# Reading Matters:

# A Fresh Start

EDITORS:
Gerry Shiel
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**Reading Association of Ireland / National Reading Initiative**

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READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND/
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# *Preface*

In September 2000, the Reading Association of Ireland and the National Reading Initiative jointly organised an International Reading Conference, which was held in Malahide, Co. Dublin. The theme of the Conference (and the title of the current volume), *Reading Matters: A Fresh Start*, represents the sense of optimism felt by the joint organisers when the idea of the Conference was first discussed early in 2000. It was hoped that the Conference would provide an opportunity for national and international experts in the reading field to discuss emerging trends and ideas with persons involved in the literacy field here in Ireland. This hope was realised as the experts presented their work and discussed it with over 300 participants for three days. The purpose of this volume is to extend that discussion.

Both the National Reading Initiative and the International Conference arose from concerns about literacy standards. National and international reports on the International Adult Literacy Survey indicated that literacy standards in the adult population were poor, and might adversely affect the quality of life of individuals, and the competitiveness of the Irish economy. A report on the outcomes of the 1998 National Assessment of English Reading indicated that reading standards among primary-level pupils had not changed between 1980 and 1998, despite increased provision of library resources to schools, and the expansion of a learning support service to address the needs of all pupils with low achievement in reading. Several studies pointed to low levels of reading achievement among pupils in schools in designated areas of educational disadvantaged, and among boys. Teachers and parents continued to be challenged in their efforts to address the needs of pupils with learning difficulties arising from dyslexia.

There is some evidence that literacy standards may be improving. In the recent OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), just one country (Finland) had a significantly higher mean score in reading literacy than Ireland. Moreover, a relatively small proportion of Irish students were judged to have serious reading difficulties. While these findings are welcome, educators realise, nevertheless, that some children and adults continue to have poor literacy skills, and need additional support to address

# *Improving Reading Education for Low-Income Children*

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Many years ago my father was lucky enough to visit Ireland – the land of his forebears. He loved the country and he loved the people, but he could not abide the warm beer. My father enjoyed a good cold beer and he was shocked to find that the pubs of that time did not serve it as he liked. But he never quit trying to find a cold one during his visit.

He would enter a pub and ask if they had cold beer, and repeatedly he was told that, indeed, a cold beer was there to be had. He would order it with great anticipation, only to be disappointed by the truth of the matter. Finally, in great frustration, he turned to the waitress and said, 'I asked you if you had cold beer, and you told me that you did. But this beer is warm. Why did you tell me that you had cold beer?'

'Oh, sir, your heart seemed so set on it.'

Well, for too long, we have told the children who grow up in poverty that we would give them a fine education only to serve them warm beer instead. And their hearts were so set on it. Nevertheless, in the U.S., there are dramatic differences in the learning of high-income and low-income students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1999). Students who grow up in poverty graduate from high school – if they graduate at all – with an average reading score equivalent to that of higher socioeconomic status eighth graders. As Ireland prospers, and the family income scale for the nation increases in

variance, expanding the differences among rich and poor, we might expect to see greater disparity in school achievement.

For the last eight years, I have been working on a project that started in one low-income, inner-city school and has now grown to more than 200 schools in the United States. This effort was adopted first in low-income schools, but it has expanded to higher-income schools as well, though its biggest measurable impact has been on closing the gap in the lowest-achieving schools. The project is notable because it has raised reading achievement quite dramatically in some instances. The results have been promising enough that the National Science Foundation, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and the National Institute of Child Health and Development have begun to fund an evaluation to determine how well this intervention works and how it influences achievement. This article will briefly describe that intervention and the hope that it provides for the education of children living in poverty.

## Shanahan Literacy Framework

My Literacy Framework (Figures 1 and 2) starts from the premise that effective, powerful school reading programmes can teach most children to read – no matter what the incomes or education levels of their parents. This premise is not just a wishful hope – I have seen school administrators and faculties use this model to improve average school achievement scores on standardised tests, sometimes by as much as 20-30% in a single year.

The model is based on syntheses of large amounts of educational research, and it uses this research as the basis of staff development for teachers and principals. The emphasis here is upon making three fundamental changes in teaching and supervision: increasing the amount of instruction, focusing the instruction upon key elements of learning that must be accomplished if our students are to be readers, and building continuity from grade level to grade level and school to school so that children receive continuous education as they proceed through their schooling.

The Framework – and the professional development activities that go with it – can provide a powerful tool for improving reading education. Because it is not a scripted programme or a commercial product, schools can



shape it to local contexts and local student populations through the application or design of specific instructional responses to the needs of poor readers, to school-parent communication, to assessment and evaluation, as well as to regular classroom instruction.

