of technology's influence than their primary colleagues ($Md = 4.0$; $U = 18,225$, $z = -5.402$, $p = <.001$, $r = -0.25$).

These findings support the qualitative finding that many teachers hold a negative view of the impact that technology has on literacy skills, which was a clear finding in Phase 1.

Overall, the survey data capture areas of relative agreement and disagreement across school sectors. They confirm the qualitative findings in underlining the high store placed in the development of literacy skills and agreement on the role of the NLNS in supporting literacy development. However, the data also point to varying perceptions relating to student literacy achievement, with post-primary teachers being far less likely to agree that students had sufficient literacy proficiency to engage with the broader curriculum. The data also revealed a split in opinion according to school DEIS status, with teachers from schools participating in the programme being less likely to agree with the idea that students held sufficient literacy skills to support learning across the curriculum and on entry to post-primary school. The next section pairs these findings with the qualitative data to highlight key implications for the coming period.

Discussion

Overall, the data present a picture of relative unanimity across the sectors on the *importance* of literacy development. Interview and questionnaire data suggest that primary and post-primary teachers deemed literacy a clear priority for their sectors. This is notable in the case of the latter sector, affirming previous findings that there has been a change in perceptions at post-primary level (Lenihan 2010; Murphy 2020). Most notably, the findings of this study align with other research evidence (Kavanagh et al. 2015) that suggests that the NLNS was successful in putting literacy on the agenda in the national context. Across sectors, roughly two-thirds of teachers indicated that the NLNS had had a beneficial impact on literacy standards. Though there was some evidence of waning attention to the Strategy and literacy teaching in data from Phase 1, again, roughly two-thirds of teachers familiar with the Strategy said that it continued to be a 'major' focus for teaching and learning in their school (Phase 2). The qualitative data, in

particular, highlighted the varying ways in which teachers interpreted and re-made policy at a local level (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012), yet the over-riding agreement on the *importance* of literacy was striking. The ‘literacy crisis’ narrative that spurred the initial enactment of the NLNS may have been overstated, but the significance of literacy for participation inside and outside the school walls is undeniable.

At the same time, the data affirm some of the more pointed critiques of the Strategy’s underpinning premise and neoliberal influences (Ball 2016; Conway 2013). The data suggest that the prioritisation of literacy has impacted the teaching of the broader curriculum, particularly at primary level. Interview data revealed clear curriculum hierarchies, positioning literacy at or close to the apex, driven at least in some cases by accountability measures. Primary teachers regularly exceeded the weekly time allocations for literacy. Affirmed also is the parallel concern that the NLNS has led literacy to be prioritised at the expense of other subjects – at least at primary level (Ó Breacháin and O’Toole 2013). Broad conceptualisations of literacy allow for it to be integrated into disciplinary learning, in keeping with the literature on disciplinary literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) and other broad definitions adopted internationally (International Literacy Association n.d.). However, the teachers in this study were more likely to equate literacy with basic skills (e.g. spelling, punctuation) than higher order skills such as critical reading or expression in multiple modes. As noted at the start of this paper, literacy can be defined and practised in different ways. The teachers in this study demonstrated the forms of literacy *they* prioritised in their accounts of practice, regardless of the broad definition that might espoused in the relevant NLNS policy documentation. Given this same policy documentation only set out to measure the literacy skills associated with print-based reading, this dissonance may be unsurprising. Moving forward, it is crucial that false dichotomies on this front are avoided; *basic* skills in literacy are needed to *enable* higher order engagement, but the teaching of the former shouldn’t preclude a focus on the latter.

The study also highlights a certain level of disagreement about the extent to which students are equipped to use literacy skills as a foundation for learning across the curriculum. Questionnaire data indicated that post-primary teachers were less content with literacy standards than primary teachers. This is a disagreement that merits further examination. Furthermore, teachers in schools participating in the DEIS programme were less likely to express confidence in students’ ability to use literacy skills across the school day. These findings tally with the broader literature on literacy achievement in disadvantaged settings and lend weight to calls for further scrutiny of literacy supports and interventions in these settings (Gilleece and Clerkin 2024). In international circles, literature and commentary on the *science of reading* is often accompanied by statements of extreme concern about the literacy achievement of students ‘at risk’. It is critical that we learn from the international research literature to strengthen literacy education for *all* students in Ireland, but this does not mean that policy borrowing (Phillips and Ochs 2003) or indeed *crisis borrowing* from countries like the USA, UK or Australia is a good idea.

Analysis of the major transition point covered in this study – from a generalist setting (primary) to one that hinges on disciplinary specialities (post-primary) – reveals some disjunctures in experience and approach between the two sectors. Interviews with teachers revealed that, for the most part, they were poorly informed about the curriculum

on the opposite side of this transition. Concerns were expressed about the continuity of support offered to students encountering literacy difficulties as they moved from primary to post-primary school. There was also evidence of major contrasts in teaching approach in some cases. This was further evidenced by the fact that, in survey data, post-primary teachers were significantly more likely to state that the subject textbooks were the most important texts used in their classrooms. These findings suggest that the previously reported discontinuities in learning between the two sectors linger (Smyth, McCoy, and Darmody 2022). They also highlight that continuity in learning should be a priority in the successor national literacy strategy.

