From Policy to Practice
The Oral Language Challenge for Teachers

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Acknowledgement

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it

(Michaelangelo)

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Executive Summary

In recent decades, a clear and unambiguous recognition of the importance of oral language development for learning, acquisition of literacy skills, and ability to access the curriculum effectively has emerged. This has resulted in a focus on oral language development which is manifest in the policy documents of education systems worldwide. Translating such a policy, which advocates the development of children's oral language skills, into effective practice in the classroom appears to be problematic. Of particular concern in this study is that in schools in the Irish education system where English is the medium of instruction, and particularly in those schools serving contexts of disadvantage in Ireland, successful implementation of policy in relation to the development of oral language continues to be challenging.

Using a triangulated design, this study generated data which was derived from three sources - consensus in the literature in relation to the status of oral language development, findings concerning teacher knowledge, perceptions, and pedagogy of oral language development from a nationwide survey of teachers in DEIS schools in Ireland, and evidence of the challenges of oral language development in action, in a case study involving three schools in the DEIS programme. This data was interrogated in relation to the central questions in the study –

What challenges does the DEIS context (i.e. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School – those schools in the School Support Programme in Ireland**) present for oral language teaching and learning?**
What is the impact of teacher support on oral language teaching and learning in a DEIS context?
What are the messages for policy makers that can be derived from the experience in this research?

Responses from a nationwide survey of teachers at junior, middle and senior class levels of schools in the DEIS programme revealed that in the context of developing children's oral language skills, many **challenges** for both teachers and children in DEIS schools exist. The impact of the frustration deriving from inappropriate facility with the required language skills in the classroom on many of the children, as reported by teachers, included

- *Reduced achievement* of potential for these children,

- Significant *communication difficulties*,

- *Low self-esteem*,

- *Lack of confidence*, and

- *Poor behaviour*

  As a consequence of these challenges,

- Teachers acknowledged having *lower expectations* for many of these children,

- Teachers talked about *dumbing down* their use of language in the classroom, and

- Teachers reported experiencing *difficulties with classroom management*.

Successful teachers of oral language have **knowledge about language** and how language is mediated in the educational context (including, for example, knowledge of the basic units of language, principles of word formation, awareness of language for communication, language of socialisation, language in the context of evaluation/assessment). Teachers also need to know about the particular language style required in the context of school, academic or literary language style – its importance, its characteristic features – and crucially, a non-judgemental awareness that this style of language is not immediately accessible to all children.

- Survey responses by teachers to questions about the content of their language teaching, planning, and targets for language teaching in their classrooms were often vague, and

- While teachers indicated an awareness of the importance of language style for success in school, the specific characteristics of a literary or academic style of language needed to negotiate the school system successfully were not clearly articulated by many teachers.

A critical aspect of teacher knowledge necessary for effective development of oral language skills in the classroom is that of **knowledge of the learners**. Teachers' awareness of the existence, validity, and challenges of the variety of language styles brought by children to the school context is central to successful implementation of policy on the development of appropriate oral language skills.

- Survey responses from teachers in DEIS schools revealed overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the language ability of many of the children, often presented from a deficit perspective.

- The perceptions of teachers in urban contexts were significantly more negative than their rural counterparts in relation to almost all aspects of children's oral language skills.

- Teachers with more experience of teaching in a disadvantaged context, and those teaching junior classes also had significantly more negative perceptions in relation to children's facility with some aspects of oral language than teachers with less experience of teaching in a disadvantaged context, and teachers of middle and senior classes.

Teacher **knowledge of pedagogy** requires teachers to engage frequently in tasks such as pair and group work, scaffolded, exploratory learning, and exposure to literature and drama, among others.

- Findings from the teacher survey indicate that the majority of teachers use these approaches in their classrooms.

- However, large numbers of teachers report using these approaches *sometimes* rather than *often*, for example, 49% of teachers reported using group work 'sometimes' rather than 'often' (see also NCCA, 2005) and

- A substantial minority of teachers appear to use some of these approaches quite infrequently, for example, 21% use drama less often than once per week (see also DES, 2005).

- Teachers report that DEIS classrooms are very well resourced for oral language learning but again a substantial minority of teachers (25%) indicated that children are not in classrooms where a range of enrichment activities are freely and easily accessible.

- An even larger percentage of teachers (48%) reported that the layout of the classroom does not change frequently, reducing children's access to a variety of interactional contexts on a regular basis.

- The number of teachers in DEIS contexts at both junior (59.3%) and senior class level (40.7%) continuing to work to teacher-pupil ratios well above the optimum level is disconcerting. This undoubtedly militates against the type of pedagogy essential to the development of oral language skills in these contexts.

Research findings are unequivocal that parents can make a difference to the success of their children in school. Because variation in home patterns of interaction can lead to differential preparation of children to engage with the system of school, it is important that teachers would have **knowledge about parents** - what parents can do to support children's oral language development, and how this support can be generated and sustained. It is clearly articulated in the literature that to harness parental support, schools need to reach out to parents in ways that signal a desire for meaningful partnership, that indicate a belief by teachers (and children) that parents *can* help, and that schools provide the necessary support for parents to fulfil this role.

- Very little evidence of sustained, meaningful school-parent partnership was evident in the survey responses received.

- Formal interaction with parents about children's oral language development occurs predominantly through parent-teacher meetings once or twice annually

- Teachers' perceptions of parents are that the majority are either reasonably or very interested in the academic progress of their children yet

- Parents rarely initiate interaction with teachers about children's academic development

- Teachers' perceptions of parents are that parents are not as aware as they might be of the importance of oral language development for their children yet

- Very little evidence emerged of an attempt by teachers to communicate this knowledge to parents outside of formal parent-teacher meetings, or to facilitate parents to support children in their developing language skills

- In those few instances where schools indicated an attempt to reach out to parents, generally teachers reported that this was positively received.

Teachers call repeatedly for **support** in relation to the content and pedagogy of oral language teaching in the survey findings, and express frustration with curriculum documents in terms of the level of support they offer.

Impact of Teacher Support

The impact of providing support to teachers was explored using a case study approach. A case study was conducted which involved working with ten teachers in three DEIS schools over a period of one academic year. The result of this intervention support was that all case study teachers improved in terms of knowledge of language and the pedagogy of language, many of them indicating that they now know a lot more about the language skills they are trying to promote in their classrooms. In the sample of Case Study teachers the following findings emerged:

- Teachers were much more aware than previously of what needs to be taught in oral language and of how that teaching and learning can best occur.

- Teachers indicated improvement in planning and target-setting

- Teachers' awareness of the importance of oral language became more acute

- Teachers were more willing as a consequence to devote time to oral language in the classroom and to seize opportunities as they presented for oral language development

- Teachers used a wide variety of approaches systematically and frequently, designed to maximise oral interaction through collaborative learning in their classrooms.

A significant effect of empowerment through knowledge on these teachers was recognition that the oral language challenge is an issue that must be tackled by schools and teachers – not a problem to be blamed on children and their families.

- Teachers in the case study readily recognised that the power to alleviate the challenges of oral language in DEIS schools lies firmly in their hands and repeatedly articulated this.

- Knowledge of language enabled teachers to see the difficulties children were presenting with, to recognise that these are not issues of special needs, but language issues that arise predominantly as a consequence of the meeting of different sets of

experiences and expectations, and to have confidence to work around the children's needs.

- Children in these classes were not judged negatively, but supported by knowledgeable practitioners to be the best they could be.

- Teachers were often surprised and even amazed at what children could actually do with language when scaffolded and facilitated in the process.

Children, too, benefitted from the impact of teacher support in this study. All of the children in the intervention group

1. encountered more high quality language through literature, poetry and from the teachers over the course of the project

2. had many opportunities to use language for meaningful communicative purposes, through pair and group-work, drama, and collaborative learning in a range of curricular areas

3. received feedback when they spoke, from teachers who were aware of the need for scaffolding to extend and develop children's contributions as well as to elicit the best quality contribution the children could make

4. were exposed to and encouraged to introduce features of academic style of language frequently in their classroom talk.

Among the children, teachers reported

- increased levels of confidence and self-esteem,

- much enjoyment in the talking activities in the classroom, and

- greater willingness to talk up.

- behavioural difficulties did not feature at all as a consequence of increased interaction in the classroom for the majority of the teachers – on the contrary, children relished the opportunity to engage in talk as part of the learning process in school.

Children in the intervention group showed clear evidence of a range of characteristics of academic style of language use when engaged in typical school-type talking tasks. The importance of this study is that it is apparent that this learning can take place given appropriate conditions.

Policy Implications of Findings

In an effort to translate existing policy around the importance of oral language development into meaningful, and effective practice in primary classrooms in DEIS contexts in Ireland, it is apparent from the findings in this study that new policy implementation structures need to be set in train by the Department of Education and Skills. These structures fall broadly into three categories:

- Teacher Professional Development

- Time Allocation for the Teaching of English

- Home-School Partnership

Teachers' acquisition of the requisite knowledge for oral language development in DEIS classrooms should not be discretionary. Teacher professional development therefore, needs to be mandatory, ongoing, and part of the normal working requirements for teachers. It is recommended that professional development for teachers in relation to the content of language for teaching and learning, with particular focus on the development of academic/literate language style, should be prioritised .

Findings from this study suggest that it may be necessary to increase the time allocation for English in DEIS schools, at least for a period of time deemed appropriate by school personnel, and most probably in the early years, so that children's facility with that style of language is improved. Policy from the Department of Education and Skills must take cognisance of this, and facilitate flexibility in relation to timing and timetabling in school settings, such that schools have discretion, in consultation with DES inspectorate, to prioritise English as necessary to provide adequate foundational skills in English among the cohort of pupils.

No meaningful difference in children's oral language skills can be accomplished without the support of parents working in tandem with teachers in the classroom. Policy from the Department of Education and Skills must support schools in reaching out meaningfully to those parents who wish to become involved in their children's education. Parents must know what the classroom teacher is trying to accomplish, why it is important, that they have a vital role to play, and what they can do to fulfil this role. This will require considerable planning and follow

through from individual teachers to accomplish. Having a strong home-school partnership which focuses on the academic development of the children is critical for success. Strengthening the role of the Home-School-Community Liaison teacher in the school is vital in this regard, as is the importance of supporting schools to dedicate at least one post of responsibility to the development of English language skills throughout the school.

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June, 2010

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INTRODUCTION

> An individual's acquisition of oracy allows access to a powerful
> symbolic system which enables the expression of needs and desires,
> the establishment and maintenance of relationships, and is a vehicle
> to learn about the world (Riley and Burrell, 2007, p.193).

Unlike the 'Rules for Children's Behaviour' (reprinted 1995) published in the Middle Ages cautioning that 'a boy's tongue should be never heard in school but in answering a question or repeating his lesson', there is widespread international recognition of the strong positive correlation between success in the school context and language competence. Of particular significance for success in the education system is facility with oral language (e.g. Wells, 1987; Snow & Powell, 2008). Building on a world-wide movement in the sixties which broadened the definition of education beyond numeracy and literacy, to include oracy, work by researchers such as Wilkinson (1965), Barnes et al. (1969) and others greatly influenced curriculum developers around the globe such that, for example, in "A Framework for the Primary Curriculum" published in the UK in 1989 it was agreed that:

> pupils are properly equipped with the basic tools of learning where
> numeracy, literacy and oracy are given the highest priority by teachers
> and are soundly taught. These skills form the basis of a proper and
> rigorous education to the highest standards parents expect (DES,
> 1989, p.2).

Centrality of Language

There are many reasons underpinning this catapulting of oral language development into sharp focus in primary school curricula internationally. The centrality of language in general and talk in particular in the **learning** process is probably the most significant of these reasons (e.g. Pantalco, 2007). 'There seems little doubt that talk in all its forms is fundamental in helping the young shape and transform their experience into understanding' (Bearne et al., p.21, 2003). Halliday (1993) posits that 'when children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one kind of learning among many; rather they are learning the foundation of learning itself' (p.93).

Riley et al. (2004) conclude from their review of existing literature that 'it would seem that fluency, competence in and comprehension of spoken language are the keys to being able to learn effectively' (p.658).

Substantial research has addressed the relationship between facility with oral language and one specific type of learning – the acquisition of **literacy** skills. In a comprehensive review of research examining the relationship between oral language knowledge and the development of literacy abilities, Dickinson et al. (2003) identifies what he describes as 'mounting evidence of the key role of oral language in supporting reading' (p.466). In this review, oral language refers to a 'composite of oral vocabulary, grammatical completion, sentence imitation and narrative recall' (p.466). The oral language skills of kindergarten children have been found to be strong predictors of children's third grade reading comprehension (Mason et al., 1992, Senechal et al., 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002), and the relationships between oral language ability and reading were seen to continue to be strong into the high school years (Snow et al., 1991; Wood et al., 2005).

Language skills that facilitate the development of literacy fall broadly into two main categories – code-related skills and oral language skills (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Code-related skills, such as phonological awareness, are particularly important in the initial phases of learning to read, while oral language skills become increasingly important as children move past the code-breaking phase into aspects of literacy such as fluency and comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is seen as a 'critical basis for the emergence of phonological sensitivity' (Dickinson et al., 2003, p.1; Senechal, 2006, Strickland & Shanahan, 2004; Whitehurst & Fischel, 2000), an important precursor to successful literacy development, and is linked to improved comprehension in older readers, a relationship which is found to be bi-directional (e.g. Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Scarborough (2001) cautions however, that oral language predictors of future reading ability should not be confined to just one linguistic domain. There is much evidence to support the long-term impact of a variety of oral language abilities (e.g. vocabulary, syntax and discourse, oral comprehension, productive narrative skills) on later development of literacy skills such as fluency and comprehension (e.g. Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Catts and Kamhi, 1999; Dickenson et al., 2003, Locke et al., 2002; Muter et al., 2004). Wasik et al. (2006) describe oral language knowledge as including word knowledge, expressive and receptive vocabulary, knowledge of syntax, and conceptual knowledge and cite ample evidence that 'oral language plays a critical role in laying the foundation for literacy

skills' (p.63) while Noel et al. (2008) emphasise that 'oral language skills become increasingly important as children move past the code-breaking phase into learning how to read fluently and comprehending what they read' (p. 824).

Summarising the 'complementary interrelationship between action, talk and text' (p.190), Wells (2003) emphasises that each one of these ways of making meaning is supported and facilitated by the other two and concludes that 'reading and writing texts may be the last of these three to be learned, but written texts only take on their full meaning in relation to the activities in which they play a part and to the talk that surrounds their composition and interpretation' (p.190). Cook-Gumperz (2006) represents oral and written language as co-existing along a continuum, and argues that oral and written language are 'different but supporting' (p.3) aspects of language use. Embedding the development of literacy firmly within a socio-cultural context she contends that 'as socially constructed, literacy is best regarded as part of an ideology of language, a socio-cultural phenomenon where literacy and orality coexist within a broader communicative framework not as opposites, but as different ways of achieving the same communicative ends' (ibid., p.3).

The importance of oral language is manifest in the widely acknowledged links between oral language knowledge and learning, as well as between oral language knowledge and the successful achievement of literacy skills repeatedly reported in research literature over the past three or four decades. The importance of facility with oral language is further endorsed by the link between oral language and the ability to access effectively all that the **curriculum** and the institution of the school has to offer. Language facilitates communication. The business of education depends hugely on communication, among teachers, parents and children. The teacher's role includes for example, explaining, questioning, describing, organising, evaluating, inspiring, challenging, and all of this is done primarily through the medium of talk (Riley et al., 2004). Assessment of educational attainment in the classroom typically takes the form of answering questions either orally or in writing such that children are required to display knowledge in the classroom context primarily through language – 'schooling is not only knowing how to do things, but rather demonstrating this knowing in appropriate contexts' (Cook-Gumperz, 2006, p.8). Wells (2006) concludes that 'it seems self-evident, therefore, that to succeed in school a pupil must have an adequate command of the linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing' (p.76). Consequently, children who have difficulties of any sort in terms of language may experience problems in learning, demonstrating learning,

becoming literate and accessing the curriculum on language-related tasks (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001). Fundamentally, it appears that 'the truth is oral language is primary, interrelated with written language and it is the basis of verbal thought, social communication, and the complexities of reading and writing' (Gentile, 1996, p.10).

Language Variety

The importance of promoting oral language skills among primary school children acquires even greater significance when the reality of **variation in patterns of language use** among children is considered. Studies exploring the relationship between marginalization and educational achievement have found that 'children from marginalized populations the world over consistently underperform academically as compared to their peers from communities of power and status' (Purcell-Gates, 2008, p.12). Given the acknowledged importance of facility with oral language for success in the school context, it seems that differences in the variety of language children bring with them into school may be implicated in the underachievement of many such children. Those children who do not have facility with the standard variety of language, that of the dominant culture through which the school functions, very often underachieve in that context (e.g. Cazden, 1972; Edwards, 1997; Heath, 1983; Philips, 1972; Schleppegrell, 2001; 2004; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Vernon-Feagans, 1996; Watson-Gegeo and Boggs, 1977; Wolfram et al., 1999).

The particular genre of language used for the purpose of teaching and learning contrasts with talk used in interpersonal communication. It is characterised as having a high degree of condensation of information and relative abstractness of presentation, as being less elliptical, less dependent on the surrounding talk and other contextual factors. The language of school may serve different functions to those used in an out-of-school context, such as the display of information in answering questions. Meaning in this context is often made explicit through words (e.g. Schleppegrell, 2004; Wolfram et al. 1999). Facility with these features of language is expected from the earliest encounters of children at school and they are required to be present in children's language use, both oral and written, throughout the school years (Watson, 2002).

Of critical importance in relation to these 'academic' or 'literate' (e.g. Pellegrini, 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004) features of the language of school is the finding that familiarity with this

style of language use is important for the acquisition of literacy skills. Eivers et al. (2004) signal that children's 'orientation towards particular kinds of language (such as the language found in books) is a major determinant of their ability to achieve in school' (p.8). Further, it is the view of many researchers that 'the use of a specific oral language register … literate language, is fundamental to becoming literate in school' (Pellegrini, 2002, p.55). Being familiar with and able to use literate style oral language has been shown to be a developmental precursor to school-based literacy learning (e.g. Pellegriini and Galda, 1998; Dickinson and Moreton, 1991; Dickinson and Sprague, 2002; Olson, 1977; Snow, 1983), as well as a strong predictor of early literacy development (Pellegini et al., 1998). Variation in patterns of language use is associated with social class (e.g. Fairclough, 2001), suggesting that children from middle-class backgrounds may be more advantaged by virtue of their variety of language in the school context than children from other cultural or socio-economic backgrounds.

(For a more detailed discussion of the impact of language variation on children's success in the school context, see

www.combatpoverty.ie/publication/workingpapers/2007-03WPTalkingPosh.pdf).

Oral Language and Policy

Recognising the acknowledged importance of oral language in the school context, successive reports in the United Kingdom during the '70's and '80's from Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) consistently highlighted the importance of speaking and listening in the classroom, e.g. the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), the Bullock Report (DES, 1975), Assessment of Performance Unit (APU, 1988). Speaking and Listening was included as a distinct attainment target in the National Curriculum (Corden, 2007). Building on such movements in curriculum development which acknowledged the significance of oral language as a foundation for success in school, the promotion of oral language in Irish primary schools is very much in evidence in Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971). This curriculum signalled a radical departure at the time from the *status quo* which had been in place for the previous fifty years and in which the development of literacy and numeracy skills would have been primary.

Evaluations of the implementation of that 1971 curriculum through the '70's and '80's however, found very little change in practice in the promotion of oral language skills in Irish primary

classrooms (Quinlan, 1990). In this context it is of major significance that the most recent revision of the primary school curriculum in Ireland (1999) strongly endorses the inclusion of an oral language perspective in the experience of all children in Irish primary schools. In the Revised Primary Curriculum (English) (1999) language learning is now characterised as an *integrated* process involving the development of oral language, reading and writing, in which oral language is given a *key role* throughout the curriculum, recognised as having a *central* place in the process of language development and given an *equal weighting* in the integrated language learning process. Significant also in this curriculum is the recognition that through oral language activity much of the child's *learning* takes place both in and out of school, and critically the focus on oral language as a *learning and teaching medium* at all levels throughout the curriculum. In fact, oral language is identified as being 'the single most important element in realising the integrated language learning experience' (p.26).

In the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 (2007), it is recognised that 'education at all stages of a child's life is of central importance for their development and future well-being' (p.13). Accordingly a high level goal set in this plan is to 'reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties in primary schools serving disadvantaged communities. The target is to halve the proportion from the current 27%-30% to less than 15% by 2016' (p.13). The policy response to this plan was the DEIS initiative (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DES, 2005). This initiative has targeted the improvement of literacy skills with 'a renewed focus on the teaching of literacy' (p.35) and a requirement that 'schools will develop three-year action plans which will prioritise and set targets for literacy' (p.35). Given the strong link between the development of literacy skills and facility with oral language it is clear that priority must be given to the development of oral language skills also if these targets are to be attained. There can be no doubt as to the views at policy level in relation to the significance of oral language and the need to implement a clear, unambiguous oral language focus in teaching.

Implementation in Primary School Classrooms

It is clear from reported research that having an oral language focus in learning and teaching in the primary classroom is extremely important, recognising especially that facility with a particular variety of language, academic language, is critical for success in the school context and may prove especially problematic for groups of children outside of mainstream, middle-class settings. Not only, therefore, does oral language development need to feature in children's school experiences, it should feature significantly and consistently at all class levels throughout the primary school and most importantly in those school settings which serve children from non-middle-class backgrounds. Despite this, available evidence would suggest that for many children, and particularly those children who may need this scaffolding and development most, this may not be the case.

Alexander (2003) bemoans the prevailing situation in the UK where 'primary education has long claimed to give high priority to fostering talk for learning, communication and social development' as one in reality where the dynamic and content of oral language 'belie the rhetoric of pedagogic and curricular reform and set the oral culture of English primary classrooms sharply apart' (p.23). He describes the place of oracy as compared with literacy development in English primary classrooms as 'at best a poor relation' (p.24). Corden (2007) reports similar findings from HMI evaluations which criticise schools for not giving enough time to oracy (p.43). Wasik et al. (2006) report findings from research on early literacy and classroom practices which show that in pre-school classrooms that serve low-income children, opportunities for language and literacy learning are limited (p.64). In the Harvard Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (HSLLD), Dickinson and Tabors (2001) observed that children and teachers spent relatively little time in pre-school classrooms engaged in conversations – recording meaningful exchanges between teacher and child only 17% of the time, and exchanges among children only 18% of the time. In this study, 59% of the time was spent not talking at all. Given that children learn to talk by engaging in meaningful dialogue, this type of experience can only serve to limit oral language development in the classroom. Dickinson (2001) noted also that even though teachers were aware of the value of storybook reading as a rich resource for language development, many teachers spent relatively little time in sharing stories with children and some did not engage the children in

interaction or discussion based on stories when they were read. In fact, it was noted that in some of these pre-school classrooms children spent more time in transition or tidying up than they did in having stories shared with them (p.200).

Reporting on findings of the Bristol Study of Language at Home and at School (1986), Wells (2006) reiterates differences in experiences of interaction between home and school which suggest that the nature of school interaction limits the meaningful use of oral language for learning in a range of rich and diverse ways as compared with home. In this study, findings indicated that children in out-of-school contexts were significantly more likely to initiate meaningful exchanges with caregivers, to ask a range of questions, and to produce complete and complex utterances. Adults in the home context were more likely to extend and develop the child's meaning whereas adults in the school context were more likely to extend and develop the adult's meaning. These findings lead Wells (2006) to conclude that

> compared with their experience at home, we find children at school playing a much less positive role in conversation with adults and having much less opportunity actively to explore their experience and develop their understanding through interaction with mature speakers who sustain their interests and encourage them to initiate topics, ask questions, and evaluate, or query the answers they are given (p.92).