**FIGURE 1**
**LITERACY FRAMEWORK**

| | Word Knowledge | Fluency | Comprehension | Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What is included? | • Sight Vocabulary<br>• Phonics Analysis<br>• Spelling<br>• Structural Analysis<br>• Word Meaning | • Reading Speed<br>• Oral Reading Accuracy<br>• Expression | • Types of information to "find" in test<br>• Information structure<br>• Strategies for constructing meaning | • Purposes<br>• Products<br>• Processes<br>• Audiences |
| How does it change? | • From word recognition to word meaning<br>• Phonics ends by 3rd grade | • Text difficulty increases<br>• Less repetition to fluency<br>• More self correction | • Text difficulty increases<br>• Text length increases<br>• Greater individual control | • Text difficulty increases<br>• More distant/abstract audiences<br>• Greater individual control |
| How much instructional time? | • 25% of time (30-45 minutes daily)<br>• Never spend more than 15 minutes on spelling | • 25% of time (ranges from brief monitoring to as much as 30-45 minutes daily) | • 25% of time (30 - 45 minutes daily) | • 25% of time (30-45 minutes daily) |
| Common mistakes? | • Lack of individual drill<br>• Too much phonics<br>• Too much spelling<br>• No applications or too workbook dependent | • Only silent reading<br>• Round robin<br>• Too much choral reading<br>• No emphasis at all | • Only using stories<br>• Materials that are too difficult<br>• Too narrow a range of responses<br>• Practice rather than teaching | • Not teaching at all<br>• Lack of revision<br>• No authenthic purposes for writing<br>• Not reading student writing |

**FIGURE 2**
**BASIC PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE LITERACY FRAMEWORK**

1. Students must recieve at least two hours of reading and writing instruction each day. Three hours per day is more appropriate when greater achievement is required.
2. Only activities that improve achievement count as instructional time.
3. Instruction should emphasise the four fundamental components of literacy learning – word knowledge, fluency, comprehension and writing.
4. Literary (narrative) texts should not dominate the teaching of reading and writing.
5. Children should be actively engaged in learning.
6. Ways should be found to increase learning opportunities beyond the school day.
7. Active supervision is essential to success.

### *Amount of Instruction*

It is essential that schools offer substantial amounts of reading and writing instruction. Surveys show that the average elementary (primary-school) teacher in America provides only about 88 minutes per day of reading and language arts instruction, and that a portion of this time is spent on activities that research indicates have little or no impact on reading achievement, or that have not been studied sufficiently (Baumann et al., 2000). Studies clearly show that increases in academic learning time can improve reading achievement (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984); however, with the exception of Cunningham's (1991) Block Scheduling Plan (which addresses only the needs of beginning readers), teacher education materials have been virtually silent on the use of time in reading instruction. Methods texts and other ancillary publications cite its importance, but say almost nothing about how to use or manage instructional time in reading. Consequently, teachers are left to figure out on their own how much time to spend on reading instruction or how to apportion instructional time among the various components of reading. Time allotment decisions are especially difficult for upper-grade teachers as departmentalisation for teaching the disciplines begins to occur.

The Framework establishes a 2-3 hour per day minimum time standard for reading and writing instruction and encourages schools to explore additional ways (before-school and after-school programmes, summer programmes, parent involvement, homework, etc.) for expanding instructional opportunity beyond the regular school day. Teachers and principals are cautioned against expending daily instructional time on activities that research has shown to be ineffective for literacy improvement (though they can still use such activities beyond the boundaries of literacy instructional time) and are free to experiment with activities that have not yet been researched. The idea, however, is to provide all students with the maximum opportunity to learn to read and write that can be provided while maintaining adequate amounts of time to teach math, science, history/social studies, and other school subjects.



### *Focus on Essential Content*

School instruction should emphasise those skills or abilities that research has shown to be essential to reading development. Accordingly, the Framework includes four basic categories, or components, of instruction – word knowledge, fluency, comprehension, and writing. The Framework requires that classroom teachers emphasise each of these four aspects equally in their reading instruction. This equivalence is to be accomplished over a period of time (2-3 weeks) rather than on a daily basis. This ensures that students will receive instruction in all of the essential parts of reading, but that teachers will not be unduly constrained by a lockstep format that restricts creativity and engagement and that does not permit the flexibility necessary to accommodate to the demands of real classroom settings.

To be included as an instructional component, five criteria had to be met, criteria established on the basis of a thorough review of existing empirical research and clinical reports:

(i) It was essential that there exist experimental or quasi-experimental studies that evaluated the *teachability* of each category (or of major subdivisions of the categories). So, for example, studies had to show that vocabulary instruction (a subdivision of word knowledge) led to better vocabulary growth or that fluency instruction led to more fluent reading;

(ii) It was required that studies show the *generalisability* of each component by demonstrating that improvements in each component led to improved overall reading achievement, at least for some populations. Thus, studies had to show that writing instruction not only led to better writing, but

to better reading achievement as well;

(iii) It was required that studies demonstrate the *combinability* of the four components by showing that various measurements of each component correlated positively and significantly with the other components and with overall reading achievement;

(iv) It was required that there be evidence demonstrating the *independence,* or separability, of each category. Such evidence includes case studies of precocious, learning disabled, or brain-injured subjects who were able to make gains in one component without commensurate or similar development in the others, or who made gains in three of the components without equivalent progress in the remaining one; and

(v) It was required that developmental studies reveal *different growth curves* for each category.