Several factors influenced how teachers thought about (and practised) literacy. Significant among these was the positioning of literacy and technology as conflicting endeavours. The challenge of including all learners in literacy teaching was also notable in interview contributions (Phase 1) and indirectly reflected in post-primary teachers' survey responses on student literacy standards (Phase 2). The dominant influence of state examinations on the types of literacy practices enacted across disciplines at post-primary level was striking, suggesting that post-primary teachers view literacy through the eyes of terminal examinations rather than broader disciplinary traditions. In sum, literacy was deemed to be important but was moulded in practice by the complexities of teacher perceptions, system-level priorities and competing policies.

The findings of this study suggest that a number of issues merit further attention as the successor National Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (Government of Ireland 2024a) moves towards action:

- The marked contrast between teacher **conceptualisations of literacy** and the definitions espoused in the 2011 NLNS merits further attention in professional learning for teachers. The focus on fundamental, foundational literacy skills is justified but broader interpretations are also necessary to ensure that higher-order and multimodal applications of literacy are not excluded.
- **Time allocations for literacy** were expanded in 2011 – a change that teachers in this study were broadly in agreement with, despite the concerns about curriculum narrowing cited at the time (e.g. Ó Breacháin and O'Toole 2013). The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) has been enacted on the basis of these time allocations. However, the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education 2023) reduces the specific time allocation to literacy and the successor Strategy (Government of Ireland 2024a) is silent on the same question. Clarification on this potential policy confusion (or contradiction) is warranted.
- The original NLNS and its successor place a high premium on **seamless transitions**. The data from this study suggests that this goal has not yet been achieved. The potential for cross-sectoral professional learning communities focused on literacy (e.g. organised by local Education Centres) may go some way in raising awareness about literacy learning on either side of the primary to post-primary transition. This professional learning may fruitfully focus on the teaching of disciplinary literacy, a concept that it is explicitly called out in the successor Strategy. This should not preclude a parallel focus on supports for students encountering difficulties with basic literacy skills.

- That teachers in schools participating in the **DEIS** programme were less satisfied with student literacy skills tallies with broader concerns raised about literacy achievement for underprivileged students (Buckingham 2024; Delaney et al. 2023). The implementation plan for the successor Strategy (Government of Ireland 2024b), notes the following action: ‘Commission research into effective literacy practices with a view to supporting learners in DEIS schools’. There is a strong case to execute this action (and associated changes in policy and practice) on an expedited timeline.
- More broadly, the findings suggest that **evidence-informed professional learning and resources** must continue to be provided for teachers on a range of issues relating to literacy, including effective practices to promote inclusion and success for all; high rankings on international assessments do not mean that all students have reached their full potential.

Limitations

In noting the study’s implications, it is also important to highlight limitations. The data gathered for this study capture teachers’ self-reported practices and perceptions at a particular point time (2019-2020). All data were gathered prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is possible that teacher attitudes and priorities will have shifted in the interim period as curriculum implementation advanced and as other demands were placed on teachers (and students). Furthermore, literacy debates that have emerged more recently (including the increased attention afforded to the *science of reading*) may not have been captured in teacher responses. From a sampling perspective, though a diverse range of both primary and post-primary teachers was included in Phase 1, the small number of post-primary teachers from DEIS schools is a shortcoming. In examining the data from Phase 2, the limitations of using researcher-designed (albeit piloted) items must be noted, alongside the potential for sampling bias. Though the demographic details suggest a broadly representative collection of teacher responses, the sampling strategy is not equivalent to more robust methods (e.g. a stratified random sample with a high response rate). Furthermore, as school-level identifiers were not collected, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which the survey data represent views across distinct schools as sampling units. Consequently, a certain level of caution is required in interpreting the findings.

Conclusion

The current study highlights important considerations for the upcoming period of policy review and enactment. Data from teachers in this study suggest that the NLNS was highly influential. In retrospect, it is likely to have been one of the most consequential educational policies enacted in recent memory. Though the PISA shock that preceded its roll-out has been found to have been unwarranted, literacy rankings have continued to climb in international rankings during and after its implementation. It may be a contested and narrow measure, but if Ireland is to maintain this success, it is crucial that policy provides harmonious guidance and that policy aspirations become a lived reality in schools. A shared vision for literacy must be aligned across the curriculum and school-based initiatives that emanate from the Department of Education and its

agencies (e.g. NCCA). Literacy can be conceptualised and practised in different ways, but its value as a tool for learning in the curriculum or broader participation in society is one few in this study would query. As noted by the post-primary teacher whose words opened this article, literacy is: ‘up there with tying your shoelaces and knowing how to pay rent. It’s vital in the world we live in’.

Notes

1. Based on tabulation of teacher numbers provided in personal correspondence with the Statistics Section of the Department of Education
2. <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/publications/statistics/2019/>
3. Based on tabulation of teacher numbers provided in personal correspondence with the Statistics Section of the Department of Education
4. Teachers who indicated that they were not familiar with the NLNS were not included in this comparison

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Patrick Burke is an Assistant Professor in the School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education at Dublin City University Institute of Education. He holds degrees in education, psychology, and literacy and completed his PhD on a cross-sectoral analysis of disciplinary literacy in Irish primary and post-primary schools under the supervision of Dr Eithne Kennedy (DCU). In addition to teaching and researching literacy education at DCU, Patrick serves as Chairperson of the NCCA Primary Language Development Group and Incoming President of the Literacy Association of Ireland (2025). His scholarly work has been recognised by several organisations including the American Educational Research Association and the International Literacy Association.

ORCID

Patrick Burke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8490-401X>

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