Implementation in the Irish Context

In the context of schooling in Ireland, many evaluations of initiatives of curriculum implementation both in general and in contexts designated as disadvantaged have been conducted in recent years. All have found unequivocal evidence to suggest that promoting oral language in Irish primary school classrooms is not at an optimum level. In *An Evaluation of Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools* (DES, 2005, p.17) it is reported that problems in the implementation of an oral language focus was evident in between 25% and 33% of classrooms surveyed. In a quarter of the classrooms observed it was noted that 'teachers did not refer to the curriculum when planning; as a result, important content objectives with regard to developing language skills in different social contexts were overlooked' (p.17). Inspectors expressed concerns in relation to 25% of classrooms, recommending 'more extensive use of improvisational drama, poetry and rhyme as approaches to language development'. It was found that in the case of

33% of classrooms, developing cognitive abilities through language was not fostered adequately because 'pupils were not encouraged to engage in activities such as justifying and defending particular opinions or attitudes, or trying to persuade others to support a particular point of view' (p.17). It was concluded that 'there was scope for development in a quarter of the classes observed. In these classrooms there was limited use of higher-order questions by teachers to elicit thoughtful responses from pupils as well as an over-dependence on workbooks and the engagement of pupils in lower-order tasks, such as completing set questions' (p.17).

Looking at reports on practice in the teaching of English in contexts designated as disadvantaged the situation appears even more disturbing. Eivers et al. (2004) found in their study of English lessons in first and fifth classes that 'pupils in designated disadvantaged schools had less English instruction time than pupils in non-designated schools' (p.13). Other published evaluations have consistently found a need for greater focus on language development in designated disadvantaged contexts. Lewis and Archer (2003) evaluating the Early Start initiative reported that 'in the core aspects of language and cognitive development … the progress of the children reflects standards that are more consistent with beginning-of-year than with end-of-year objectives' (p.16). Archer and Shortt (2003) on the Home-School Liaison Scheme suggest that co-ordinators of the scheme need to become more heavily involved in work designed to stimulate children's learning in the home, including language development' (p.116). Weir et al. (2002) in their evaluation of the 'Breaking the Cycle' initiative noted than rather than prioritising English in this programme there was a slight reduction in time spent on teaching English. Most recently, findings by the DES, in its evaluation of *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners* were as follows:

- The dramatically low achievement levels reported suggest that pupils are not benefiting from their educational experience
- These findings should be of major concern to teachers, school management authorities and policy-makers, given the importance of language competence as a foundation for learning in many disciplines (2005, pp.61-63).

In an earlier study as a precursor to this current research, which looked at patterns of language variation among children by social class, and teachers' responses to the

perceived language needs of the children, the findings of the evaluations reported above were corroborated. In that study (Cregan, 2007, pp.181-183) focus group discussions with the children in schools designated as disadvantaged indicated that they had no concept of talk as a legitimate learning activity, viewing talk in the classroom as something which occurred when '*the teacher is out of the classroom*' or when '*subjects are boring'.* Focus group discussions with teachers in the schools designated as disadvantaged in the study revealed the following:

- Teachers were unanimous in their agreement on the importance of oral language development in the school context but characterised its importance only in terms of its contribution to the development of children's literacy skills and deemed it to be of most importance in infant classrooms.

- Teachers' perceptions of the oral language skills of the majority of children were very negative, describing their language as '*poor'* and *'weak'.* This reiterates findings by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) that teachers often remark on 'the fact that children come to school with a significant oral language deficit' (2005, p.25). The poor language skills of the children were attributed to the types of language experiences in the home, parents' lack of education and different priorities for parents.

- No formal, dedicated, targeted, focused oral language lessons were taught by the teachers in the designated disadvantaged schools in the study. Teachers in these schools indicated that oral language development takes place in their classes but not in the form of discrete oral language lessons. The exact nature of the oral language development that takes place was unclear. The lack of clarity was reflected in the children's lack of awareness of formal oral language activities in the classroom in these schools when asked about talking in school.

- Teachers broadly welcomed the renewed emphasis on oral language development in the Revised Curriculum (English) (1999), but indicated that they found this curriculum difficult to follow. There was a general feeling also among these teachers that the particular challenges faced by teachers in designated disadvantaged contexts in relation to language development were not addressed.

- Findings by the DES that 'teachers experience a lack of engagement with the planning process' (2005, p.61) were evident in this study also. While all of the schools had a school plan for English as required, many teachers in these schools were not involved in developing that plan, many were not familiar with the contents of the plan, and many did not refer to the plan when organising classroom activities in English.

- Teachers in these schools expressed negative views of the literacy skills of many of the children and cited poor home experiences as the source of the difficulty for many children.

From the findings reported above it appears that in the Irish context, those children who most need intervention in terms of language development may be least likely to get it, thus making it considerably more difficult for them to achieve their potential through the school system than is the case for their more privileged, mainstream counterparts.

Despite the overwhelming volume of research which clearly identifies the importance of facility with oral language in the process of learning, becoming literate and accessing the curriculum in school, and in particular the importance of knowledge of literate style language, allied with the vigorous endorsement at policy level of the need to centralise and prioritise oral language in the primary classroom, the practice remains problematic in many primary classrooms. Alexander (2003, p.29) characterises typical teacher/pupil interactions in classrooms in his study as

- brief rather than sustained
- teachers questioning about content but children questioning mainly on points of procedure
- closed questions in the main
- children concentrating on identifying 'correct' answers
- little speculative talk or thinking out loud
- children's answers usually Marked the end of an exchange and teacher's feedback usually closed it
- feedback tended to praise or encourage rather than to inform.

He cites evidence from independent research which suggests that such features of classroom interaction are remarkably resistant to centralised reform (e.g. Hardman et al., 2003; Moyles et al., 2003; Skidmore, 2002, in Alexander, 2003). Corden (2007, p.43) refers to the National Oracy Project (Norman, 1990, p.13) which advocates that 'if talk is to be valued as a tool for learning and a means of communication of educational worth equal to reading and writing, its status may have to be improved in the eyes of everyone concerned with the children and the school'. In line with the conclusion of Alexander (2003) it seems that 'habits of classroom talk and the thinking that goes with them, are deeply embedded, historically and culturally' (p.30).

Summary

The research is unequivocal in terms of the need to develop children's oral language skills in the school context, given its importance for learning, literacy development and accessing the curriculum. For many children, the challenge of coming to school familiar with a variety of language, which is not the standard variety through which the school functions, is clearly established. Accepted policy vigorously endorses having oral language development as a central tenet of education systems, and yet the practice in relation to the implementation of oral language development in schools is problematic and is of particular concern in schools in Ireland serving contexts of disadvantage.

The purpose of this study is to explore in schools where English is the medium of instruction

- why the leap from policy to practice is problematic in terms of the development of children's oral language proficiencies and

- how practice might be improved so that the development of oral language might be enhanced in Irish primary school classrooms.

The study is particularly concerned with practice in the development of those oral language skills which are critical for success in the school context, with a focus on children for whom such oral language skills present particular challenges.

The study begins with an examination of relevant literature to uncover consensus as to the requirements for effective practice (Chapter One). Focussing on school contexts designated as disadvantaged, a nationwide survey of teachers generates data from these schools on classroom practice in oral language on a broad scale (Chapter Three), followed by an intervention case study, which gives an insight into the possibilities and problems of practice when implementing an approach to the development of children's oral language proficiency in these schools (Chapter Four). Findings from the data gathered using this triangulated design will be used to make recommendations for policymakers aimed at improving the practice of oral language development in schools in the school support programme in Ireland (Conclusion).

CHAPTER ONE

Effective Implementation of Policy: The Importance of Teacher Knowledge

It is inevitable when exploring the issue of effective implementation of policy in an education context that the focus would centre on practice, in particular on practice in the context of the effective teacher. One of the significant factors associated with successful implementation of policy is the importance of implementers who are skilled and committed (e.g. Parsons, 1996). Research findings clearly signal an undisputed significance attaching to the teacher for effective and successful practice leading to high quality learning by the student. This chapter will explore findings in the research which examine the impact a teacher can have in the classroom and will investigate in particular, the kinds of knowledge a teacher needs in order to maximise that impact in developing children's oral language proficiency.

Teachers Can Make a Difference

The greatest source of variation in the learning of students is acknowledged to be attributable to differences in what students bring to school. However, it is also acknowledged that 'of those variables which are potentially open to policy influence, **factors involving teachers and teaching are the most important influences on student learning**' (McKenzie and Santiago, 2005, p.28 – emphasis added). Reviews by Santiago (2002), Schacter and Thum (2004) and Eide et al. (2004) all suggest that the most important school variable affecting student achievement is teacher quality. That teachers can make a difference is undisputed (e.g. Mortimer et al., 1988; Tizard et al., 1988) – 'the teaching profession is a key mediating agency for society as it endeavours to cope with social change and upheaval' (Coolahan, 2002, p.9). He refers to comments

by Fullan (1993) that 'there are no substitutes to having better teachers … We cannot have a learning society without a learning profession of teachers' (Fullan, 1993, p.131, in Coolahan, 2002, p.30). The work of researchers such as Tough (1977), Wasik et al. (2006), and Wells and Mejia-Arauz (2006) have demonstrated that teachers can make a dramatic difference to the language development of children. Several studies have found that when oral activities involving the use of 'literate' style language have been emphasised for children for whom this type of language knowledge is not well developed, literacy standards have improved (Galda, Shockley & Pelligrini, 1995; LeFevre & Senechal, 1999). Significant impacts such as these don't occur by chance, however. Fundamental to successful practice is the concept of **teacher knowledge**, which it is agreed, is an important factor influencing teacher quality and effective practice. Characterising appropriately the form and extent of that knowledge is somewhat more problematic.

Teacher Knowledge

It is accepted that teacher knowledge is a key element in implementing and sustaining reform in education worldwide (e.g. Earl et al., 2001). Early studies of teacher knowledge in English tended to focus on teachers' knowledge about language - subject knowledge (Bearne et al., 2003, p.49) and in the case of primary teachers highlighted what these teachers appeared not to know, concluding that increasing teachers' subject knowledge would improve the effectiveness of their teaching (Poulson, 2003). More recent studies however serve to demonstrate that the pedagogical transformation of subject knowledge is a complex task in the case of primary school teachers (Shulman, 1987, p.4) and 'there appears to be little evidence of a clear relationship between well developed formal academic knowledge of particular subject content and effective teaching in the primary phase of schooling' (Poulson, 2003, p.56).

The work of Shulman (1987) refers to the importance of 'pedagogical content knowledge', that is, knowledge of the content and additionally an ability to present it meaningfully to children (in Poulson, 2003, p.55). Relevant findings (e.g. Snow, 2003)

indicate that teacher knowledge in relation to the successful teaching of English comprises even more than pedagogical content knowledge, requiring

- knowledge of **content**,

- knowledge of **pedagogy**, and also

- knowledge of **learners**,

- knowledge of the **curriculum**, and

- knowledge of one's **beliefs as practitioner**

(e.g. Alexander, 2003; Corden, 2007; Jones, 2007; Poulson, 2003; Riley et al., 2007; Wysse & Jones, 2007).

Each of these layers of knowledge is acquired and built upon throughout the continuum of a teaching career, and additionally, each of these layers operates simultaneously, in synchrony with the others. For the purposes of clarity each will be considered in turn over the next few sections in order to elucidate as precisely as possible the nature of teacher knowledge most likely to enable the successful transformation of appropriate knowledge into effective practice in primary classrooms having an effective oral language focus.

Teacher Knowledge of the Content of Language Learning

> The diversity of English, involving differences of national perspective as well as different disciplinary enterprises requires a continuing dialogue … there is also a need to situate the teacher and teachers' development, as well as the development of students, in the collaborative activity of English. (Ellis et al. 2007, p.8).

Although it is widely acknowledged that having appropriate content knowledge may not necessarily result in successfully teaching such content to students, it is accepted that a teacher needs to have subject knowledge in order to teach effectively, and where high standards of teaching are reached teachers display considerable levels of content knowledge in the subject they are teaching (e.g. Corden, 2007, p.116). In the absence of such knowledge Corden (2007) warns that 'without a fundamental grasp of those elements of language study that are expected to be taught in primary schools, there is a

real danger of teachers relying on 'off the shelf' textbook activities and returning to …
arid decontextualised exercises' (p.117).

Invoking the prevailing situation where there are 'tremendous pressures on children to become skilled users of language in school' (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003, p.9), these researchers argue that teachers need 'a thorough understanding of how language figures in education' (ibid.). The multiplicity of functions in which a teacher engages which are mediated through language underpin the rationale for their argument. Teacher as *communicator* needs to know that patterns of discourse are culturally determined and that all patterns of discourse are equally valid. Teacher as *educator* needs to know about and understand the basics of language and child language development so that appropriate language content and relevant activities and resources are selected to promote language development in the classroom. Teacher as *evaluator* needs to be aware that all assessment is ultimately an assessment of language and so must realise how sources of variation in language use may impact on children's assessments. Teacher as *educated human being* needs to have a personal facility with language. Teacher as an *agent of socialisation* must facilitate successful interaction with the system of school for all children regardless of linguistic or cultural background (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003). Much attention is given in this argument to the significance of teacher knowledge in relation to oral language proposing that 'despite its importance for learning, many teachers know much less about oral language than they need to know' (ibid., p.20). Among the specific aspects of language knowledge required are, for example:

- knowledge of the basic units of language (phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, discourse);
- knowledge of processes of vocabulary acquisition and the importance of accurate definitions and explanations when introducing vocabulary;
- awareness of dialects and an appreciation of their validity and complexity;
- understanding of academic style of language – its existence, its significance, and its characteristics

(Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003, pp.20-33).

In the same volume, Snow (2003, p.129) clarifies that such knowledge is necessary not as content to be presented to children but for the purpose of enabling teachers to understand and support children as learners and readers. This corroborates Shulman's

(1987) claim that the content knowledge of a teacher should go well beyond what needs to be taught to a particular cohort of students in order to structure learning experiences effectively.

As signalled in the introduction to this study, knowledge of academic style of language has been found to be particularly important for children in order to succeed when engaging with the system of school (see p. 8). Much research points to the link between poor achievement in literacy and difficulties with this 'academic' style of language (e.g. Pilgreen, 2006; Schleppegrell and Columbi, 2002). In spite of this, however, relatively little research attention has been given to the 'challenges faced by native speakers in learning the rules, the structures and the content of academic English' (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 113). Given the importance attaching to the teacher articulating clearly expectations for language use in the classroom, particularly expectations for formal, academic or literate style of language use by children (Schleppegrell, 2001), it would seem critical that teachers would have knowledge of the specific characteristics of this style of language so as to clearly articulate expectations for its use and for purposes of instruction where necessary. The academic style of language expected in the classroom context is one which involves

- ❑ authoritative presentation of ideas
- ❑ using apt vocabulary and
- ❑ complex grammatical structures which are
- ❑ expanded appropriately
- ❑ with a high degree of organization
- ❑ are high in new information and
- ❑ adopt an impersonal stance with regard to both the speaker and listener.

 (e.g. Schlepegrell, 2001, 2004; Snow et al.1989; Michaels, 1981; Halliday & Hasan, 1989).

Snow & Uccelli (2009) condense the features of academic language style revealed by linguists and educational researchers as:

- *Interpersonal stance*: characterised in academic language by being detached and authoritative in the style of language used
- *Information load*: characterised by conciseness and density of language
- *Syntactic organisation of information*: characterised by the use of embedded clauses

- *Organising of information* such that information is presented coherently and logically
- *Lexicon* characterised by vocabulary choice which is diverse, precise and formal
  (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p.118-121).

Snow (2003) acknowledges the enormity and complexity of knowledge required by teachers of language, which on the one hand is accessible by virtue of the fact that all teachers can speak a language, but complicated by the level of technical knowledge required in what is an intuitive process (p.129). She recommends that teachers need to develop a curiosity about words and suggests that 'the first benchmark en route to mastery of the domain of language for teachers should perhaps be defined as familiarity with the dimensions on which words and language might vary and an unrelenting willingness to learn more' (p. 130). The overwhelming need for teachers to develop this knowledge of language is perhaps best expressed in the words of Shirley Brice-Heath (2007):

> The young enter our classrooms full of their stories and electronic fascinations. We do them no favour if they leave with these tales and interests validated and with only the same language structures and uses they brought with them. … **If they have not read and heard, as well as practised in meaningful roles with supportive models, the kinds of language they will need to deliberate and contest existing injustices and necessary reform, they will remain subject to social, economic and political exploitation**. (p.205). (Emphasis added)

Teacher Knowledge of Pedagogy

> Effective teaching … requires teachers to be able to make the transition from personal knowledge and understanding of a subject to the representation of that subject to their pupils (Corden, 2007, p.116).

Contemporary research on learning and language development focuses on how socio-cultural issues such as socio-economic status affect children's language and learning (Anderson et al., 2006). It is based on a theory of language learning as 'language-in-use' (Purcell-Gates, 2008) where language is embedded within the context of social activity (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962; Wertsch, 1981). Previous research on children's

language learning concentrated on issues of cognition, relied on standardised tests to assess language proficiency and often put in place compensatory interventions with a behaviourist or sub-skills orientation. The 'deficit thesis' of the 1960's and '70's, focussing on the perceived inadequacies of the child and his environment, was replaced when 'the recognition that diversity is as much a matter of language use as it is of culture' paved the way for a new research focus on schooling processes (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 2006, p.55). Only recently has research on children's language development 'considered how social relations among learners, or *among learners and those who judge their performance*, might affect judgements of cognition, social adjustment or learning styles' (Toohey, 2000, p.7) (emphasis added).

Socio-cultural Context of Learning and Teaching

> The ways in which children acquire language and construct knowledge in nonschool environments and the dynamic relation with what they are taught in school is maximally relevant to school learning (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p.202).

Human activity takes place in cultural contexts and is mediated by language and other symbol systems (Vygotsky, 1978). Children are motivated to learn by a desire to participate in the activities of their families and communities and are facilitated in that process by assistance through language from more expert others (Wells, 2003). Contemporary research derived from socio-cultural approaches to learning and development supports the claim that cognitive and linguistic mastery is based on the relationships between individuals, whether in the classroom or in an out-of-school context (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p.192). An over-arching focus in the socio-cultural approach to teaching and learning is the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (ibid. p.191).

The consensus of studies which focus on the socio-cultural nature of language and literacy learning is that such learning occurs as a matter of course in a social environment through a process of interactional exchanges leading to a joint construction of understanding between teacher and student. Cook-Gumperz (2006) reminds us that 'it is the purpose of educational settings to make possible this mutual construction' (p.9).

The 'mutual' construction and co-construction of meaning mediated by language may be jeopardised when teacher and learner, coming from varied socio-cultural experiences, bring different perspectives to bear on what constitutes knowledge and what learning outcome is valued. Mercer (2004), building on the concept of a 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that

> for a teacher to teach and a learner to learn, they must use talk and joint activity to create a shared communicative space, an 'intermental development zone' (IDZ) **on the contextual foundations of their common knowledge and aims**. In this intermental zone, which is reconstituted constantly as the dialogue continues, the teacher and learner negotiate their way through the activity in which they are involved. If the quality of the zone is successfully maintained, the teacher can enable a learner to become able to operate just beyond their established capabilities, and to consolidate this experience as new ability and understandings. If the dialogue fails to keep minds mutually attuned, the IDZ collapses and the scaffolded learning grinds to a halt (p.128)(emphasis added).

The role of the teacher in successfully empowering students in the construction of meaning as active agents in their own learning is a feature of the work of Cummins (1986), cited in Au (1998). Empowered students are described as 'confident in their own cultural identity, as well as knowledgeable of school structures and interactional patterns' (Au, 1998, p.304) thus enabling them to participate successfully in learning activities in school. Other students, from diverse backgrounds, may be disempowered in the school context by virtue of a lack of connection between schooled knowledge and their personal experience. The poor academic achievement of students of diverse backgrounds has been attributed in part to the low status accorded to the home language of such students (Au, 1998) which may be ignored or denigrated or used as a basis for negative judgements of cognitive ability (e.g. Michaels, 1991; Roth, 1986). Cummins (1986) argues that this can best be countered where teachers incorporate the language and culture of such students into the school programme, reach out to their communities, and engage in pedagogy which encourages them to use language to construct their own knowledge (in Au, 1998, p.305). This viewpoint is reiterated by Poplin and Phillips (1993) arguing that 'an appropriate education must respect who children are, their communities, their language, and their histories and help them become the best they can be rather than simply requiring them to become like the rest of us' (Poplin and Phillips,

1993, p.253). This is best realised through a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

Social Constructivist Pedagogy

The pedagogy deriving from the socio-cultural nature of learning is that of social constructivism - 'Because reality is seen to be created through processes of social exchange, historically situated, social constructivists are interested in the collective generation of meaning among people' (Au, 1998, p.299). This paradigm is consistent with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development (Pantalco, 2007).

The interrelationship between spoken language and learning has led psychologists and educationalists to advocate pedagogy in which discourse is centrally involved in the search for meaning (e.g. Barnes, 1992; Bruner, 1986; Wood, 1988). Influenced by the work of Vygotsky who argued that thought is not just expressed in words but comes into existence through words, these researchers see talk as central for learning in the context of school. Having discourse as a central pillar in teaching and learning is the lynchpin of social constructivist pedagogy.

Barnes (1976) reported on two major pedagogical styles in classrooms: transmission and interpretation. In the transmission model, teachers emphasise information transfer, determining what is to be taught, transmitting information, and testing children to ensure that it has been learned. In the interpretation model teachers are concerned more with open-ended, interactive discourse, involving exploratory and reflective learning, pupils taking risks, and sharing thoughts and ideas. The transmission model of teaching is characterised by the teacher initiating the discourse with a question to which the pupil responds, followed by feedback in the form of an evaluation from the teacher (IRE, Mehan, 1979). This model, known also as a 'recitation script' (Wells & Mejia-Arauz, 2006), has been found to disadvantage those children whose out-of-school culture does not expose them to this pattern of interaction (e.g. Heath, 1983; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), provides no link between the patterns of everyday language use and those more

formal patterns required in the school context (Lemke, 1990), and gives children minimal opportunity to voice their own ideas or to respond to the ideas of others (Wood, 1992).

In their survey of teacher-pupil discourse Galton et al. (1980) found that in classrooms pupils gave limited responses to predominantly closed questions, rarely initiated exchanges or explored issues. Work was found to take place largely independently and individually and teacher intervention was usually restricted to giving information or correcting work. A repeat of the survey in 1999 found that at this time there was even less emphasis on active learning and more time was spent on direct instruction. This corroborates findings from other studies that the transmission mode of instruction, where an asymmetrical discourse sequence predominates and which, therefore, of necessity minimises interaction, continues to prevail in many classrooms (e.g. Cole, 1996; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

In the Irish context, a review of teachers' and children's experiences of the Primary Curriculum (English) by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005), found that 'whole class teaching was the organisational setting which teachers most frequently reported using to teach the English curriculum, followed closely by individual work. Teachers reported limited use of group and pair work with children in their classes' (NCCA, Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1, 2005, p.2).

The transmission model of teaching is, according to Wells (1992, p.289) completely incompatible with the concept of constructivist learning. According to Corden (2007, p.112)

> the essence of constructivist learning is that pupils will gain through social interaction with others, where they share perceptions, extend their knowledge base and develop conceptual understanding through being exposed to other, sometimes conflicting, views of the world.