These criteria, applied together, suggested Word Knowledge, Fluency, Comprehension, and Writing as four related, yet separable components of literacy growth that are amenable to teaching, components which, when taught, are likely to lead to higher reading achievement, and which, for many students, require direct instructional attention. Recently, a National Reading Panel was appointed to inform the U.S. Congress about the implications of reading research for the teaching of reading. The panel in their report (NRP, 2000) found that instruction in three of the framework categories – word knowledge (including phonics, phonemic awareness, and word meaning), fluency, comprehension – made a clear difference in reading achievement for elementary and secondary level students, and the fourth category of the framework – writing – has been shown to be effective as well in previous research synthesis (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

The first category, Word Knowledge, includes instruction in sight vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and word meanings. The second category, Fluency, emphasises speed, accuracy, and expression (prosody) in the reading of connected text. Comprehension is the third category, and it includes both understanding text and learning from text, emphasising literary and content (sciences, history, etc.) reading. Writing is the final component, consisting of students' learning to compose their own texts effectively for a variety of purposes. These four categories are all equally important across the various grade levels, but the emphasis within



categories shifts somewhat over time. For example, early word instruction centers on phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight vocabulary, but as children accomplish these, the emphasis switches to the study of word meanings (vocabulary instruction) at higher grade levels. In another example, initial instruction might place greater emphasis on literary (narrative) reading or writing as part of instruction in comprehension or composing, but this emphasis shifts to a greater focus on studying and composing expository or explanatory content texts as students get older.

Based on this framework, I provide teachers with staff development that suggests a set of research-based principles in the area of instruction as well as specific methods of instruction. For example, one instructional guideline is that phonics lessons should always include some application of the new information to decoding or encoding words the children couldn't read or spell before the lesson began. Teachers are not required to use any particular instructional methods or materials, but they are expected to honour such research-based guidelines. They can choose instructional methods and materials from what I share, from their past knowledge, or from other sources like journals, instructional materials, and graduate coursework. This means that teachers have choices to make, and their choices will be respected if it appears that they have a strong possibility of working.

***Continuity***

Powerful reading instruction is longitudinal. It builds quality upon quality, across classes, grade levels, and schools. The Framework helps establish continuity, or connectedness, across teachers at all grade levels, and from all aspects of a school or district instructional programme – including within disciplinary fields and in remedial or special education programmes. Entire school faculties, not just reading teachers, are trained in the Framework. Anyone whose teaching requires the use of text is expected to be part of the effort.

In my state there are few unit school districts which means that children usually go to one district for their instruction at primary, then they transfer to a separate district for the instruction they will receive until they are 17 or 18 years old. In the spirit of continuity, often districts will enter into consortia agreements concerning the Framework. That is, a senior high school district

will often join with associated elementary districts to make it possible for children to be on the same framework from Kindergarten through Grade 12.

Schools can ensure continuity by purchasing some commercial programmes that span the years and that would offer some consistency of content coverage. However, commercial programmes are just one alternative for providing such continuity. Often districts would rather develop continuity through a set of social agreements or shared, specific curricular goals among teachers concerning what will be taught at the various grade levels.

The Framework is adopted school-wide, and elementary school principals or secondary department chairs are trained in learner-centred observation and supervision that allows them to determine instructional effectiveness and degree of continuity. The Framework has been adopted by single schools, by single school districts, and by consortia of feeder school districts that want to ensure greater continuity across their diverse programmes.

Another way that we make sure that progress is continuous and that children work through a programme of study rather than a collection of disparate activities, is through supervisory training. School principals are taught how to conduct learner-centred supervision in which they look not so much for compliance on the part of teachers, but learning on the part of the students. The principal acts as a second set of professional eyes who can monitor the ongoing success of the programme, and who can help teachers to provide consistent instructional quality.

## Conclusion

Educational research has accumulated over the past 30 years and it has overwhelmingly argued for greater time, greater focus on the essentials of learning, and greater continuity – particularly through closer supervision of teaching. The literacy framework described here attempts to address each of these concerns. Though research consistently supports such instruction, each could be argued for on the basis of commonsense alone. And yet, in large numbers of schools charged with the responsibility of teaching poor children, there is a failure to provide these basics.

In my experience, poor children receive less instruction than their more



privileged peers. They are, likewise, less likely to receive well-balanced instruction that addresses all of these key areas of concern, and there are likely to be fewer supports for continuity, such as sound supervision. It often is in these schools also that there is the greatest desire by policymakers to impose a 'magic bullet' solution upon the teachers and this, too, can be a distraction. However, research makes it clear that there is no magic bullet. What is needed is sound teaching, sound supervision, and lots of it. When we have made sure that these simple conditions exist in poor schools through implementation of the framework, we have often managed to raise reading achievement – without imposing specific commercial programmes on the teachers, without scripting their lessons, and without undermining or curtailing their professionalism.

How can we best meet the reading needs of poor children? Energetic, intelligent, high-quality teaching remains the best solution to our literacy problems. It works and we must make our decisions so that poor children – indeed, all children – receive lots of instruction in those aspects of reading that have been found to be essential. Good teaching results in sound learning.

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