This model of learning, which is essential if an oral language perspective is to be promoted in the classroom (e.g. Wells & Mejia-Arauz, 2006), requires a re-balancing of the traditional model involving the triadic dialogue of Initiation-Response-Evaluation to a context where knowledge is also dialogically co-constructed (Wells & Mejia-Arauz, 2006,

p.380). This context requires students to explore content in dialogue which has greater symmetry between participants. Alexander (2003, p.33) identifies four criteria or conditions of dialogic teaching as:

- *Collective*: pupils and teachers address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation;
- *Reciprocal*: pupils and teachers listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- *Cumulative*: pupils and teachers build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- *Supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings

In such a context the teacher is required to take on a range of roles – facilitator, manager, instructor, and assessor (Fisher, 1992); to use a range of strategies – modelling, demonstrating, supporting, and scaffolding (Bruner, 1986); and to engage in an interactive process of teaching and learning focussed on collaborative learning and the joint construction of knowledge (Corden, 2007). The pedagogical implications of such an approach include increased emphasis on group work and exploratory learning through talk, exemplified in discussion opportunities, exchange of ideas, sharing information and problem-solving. This is supported by scaffolded dialogue premised on structured questioning designed to guide the learner. An encounter with literature and poetry, along with increased participation in play and drama activities are among the strategies recommended (e.g. Alexander, 2003; Corden, 2007; Grainger, 2004; Mercer, 2004; Wysse & Jones, 2007).

Teacher Knowledge of Learners

> There is a longstanding finding by researchers that teachers' perceptions of children's non-standard speech produces negative expectations about the children's personalities, social backgrounds, and academic abilities (Giles, 1987).

Teachers' perceptions of their students' capacity for learning and achievement may be affected by issues of social class, gender and ethnicity (Roth, 1986; Filer & Pollard, 2000). Some children, whose variety of language, although equally complex and valid, is not the standard variety, instead of experiencing 'synchronous interaction with the teacher' (Schleppegrell,

2001, p.433) as is the case for mainstream students, rather encounter 'discontinuity' of experience by virtue of a mismatch between the spoken language of the home and that expected and demanded by the school (Edwards, 1997; INTO, 1994; MacRuairc, 1997). This in turn may contribute to the underachievement experienced by these children in the context of school and in the development of literacy skills. Children may come to school as competent speakers and listeners in their home environments, but, because of the pre-eminence of one variety of language, both spoken and written, as the medium of all educational exchange (Cook-Gumperz, 2006, p.9) and the implicit and perhaps unconscious assumptions of socially distributed differences among groups of children, 'the way they are judged, not only in their speaking performance but also in matters of their attitude and motivation, is reflected back within the evaluative context of classrooms as differential language abilities' (ibid., p. 9). A study by Riley & Burrell (2007) found that 'effective early language teaching depends on having detailed knowledge about children's skills, especially those children from diverse backgrounds' (p. 183). The study suggested that the extent to which teachers, through appropriate teaching, enabled children to progress varies considerably due to a lack of knowledge of the variety of language skills children bring with them into the school context. A compelling case was made in that study for the use of an oral narrative assessment tool by teachers to improve teacher knowledge of learners with a view to enhancing teacher impact on children's oral language development.

In the precursor to this study (Cregan, 2007) findings from the teacher focus group discussions revealed perceptions of children's language skills as *'poor', 'weak'* or *'very weak'* (ibid., p.156), and extended to deficit perceptions of children's general cognitive ability which was often characterised as not as well developed as it would be if the children were raised in a middle-class context – *'they're not as able because they don't get the same opportunity – if these children were compared with children in a similar class in a middle-class school they would be way behind – lots of important development takes place before the child starts school – that's all happened before they even come to school so they've missed out already'* (Cregan, 2007, p.157). Such perceptions of children may result in teachers having lower than appropriate expectations for some children, which may lead to lower than appropriate levels of achievement on the part of such children (e.g. Archer & Weir, 2005; Kennedy, 2009). In terms of knowledge of learners, critical knowledge for teachers to acquire includes an awareness of the existence of variation in language among children, the complexity and validity of all

varieties of patterns of language use, and the implications of children's language variety for achieving success in the school context (Cregan, 2007, p.185).

Teacher Knowledge of the Curriculum

Despite the fact that curriculum development at national level progresses on a representational basis, where all vested interests are involved, the reality for the majority of teachers is that they are required to work within a framework which is externally devised and prescribed (Poulson, 2003). While broadly welcoming the Revised English Curriculum (1999) and particularly, its increased emphasis on oral language, teachers in the Cregan study (2007, pp. 161-162) expressed dissatisfaction at the suitability and applicability of that curriculum as currently constituted for the pupils in their schools. Among the views expressed in relation to the curriculum was the difficulty of accessing it effectively, some teachers admitting to having *'grappled'* with it, or *'spent a lot of time trying to figure out the curriculum and found it impossible',* while some indicated that they *'never look at it'.* It was described as being *'too wordy'* using *'big language'* and *'generally unhelpful and detached from the reality of the classroom'.* The suitability of the curriculum for developing language skills in schools in the school support programme was raised by teachers, some of whom argued that it was *'too broad',* and many felt that the *'objectives are unrealistic for many children'.*

Evidence of difficulty for teachers in successfully implementing the Revised Primary Curriculum (English) (1999) is presented in the Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1 (NCCA, 2005). This review found that 'teachers reported difficulty in understanding the English strands and using them to plan for and to teach the English curriculum' (2005, p.2). One of the main recommendations arising from this finding was that 'the organisational framework (strands and strand units) for the English curriculum should be revised to ensure the English curriculum is presented in a manner that is accessible to teachers and that enables them to plan for, and to support children's learning in the primary school' (p.3). Arguing that the additional support materials subsequently produced (English Additional Support Material, 2005) changed only the structure but not the content of the English curriculum, what had originally been presented as the *strands* (i.e. the pillars on which language learning is premised – *Receptiveness to Language, Competence and Confidence in Using Language, Developing Cognitive abilities*

through Language, Emotional and Imaginative development through Language) were replaced by the *strand units* (i.e. the modes through which language learning is realised – *Oral Language, Reading and Writing*) and vice versa. It remains to be seen whether this flipping of the strands and strand units has improved access to the English curriculum for teachers and resulted in greater knowledge and understanding which transforms into effective practice.

Findings from the *Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools: Challenges for Teachers and Learners* (2005, pp.61-63) recommend that

- Everyone involved in the work of designated disadvantaged schools must recognise that the significant level of low achievement in classrooms means that **teaching and learning approaches must be highly focussed on the specific needs of individual children**
- Provision in the schools must be characterised by **high expectations for all children and an emphasis on improving standards**.
- Learning contexts involved require a very **high level of teaching expertise**
- A more **systematic, school-based planning process** is required to ensure continuity and progression in children's learning (DES, 2005, p.61-63)(emphasis added).

To deliver on these recommendations it is essential that teachers are familiar with and able to access all that the curriculum has to offer. Clearly, published reports in Ireland by both the NCCA and the DES have found teachers experiencing difficulty with implementing the English curriculum and using the curriculum for effective planning. Teacher knowledge of the curriculum is central to effective implementation of policy.

Permeating all of the teacher knowledge outlined above is the belief system through which teacher knowledge of various kinds in terms of language learning is accessed and developed, which is as important as the knowledge itself (Twiselton, 2003). Teachers' sense of professional identity, explained as 'how teachers define themselves to themselves and others' (Sammons et al., 2007, p.687) was found to be fundamental to their effectiveness, influencing such factors as motivation, job fulfilment, commitment and self-efficacy (p.687). This study found that the pupils of teachers with a positive sense of professional identity had levels of attainment which exceeded those of teachers who did not (ibid., p. 699). How teachers view their role in the context of the classroom impacts fundamentally on the content they teach and the actions they take. Reflection on the goals of education and the role of the teacher in achieving them must be central in the development of a teacher's sense of identity such that 'teachers need to see their primary role in the classroom as a catalyst for learning – the link

between pupil, curriculum and subject, task and learning, classroom and the world beyond it' (Twiselton, 2003, p.73).

Jones (2007) summarises all of this pre-requisite knowledge of the effective teacher of language in his description of the 'imaginary … ideal teacher' (p.59) as follows:

> This imaginary teacher is committed to knowing about language as well as its place in the construction of educational knowledge. She is assumed to possess considerable language expertise. She has substantive knowledge of register (especially how meanings are specialised according to curriculum contexts) and text (as instances of meaning choices) to bring to pedagogic decisions. She understands the distinction between register (language variation according to use) and dialect (variation according to user) sufficiently to support students' investigations of both (*different varieties of English, different contexts).* She recognises that specialist repertoires of meanings are built upon the everyday. The ideal teacher is also one who understands the role of the adult in learning as one involving gradually diminishing assistance while learners appropriate curriculum discourses and practices with increasing confidence' (p.59).

Parent Knowledge

In addition to teacher knowledge, it is evident from the literature that parental involvement and improved parent knowledge can have an impact on the language development of children. Parents are interested in their children's education, and many parents want to help children to have a successful school experience (e.g. Cregan, 2008). It is critically important that the impact not only of the teacher and the school but also the home influences on developing children's oral language skills be considered, to maximise the potential for children's success in the school context.

Children from low socio-economic families face heightened risks of underachievement in literacy and language related tasks in schools (e.g. Rescorla & Alley, 2001) and have been found to be more likely to be slow in the development of oral language skills (e.g. Juel et al., 1986; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst, 1996). Children reared in poverty from an early stage in life are more likely to achieve poorly in school as compared with those who experience economic disadvantage later in life (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Also, children experiencing chronic as distinct from transitory disadvantage have poorer performances on

measures of language skills at school entry (NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2005). There are consistent findings in the literature that children who come from homes where parents have higher levels of education and higher income levels have more advanced language skills than other children (e.g. Mantzicopolous, 1997; Snow et al., 1998; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This is thought to occur as a consequence of variation in parent-child interaction styles (e.g. Hashima & Amato, 1994; Mistry et al., 2004).

Variation in Patterns of Interaction at Home

> An unsettling surprise was how different families were in how often and in what ways they interacted with their children, even though all were similarly raising children to participate in a common American culture (Hart, 2000, p. 29).

While findings reiterated by Wells (2006) referred to on page 9 point to better experiences of interaction at home than in school, research findings also highlight variation in frequency of some patterns of parent-child interactions in the home. In terms of general conversation in the preschool context, Hart (2000) identifies three conditions which increase the power of such interactions so that children's language development is maximised – attention, amount and partnership (p.31). The frequency with which such conditions are met was found to vary substantially in the preschool interactions of children. Optimum conditions for language learning in the home identified by Hart (2000) involve:

- caregivers paying **attention** to children's talk, i.e. *listening* to children,
- increasing the **amount** of interaction the child is involved in at home, i.e. *speaking* to children and giving children multiple opportunities to speak,
- engaging children meaningfully in the 'social dance of conversation' i.e. **engaging** with the children as real, *meaningful partners* in the conversation (ibid., p.30).

This means that what each partner says is governed by what the other said, and requires partners to listen, maintain the topic and elaborate to sustain the conversation. Children need to experience conditions frequently where they are heard when they speak, are exposed to rich and varied models of talk, and are engaged as real partners in conversation as distinct from just turn-takers in an interaction.

Other research has identified that home discourse patterns have been found to vary in terms of the amount of 'non-immediate' talk (deTemple, 2001, p.39) evident between parent and child, particularly during storybook reading sessions. This type of talk refers to information that is 'not immediately visible in the illustrations or in the text' (ibid.) and tends to involve longer utterances and more complex language. It is a form of talk which contributes to children's language development and is particularly important as a precursor to the development of literacy skills. Similarly, Katz (2001) found variation in patterns of parent-child talk during play activities. Parents varied considerably in the amount of pretend talk they engaged in with their children. Pretend talk is also a form of non-immediate talk which involves extended, complex discourse and is related to language and literacy development in the pre-school years. Wide variation in types of mealtime talk was reported by Beals (2001). This study focussed on the opportunity provided by mealtime for exposure to and participation in narratives, a form of oral language strongly connected to later language and literacy development. The frequency with which families use storybook reading, pretend play and mealtime contexts to expose children to new words was examined by Tabors, Beals and Weizman (2001). Exposure to new words was found to correlate positively to later measures of language knowledge and in this study it was found that families varied in terms of the degree to which such contexts were exploited to develop new word knowledge. Where parents did avail frequently of opportunities in the home to engage in extended discourse, focussing on referring to beyond the immediate context, setting up narrative exchanges and extending vocabulary knowledge children were found to perform better on language and literacy measures. It is clear that parents can make a difference to children's language skills (e.g. Marvin & Wright, 1997) and this potential must be harnessed to maximum effect.

However, the focus of research on the impact of parents on children's language skills concentrates largely on those language skills associated with the development of literacy. Where research has examined the effect of increased parental effort to enhance children's oral language skills, findings are not conclusive. Studies by DeBaryshe (1995) and Wiegel et al. (2006) did not find a significant association between parent-child activities and children's oral language development. A possible explanation for this posited by Wiegel et al. (2006, p.373) is that the strategic parental activities encouraged in these studies (e.g. shared book reading, reciting rhymes, telling stories, drawing pictures, playing games with the children) involved intentional efforts by parents and were specifically designed to enhance later literacy skills

such as print knowledge and reading interest. The potential for non-intentional language development during routine parent-child interactions was not considered.

Among those interventions found to be positively correlated with the development of children's oral language skills in the home environment is exposure to storybook reading. Craig-Thoreson & Dale (1999) argue that shared book reading provides an ideal context for language development as it facilitates the development of new concepts, allows the adult to scaffold the child's comprehension through questioning, and presents opportunities for the development of language forms and functions as parent and child negotiate meaning together. One particular type of storybook encounter, dialogic shared reading, has been found to be particularly associated with enhanced language development (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In this experience of reading the child becomes actively involved in the process, responding to adult questions, being prompted to expand on utterances, increasing the level of sophistication of description through scaffolding by the adult. This type of reading experience conducted in childcare settings with children from low-income families has produced substantial changes in children's language knowledge which were maintained up to six months following the intervention (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Studies which have focussed on interventions designed to teach parents dialogic reading strategies (e.g. Elias et al., 2006) and increased use of decontextualised language when interacting with children during story reading routines (e.g. Morgan & Goldstein, 2004) have found caregivers of children in low socio-economic contexts can be taught successfully to use the type of interaction which should help prepare the children for the language demands of school.

Parental Involvement Initiatives

Because parental involvement in children's education is found to be positively associated with academic achievement across race and culture (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; 2005; West *et al.,* 1998), it is important to mobilise parents to support children's success in school to the best possible effect. When designing programmes to encourage greater levels of parental involvement in education, three considerations must be taken into account –

- factors influencing parent involvement in supporting their children's education;
- the role of the institution of school in bringing parents on board; and
- characteristics of effective parental involvement initiatives.

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Factors which influence parental involvement include parents' beliefs about what matters in education and the role they believe they can play in supporting their children's development (e.g. Baker et al., 1995; DeBaryshe, 1995; Lynch et al, 2006; Wiegel et al., 2006). The importance of the influence of parental beliefs about the importance of literacy and language, as well as their perception of their capacity to support their children's learning were also highlighted in the Wiegel et al. (2006) study as factors influencing the success of home influences on children's literacy and language development. Parents need to know the importance of language and particularly oral language in their children's development and its impact on the success of children in the school context. Parents also need to have knowledge about how best to support their children to maximum effect (e.g. Hart, 2000; Lynch et al., 2006).

Parent beliefs are also concerned with the extent to which they believe that their children and the school want them to be involved (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Where schools and children signal to parents an expectation of involvement, parents are more likely actively to support children's education in the home. Teacher practices which encourage parents to work in partnership with the school constitute one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of successful parental involvement (e.g. Epstein, 1986; WilLukes & Chavkin, 1989). Reaching out and communicating with parents about the academic content of children's schooling has been found consistently in the research to be a critical factor in improving parental involvement in education across social class.

A feature of successful intervention programmes is the need to reduce the confusion for parents of the role the school expects them to play in supporting their children's education and to share with parents the knowledge required to provide this support effectively (e.g. Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, 1986). This requires clear and regular communication between the institution of the school and the parents of the community of children it serves. Because of the association found in the Wiegel et al. (2006) study between parental demographic characteristics (described as parental socio-economic status, educational attainment and literacy skills) and children's expressive and receptive language development, it is recommended that successful interventions in supporting home influences on language

development must consider among other things adult basic education and literacy (p.375). Findings in the Noel et al. (2008) study recommend interventions designed to improve the levels of communication between parent and child such that relationships improve, leading to more advanced levels of vocabulary knowledge and narrative skills as important prerequisites to the development of literacy skills.

It is clear from the literature that successful partnership between school and parent involves increasing parent knowledge around factors such as the expectations of the school for parental involvement, the importance of their involvement, their capacity to become involved, the significance of oral language development for their children, and what parents need to do to support the school in a meaningful way in developing their children's oral language skills

Reviewing literature on the impact of successful connections between school, family and community, Henderson & Mapp (2002) summarise findings as follows:

> When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them to plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better at school. **When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains**. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honour their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement (p. 8).

Higgins (2007) acknowledges that 'barriers to partnership exist within the school and home' (p.120), but contends that 'ultimately, the underlying power to harness and develop partnership rests with schools' (p.120). It is important that teachers know the significance of the impact that all parents can have on their children's education. It is necessary for schools and teachers to communicate an expectation to parents that they need to be involved in their children's education. It is fundamental to the success of that involvement that a partnership approach is realised between the institution of the school, and the home and community in which the child is raised. Central to this is the need to ensure that both teachers and parents are empowered through knowledge in the process.

Summary

This chapter has focussed on the significance of the impact of the teacher on the successful development of children's oral language in the context of the classroom. Central to the reported findings in the literature in relation to this question is the importance of teacher knowledge for effective implementation of policy. Teacher knowledge is crucial in terms of

the **content** of oral language development – including important aspects of language knowledge required by teachers such as, knowledge of the basic units of language, awareness of the process of vocabulary acquisition, awareness of dialects, familiarity with the academic style of language required for success in the school context;

the appropriate **pedagogical approaches** to be taken – in particular a familiarity with and openness to establishing a social-constructivist approach to pedagogy, where an interactive rather than a transmission model of teaching is employed in the classroom; in this regard, the centrality of collaborative group and pair work, the importance of drama, and the need for exposure to literature and poetry are paramount;

the needs of the **learners** – where teachers' perceptions of learners are informed by knowledge of those learners, their strengths and needs in the school context;

the **curriculum** being implemented – which needs to be clear, accessible and supportive of teachers in the classroom

the **personal identity** of teachers - as professionals in the classroom.

Added to this is the need for teachers to recognise the significant role potentially played by **parents** in supporting their children's oral language development and the factors which influence the harnessing of this support effectively – how best to secure parental involvement, the significance of the role of the school in supporting parental involvement, the importance of school/parent communication.

The next chapter will describe and explain the design of the research undertaken to investigate the questions of concern in this study.

Research Design and Methodology

Given the undisputed importance of the teacher in enhancing children's learning, and findings in the literature of poor implementation of policy in the classroom in relation to the development of children's oral language proficiencies, this study sought to explore the challenges of policy implementation in Irish primary classrooms. The focus of the investigation was on the following questions:

What challenges does the DEIS context (i.e. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School – those schools in the School Support Programme in Ireland**) present for oral language teaching and learning? (Literature Review and Survey)**

What is the impact of teacher support on oral language teaching and learning in a DEIS context? (Case Study)

What are the messages for policy makers that can be derived from the experience in this research? (Conclusions)

Specifically the study focussed on the following sub-questions:

1. What supports do teachers need in the classroom context to facilitate the development of children's oral language skills (Literature Review, Survey and Case Study)

2. What perceptions and practices currently prevail in classrooms in the development of children's oral language skills (Survey)

3. What impact, if any, does teacher support have on the teachers, and the community of learners and their parents being served by the school. (Case Study)

4. What has been learned in this process that can be disseminated more widely and how can this be done most effectively. (Case Study and Conclusions).

In addition to the review of relevant literature on the subject, this study used a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to expand understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2003). A context for the qualitative study was established through a nationwide survey of teachers in DEIS schools (urban and rural), which

was designed to uncover prevailing perceptions and practice. The purpose of this survey was to elicit teacher perceptions of children's oral language skills and to document broadly the types of pedagogical approaches used by teachers in response to these perceived needs. The understanding derived from this quantitative methodology was then expanded by means of a qualitative case study method of generating data. The baseline data from the survey revealed the challenges as perceived by teachers of oral language teaching and learning in a DEIS context and significantly, provided a context in relation to teachers' practice, forming an important backdrop for the case study which followed. The focus of the case study was on the delivery of an intensive programme of support for oral language teaching and learning in three DEIS primary schools in Ireland with a view to learning more about improving practice in oral language teaching and learning in the context of these schools. This chapter will present a description of and rationale for a mixed-method approach and will outline in detail the survey (quantitative) and case study (qualitative) approaches used. Conclusions from the survey and case study data were used to develop recommendations for policy makers on strategic initiatives to maximise teacher implementation of policy in relation to oral language teaching and learning in the DEIS context on a nationwide basis.

Survey

A postal questionnaire survey was conducted on a stratified systematic sample of DEIS (Band 1, 2 and Rural) schools in Ireland. One hundred schools were surveyed. These schools were selected systematically from the list of schools in the School Support Programme (SSP) under the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) action plan for educational inclusion. This list was provided by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and was generated for the DES with reference to guidelines produced by the Education Research Centre.

> …surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions (Cohen & Manion, 1998, p.83).

A survey methodology was selected to estimate particular characteristics of a population, in this case teachers - their perceptions of children's language skills and their pedagogical approaches to language development in their classrooms. Because the purpose of this aspect of the data collection process was descriptive in nature, seeking to provide a reliable snapshot of a situation

at one particular moment in time, the sample survey was deemed the most appropriate approach to compile the information – 'sample surveys are usually at their best when the goal is to describe certain features of a population' (Hoaglin et al., 1982, p.99). A sample survey was deemed appropriate as there was a clearly defined population – teachers in schools in the School Support Programme, the goals of the research could be expressed quantitatively – perceptions and teaching approaches used by teachers, and the respondents would be able to provide the information requested. The Survey Population of interest in this survey was teachers in DEIS schools and the sample was teachers in junior, middle and senior classes in schools systematically drawn from the nationwide list of DEIS schools.

Sampling

To select the schools which would form the sample, a stratified, systematic sampling technique was employed. This technique guaranteed representation from each of the strata of schools in the School Support Programme and thus could give more precise results than might return from a simple random sample (Hoaglin et al., 1982, p.93). The sample was stratified by DEIS schools which were urban band 1, urban band 2 and rural. (Band 1 schools are those characterised as most in need of support). In each category of schools an almost equal number was selected using a systematic selection process. For the schools in the urban band 1 list every sixth school on the list was selected generating a total of 33 schools out of the 195 on the list; in the urban band 2 list, every fourth school was selected generating a total of 33 schools out of the 137 schools on the list; and in the list of rural primary schools in the School Support Programme (SSP) under the DEIS action plan for educational inclusion every ninth school was selected yielding 34 schools out of a total of 330 schools in that category. A total of 66 urban schools and 34 rural schools were selected. The number of schools selected from the 'rural' stratum was not in proportion to the size of that stratum because resources dictated that a maximum of 100 schools could be included in the sample selected. More urban than rural schools were selected because a similar number of schools from each of the three bands identified by the School Support Programme (Band 1, Band 2, and Rural) was sought.

Questionnaire Design

A postal questionnaire is often the best form of survey in the context of educational enquiry (Cohen & Manion, 1998) and was the survey method used in this study (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire sent to schools). Its advantages include that it is a less expensive method of gathering data than the more costly interview process. It allows for a larger sample to be included in the research process, which can cover a wide geographical span. It removes interviewer bias and allows for anonymity of response. The limitations of the postal questionnaire are that it may yield a low response rate or respondents may respond only partially to the questions asked. How respondents interpret questions may not necessarily match the intentions of the researcher thus reducing the validity of the data. Questionnaires need to be short to ensure a satisfactory response rate. Seeking to minimise these limitations, Davidson (1970) outlines the characteristics of a good questionnaire as follows:

> It is clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable. Its design must minimize potential errors from respondents … and coders. And since people's participation in surveys is voluntary, a questionnaire has to help in engaging their interest, encouraging their co-operation, and eliciting answers as close as possible to the truth. (in Cohen & Manion, 1998, p.93).

It is important when constructing a questionnaire that the questions asked actually measure what is required to be measured, i.e. that the questions have validity. This requires that the respondents share the researcher's understanding of the question and that all respondents share the same understanding. Validity in a questionnaire is maximised when the questions are clear and unambiguous (Hoaglin et al., 1982). This may be achieved through a pilot test of the questionnaire and through focus group involvement to identify topics of importance to respondents for consideration as part of the questionnaire (Cohen & Manion, 1998). In the case of the questionnaire designed for this study, it was pilot tested for clarity among a group of teachers. Questions which were vague, unclear or overlapping were either eliminated or made more explicit. Issues arising from focus group discussions with teachers during the Cregan (2007) study which highlighted aspects of language knowledge and pedagogy of interest to the present study were included as questions in this questionnaire, for example, questions relating to teachers' perceptions of children's language ability in those areas of language most important for success in the school context (see , for example, questions 4,5,8,9 of section B – children's general language ability). The pilot process maximised the reliability of the questionnaire also, i.e. that questions are understood in the same way if asked in different contexts. Aspects of question wording which

needed to clarify concepts were altered to ensure that the respondents would understand what was being asked and that all respondents would have the requisite knowledge to answer the questions (e.g. question 6, section B was expanded to ensure clarity and common understanding of what was being asked - *language registers* was highlighted as being different when speaking to *someone they know well, or someone in authority* and also as changing in relation to *what they might be speaking about;* and in question 6, section G forms of communication with parents were identified as *an informal chat, note in journal, letter to parents, suggestions for activities at home*).

When constructing the questionnaire only those questions deemed absolutely necessary were included. The questions included both closed and open questions. The closed questions provided a list of possible answers from which to choose. The range of options presented was exhaustive and non-overlapping. To ensure validity and reliability every attempt was made to ensure that questions were as specific as possible. This was designed to help reduce ambiguity and vagueness and to minimise variation in interpretation. Because it helps respondents to give most accurate answers when questions are embedded within a specific time frame, teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire with reference to the group of children they taught during the last school year (i.e. 2007/2008).   Open questions were asked when it was important to allow the respondent to give information in his/her own words. The open questions meant that the verbatim answer of the respondent was recorded and also gave an opportunity to collect data on the particular or exceptional experience of the individual completing the questionnaire. Confusing questions such as those asking the respondent to focus on more than one thing in the answer, questions presented from a negative perspective, and questions which pre-empt the answer before getting to the nub of the question were avoided (Cohen & Manion, 1998).

Consideration was given also to the ordering of the questions as they appeared in the questionnaire (e.g. Czaja & Blair, 1996). The first section of the questionnaire focussed on concrete information, easily and quickly accessible to the respondent, designed to encourage participation on the part of the respondent. This was followed by a series of closed questions which required the respondent to tick a box. Instructions were given clearly and repeated where it was deemed necessary throughout the questionnaire.   Closed and open questions were interspersed throughout the questionnaire, and where open questions were asked, for the most part teachers were provided with a limited amount of space to respond so that they would be enticed to respond and so that their answers were concise and to the point. Questions were grouped into coherent blocks and each block of questions had a heading, signalling the particular

focus of this section of questions for clarity of intention. The most thought-provoking and difficult questions were posed in the middle of the questionnaire and questions thought to be of high interest to the respondents were placed toward the end of the questionnaire to motivate teachers to complete the questionnaire and return it Cohen & Manion, 1998).

Three copies of the questionnaire were sent directly to the principal of each school. A cover letter was included as was a stamped, addressed envelope to facilitate return of the completed questionnaires. The cover letter sought to explain the goals of the data collection process and to emphasise the importance of the information which would be generated for the population of teachers in the School Support Programme. (See Appendix A for a copy of the cover letter). The cover letter asked the principal to designate a junior, middle, and senior class teacher to complete the questionnaire and to return the three completed copies of the questionnaire within a short, specified time. No further directions were given to the principal in relation to which teachers should complete the questionnaire, therefore the possibility that the questionnaires were completed by those teachers perceived as the better teachers by the principal cannot be excluded.

Despite the fact that the importance of the data this questionnaire would generate was emphasised in the letter, and that the timing of the letters was chosen to maximise the response rate, only 19 out of the 100 schools surveyed returned the questionnaires within the specified time. It is not unusual that the response rate to a large survey would be low (Cohen & Manion, 1998). It was therefore necessary to initiate a procedure to deal with the low level of response. The follow-up procedure involved first a call back to the schools reminding them of the importance of returning completed questionnaires. The call back indicated that many schools felt under great pressure dealing with the day-to-day issues of working in a DEIS school and found that teachers were unable to take time out to reflect on the issues raised in the questionnaire. Subsequently, another letter asking again that the questionnaires would be returned was issued. The importance of the research was reiterated in this letter and a copy of the questionnaire was included again to facilitate a speedy response. (See Appendix A for a copy of the follow-up letter). The final response rate as a result of the follow-ups was 44%. Forty-four of the schools returned questionnaires. Not every school returned three questionnaires and a total of 113 completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit data from teachers in relation to those aspects of teacher knowledge found to be important for successful teaching of language in the context of

primary school. Teachers' perceptions of the children's language skills were sought, in particular in relation to those language skills found to be critical for success in the school context and in the acquisition of literacy skills. Teacher knowledge in relation to the importance of oral language in general and in particular the need for children to be familiar with a particular style of language in the school context was explored. The awareness of teachers of the content of a language curriculum and the range of possible pedagogical responses to children's language needs was investigated. Teachers' familiarity with the curriculum and their perceptions of its suitability for children in DEIS schools along with common planning strategies were examined. The extent and nature of parental involvement in the development of children's language knowledge was also elicited as part of the questionnaire. The final page of the questionnaire gave any teacher who wished, an opportunity to talk to the issue of teaching oral language in the context of the School Support Programme freely. This was designed to elicit personal responses to the challenges teachers face on a daily basis and so to identify more precisely teachers' needs in tackling the problem and supporting them more effectively in the process.

Case Study

The case study method was used in this study to explore how best to support teachers such that oral language policy might be translated into effective practice in their classrooms. Findings from the review of the literature and the survey informed the focus and approach taken in the case study.

Researchers in language and education have been using case study methods since the 1970's. The common characteristic found in case study methods is that they examine a specific phenomenon as a bounded system (Smith, 1978) which means that the focus of analysis has clear cut boundaries, in the case of this research, the school. There were two advantages of case study methodology which were of particular importance in the decision to use the approach in this study: first, a case study can highlight the complexities of a situation, the fact that many factors are at play in a given context, and help to reveal those factors more clearly (e.g. Hoaglin et al., 1982); second, a case study may be viewed as a 'step to action' (Adelman et al., 1980). A case study takes place in a world of action and contributes to that action. The insights gained through the study may be interpreted and put to use by practitioners, and by policy-makers (e.g. Cohen & Manion, 1998).

There are two main categories of case study in the research of language and education, the *interpretive* case study and the *intervention* case study (Faltis, 1997). While both approaches use observation and reflection techniques in the process of data collection, an interpretive case study is an analytical description of the *status quo*, while an intervention case study involves observation of the effect of an intervention on participants in the case. The focus in this type of study is to intervene in the context in some way and to observe whether the intervention had an effect and if so, the form of that effect. This study used an intervention case study design, where the researcher adopted the role of a non-participant observer and intervened to support teacher behaviour in the classroom context (Cohen & Manion, 1998). The intervention case study is less common than the interpretive case study since researchers interested in studying the effects of an intervention generally use positivist experimental techniques so that generalisable effects of the intervention may be identified. However, in this study, the intervention was such that intensive teacher support was necessary which would have been impossible to conduct on a large-scale.

The most common form of intervention case study used in language and education typically uses a three-phase approach (Faltis, 1997). Phase 1 involves an interpretive case study design which establishes through observation and description a baseline against which future understandings can be compared. This phase was carried out in the precursor project to this study (Cregan, 2007) where an interpretive case study approach uncovered baseline data on the language use of children in schools designated as disadvantaged, and explored teachers' perceptions of children's language skills and teachers' pedagogic responses to the perceived needs of the children in those schools in which the case study was conducted. While findings from that study cannot be generalised beyond the particular contexts in which the data were gathered, the schools used in phase 2 of the study, the current study, are DEIS band 1 urban schools and a DEIS rural school, as were the schools used in the previous study, and as a consequence share many of the population characteristics of schools in the precursor study. Phase 2 of an intervention case study involves an intervention in the context being studied. In this study, that intervention took the form of delivery of in-service support for teachers in the selected schools over an eight-month period. The final phase of the intervention case study is an analysis of change from the first phase to the final phase.

The goal in this study was, having identified in the Cregan (2007) study a need on the part of teachers for substantial support in the development of the oral language skills of the children in their classes, to explore more extensively the support needed and to investigate the effects such support might have on the whole school community – teachers, children, and parents.

Description of Case Study

Selection of Schools

This study was conducted in three schools in the Munster region in the south of Ireland. (For a profile of the schools see Appendix B). The schools were selected on the basis of membership of the DEIS school support programme (two urban band 1 schools, and one rural school), willingness to participate in the study, and accessibility. It is of interest to note that quite a few of the schools contacted declined the opportunity to participate in the project. While all principals contacted acknowledged the importance of oral language and the need to develop it more effectively in their schools, many principals and teachers expressed frustration at the large number of initiatives and projects on-going in DEIS schools. These schools felt unable as a consequence to extend the demands on their time to include yet another initiative.

In those schools which agreed to participate in the study, principals were contacted initially and given an outline of the scope of the study. At this point schools were ensured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the process. An undertaking was given also that the schools would receive the penultimate draft of the report so that they would have an input into the final draft. The principals then consulted with teachers of senior infants, third, and sixth classes, as well as with the Board of Management, to seek agreement to participate in the study. Following this, the researcher met with the teachers in each of the schools and outlined in detail (both orally and in writing) the purpose of the study, the *modus operandi*, the requirements on the part of teachers participating in the study, and the nature of the supports that would be made available to the teachers in the course of the project. Teachers were asked to reflect on this information and to decide whether or not they still wished to participate in the study. It was critically important to the success of this initiative that teachers came on board in the study positively oriented towards its goals, and with as much information as possible. This was necessary to reduce the risk of

frustration or resentment on their part as the study progressed. All of the teachers in each of the three schools decided to participate following this information session. Two of the schools were located in urban areas and one school was in a rural setting. In each of the three schools, agreement to participate was given by the principal, the Board of Management and teachers of senior infants, third, and sixth class. In one of the urban schools, the learning support teacher chose to be involved in the study also, so four teachers participated from this school. A total of 10 teachers were involved actively over the period of the school year in emphasising oral language in their classrooms: three senior infant teachers, three third class teachers and three sixth class teachers. One learning support teacher supported the three class teachers in her school in a wide range of ways as the study evolved.

Teacher Support - Delivery

The main focus of the intervention throughout the study was to empower, through knowledge, the teachers in the schools, and in this way to improve oral language provision in their classrooms. This empowerment was realised through a series of in-service sessions led by the researcher and responding to the needs, concerns, and issues raised by the teachers in an interactive, organic and evolving process. Six focussed in-service sessions and one open-ended session were planned and delivered to the teachers in the three schools over a period of eight months. The substantive content of these sessions was derived from findings in the literature in relation to the types of knowledge which are important for effective delivery of an oral language programme in the context of schools designated as disadvantaged.

It was not possible to deliver the in-service sessions to all 10 teachers collectively, so the in-service was delivered in each of the three schools separately each month between October 2008 and May 2009. In one of the urban schools the teachers were released for one to two hours while the in-service session was taking place and these teachers were replaced during this period by additional support staff (learning support teachers, home-school liaison teachers …). In the other urban school this procedure was followed whenever possible but often it was necessary to provide the in-service to these teachers in two's or individually over the course of the school day due to insufficient cover being available. In the rural school, the in-service sessions took place during lunch-time on Thursdays when all three teachers were available. In all schools the

sessions took place in a quiet room without interruption. Every effort was made by the school management to facilitate these sessions and to make them as productive as possible.

Teacher Support – Content

Deriving from findings in the literature about the importance of teacher knowledge, and findings from the nationwide survey of common perceptions and practice in the teaching of oral language in primary classrooms, the in-service provision focussed on expanding teacher **knowledge** of

- **language**
- **pedagogy**, and
- **outreach** to parents

with the goal of empowering teachers to engage in a form of practice designed to maximise the development of children's oral language proficiency.

Requirements of Teachers on the Project: TEACHING

The main area of concentration for teachers was to focus on their teaching. This focus aimed to enhance teacher understanding of what constitutes knowledge of language. In this way it was hoped that teacher understanding of language learning content would be developed, leading to clearer goals and objectives. It was important also to build teacher knowledge of those teaching methods most effective in developing language skills in children.

Teachers were asked to make a number of changes to their self-reported practice:

- ❑ One of the main requirements of this project was that teachers would commit to having regular **dedicated, discrete teaching time** for oral language development in their classrooms (two 30 minute sessions per week at third and sixth class levels, and one daily ten minute session in Senior Infants).
- ❑ Teachers were also required to **plan systematically** and in a structured way so that it would be clear to them what their targets were and whether they had been achieved.
- ❑ **Prioritising oral language** so that opportunities throughout the day would be seized to develop oral language skills was required.

- Teachers were asked to underpin the importance of talk as a significant mode of learning across the curriculum by regularly **engaging children in oral tasks** (and not always writing tasks) as part of the learning experience.

- Teachers were encouraged to emphasise the **broadening of children's experiences** (real and vicarious) on which talk could be based.

- The inclusion of a **focus on** the development specifically of that language style - **academic style of language use** - found to be important for success in the school context and particularly necessary for children coming from non-mainstream backgrounds was recommended.

- Teachers were asked to ensure that children encountered and engaged with **literature, poetry, and drama,** on a regular basis

- The use of interactive **pair and group-work** as an approach whenever possible was highly recommended.

Requirements of Teachers on the Project: ASSESSMENT

Teachers were asked to include assessment of children's oral language skills as part of their commitment to the project. The proposal at the outset was that a profile checklist for the whole class would be kept three times during the project. In addition, an in-depth profile of four children of varying ability would be kept to include standardised test scores, pre-test and post-test results, and the completion of the Drumcondra English Profiles. Incidental notes on these four children or any child of note in terms of development in oral language would also be kept in the teacher journal.

Requirements of Teachers on the Project: REFLECTION

All of the teachers were asked to complete a reflective journal. Initially, no steer or guidelines were given on the content of the journal so that the teachers might feel free to jot down thoughts and report events in the classroom which reflected on the process, its challenges and successes, and ways in which the process might be changed. Later on, as they became more familiar with the process and more aware of the issues involved, teachers were given an outline of factors to consider in journal reflections.

Requirements of Teachers on the Project: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

A significant departure from prevailing practice was a requirement that efforts would be made by teachers to outreach to parents and to involve parents in the delivery of a focussed oral language perspective in their children's learning. Because research findings indicate that parents both wish to and can make a difference in their children's education, it was essential that some form of parental involvement would be established and developed over the course of this project. It was necessary to build parent belief that both teachers and children wanted their involvement, and also it was necessary to empower parents with guidelines on how to support their children's learning. To that end, parents were invited to participate and facilitated by the schools with clear guidelines on their role in promoting the children's language development.

MATERIALS

In order to facilitate teacher delivery of these requirements the following guidelines, resources and materials were presented to the teachers over six in-service sessions:

- Outline of the components of language, along with a framework for developing an oral language lesson to include all three components of language (an oral language lesson was modelled for the teachers during this session).
- Sample oral language lessons (these were presented on a CD to each school, lessons based on themes, suitable for all three levels, and resources to accompany lessons were also included). Language games and lists of teacher behaviours to facilitate language development and teaching strategies were also distributed
- Outline of target language skills so that teachers were aware of specific aspects of language which needed to be included in the development of children's proficiencies (this drew significantly from materials in *First Steps – Speaking and Listening* for pragmatic language development)
- Features of Literate Style Language – to be targeted specifically
- Support for a range of pedagogies was provided, notably using literature, poetry, drama, group work as approaches to oral language development (e.g. Corden, 2007; Wyse & Jones, 2007)

- Details of how to plan appropriately for oral language development, incorporating an outline of language content as well as teaching approaches, objectives, integration, contribution to the strand units in the curriculum
- Support Materials for the accessing the English Curriculum
- Differentiation in an oral language curriculum
- Assessment of oral language – guidelines, profiles and checklists
- Guidelines for the completion of the reflective journal
- Parental involvement – ideas for teachers and parents to work together to develop children's oral language skills

(For full details of materials distributed to teachers see Appendix C)

CHILDREN

It was important to monitor the impact of changes in teacher knowledge and pedagogy, and expanded, focussed parental support on the children and their language development over the course of the project. To that end, four children of varying ability from each class participating in the project were selected by the teachers. These children were observed carefully and profiled by the teachers. In addition they took part in pre-/post-testing to establish whether their language skills, in particular their decontextualised language skills, had changed in any observable way. A control group from a parallel stream in one of the urban schools was pre- and post-tested for comparison. These results were designed to give some form of feedback on the effects of the intervention on the children in the classrooms.

The data collection process involving children was conducted following considerations highlighted by Hill (2006, p.81):

1. Welfare – the purpose of the research should be such that the well-being of children in general is enhanced by the research
2. Protection – data collection methods should be designed so that children are not placed in stressful contexts
3. Provision – children should be aware of the importance of their role in providing data for the research process and feel good about contributing to that process

4. Choice and participation – children should be enabled to make informed choices about participating in the research

As the gatekeepers protecting children, parental permission was received in writing for each child taking part in the pre-/post-testing (e.g. Hill, 2006). Informed consent was also sought from each of the children selected to participate in the study. The purpose and nature of the data collection process was made clear to the children so that they knew the importance of the research, their role in the research process and what they would be required to do. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. It was also clarified for the children that they had a right to withdraw and return to their classroom at any point in the process (e.g. Greig & Taylor, 1999, p.149). Children were accompanied during the testing by a familiar adult from the school where possible. When this was not possible, testing took place adjacent to a familiar adult and the doors remained open. (See Appendix D for parental permission letters and child consent forms). The test items were presented to the children in the form of 'fun talking games' and every effort was made to ensure the children were at their ease throughout the process. An informal interpersonal style was adopted throughout the elicited production sessions aimed at reducing inhibitions and an appropriate style of language was used to ensure understanding on the part of the children, regardless of age (e.g. Hill, 2006, p.63).

The pre-/post-testing of the children took the form of elicited production techniques as developed by Underhill (1987). The children were taken in pairs from their classroom to a quiet room and presented with some 'fun games' to play which involved talking. The focus of the talking tasks designed to elicit oral responses was on those oral language skills thought to be important for success in the school context and related to the development of literacy skills. The types of tasks selected were similar to those in the SHELL test battery (Snow et al., 1995) designed to test children's ability to produce oral decontextualised language. One of the tasks in the SHELL test battery involves children producing oral narratives, an oral language skill linked with later literacy development (e.g. Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Riley et al., 2007; Tabors et al., 2001) because 'the ability to narrate orally encompasses a range of complex language skills and is an important predictor of later language and literacy achievements' (Riley et al., 2007, p.183). Tabors et al., (2001) also argue for the important connection between ability to produce formal definitions and later literacy achievement. A definition task was included in this study as it was in the SHELL test battery. The final task in the SHELL test battery is a picture description task and this task was included in this study also. An outline of the talking tasks used is presented in Appendix E.

Summary

The triangulated design of the study resulted in the generation of data relating to the questions of central interest in the study from three sources: findings from a review of literature, findings from a nationwide survey of teachers in DEIS schools, findings from a Case Study in three DEIS schools. In this chapter the design and methodology chosen for this study was presented and justified. The generation, distribution and response rate of the questionnaire was outlined and the details of how the case study was conducted were presented.

The remaining chapters will present findings from the survey (Chapter Three) and the case study (Chapter Four) and consider their implications (Chapter Five).

Survey Findings

A nationwide survey of teachers in schools in the DEIS category was conducted to establish baseline data on teachers' perceptions of children's oral language skills, and to identify pedagogical responses to the perceived needs of children. Using a systematic stratified sampling technique, surveys were sent to 100 schools. Forty-four schools returned completed questionnaires. This chapter will outline initially the profile of those teachers who completed the questionnaire and then present teachers' responses to the questions contained in the survey.

Section A: Profile of Teachers

A total of 113 questionnaires were completed and returned by teachers in forty-four schools. The profile of the teachers who returned questionnaires was as follows:

- 76 of these were teachers in urban schools and 37 were teachers in rural schools.

- 33 of the teachers taught in single-sex schools and 80 of the teachers were in co-educational schools.

- 36 of these teachers had less than five years teaching experience, 40 of them were teaching between five and ten years, and 36 were teaching for more than ten years.

- Of the teachers who supplied this information, 55 reported having less than 5 years experience teaching in designated disadvantaged schools, and 54 more than 5 years experience. Breaking it down further the ratio of junior class teachers is 15:19, for middle class teachers 25:18 and for senior class teachers 15:17.

- 36 of the teachers who responded were teaching junior classes (junior or senior infants), 43 were teaching middle-classes (first to fourth class), 34 were senior class teachers (fifth and sixth classes).

- 59 of the teachers were teaching junior infants to second class. Of these 59 teachers 24 (40.7%) had class sizes of 20 children or less (the targeted pupil-teacher ratio for classes from junior infants to second class in the DEIS action plan). 35 teachers (59.3%) had over the targeted number of children in their class.

- 54 of the teachers were teaching from third to sixth class. Of these 54 teachers, 22 (40.7%) had class sizes of more than 24 pupils. (The targeted pupil-teacher ratio for teachers of classes from third to sixth class in the DEIS action plan is 24:1 maximum).
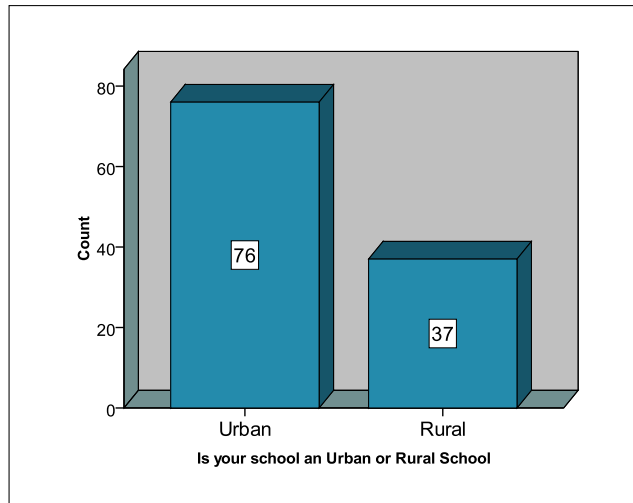
Table 1: Teacher Profile – Urban/Rural

Table 2: Teacher Profile – Experience of Teaching in Disadvantaged Context
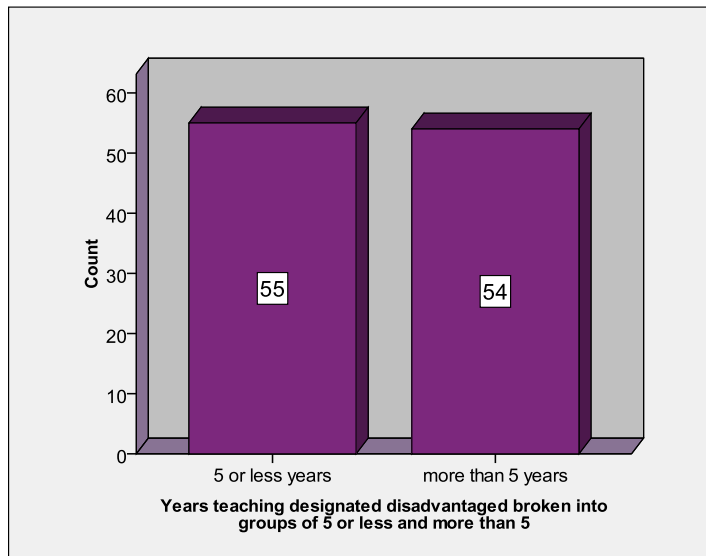
Table 3: Teacher Profile – Teaching Experience in Disadvantaged Context by Class Level
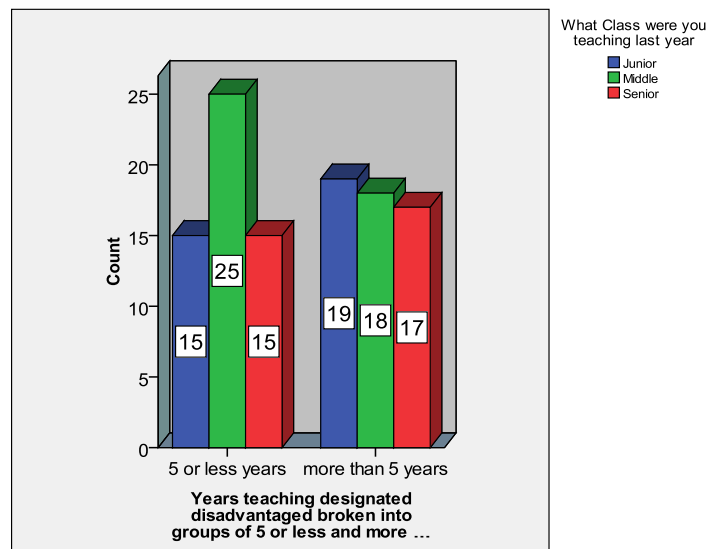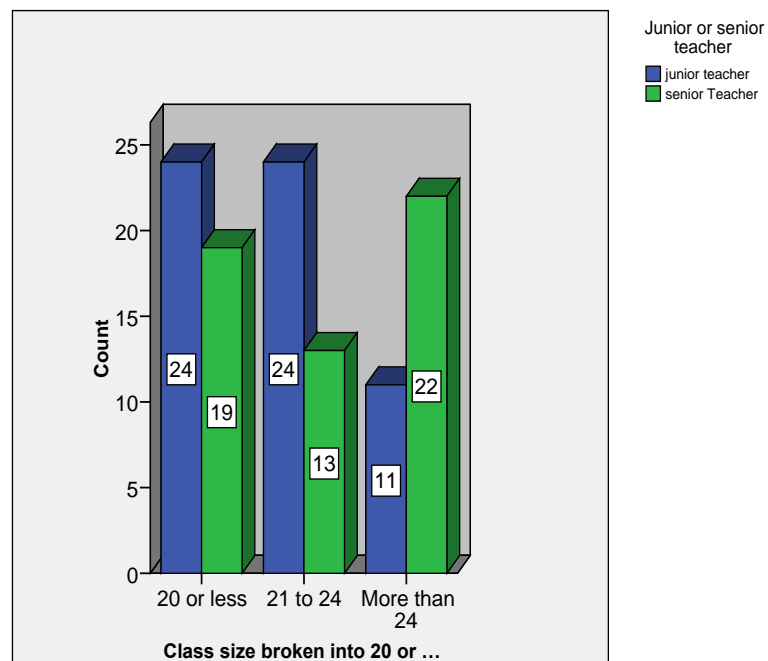

Table 4: Teacher Profile – Class Size

Of note in these data is the fact that approximately 50% of the teachers had less than five years teaching experience in a disadvantaged context, suggesting a high rate of turnover of teachers in these schools or perhaps a significant number of young, inexperienced teachers charged with teaching in these contexts. This also indicates that many of the teachers teaching in these contexts have relatively little experience of working with children in designated disadvantaged contexts and a substantial number of the infant and middle class teachers fall into this category. To counteract the high turnover rate of teachers in DEIS schools, a sabbatical leave option had been included in the action plan as originally envisaged (DES, 2005, p. 12) where teachers could undertake 'a period of development to enhance their own learning and effectiveness, and to bring subsequent benefits to their students and their school' (p.12). This option did not materialise as the scheme unfolded and so no facility to take time out of teaching in the disadvantaged context as a means of re-invigorating and up-skilling teachers has been afforded these teachers as yet.

In the DEIS action plan for educational inclusion (DES, 2005) an undertaking was given that by 2006 the teacher-pupil ratio would be 20:1 for junior classes (junior infants to second class) and 24:1 for senior classes (third to sixth class) in the 150 urban/town primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage (p.11; p.78). Clearly this ratio is deemed important for teachers to enable them to work effectively with these children. It is of note that almost 60% of the teachers responding to this survey still find themselves in classes of over 20 at junior level and 40% of teachers at senior level are in classes of over 24 pupils. Certainly inroads have been made to improve the pupil teacher ratio, and some of the teachers responding to this survey are in urban band 2 schools to whom no commitment to reduced pupil-teacher ratio was given. However, it would seem obvious that the ratios identified in the DEIS action plan are at an optimal level for contexts designated as disadvantaged and yet many teachers in both band 1 and band 2 schools are still not in circumstances to maximise the effectiveness of the educational experience of children they teach. This is of critical importance in the context of oral language development where the ratio of adults to children in the classroom is extremely important if the children are to be given appropriate, scaffolded opportunities for meaningful on-task talking activities to take place on an ongoing basis.

Section B: Teacher Perceptions of Children's Oral Language Skills

Teachers were asked to rate the oral language ability of the children. In this section of the questionnaire, teachers' perceptions of children's facility with oral language, including their facility in relation to those language skills necessary for success in the school context was the focus. Research suggests a number of characteristics of language use which are expected by teachers and are necessary for success in the classroom context:

- Authoritative presentation of ideas
- Using apt vocabulary
- Complex grammatical structures
- Expanded appropriately
- High degree of organisation
- High in new information
- Adopt an impersonal stance

(e.g. Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Michaels, 1981; Schleppegrell, 2001,2004; Snow et al., 1989)

Teachers were asked to give an opinion about the oral language skills of the majority of the children in the class. Findings indicate that teachers have concerns for many of the children they teach in relation to the children's facility with these language skills. The data on teachers' perceptions of children's oral language skills suggests that many teachers believe that the oral language skills of children in DEIS schools are not as good as they need to be in the school context.

Children's ability to express themselves generally was categorised as inadequate or weak by 39.8% of teachers. Within this grouping, 50% of junior teachers characterised children's general expressive ability as inadequate or weak, 44.1% of senior class teachers and 28% of teachers of children in middle classes. Similar findings were returned for all of the discrete language skills identified in this section. Children's receptive language knowledge was thought to be weak or inadequate by an even greater number of teachers: 46% of the teachers in general felt the receptive skills of the children were weak or inadequate - 47.1% of junior class teachers, 39.5% of middle class teachers, and 52.9% of senior class teachers. The expressive vocabulary skills of the children were described by 53.3% of teachers as weak or inadequate -

51.4% of junior teachers, 51.2% of middle class teachers, and 64.7% of senior class teachers characterised children's expressive vocabulary skills as either inadequate or weak.

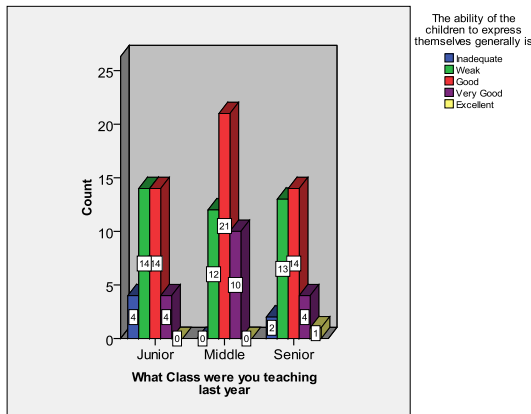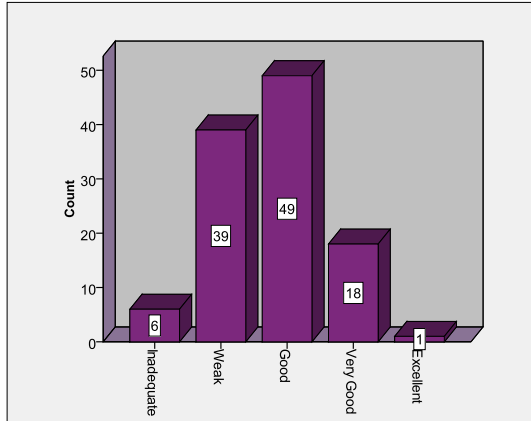## Table 5: Teacher Perceptions of Children's general ability to Express

Table 6: Teacher Perceptions of Children's Receptive Vocabulary
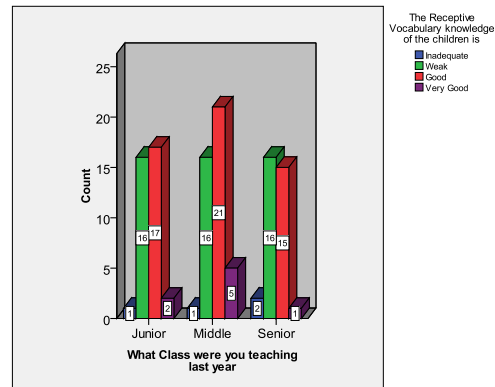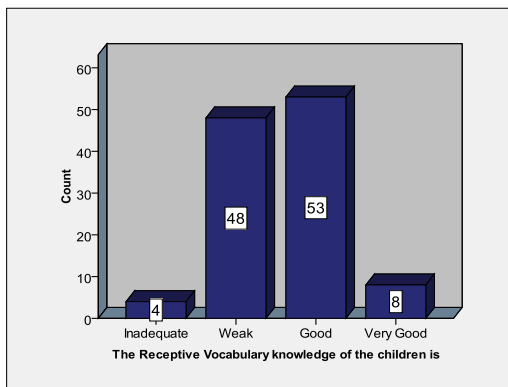
Table 7: Teacher Perceptions of Children's Expressive Vocabulary

Looking at children's ability to produce complex utterances, to use language for a variety of purposes,and the use of appropriate language registers in different contexts, all of which are pre-requisite language skills for success in the school context, the data suggests concern by the teachers once again. The ability of the majority of children to produce complex sentence structures was characterised as inadequate or weak by 80.5% of the teachers – 83.7% of junior teachers reported inadequate to weak, 74.5% of middle class teachers, and 85.3% of senior class teachers felt that the ability of the children to produce complex sentence structures was

Table 8: Teacher Perceptions - Ability to Produce Complex Sentences
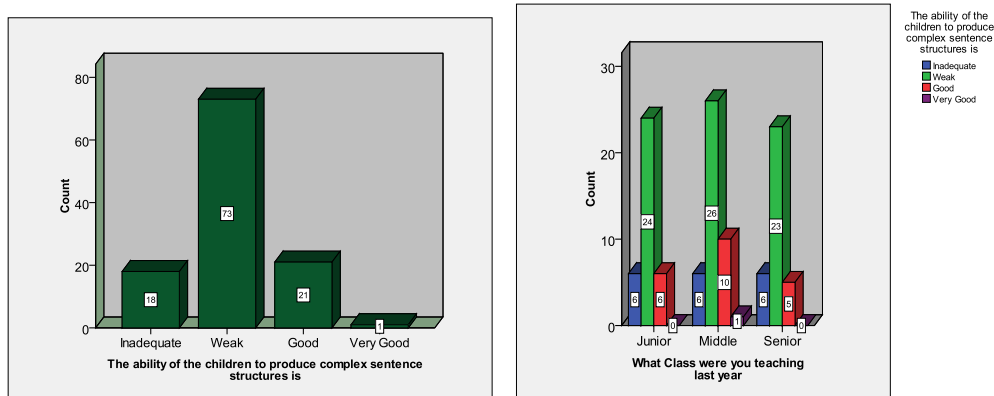
Table 9: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Use Language for a Variety of Purposes
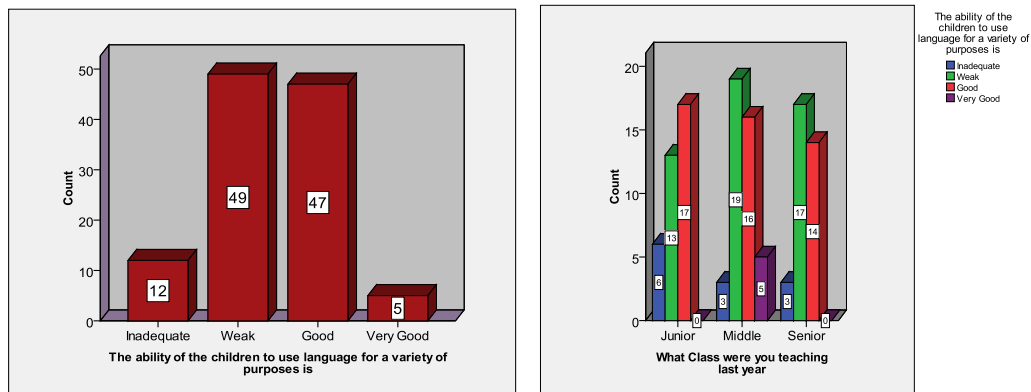
Table 10: Teacher Perceptions – Use of Different Language Registers
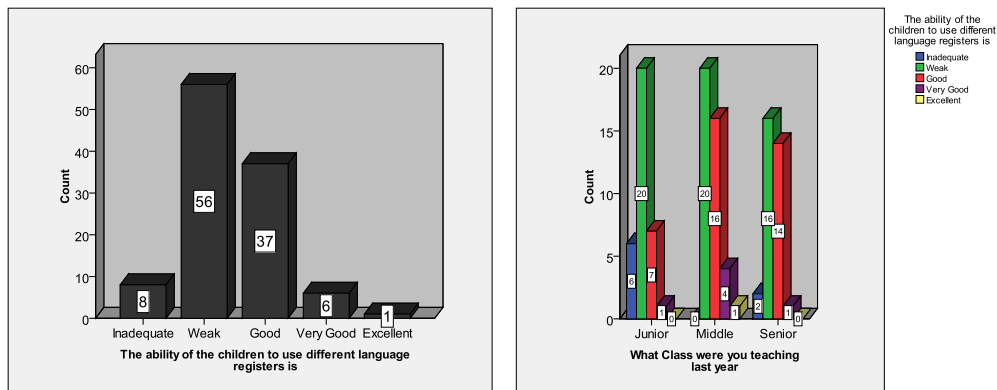
inadequate or weak. 54% of teachers thought that children's ability to use language for a variety of purposes was inadequate or weak – 52.8% of junior teachers, 51.2% if middle class teachers and 58.8% of teachers of senior class children. 59.3% of teachers thought that children's ability to use different language registers was inadequate or weak – 76.4% of junior teachers, 48.8% of middle class teachers, and 54.6% of senior class teachers.

Teachers were asked to rate children in terms of their facility with language skills of particular importance in successfully producing decontextualised language of the type required and expected in the school context. A large number of teachers reported these skills as problematic for the majority of the children in their class. Specifically, 50.7% of teachers felt that children's ability to stick to a topic when talking was either weak or inadequate – 58.3% of junior class teachers reported this, 39% of middle class teachers, and 66.7% of senior class teachers. The children's ability to develop a point appropriately when talking was described as inadequate or

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weak by 58.2% of teachers – 69.5% of junior class teachers, 51.2% of middle class teachers, and 57.6% of teachers of senior classes. One may not be too surprised at the large percentage of junior class teachers reporting difficulty with this skill, as it may not be acquired until children are a little older, although the question did ask for a rating of children's ability to perform this language task at an appropriate level. The large percentage of teachers commenting on difficulty with this skill and that of sticking to a topic while talking at senior class level is of concern however.

Table 11: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Stick to a Topic
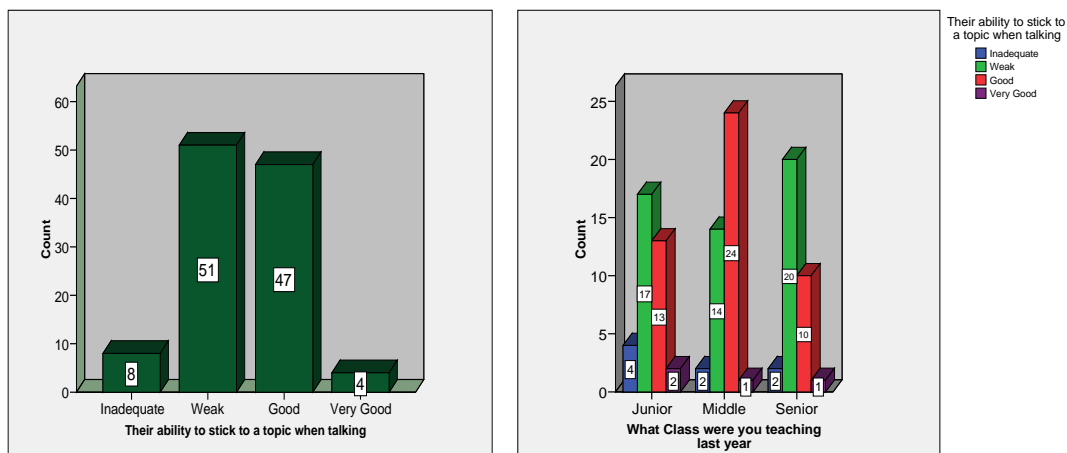
Table 12: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Develop a Point
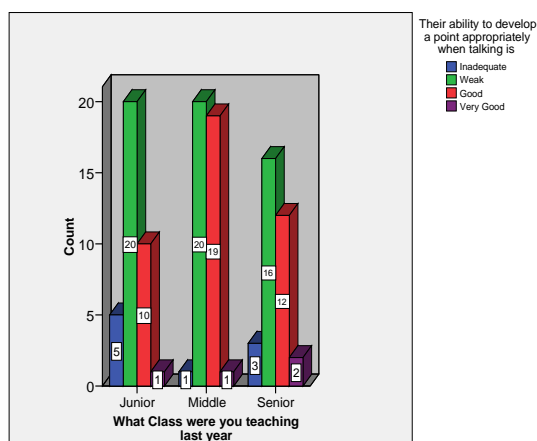
Children's ability to explain was thought to be inadequate or weak by 46.4% of teachers – 44.5% of junior class teachers, 46.4% of middle class teachers, and 48.5% of senior class teachers. The ability to describe accurately and effectively when talking was thought to be

inadequate or weak by 60% of the teachers – 66.6% of teachers of junior classes, 48.8% of teachers of middle classes, and 66.7% of senior class teachers. Children's ability to organise their talk coherently was described as inadequate or weak by 55.5% of teachers – 58.4% of junior class teachers, 41.5% of middle class teachers, and 69.7% of senior class teachers. Being able to take a perspective other than their own was characterised as inadequate or weak by 60.9% of teachers - 75% of junior teachers, 56.1% of teachers of middle classes, and 51.5% of senior class teachers.

Table 13: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Explain
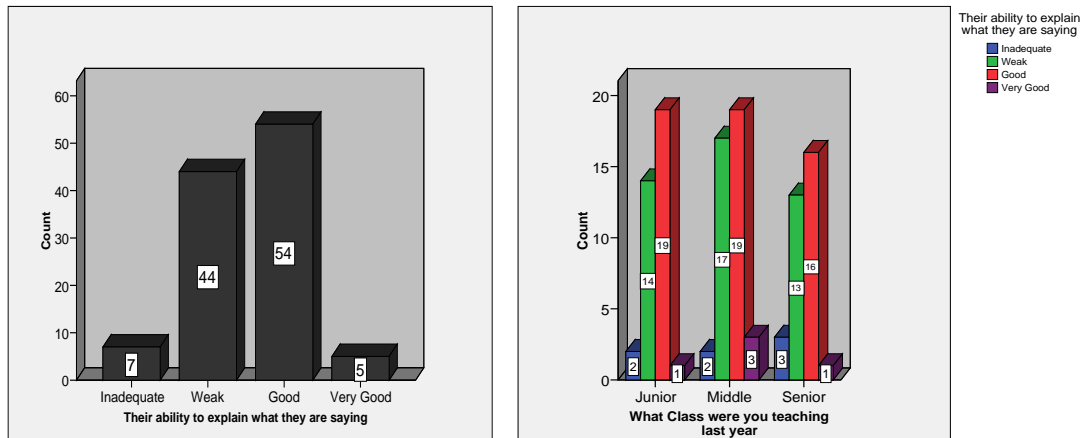
Table 14: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Describe
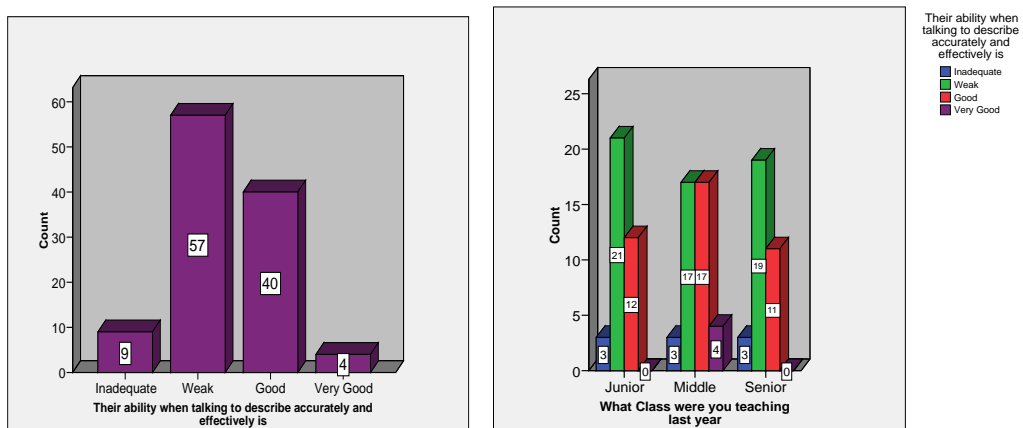
Table 15 : Teacher Perception – Ability to Organise Talk
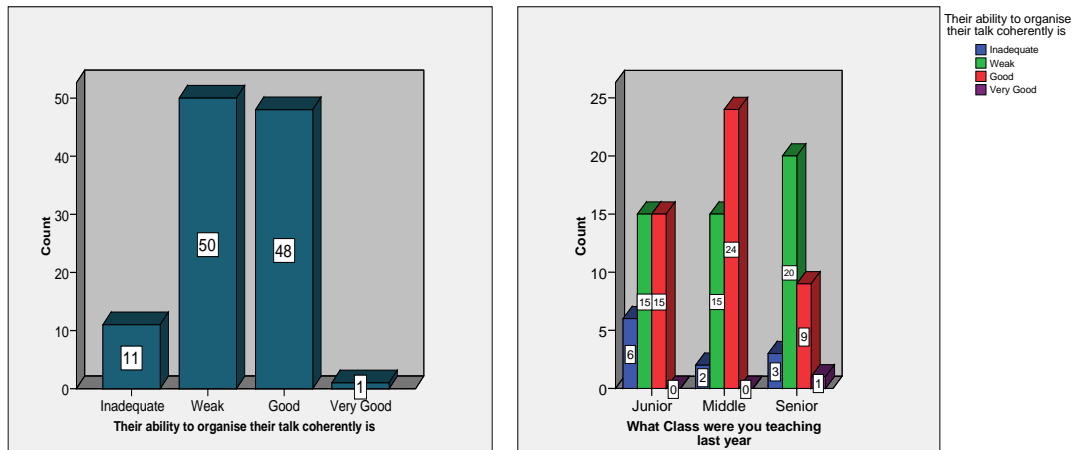
Table 16 : Teacher Perception – Ability to Take Perspective
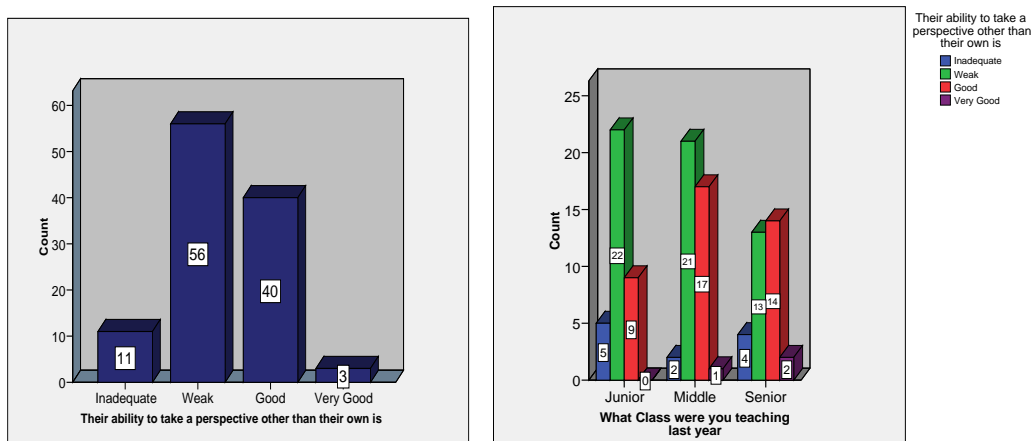
Given these data it is hardly surprising that 51% of the teachers rated children's listening skills as inadequate or weak – 63.9% of the teachers of junior classes, 36.6% of the middle class teachers, and 54.6% of the senior class teachers.   Despite these negative findings, however, teachers reported the children generally as being willing to talk and as using either an adequate amount or plenty of talk in a learning context in the classroom.

Table 17: Teacher Perceptions – Ability to Listen
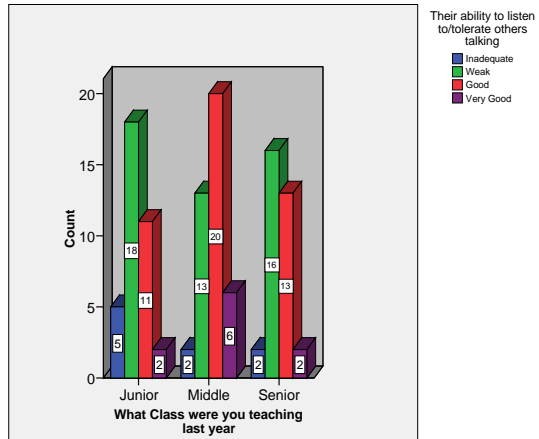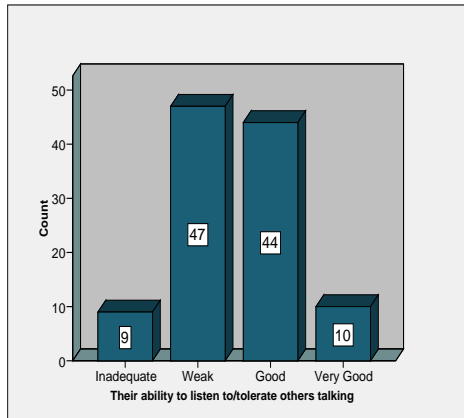
Table 18: Teacher Perceptions – Willingness to Talk
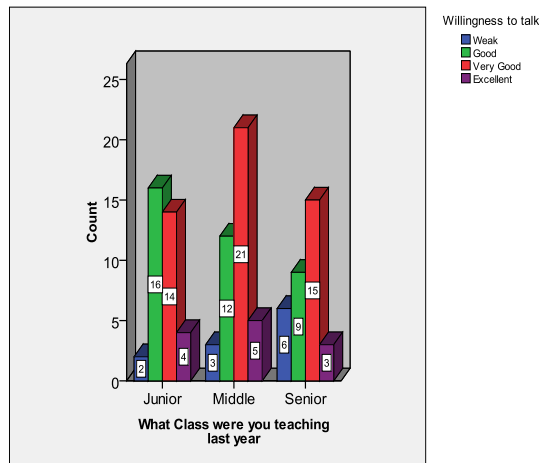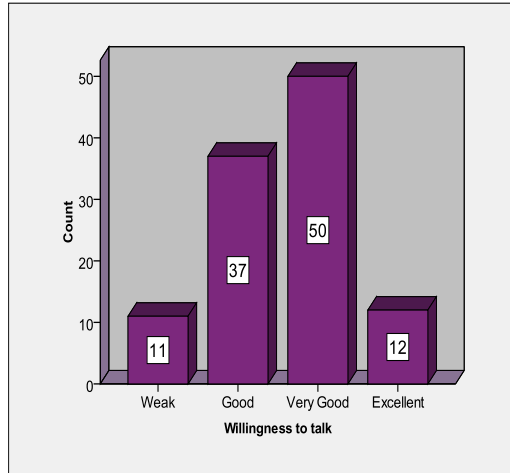
Table 19: Teacher Perceptions – Amount of Talk in a Learning Context
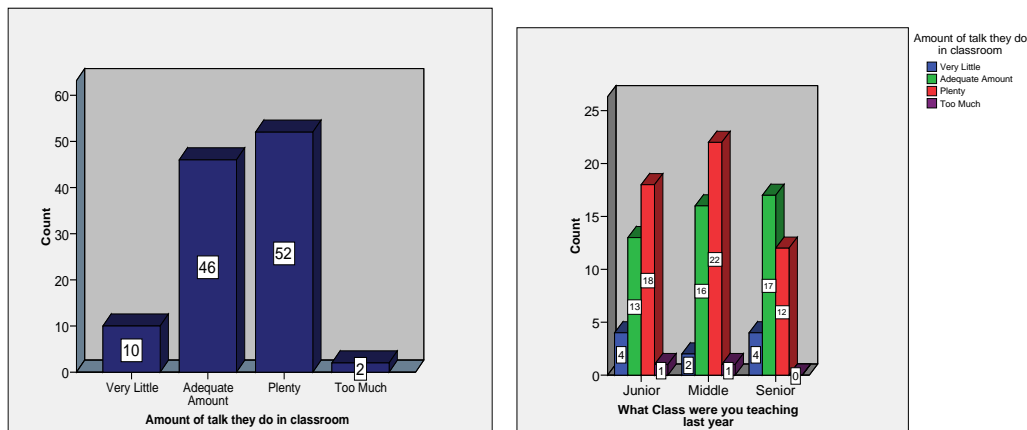
These findings present a gloomy picture of teachers' perceptions of the oral language skills of the children they teach. Many teachers in DEIS schools believe that oral language skills of the many of the children are either weak or inadequate. These perceptions are evident at all levels of the primary school, giving cause for some concern in relation to the perceived ability of these children to function effectively through language in the classroom context.

Tests of Significance

To interrogate the data fully in an effort to get the clearest picture possible from these findings, statistical tests were conducted to establish whether there was a significant difference between the responses of teachers from different groups to the questions in Section B – Teachers' Perceptions of Children's Oral Language Skills. The following groups were tested:

- ❖ School Type
  - ➢ Urban
  - ➢ Rural
- ❖ School Gender
  - ➢ Single Sex
  - ➢ Co Ed
- ❖ Teacher Type
  - ➢ Junior
  - ➢ Middle
  - ➢ Senior

❖ Years Teaching Experience
  ➢ Less than 5 years
  ➢ 5 to 10 years
  ➢ More than 10 years
❖ Years teaching designated disadvantage
  ➢ 5 years or less
  ➢ More than 5 years

For each of the questions the teachers were asked to give their opinion in relation to the oral language skills of the majority of the children in their class. The options available were:
  ➢ Inadequate
  ➢ Weak
  ➢ Good
  ➢ Very Good
  ➢ Excellent

The responses were coded 1 – 5, with a low score indicating a negative opinion and a high score indicating a positive opinion. A statistical test was then run to see if there was a significant difference between the average responses of each group. Some significant differences between groups of teachers were highlighted by these tests.

URBAN/RURAL

Q1: The ability of the children to **express** themselves generally is

Group Statistics

	Is your school an Urban or Rural School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The ability of the children to express themselves generally is	Urban	76	2.57	.772	.089
	Rural	37	3.05	.848	.139

For this test, the average level of opinion for urban teachers was 2.57. This would indicate an average opinion of between weak and good. The average level of opinion for rural teachers was 3.05. This would indicate an average opinion of between good and very good.

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Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
The ability of the children to express themselves generally is	Equal variances assumed	1.258	.264	-3.055	111	.003	-.488	.160	-.805	-.172
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.956	65.750	.004	-.488	.165	-.818	-.159

Equal variance in the responses of both groups can be assumed as the p-value for Levene's test is 0.264 and this is greater than 0.05. The p-value for the t test is 0.003 and as this is less than 0.05, this would indicate that there is a significant difference. The confidence interval does not contain zero so this backs up the p-value.

There is therefore, sufficient evidence to suggest that **the opinions of urban teachers are more negative than those of rural teachers in relation to the ability of children to express themselves generally**.

Similar findings in relation to significant differences of opinion between urban and rural teachers returned for many of the discrete oral language skills considered by teachers. Findings indicate that for the independent samples T-Test a p value < 0.05 was returned where urban teachers' opinions were significantly more negative than rural teachers for children's receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge, children's ability to produce complex sentence structures, to use language for a variety of purposes, to use different language registers, to develop a point when talking, to explain, and to organise their talk coherently and to listen to/tolerate others talking. No significant difference was found between urban and rural teachers' opinions of children's ability to stick to a topic when talking or their ability to describe accurately and effectively when talking. There were no significant differences of opinion between urban and rural teachers in relation to children's willingness to talk, or the amount of talk children do in a learning context in the classroom. (See Volume 2 of this document for a full outline of the statistical analysis of the survey findings).

JUNIOR/MIDDLE/SENIOR TEACHER

Tests of significance were conducted to establish whether there was any significant difference of opinion among teachers depending on the class level they taught – junior (junior/senior infants), middle (first, second, third, fourth), senior (fifth, sixth). As there were 3 groups

involved here, the test used was a one-way ANOVA to see if any particular group differed from the others. For this test a small p value (Sig) less than 0.05 would indicate that at least one group differs. If there was a difference, then a pair-wise post hoc test was used to identify which group was different.

Q1: The ability of the children to **express** themselves generally is

ANOVA

The ability of the children to express themselves generally is

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.147	2	2.074	3.153	.047
Within Groups	72.348	110	.658		
Total	76.496	112			

The p value of 0.047 here is not greater than 0.05 so it is possible to say that at least one of the groups differs from the others.

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: The ability of the children to express themselves generally is
Tukey HSD

(I) What Class were you teaching last year	(J) What Class were you teaching last year	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Junior	Middle	-.453*	.183	.039	-.89	-.02
	Senior	-.176	.194	.635	-.64	.28
Middle	Junior	.453*	.183	.039	.02	.89
	Senior	.277	.186	.300	-.17	.72
Senior	Junior	.176	.194	.635	-.28	.64
	Middle	-.277	.186	.300	-.72	.17

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The post hoc test given here does a pair-wise comparison of all 3 groups. Because the confidence interval does not contain zero it is possible to conclude that there is a significant difference between the two groups. In this case, the conclusion is that there is a significant difference in opinion between Junior and Middle teachers only, **in terms of children's ability to express themselves generally – junior teachers' opinions being significantly more negative than the opinion of teachers of children in middle classes**.

Significant differences of opinion between Junior and Middle class teachers were returned also for teachers' opinions of children's ability to listen and to use different language registers. In

terms of changing language style and using different registers appropriately in a range of talking contexts it is to be expected that many children in junior classes have not acquired these skills as they are acquired developmentally and so a significant difference between the opinions of junior and middle teachers is to be expected.

(See Volume 2 of this document for a full outline of the statistical analysis of the survey findings).

YEARS TEACHING IN A DISADVANTAGED SCHOOL

Significant differences of opinion were expressed by teachers with five years or less experience of teaching in a disadvantaged context as compared with teachers who were teaching for more than five years in a disadvantaged context. The differences were significant only in relation to teachers' perceptions of children's ability to produce complex sentence structures and children's ability to use language for a variety of purposes. The opinions of the teachers with more experience in a disadvantaged context were significantly more negative in relation to these two language skills.

Q4: The ability of the children to produce **complex sentence structures** is

Group Statistics

	Years teaching designated	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
The ability of the children to produce complex sentence structures is	5 or less years	55	2.16	.660	.089
	more than 5 years	54	1.93	.578	.079

For this test the average level of opinion for teachers with 5 years or less experience was 2.16. This would indicate an average opinion of between weak and good.

The average level of opinion for teachers with more than 5 years experience was 1.93. This would indicate an average opinion of between inadequate and weak.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
							Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Difference	Difference	Lower	Upper
The ability of the children to produce complex sentence structures is	Equal variances assumed	1.920	.169	1.999	107	.048	.238	.119	.002	.473
	Equal variances not assumed			2.001	105.634	.048	.238	.119	.002	.473

Equal variance in the responses of both groups is assumed as the p-value for Levene's test is 0.169 and this is greater than 0.05. The p-value for the t test is 0.048 and as this is less than

0.05, this would indicate that there is a significant difference between the responses of both groups. The confidence interval does not contain zero so this backs up the p-value. Similarly for teachers' perceptions of children's ability to use language for a variety of purposes the p-value for the t test is 0.032 and as this is less than 0.05, this would indicate that there is a significant difference between the responses of both groups. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that **the opinions of teachers with more than five years experience are more negative than those of teachers with 5 years experience or less teaching in a designated disadvantaged context in relation to these two language skills**.

No significant difference was evident between the opinions of teachers in schools which were co-educational and those which were single-sex. There was no significant difference of opinion either among teachers according to years of teaching experience. (See Volume 2 of this document for a full outline of the statistical analysis of the survey findings).

Section C: Teacher Behaviour

The focus in this section was to elicit

- the significance attached to oral language development by teachers
- teacher awareness of language style needed in the school context, and
- teachers' pedagogical responses to the oral language development needs of the children they teach.

Teacher Perceptions about Language

From the responses received, it is clear that teachers attach a great deal of significance to the development of oral language skills in their classrooms. 100% of the teachers indicated that they think oral language is important for the children in their class and 95.5% of the teachers said that they formally teach oral language. There seems to be an awareness of the need for children to switch language style in the context of school among teachers also as 72.7% of teachers felt that children's use of language in school is different to their use of language outside school, and 91.5% of teachers responded that they think children are expected to use language in particular ways in school. It is clear from the level of these responses that the need for oral language development in the school context is firmly established among teachers.

Teachers were asked to elaborate on why they feel oral language is important. From the responses received it is clear that teachers are aware of the fundamental importance of oral language for children's development and many believe that its importance is very high for the cohort of children they are teaching. Many teachers articulated the view that language is important for expression and communication which are vital life skills, along with the view that language helps to build confidence and self-esteem – *verbal interaction is an essential life skill; it develops their understanding of themselves and the world they live in; ability to explain/question/describe and listen – important skills in today's world; it is important to give them the tools to express themselves effectively; it develops their skills and self-esteem; it helps children communicate more confidently in a variety of situations and for different audiences and purposes.* A large number of teachers made reference in their responses to the importance of language as a basis for learning and accessing the curriculum -

Oral language is central to the curriculum and everyday life – easier to access the curriculum; every subject depends on an understanding of language; equips children to deal with all aspects of the curriculum; basic for all other learning; because all learning depends on their ability to speak and listen. The important link between oral language development and the development of literacy skills was acknowledged by many of the teachers – *oral language has a direct link to written language and the more the children are taught to speak in a correct fashion, the more they will use language effectively in written work; language development helps children's comprehension and reading develop. Children need to be able to understand and express an understanding of what they read and write; crucial for literacy development.*

From the responses received it would appear that teachers' awareness of the significance of oral language development is well developed. Many teachers articulated the view that it is of particular importance for children in the DEIS context, indicating a perception that for many of these children language skills are not as well developed as they would need to be – *they have poor oral language skills – they need to fine tune them to succeed in their adult life; some children do not receive adequate interaction at an early age and so their oral language and social skills may be poor; the children don't get the opportunity to develop their language in their home environment – it is important they get the development in school; I think the level of oral language that they have is very low, they have a lack of appropriate vocabulary and phrases with which to communicate; the standard of oral language is very low in their homes; there are huge deficiencies in their oral ability, but adding to their vocabulary and quality of*

discourse is proving to be enormously difficult; many children come from areas where language development is majorly overlooked; it is an area in which they are very weak.

Acknowledging that there is a difference between children's use of language in the context of school and language use outside of school, teachers generally characterised the difference along a formal/informal divide – *the children need to understand the language used by the teacher as this may differ greatly from the informal language used at home.* The language of school was generally described as *more structured; extended vocabulary; more academic; more accurate language is used; more polite/exact; speaking in full sentences, proper grammar; children are challenged in school to express themselves and are exposed to language that would be a higher standard than among their peers; children are given more of an opportunity to speak about particular topics in school; children are taught to speak to adults in respectful manner; at school children are required to explain and consolidate responses; they are given time which is not often the way at home.*

The language of outside of school was described by teachers as *bad language; slang; less cultured; baby talk; monosyllabic; more crude; less accurate; limited vocabulary; 'rude' toilet words; shortened pronunciation; stronger accent; incorrect grammar; tendency to shout; cutting across a person talking.* The fundamental differences expressed by teachers are best summed up by one teacher as follows: *outside school, the use of language is more informal with less emphasis on sentence structure and grammar.*

Articulating their expectations for language use in the school context, teachers again emphasised the importance of using full sentences, grammar, structure, pronunciation, politeness and respect when speaking. Mentioned also by teachers was the need in school for explanations and descriptions, and some teachers highlighted the need to use a range of register when speaking in school – e.g. *they realise that there's importance placed on pronunciation, grammar and register when speaking in school; correct sentence structure, appropriate intonation of voice, more elaborate vocabulary sought in school; forced to explain themselves clearly – use full and clear sentences; they are expected to use clear structured language in school whereas at home they are understood whatever language they use.*

It is clear from the responses presented that teachers are extremely aware of the importance of oral language and are aware also that there are challenges for children in DEIS schools in

meeting the expectations for language style in the school context. While the significance of oral language in the overall development of the child was very clearly articulated by the teachers, awareness of the precise nature of the differences in language style in the school context is less clearly expressed by the teachers. The challenge of an academic style of language use was represented broadly by the need observed by teachers for children to

- speak more politely and respectfully,
- to use full and correct sentence structures when speaking,
- to use a wider range of vocabulary, and
- to pronounce words properly when speaking.

One teacher mentioned the importance in school of being aware of audience when using language – *different audience, different language needs, different contexts;* some highlighted that *they are required to use lots of different registers;* and one teacher suggested that *they are required to use language for different purposes – describing events, sequencing events etc. They don't always have experience of using language for these purposes.* However, these aspects of academic style of language use were not highlighted by the vast majority of teachers who responded.

Looking again at the consensus in relation to requirements for effective language use in the classroom context it is apparent that teacher knowledge is not as precise as it might be in this regard –

- Authoritative presentation of ideas
- Using apt vocabulary
- Complex grammatical structures
- Expanded appropriately
- High degree of organisation
- High in new information
- Adopt an impersonal stance

In the teacher responses no mention was made of the need for children to speak confidently using an authoritative presentation of ideas; the need for better vocabulary is well recognised; the need to be able to produce complex grammatical structures is also well recognised but typically characterised as needing to speak in full sentences, to speak correctly, to use better grammar – the importance of embedding ideas in dense complex structures was not highlighted by any teacher; that ideas would be expanded was suggested by teachers in terms

of the need for children to describe and explain more effectively; the importance of coherence and organisation in the overall presentation of ideas was not mentioned; nor was the need to present new information; and only a very few teachers acknowledged the need to take audience into consideration, the need to vary the language register used and importance of altering language style to suit the purpose of the talk as important language requirements in the school context. It is not surprising that such level of detail in relation to the precise nature of the challenge of academic style of language in the school context would be unAmyilable to teachers in primary school. It is important to note, however, that this knowledge is crucial for teachers if they are to make a significant difference to children's oral language skills such that the school experience of these children is the best that can be offered.

The other point of note from these responses is the perception of language deficit articulated by many teachers. It was observed repeatedly that the language skills of the children were poor or weak and the nature of the language experience in the home was characterised as inadequate. There is a prevailing perception among many teachers that the 'different' language style used by children in DEIS contexts is deficient. Teacher knowledge needs to be developed so that teachers understand that children's language skills are not deficient but different and that for children to succeed in school specific teaching of particular language skills is necessary.

Teacher Pedagogy

The majority of the teachers indicated that they formally teach oral language. In terms of frequency many teachers suggested that they teach oral language every day, generally indicating that it occurs naturally in the course of teaching other subject areas. Other teachers responded that a formal oral language lesson is taught once or twice weekly. It is clear from the responses that teachers use many opportunities to develop the language skills of their pupils, either informally during other lessons, or formally during discrete structured oral language lessons, although this latter appears to be the case for fewer teachers than the more informal approach through other subjects.

Teachers' responses to the question of how they plan for oral language took the form of outlining strategies such as games, drama, discussion, circle time, small group teaching;

resources such as published oral language programmes; and the selection of topics for oral language, generally sourced from other curricular areas especially English, SPHE/SESE. A minority of teachers indicated that they took the plan from a whole school plan for English, and a small number of teachers indicated that they select a topic and decide what vocabulary skills need to be developed and formally focus on that vocabulary during an oral language lesson. Developing a formal plan for oral language outlining content to be taught and methodology to be used does not seem to occur. For the majority of teachers, oral language planning seems to take the form of sourcing appropriate activities which involve the children talking, and often this seems to occur as a by-product of other lessons which are taking place.

Teacher Knowledge of Language Learning Content

Teachers were asked to identify the oral language learning content they target when teaching. The purpose of this question was to elicit teacher awareness of discrete language skills which need to be targeted when teaching oral language to children and to investigate whether skills for academic style of language use are specifically focussed on by teachers.

28% (32 teachers) did not answer this question at all. Some of the responses were particularly vague, e.g. one teacher replied *I don't know;* another teacher's response was a*ll.*   Other responses were – *phonics; variety; talking and listening; listening, speaking; development of language; conventions of speech; oral language in general.* The majority of the remainder of the responses referred to the curriculum strands - 21% (24), or developing vocabulary 13%(15). Other responses to this question included - confidence, willingness to talk, fluency, ability to describe and explain, social language skills, listening skills, use of correct tenses, different language registers, narrative skills, sequencing, grammar. Some teachers responded to this question by identifying teaching strategies – discussion, oral language sheets, role-play, drama, creating stories, games, team teaching; and some teachers suggested topics used for language development in their class.

It is abundantly clear from these responses that teachers are quite vague in relation to the specific content of language learning needed in the school context. Teacher knowledge of language skills which need to be developed in general, and in particular knowledge of those language skills required for success in the school context appears to be vague for the majority of teachers. Given findings reported earlier about teachers' difficulty accessing the curriculum

for appropriate planning in English, it is of concern that 21% of these teachers used the precise wording from the curriculum to respond to this question.

Teaching Strategies for Oral Language Development

Teachers were asked about the strategies and approaches they use when developing oral language skills. Almost 20% (22) of the teachers did not respond to this question and again some vague responses were returned such as - *variety* (response given by three teachers) and *a wide range.* However, of the majority who did respond, teachers listed many approaches which are identified in the literature as facilitative of oral language development, such as: discussion, group-work, pair work, drama, circle time, questioning, games, story, listening, teacher modelling, brainstorming. The use of story and drama were mentioned by many teachers, but only 4 teachers mentioned poetry as an approach to developing oral language skills. Group/pair work was mentioned by many teachers also.

Probing more deeply to ascertain the frequency with which these approaches are used in typical classrooms it was revealed that despite the fact that a large number of teachers identified group work as a strategy used to facilitate oral language development, 48.1% of teachers reported using this strategy 'often', while 49.1% of teachers indicated that they use it 'sometimes'. For the other strategies listed, the majority of teachers generally reported using them once or twice weekly or more than twice weekly - language games (85%); discussion (96%); listening to story (93%); responding to story (93%); newstelling (91%); pretend play (51%). Creating story (46%), listening to poetry (40%), responding to poetry (41%) and drama (52%) were approaches used by a majority of teachers once a week.

Table 20: Use of Collaborative Group Work
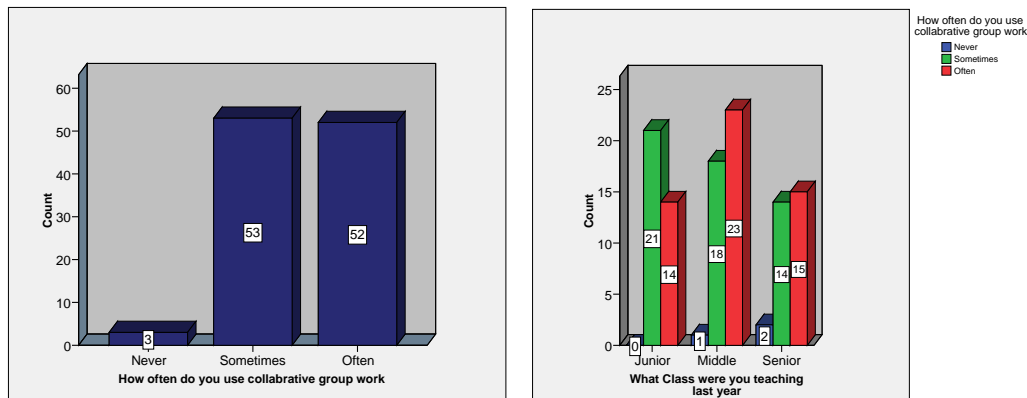
While it is heartening to see a wide range of appropriate strategies and approaches being used by teachers to facilitate oral language development in the classroom, it is worth attending to the fact that almost half of the teachers only use group work 'sometimes', 21% use drama less often than once per week, 23% have children listening to poetry less than once per week, and 28% have children responding to poetry less than once a week.

Section D: Classroom Environment

The majority of responses to the questions in this section were positive, indicating considerable satisfaction with the resources and materials available in classrooms for the purpose of language teaching and learning. The indications are that children have easy access to one another in a classroom environment which is rich in sound and sense. The majority of teachers (74.3%) indicated that children have easy and free access to a range of enrichment activities during their spare time, but one quarter of the teachers indicated that this is not the case. Having access to enrichment activities during spare time for children would be important for language development as a means of broadening experience, encountering a wide range of language, and using language for a range of meaningful purposes in a variety of communicative contexts. It is of concern that this facility is not available to the children of 25% of the teachers surveyed. Almost half of the teachers (48%) indicated that the classroom layout does not change frequently. This is of concern as it is important for children to sit in different formations with different groups to facilitate communication and co-operation in the

classroom. An overwhelming majority of teachers indicated that their classrooms are well resourced with interesting reading material which is freely available and the majority (80%) of teachers felt that their classrooms were well resourced for the development of children's oral language skills.

Teachers were asked to outline resources they would need which they don't currently have in their classrooms. The response to this question included reference to resources such as, for example, interactive white board, video recorder/voice recorder, software for the computer, data projector, cd's, posters, story tapes, puppets, dress-up clothes, toys, board games. However, many of the teachers expressed the need for more teaching resources in the form of lesson materials, ideas for language development, guidelines for developing children's language skills, language games, scheme of work for language development, ideas for drama. Teachers also suggested more time and more adults in the classroom as necessary resources for effective development of the children's language skills.

It is clear from the responses to this section of questions that classrooms in DEIS schools for the most part are well resourced for language development but many teachers feel the need for support in terms of teaching guidelines and structured programmes and ideas for the teaching of language in their classrooms. The importance of adequate time and greater access to more adult supervision in the classroom context was recognised as important by some teachers also.

Section E: Appropriateness of the Curriculum

This section of the questionnaire sought to elicit teacher familiarity with the curriculum and teachers' perceptions of its accessibility and its appropriateness for the children in the DEIS category of school. Almost all of the teachers have read the curriculum. The majority of teachers (67.3%) indicated that they found the curriculum 'reasonably' accessible. Only 27.4% found the curriculum 'very' accessible however. Similarly, only 22.5% of teachers responded that they find the curriculum 'very' helpful in relation to developing children's oral language skills with the majority (69.4%) finding the curriculum 'reasonably' helpful in this regard. 68% of teachers felt that the curriculum could be improved in terms of addressing the particular needs of children in disadvantaged contexts for oral language development.

Almost one-third of the teachers (32%) expressed the opinion that the curriculum does not address the needs of children in disadvantaged contexts particularly well in terms of oral language development. Comments such as the following were made - *the curriculum is geared towards children in middle class areas and does not take the disadvantaged areas into account; English curriculum is too wide and varied; the curriculum lacks actual ideas etc for teachers to use and is far too 'wordy'.* One teacher suggested that *they have to realise that English is like a second language as these kids use a very different language at home;* another teacher said *I think that there should be a very defined differentiated curriculum for DEIS schools; I think that the objectives for disadvantaged children need to be reviewed and expectations for disadvantaged children should be reduced; take backgrounds into consideration - more detail on what is expected in oral language lessons – outcomes, skills to be learned and developed so that it can be applied generally across the board in any subject matter.* Again teachers called for more time and more practical ideas as to how best to address the oral language needs of the children in their classes.

A substantial number of teachers report finding the curriculum 'reasonable' in terms of its accessibility and the support it offers. Quite a few teachers feel the curriculum could be improved in terms of its support for teachers addressing the particular needs of children in disadvantaged contexts. Teachers call repeatedly for support in relation to what they should do to improve the oral language skills of the children they teach, and many teachers indicate that this support is not to be found in the main policy document available to them. This is of great concern and needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Section F: School Planning

Almost all of the teachers indicated that a school plan for English had been developed in their school and that oral language featured in that plan. Clearly, a critical part of a teacher's planning must be the targets set. Given the responses of the teachers to the question about oral language content targeted in their teaching, it is not surprising to find similar vagueness in their responses to the questions focussing on targets in planning. 34 (30%) of the teachers did not reply to this question. A further three teachers responded that they had no targets in place. Many teachers gave general responses to this question, e.g. *content covered, focussed on improving children's oral language and thinking skills, fluency in speaking English, assessment*

by class teacher, my own targets – self-expression, non-specific oral language targets, allow for the development of specific oral language skills; we taught following different oral language programmes, we followed different themes. Some teachers' oral language targets were confounded with targets for reading, writing and mathematics, e.g. *mathematical language targets; letterland phonics; good understanding of writing English in the correct context; reading certain sight words, letter sounds, recognition; read clearly and loudly with expression.* As before, the majority of teachers who responded to this question invoked the curriculum in their response, but again this was vague in many cases, e.g. *the curriculum targets; curriculum objectives; as in curriculum; language for social purposes; speak coherently and confidently about a topic; various aims from the strands of the oral language curriculum.* A great many teachers mentioned specific strand units from the curriculum as their focus but no elaboration was included in the response, e.g. *develop competence and confidence in using oral language; speak confidently; emotional and imaginative development through language; developing child's ability to engage appropriately in listener/speaker relationship.* Some teachers made reference to DEIS targets devised under the DEIS plan. Some teachers mentioned 'first steps' stages. Also mentioned was *targets taken from Drumcondra English Profiles – to get to no. 2/3 of attainment level.* As before, many teachers indicated targets of speaking in full sentences, expansion of vocabulary, listening skills, retelling story, e.g. *to expand vocab., develop correct grammar, syntax, improve listening skills; a growing elaboration and sophistication in use of vocabulary and sentence.*

It is apparent from teachers' responses that a clear expression of appropriate targets for language development is not in place in the oral language plans of many teachers. This will undoubtedly militate against satisfactory achievement in the area of oral language development in their classes. This was made clear in teachers' responses to the question of whether targets had been attained. 48 (42%) of teachers did not respond. Of the remainder who responded many indicated they did not achieve their targets with some of the children – *I wish I did!; found it difficult to get time; not all children achieved these; some of them; not all children would have achieved the target level; set my targets too high; by the end of the year I found many children still found it very difficult to listen to each other and me in class – due to poor concentration and listening skills; wasn't possible to achieve all targets; didn't get much time with other teaching activities; too high to aim for; limited success.* One teacher replied as follows: *some of the targets were achieved. However, due to time constraints and demand to achieve other targets of the English curriculum and the introduction of new readers, the jolly phonics scheme, the first*

steps initiative, not all targets were met. However, oral language was integrated into these other areas. It just wasn't possible to explicitly teach an oral language lesson in isolation.

These findings suggest that teacher planning for oral language may not be as explicit and clear as is needed to enhance children's oral language skills effectively and especially to ensure that those language skills which are vital for success in the school context are targeted and achieved with the children in these contexts.

Section G: Home-School Contact

It was important to elicit from teachers the extent and nature of communication with parents around the academic development of the children with particular reference to the development of children's oral language skills. 86.5% of teachers said that they communicate with parents about the children's oral language skills. Teacher perceptions of parent interest in children's academic development suggested that teachers feel that the majority of parents are reasonably interested in their children's progress, with only 14.5% characterised as having a 'poor interest' in their children's academic development.

Table 21: Teacher Perceptions – Parental Interest in Academic Progress
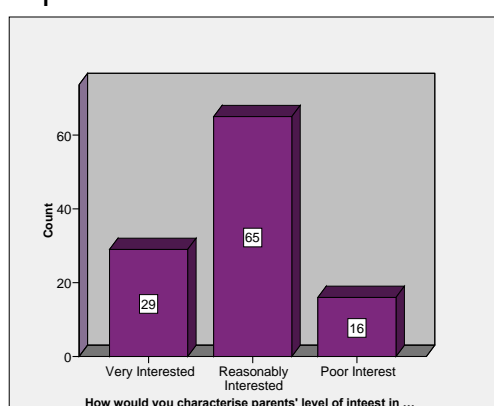
Teachers indicated that formal communication for the most part takes place during parent-teacher meetings which occur once or twice a year in the majority of schools. A substantial number of teachers indicated also, however, that they communicate with parents as the need

arises - *informal communication takes place if and when necessary.* The majority of teachers indicated that they communicate with parents about the oral language development of the children, many of them using the parent-teacher meeting as an opportunity to do so. Teachers also agreed that they use notes in journals, suggestions for activities at home, and informal opportunities to chat to parents as ways of communicating with them about their children's oral language development.

The overwhelming response from teachers about the extent to which parents initiate interaction with teachers about their children's academic progress was that it does not occur too often – *rarely, never, seldom, not too often, very little, very rarely, majority of parents – not at all.* One teacher suggested – *not often about academic progress. Parents would approach school about other issues, not academic.* In relation to children's oral language development teachers felt that parents are not as aware of its significance as they might be - *generally this is not an area parents were concerned about; they have a lack of interest – they are more worried about other curricular areas; I found parents' interests focussed on writing ability and spelling; some were unconcerned; some parents don't understand because they have limited oral language themselves* (this point was made by several teachers)*; oral language didn't seem to be a priority for most – more interested in what they saw in writing/maths etc.; I felt like the need for oral language was undervalued and often written or reading was of the main concern.*

Teachers revealed, however, that when they did communicate with parents about children's oral language development, for the most part, it was received very well by parents – *generally quite well and interested in helping when they can; very well – they wanted to help their child.* It is clear, however, that sustaining interest and parental involvement in a positive and supportive way is very challenging – *listened but don't know if they understood; parents were very positive but old habits die hard; seemed to comply. Don't know if actual work was completed at home; seemed positive but often ignored ideas; difficult to measure but I would venture to suggest that little changed; slow to adopt this advice.*

Findings in this section of the questionnaire point to the fact that teachers' communication with parents around children's oral language development takes place formally during parent/teacher meetings and otherwise less formally if the need arises. Teachers' perceptions were that parents are interested in their children's academic progress but parents rarely initiate interaction with teachers about children's academic development and are for the most part

unaware of the importance of oral language as a significant facet of children's development. It is clear also that where teachers reach out to parents and attempt to involve them in the process of enhancing children's language development, such opportunities are welcomed by parents for the most part, but some teachers are doubtful about the sustainability of such outreach indicating that it is hard for parents to maintain meaningful involvement.

General Comments

In the final section of the questionnaire, teachers were invited to comment generally on oral language development in school. The purpose of this section was to give teachers an opportunity to express personal opinions freely about oral language development in the context of the DEIS initiative, and in this way to reveal some of the layers of complexity surrounding the implementation of an oral language perspective in teaching as perceived by the teachers delivering the curriculum.

A total of 48 (42.5%) teachers contributed to this section of the questionnaire. Many of these teachers made significant submissions indicating their level of engagement with the subject of oral language teaching and learning, and their anxiety and concern for its improvement.

Teachers' responses in this section signalled that they were most concerned at the
- extent of the oral language challenge experienced by children in DEIS schools, the
- negative impact of this on children in these schools, and the
- need for support in dealing with this significant issue both in the classroom and in terms of harnessing parental support.

The **serious language difficulties** experienced by children in these schools was strongly articulated by teachers. This was expressed by many, however, from a deficit perspective with negative perceptions of the home and parents identified as the root cause of the problem -
It is my experience in this environment that children are seriously deficient in language. Vocabulary is barely functional. There is great dysfunction in homes and often serious neglect. Learning is peripheral to many lives. It is blatantly obvious that there is serious lack of proper communication. Self-expression and proper resolution of conflict is aggravated by language difficulty;

Oral language is a very important area of the curriculum especially in a disadvantaged area where children come to school with very poor and underdeveloped oral language abilities;

Some of our children would come to school with very little oral language. They would not be able to put names on simple objects – body parts etc. let alone put a sentence together. They may be left all day with no parental chat – v. poor parenting skills etc.;

Children's improvement in terms of oral language development in disadvantaged schools is for the majority a lot slower, simply because the language they learn in school is not reinforced outside of school. Many parents' ability to express themselves articulately is very poor and this is most evident during parent teacher meetings;

Children do not get enough opportunity at home to discuss thoughts and feelings with their parents;

Expressive and descriptive language is very poor – the children often incorrectly answer questions (basic lower order questions) because they've misunderstood the question due to phrasing or vocab.;

I believe that oral language is a very important area of the curriculum especially in a disadvantaged area where children come to school with very poor and underdeveloped oral language abilities;

Oral language or a deficit in oral language impacts every aspect of a child's learning. Many of my pupils have difficulty correctly articulating their ideas and this causes frustration and poor performance.

Many of the teachers commented on the **negative impact** of the challenge of oral language in the classroom on the children they teach. This was described in terms of its effect on

<u>Achievement of potential</u> – *instantly sets a child apart as weak if they have poor oral language skills; without good oral language and understanding little of the curriculum can be accessed; when children's oral language skills are well developed they can achieve their potential and benefit from how the curriculum is planned and presented; I feel that oral language is central to the child's academic progress as it influences every aspect of their learning.*

<u>Reducing targets</u> – *I find I am constantly dumbing down topics in text books, especially SESE because the children struggle with the language and books for their class level*

<u>Personal development</u> – *oral language development is critical for the development of the whole child – emotionally, academically and socially, without which inhibits the child from interacting successfully with peers and engaging to full extent in class lessons. This can result in*

behavioural problems and a lack of self-esteem; self-esteem and confidence grows with language; underdeveloped oral language leads to a high level of frustration in the class as children fail to understand instructions or lack the ability to express feelings and ideas. A lack of understanding leads to low levels of confidence in children as they feel isolated or feel they are struggling with class work.

Communication – *it's all about communication, communication, communication – it is not being done at home – oh! the curse of rubbishy TV; the silent child may not just be shy – he/she may have great difficulty communicating;*

Behaviour - poor listening skills, social skills, confidence and self-esteem, as well as heightened levels of frustration due to inability to express themselves adequately were cited repeatedly as leading to behavioural problems by a large number of teachers – *behaviour is affected if children have problems with oral language and communication. They become frustrated and act out. They fail to reach targets set for their class level. They find it difficult to communicate with their peers which leads to problems socially; the ability of a child to express himself competently and confidently can be the solution to many problems – behaviour, academic difficulty and social inclusion.*

Classroom management - teachers indicated repeatedly that poor behaviour leads to problems of classroom management – *it has an effect on classroom management. Those with poor oral language skills find it easier to resort to violence than to argue their point. They bear grudges because they can't talk things out in an articulate way.*

It is clear to teachers that the ripple effect of inappropriate language skills in the classroom context is having a severe and crippling impact on the success of many of the children they teach from a personal perspective as well as from an academic perspective. Teachers are concerned about the severity of this situation and, while aware of its existence, cry out repeatedly for **support** in dealing with it so that children's school experience might be improved with the concomitant impact on enhancing their life chances –

I think oral language is the foundation of the English curriculum. If children experience success in this area, the rewards will be reaped in other areas of the curriculum – writing (formal and informal), development of the imagination etc. However, it is not an area I feel confident teaching – I'd like guidelines and resources to be made available for each training level. I sometimes wonder whether what I do with the class is beneficial to their confidence and progress.

I feel that a comprehensive list of resources and websites should be available for oral language development; teachers need a huge bank of ideas and ways of teaching it at every age group; oral language scheme would be very handy – at the moment just dipping into various resources whenever I get the chance – no formal programme as such; additional resources and training are badly needed; additional resources and training in this area would be invaluable for both pre- and in-service teachers in my opinion; I would like to see more resources/lesson material sent to school/teachers as I am not too sure where to go for formal oral language lessons.

The importance of the **role of parents** in supporting effective oral language development was recognised by teachers, focussing on the need to make parents more aware of its importance and of empowering parents to become involved meaningfully in the process –

I feel that more resources need to be made available to teach parents especially in disadvantaged areas of the importance of oral language. Also a programme should be in place to help parents of toddlers 0-24 months as children from disadvantaged areas often arrive in school with a delay in their oral language development due to a lack of knowledge/resources;

Home life has a massive impact on a child's oral language skills so therefore parents would need to be more aware of the importance of oral language and be encouraged to talk to their children at home;

It seems foolhardy to me to imagine that school by itself will overcome the language inadequacy of pupils … if people in the home/support setting of a child have come from a circle of inadequacy, they themselves lack the confidence and ability to provide their children with the good foundation and ongoing support needed to raise the level of language capacities … I am not a pessimist, but feel that education planners and philosophers need to look at the human reality that surrounds school life – a school is not an isolated laboratory and its pupils progress at a rate that is moderated by the community around it;

Help needs to be given outside school as well as in school if the objectives of the curriculum are to be achieved in a disadvantaged area.

There were some very impressive examples given of schools taking the initiative to deal at local level with the oral language difficulties experienced.

Each year we held a coffee morning where we invited the junior infant parents into the school for a cup of coffee and a chat about developing oral language with your child. The first year we held this no parents showed up to the meeting. So we held it again and with the help of a

visiting teacher for travellers and their school liaison officer we got 6 parents. So we left it for a few weeks and invited parents in again for a nursery rhyme show involving their children. Success - every child had at least one parent in attendance. So we took this opportunity after the children had performed and discussed with parents – reading to the child, suggested questions you could ask about the book/story, gave them sample nursery rhymes and explained ways of making nursery rhymes fun, suggested games they could play to develop oral language e.g. What if, I spy etc. And discussed times when they might engage in conversation with the child e.g. shopping, cooking etc. Each family got a pack going home containing – a story book, a book of words and pictures, colours, nursery rhymes, and some examples of oral language games, a library card to encourage joining the local library. Overall that year was a success and about 70% of the class had a parent read a story book to them which was great.

We ran it every year since and by holding 1 – 2 meetings we manage to get about 50% of the parents in, but that at least is something.

We actually have a three-year plan up and running. It started Oct 07 to enhance children's functional oral language needs. Individual teachers timetable discrete oral language time daily for 15 mins. We as a staff devised a list of teaching methodologies to teach a range of basic skills in conjunction with our first steps programme, aided by our cuiditheoir. Actions will be taken in a sequenced, coordinated manner over a three-year period to try to ensure maximum effect and to allow for ongoing review – adaptation and rewording. We are on year two now. Three targeted children from each class (same three as last year) to be assessed in Dec 08, easter 09, again in May 09 using our staff devised checklist.

Looking at the O/L indicators for junior infants (Drumcondra English profiles), quite a number of our junior infants would come in at the lower end of the scale. Some would have difficulty communicating with peers, quite a few cannot recite nursery rhymes and are not familiar with common fairy tales. Oral language is prioritised in our English programme throughout the school (junior infants – 2nd). Some years ago we decided to delay introducing formal reading until senior infants. Junior infant teachers devised a comprehensive plan to include oral language lessons, story, poetry, pre-reading activities, Newell Phonics scheme, and writing. This year (08/09) Senior infants have introduced Literacy Lift-off and again oral language is prioritised.

A number of other initiatives have been introduced throughout the school to help the development of oral language (Forward Together, book week, pyjama party to encourage bed-time story, weekly trips to library, C.A.P.E.R books , story chest...)

We would welcome any advice/help that would enable us to develop effective communication skills in our pupils and help them access the curriculum in a more meaningful way.

Oral language is an extremely important element of the new curriculum. Language affects the child's ability to engage with his/her peers, engage with adults, and engage with the curriculum. It is important in any school that oral language is undertaken in a structured manner throughout the school. We have found that through "theme teaching" we can approach language in a 'tiered way' throughout the school. This provides a more holistic approach to language within the school and provides a framework within which teachers can operate. We approach language in maths in a similar way – the oral element of maths providing an important

foundation: a continuum of language throughout the school proving extremely important. In multi –class situations while time is always a constraint, the teacher has to seek language opportunities through the linkage of subject area. Again theme teaching has proved successful for us in achieving this goal

It emerges very clearly from the material presented by teachers in this section of the questionnaire that the oral language challenge presented to teachers in schools in the DEIS context is very real, very significant, and taken very seriously by these teachers. It is evident that teachers are aware of its existence and the severity of its consequences, but are unsure of how best to respond to its demands. Some schools have taken control of the situation as they see fit to respond to it – in one instance focussing on the role of the parents, in others looking at developing a coherent, school-wide response to the difficulties of children in relation to oral language development.

SUMMARY

This chapter has focussed on presenting the findings from a nationwide survey of teachers at junior, middle, and senior class level in primary schools in the DEIS School Support Programme. The nature of the survey was such that teachers' perceptions of the language skills of the majority of the children in their classrooms was sought. In addition, teacher behaviour was examined with a view to uncovering how teachers respond to the perceived language needs of the children in their classes. Many of the questions on the survey were analysed quantitatively, while others, where teachers were asked for their views, were analysed qualitatively. In the case of the latter, results presented indicated the predominant views expressed by teachers, accompanied by numerous examples of indicative comments made by teachers. A summary of survey findings is presented below.

Almost 50% of the teachers who responded had less than five years experience teaching in a disadvantaged context.
Almost 60% of the teachers in junior classes (junior infants to second class) were teaching classes of over 20 pupils (the targeted pupil/teacher ratio in the DEIS Action Plan) and 40% of senior class teachers (third to sixth class) were teaching classes of over 24 pupils (the targeted pupil/teacher ratio in the DEIS Action Plan). This means that an average of almost 50% of the

teachers who responded to the survey were teaching classes exceeding the targeted pupil/teacher ratio for DEIS schools.

Survey results clearly reported teachers as having negative perceptions of children's oral language ability.

The perceptions of teachers in urban schools were found through analysis to be significantly more negative than those of teachers in rural schools. This is perhaps unsurprising given findings by Weir et al. (2009) that 'pupils in a sample of schools selected for inclusion in the rural dimension of a programme to address educational disadvantage performed significantly better than pupils in a sample of urban schools participating in the same programme' (2009, p.3).

The perceptions of teachers of junior classes were found through analysis to be significantly more negative than those of teachers of middle classes.

Teachers with more teaching experience were found through analysis to have significantly more negative perceptions of children's ability to construct complex sentences and to use language for a variety of purposes (two important language skills associated in the literature with success in school-type talking tasks).

Teachers appeared from their comments in the survey to be acutely aware of the importance of oral language, characterised by the teachers in terms of its importance for expression, communication, learning, accessing the curriculum and developing literacy skills in the classroom.

Teachers appeared also to be aware that language use in the school context is different from the style of language used outside of school and that there is a particular need for oral language development in the case of children in DEIS schools.

Teachers demonstrated awareness that there are language challenges for these children in the context of school, but unsurprisingly, were vague in terms of the particular language challenges involved.

The prevailing perception expressed by many teachers was that the 'different' language style used in school by children in DEIS contexts is deficient.

Teachers were vague in their responses in relation to the precise language skills targeted in their teaching, but clearly reported using a wide range of pedagogical approaches in their oral language teaching. The degree of frequency with which teachers reported using some of the required approaches was of some concern.

While teachers reported their classrooms as well-resourced for language teaching, that most crucial of resources, teacher support, was called for repeatedly by teachers.

Almost one-third of the teachers who completed the survey felt that the curriculum does not address the needs of children in disadvantaged contexts well in relation to oral language development, while 68% of the teachers felt that the curriculum could be improved in terms of addressing the particular needs of children in disadvantaged contexts for oral language development.

Teachers' responses about planning for oral language teaching indicated that a clear expression of appropriate targets for language development is not in place in the oral language plans of many of the teachers surveyed.

Teachers reported that the majority of parents are interested in their children's progress in school, and teachers talk to the parents about children's oral language development mainly through the formal parent-teacher meetings scheduled by the school once or twice yearly.

Teachers also reported that parents do not often initiate interaction about the academic progress of their children.

Teachers perceived that parents are more interested in their children's progress in relation to the development of literacy skills than in their oral language development.

Teachers experiences of communicating with parents about children's oral language development was generally well-received by parents.

Teachers expressed concern, however, about the sustainability of parental interest and involvement in their children's academic progress.

In the final section of the survey where teachers were invited to articulate general comments about oral language development in their classes, some very clear views emerged which broadly made four points of note:

Teachers perceived the majority of the children in their classes to be presenting with **serious language difficulties**.

- These difficulties, teachers commented, had a **negative impact** on the children in terms of
- the achievement of potential,
- teacher reduction of targets set for the children,

- the personal development of the children, most notably in terms of low self-esteem in the case of many of the children,

- children's ability to communicate, and

- behaviour, leading to problems of classroom management.

Such was the concern of teachers about the crippling impact of serious language difficulties that repeated calls for **support for teachers** tackling oral language development in the classroom were made.

In their comments, teachers also recognised the importance of the **role of parents** in supporting effective oral language development, citing the need

- to make parents **more aware** of the importance of oral language development for children, and the need

- to **empower parents** to become involved meaningfully in the process.

It is abundantly clear that intervention is needed on a grand scale to alleviate the difficulties cogently articulated by these teachers in effecting a meaningful response to this challenge. The focus of the case study which followed this survey was on examining how best this might be achieved on a small scale. Among the objectives of the study was that of devising recommendations for dissemination of good practice nationwide so that teachers may be facilitated to respond professionally and effectively to a situation which has clearly evolved in relation to oral language development in our most disadvantaged contexts in this country. Findings from the case study will be presented in the next chapter.

Case Study Findings

Working with teachers of senior infants, third, and sixth class in three schools, the purpose of the case study intervention was to explore the support teachers needed in order to facilitate an oral language perspective in their teaching, and to examine the impact such support might have on teachers, children, and parents. The focus of the intervention in the case study was very much driven by (1) findings from the literature around the importance of *knowledge* for effective implementation of policy in a meaningful and effective manner, as well as by (2) data generated from an analysis of teacher responses to the nationwide survey.

The nature of the support provided to teachers during the six in-service sessions was based on enhancing teacher knowledge about language and the most effective means of developing language skills in the classroom, with particular reference to the development of academic style of language use (see page 47 in Methodology chapter for a full description of support given to teachers, and Appendix C for support materials given).

The support given during the study was explored in relation to its impact on the teachers and its impact on the children. Data from the case study around the impact of the support on teachers was generated in two ways: anecdotal reporting by teachers on a monthly basis during in-school in-service sessions; and comments by teachers on the process, noted in reflective journals kept over the duration of the intervention, as well as during a plenary session at the conclusion of the intervention. Data on the impact of the project on the children was generated from teacher reports and on data generated from a comparison of pre-test and post-test performance on oral language tasks of a selection of children representing a range of ability in each class. The findings based on the test performance were compared with findings from a comparative group of control children whose teachers did not receive the intervention support.

Teacher Support Findings

All of the teachers in the study reported that the required changes to practice outlined at the outset had been made. In all cases, teachers indicated that oral language was prioritised in their classrooms for the duration of the project. In fact, all reported repeatedly that as a result of being involved in the project, oral language development would remain a priority in their

teaching into the future. All teachers indicated also that oral language teaching was delivered during regular, dedicated, discrete oral language lessons in their classrooms. All of the teachers engaged children in oral tasks across the curriculum as part of the learning process, many considerably more frequently than had been the case previously. There was an increase in teachers' use of pair and group-work in the classroom, and an expansion of children's exposure to good quality literature, poetry and drama. A minority of teachers reported that drama was not used as an approach very often during the project, but for the majority, drama was used more than had been the case prior to participation in the project, and in some cases, for the first time. All teachers were aware of the importance of developing children's ability to use a more academic style of language and attempted to develop this primarily through exposure to high-quality, formal language style, and by focussing with children on establishing context when speaking, use of clear, explicit vocabulary, and increasingly dense and complex utterances, increasing awareness of audience, and development of children's confidence when speaking.

Challenges in the DEIS context for language teaching and learning

From discussions with the case study teachers during monthly in-service sessions and at the plenary seminar, along with comments made by teachers in their reflective journals, the following data emerged in relation to the reality of dealing with the issue of language teaching and learning in a DEIS context:

The language style of the children is such that often they can experience difficulty expressing themselves effectively/appropriately in the classroom context. Based on their own experience of language use, teachers assume a certain minimum standard of English on the part of the children. Where this is not evident, there can be **frustration** on the part of the teacher and the children. The effect on teacher behaviour is that the teacher tends to **simplify the language of interaction** with the children. Teachers may also have **lower expectations** for these children, '*dumbing down*' the targets set for children in these contexts. The effect of frustration with difficulty of expression on the children is that they present **behavioural difficulties** and manifest problems in developing appropriate **social skills**. This in turn may have the effect of distracting both teacher and children from the core focus of learning in the classroom context, with the concomitant effect of **lower achievement levels**. Children's language experience in

the classroom may also lead to **poor levels of self-esteem and self-confidence** deriving from their inability to communicate effectively. One teacher exemplified this in the context of two children who misbehave in the school yard – the child who has appropriate language skills to talk his way out of the situation generally fares better than the child who can't explain himself as effectively. Such perspectives on the challenges presented for teaching and learning of oral language in the context of DEIS schools very much echo those identified by teachers who completed the survey. Clearly, finding a means of supporting teachers to enable children function effectively through language in the context of the classroom has the potential to have a far-reaching impact on all concerned.

Currently there are two main pillars of support for teachers in DEIS schools in meeting the demands of working with language development: the Primary Curriculum (English) (DES, 1999), and the many supports put in place as part of the DEIS initiative. In relation to the curriculum, survey findings indicated that the majority of teachers think the curriculum could be improved in terms of how it supports teachers dealing with oral language in schools designated as disadvantaged. Concurring with this perspective, case study teachers articulated the view that in the context of their classrooms (DEIS context), the curriculum is too broad and vague. They reported that they find the *language of the curriculum difficult.* They expressed the opinion repeatedly that there is not enough guidance in the curriculum in relation to specific targets, nor is there a clear expression of the language content to be covered with children. In terms of dealing with the specific requirements of children in DEIS contexts for appropriate language development, the teachers felt that the expectations were not spelled out clearly enough – *expectations of the curriculum are aimed towards middle class schools.* There was no cognisance taken of the fact that children in these contexts present with quite different language skills to those actually required, and that it will take more time to develop requisite language skills for children in these schools.

In contrast, case study teachers were very positive and enthusiastic about the support provided through involvement in the DEIS initiative. Specifically, teachers cited reduced pupil-teacher ratio, extra money for resources, extra personnel in the form of learning support, resource, home-school liaison, and language teachers as being hugely beneficial in dealing with the challenges of teaching in disadvantaged contexts. Significantly, teachers were very positive about the impact of 'cuiditheoiri' on whole-school planning. Teachers indicated that prior to involvement in DEIS, planning was done on an individual basis whereas now teachers plan

collaboratively with the support of the Primary Professional Development Service (www.ppds.ie) personnel. This has made an enormous difference to teachers. Teachers also cited the positive impact of the many programmes now available for teachers, pupils and parents in DEIS schools as contributing significantly to the development of children in the schools. Specific programmes mentioned included Reading Recovery, Maths Recovery, First Steps, School Completion Programme. It is worthy of note, that only one of these programmes, the First Steps programme, targets oral language development and that programme has not yet been introduced into schools for oral language development. Noteworthy also is that teachers in two of the case study schools reported that recent whole-school evaluations did not focus at all on the development of children's oral language skills but focussed instead on the development of literacy and numeracy skills. While teachers repeatedly talk about the success of programmes such as 'Reading Recovery' in improving children's performance on standardised tests of literacy, intervention in these programmes is capped at an early age. It remains to be seen whether the gains produced on literacy test scores are sustained as children progress through the school. When children encounter literacy which involves high demands on comprehension skills as well as decoding skills, a lack of focus on the development of oral language skills may contribute to difficulties in comprehension, given the importance attributed to the link between facility with oral language and the development of comprehension skills in literacy (e.g. Riley et al., 2004).

The challenges facing teachers in DEIS schools in developing children's oral language skills, allied with the perceived inadequacy of the curriculum and the lack of formal support targeting teacher knowledge of oral language development in the classroom context may have led to the deficit views of children's language skills articulated by many teachers in the survey findings, as well as the low level of awareness manifested by survey teachers of the content and targets for oral language development of children in these schools The focus in the case study was to empower teachers, through enhanced knowledge, to target oral language development more effectively, and to monitor the effect of this enhanced knowledge base on the teachers, and the community of learners and their families served by the school. The next section will consider the impact of that knowledge as reported by teachers during the case study intervention process.

Impact of Participation in the Project

Case study data generated insights on the impact of support on teachers in relation to their

Knowledge about language
Perceptions of the language skills and ability of the children, and
Pedagogy - knowledge about approaches and strategies, planning, resources, co-operation.

Case study data also explored the impact which the teacher support had on the

Community served by the school and the teachers:

- the children in terms of learning, and

- their parents in terms of involvement with children's learning.

Teacher **Knowledge about Language**

It is clear from findings in the literature that a substantial amount of knowledge of language is required to develop oral language effectively in the classroom context. In addition, specific knowledge of academic style of language, and its implications for success in the classroom is necessary. Knowledge of the particular importance of developing such a style of language where children present with different varieties of language is critical if such children are to be empowered to access all that the curriculum and experience of school has to offer.

Data reported by teachers in the survey findings indicated that teachers are unclear in relation to the content of their oral language teaching (suggesting a lack of awareness of appropriate knowledge of language), and vague in relation to the targets set for oral language development in their classrooms – this arising most probably from the lack of clarity of the content of oral language teaching. While clearly demonstrating an awareness of the fact that children are required to use a different style of language in the school and classroom context, teachers appear to be considerably less clear on the specific characteristics of that style of language required and expected in the school context - academic style of language use, and not as aware as they might be of the fact that different varieties of language use in the home, while preparing children differently for the language demands of the school, do not imply deficient language skills on the part of the children.

The case study intervention sought to explore the process and effect of increasing teacher knowledge of language. To that end, the components of language and their interaction was presented to the teachers, along with target language skills for specific focus, and a clear outline of the features of literate or academic style of language, also to be targeted in teaching oral language in the context of disadvantage. (See Appendix C for materials presented to teachers during in-service sessions). Findings suggest that this had a substantial impact on teachers participating in the project.

It is clear from the teacher journals that for all of the teachers involved in the project the level of knowledge in relation to the content of a language programme improved over the course of the year, and very many fine examples of appropriate language content to be targeted by teachers were evident. Comments in journals which show evidence of the impact of knowledge about the content of language teaching and learning are presented below:

In the early stages of attempting to teach oral language formally to the children a sixth class teacher admitted that he - *found that it was difficult to think on the spot … will be better prepared next time.* An example of a language lesson completed with the children later in the year shows Marked development in knowledgeable preparation by this teacher for a formal oral language lesson –

Theme: Snow

Asked groups to give nouns (snowflake, snowball, avalanche) verbs (throwing, building, playing) dealing with snow.

Split groups into pairs (A/B) – A told B what they like about snow; B told A what they dislike about snow.

Class discussion – Dangers of Snow (who is at risk, old, homeless, isolated)

Vocabulary – hypothermia, frostbite, harsh, isolated

Read and discussed 3 poems about snow

This teacher scaffolded the quality of children's contributions during oral language lessons, e.g. during an oral activity in preparation for a debate on the topic *Homework should be banned* – children were required to contribute ideas in the form – *I think that homework should/should not be banned because …*

This teacher also acknowledged that *teacher must have knowledge to scaffold child's learning and understanding of poetry.*

Another teacher (third class teacher) commented in her reflections as follows:

*I am teaching for 20 years and … **up to this year I felt slightly out of my depth** as to what I should be doing in my oral language classes … If I were to be honest I would say that far too often the oral language lesson was a discussion based around either an English story or history lesson. **Now I know how to structure the lesson and am more willing to do group work and paired work**. Teachers are far too aware of the need to improve language in written work, but we don't consider the consequence if oral language too isn't improved … By establishing a meaningful oral language perspective teachers will encourage language development formally and informally throughout the school week. The children will become more aware of how to structure sentences and give explanations and answer questions giving more information and detail.*

This teacher demonstrated a clear grasp of the content of language teaching as the intervention progressed with many very fine examples of excellent oral language lessons focussing clearly on appropriate language content, such as the following*:*

Theme: Friendship

Stimulus: Story – Betty's Banger (Story about friends coming to help)

Vocabulary – Friend, chum, buddy, pal; friendly, kind, caring helpful, trustworthy, loyal, fond friend; acquaintance, companion, ally, cordial, confiding;

Discussion – characteristics of friends; a friend in need; a circle of friends;

Group Work – Minster's friend is a _____ friend; Role-play – Friend in Need; Design a card for your friend.

A senior infant teacher remarked in her journal that *from taking part in this project I can clearly see how valuable oral language is and how undervalued it is in the average classroom … It is no good speaking to/"talking at" the class for 20 minutes and calling it oral language. … Successful oral language lessons should be well planned … children need to learn the explanation and meaning of words and phrases in order to be able to use them correctly*. This teacher also indicated that ***I feel that I am more aware now of the outcomes and of what the children should be achieving***.

There was substantial evidence throughout this teacher's journal of a strong awareness of the content of language teaching as exemplified in the following lesson outline:

Theme: Food

Stimulus: Story – A Piece of Cake (Jill Murphy)

Vocabulary – what is my favourite food; what types of food do I know? Colour – e.g. orange, green, brown; Size – long, short, big, small; Type – vegetable, meat, sweet food, dairy; sweet, sour, salty; what does it look like? What does it taste like?

Discussion – where do we get our food? What shop? How? When? Why? Game: I went to the shop and I bought …Why do we need food? (Healthy bodies; growing up)

Pair Work – "The Food Store" – children walk around the class. On the signal to stop they must pair up with the nearest person and discuss what food they have bought, what it looks like and why they bought it. (They must use as many words as possible to describe the food).

Extra ideas – Bring in fruit and vegetables – look, feel, describe; Game - "What do I have?" – in pairs hide fruit/vegetable behind back and friend asks questions in order to guess correctly.

Outcome: That children would be able to describe fruit/vegetables including colour, size and taste; that they will be able to talk about their favourite food in detail.

Another third class teacher participating in the project commented that *I thought oral language was just something you develop in other lessons …however, I now see its huge importance as a lesson in itself. **Only when you know exactly what you want the children to learn and how you are going to assess this can you have an effective lesson** … Because of this study, I'm constantly looking for and encouraging rich language from the children. Even if I just say "Could we say that sentence in a better way?" – the children jump at the opportunity. They love the challenge – you can almost see their minds racing … I will definitely continue to focus on oral language development in my classroom. I feel that it can be very rewarding when you hear a child using the rich vocabulary that you would like them to use.*

Again it is clear from examples of activities and lessons in this teacher's journal that a focus on developing a rich and varied array of oral language skills was very much to the fore as well as an awareness of the importance of teacher knowledge and focus in lesson planning, evident in a comment noted at the end of one particular lesson – *very good lesson! Felt prepared and knew what I wanted to achieve!*

Another teacher who participated in this project remarked in her journal that now she has *a clearer picture of the structure of a typical oral language lesson and the skills pupils need to acquire … these should be circulated to all teachers.*

Another senior infant teacher reflected in her journal that ***I have had to change my attitude and thoughts about oral language drastically*** *… I would have been guilty of dumbing down language and vocabulary for the children ... I could never have imagined how language could have been developed in such a systematic way.* This teacher acknowledged that *I would have been guilty of streamlining what I say (and cutting out unnecessary vocabulary) to make my teaching more efficient. I now know that both can be done – teach topic $\rightarrow$ use extra vocabulary $\rightarrow$ encourage children to use it $\rightarrow$ helps their own language $\rightarrow$ helps reading $\rightarrow$ more success $\rightarrow$ higher self-esteem $\rightarrow$ reading helps with sentence structure and grammar $\rightarrow$ promotes learning and education $\rightarrow$ hopefully making children more open to learning and making things easier to teach.* ***All of this can be achieved with a little extra input from me***. The teacher is very aware of the content of such extra input from her as exemplified in the following statement – *I now encourage children to use more complex sentences or to express an opinion about something … this is far more worthwhile for children.*

A second sixth class teacher made the observation that *prior to participating in this project I would not have recognised the central importance of oral language in a child's school day. I would not have taught oral language in a structured format and it would have been more informal acquisition than the teaching of specific skills of language. Since participating in the project* ***my knowledge of oral language has improved greatly***. *In the past I would not have put as much emphasis on oral language and focussed more on reading and writing skills and from talking to other teachers they have done and some still do the same. Even though oral language is in the primary school curriculum, prior to participating on this project I would not have taught it with a structured approach and been of the opinion that everything is oral language so therefore focussed more on other aspects of the curriculum.*

Examples in teacher journals of lessons, tasks and activities engaged in with children throughout the course of the intervention demonstrate an awareness on the part of the teachers of the need to scaffold and develop the children's ability to establish context when speaking, to present their thoughts coherently, to take the needs of their audience into

consideration when speaking and to work with children to build confidence when expressing themselves orally in the classroom.

Drawing all of these findings together during the plenary discussion with the teachers involved in the project, the following views were articulated:

Teachers agreed that they are now clearer than before on the primacy of oral language in the classroom. They recognise that oral language needs time to be adequately developed in a DEIS context and do not resent giving this time because they can see the effects of improved oral language skills on children. For all of the teachers much of this comes now in the form of time dedicated to oral language development, using clear strategies with a high level of awareness of the desired language outcomes. Significantly, the teachers acknowledged the importance of the teacher in this process as a role model for the children and to scaffold the children, giving them structures, direction and support when responding to oral tasks. None of these teachers simplify language for the children now because they realise that children can handle much more complex language than teachers would have thought previously. Teachers suggested that before, they would have accepted a lot less in terms of language from the children but now they expect more and as a result are getting more quality oral language from them. One teacher remarked during the discussion - *I think it's probably the teachers that actually probably learned the most.*

Teacher **Perceptions** of Children's Language Ability

There is abundant evidence in the literature to indicate that many teachers maintain a deficit perspective in relation to the language skills of children in disadvantaged contexts. This finding emerged in the precursor to this study (Cregan, 2007). This finding also emerged from the survey of teachers conducted as part of this study. The case study data was interrogated to investigate evidence of teacher perceptions of the language skills of the children. The impact of participating in this project on teachers' perceptions of children's language skills was interesting. Teachers acknowledge that the children have needs in relation to language development, e.g. one sixth class teacher identified children's language needs as follows: *(the children) find it very difficult to tell a story – continue to talk … elaborate – very poor; describe (poor); sequence stories; show good manners/refined language/speak in low, calm voices –*

often very loud; poor to make eye-contact or maintain eye contact. However, instead of judging the children negatively and perceiving children as deficient in some way, many of the teachers are now in a position to recognise those needs specifically, and **aware of their responsibility as teachers to respond appropriately to these needs**. The empowerment of understanding children's needs, identifying precisely what these needs are in the context of language development, and being in a position to respond meaningfully to the needs would appear to have had the effect of reducing negative perceptions teachers may otherwise have of these children arising from their language skills.

One teacher observed that during a role-play exercise *many of the children made a confrontation aggressive without need. A more structured approach was needed to achieve the dialogue desired.* This teacher commented in reflection that *the children in my class definitely have many language needs. One particularly serious need would be the lack of use of language to settle a dispute or to meet social obligations when working in groups. These are not only classroom issues but also life skills … oral language development in the classroom is key.* Another need identified by this teacher when engaging the children in oral language tasks referred to the confidence levels of the children - *I was surprised with the lack of self-confidence among the class as a whole.*

Another sixth class teacher said - *I came into this project with a preconceived idea of what children should be able to do, i.e. talk in different situations, use appropriate vocabulary etc. even though they may never have been exposed to these situations … have to understand where these children come from, to accept that they are not and may never be exposed to certain things … but if they are shown, taught, how to respond, how to act, how to communicate, they <u>can</u> do this … my children are in sixth class so I can never turn back the clock and start over but I can try to ensure that they are exposed to different aspects of language hitherto unexplored … these children <u>are</u> as good as any child their own age and they have to believe that. You do that by believing it yourself.*

One third class teacher in a rural DEIS school characterised the language skills of some of the children in her class as follows: *the language skills of those disadvantaged in my class are … such that if they are the first or second child to give the answers, e.g. something cold - it's ok – snow, ice-cream (obvious answers) but if they are 5th or 6th in the circle to answer, their depth of knowledge means they are very stuck.* This teacher observed that *my attitude to*

children's ability has not changed as I feel that those good orally have more of a chance of succeeding in the classroom. However, now I can see how I can help those who are unable to express themselves clearly.

Another teacher's observations were as follows: *many children have adequate knowledge but have difficulty expressing themselves. Need huge amount of experience in order to meet the language demands expected. Children need to be exposed to the different forms of language. Class teachers need to do much more paired work using a structured format to give pupils opportunities to talk.*

A senior infant teacher noted that *it would appear that children (from a disadvantaged background) need to speak and be understood at all times. They also need to be exposed to new experiences, wide ranges of vocabulary and to listen to a language that is clear and understood … since beginning this project I have allowed a lot of time for oral language that ordinarily I would not be able to give … there should be a specific time allowance in DEIS schools for oral language for this reason alone.*

Another senior infant teacher remarked that *with very little skill-teaching we expect children to be good at communicating with others (this will change!!!).*

More than once, teachers express surprise at the ability of the children when scaffolded and supported in their language skills – *children have a huge capacity for language; children said many words … I was surprised at their knowledge of different birds … they thought of more than I had on my own; Children amazed me in how they described it; one child told me that a particular character was 'aghast'. We had come across this word a few weeks previously in our English reading; kids were more confident having re-read the poem together … we analysed images, use of language … had great discussion.* As part of a preparatory discussion for writing on the topic 'In the Forest at Night' a teacher listed some of the sights, sounds and smells suggested by the children *- squelchy mud, sparkling stars, pitch black, stench of decaying carcasses, debris on the forest floor – they came up with these.* Another teacher describes the reaction of the children to a visitor to the classroom – *children showed great interest in the topic … they asked many questions and were very interested in hearing the detailed answers (visitor) gave.* On another occasion this teacher remarked in her journal – *great essays written after this oral discussion.* A senior infant teacher wrote about a task based

on the school sports day – *children were asked to give at least three sentences each based on their sports day. All of the children were able to complete the task. Children who, in particular, were not able to construct very simple sentences back in January were able to put three sentences together for this and most had even more than three.*

These sentiments were revisited during the plenary discussion when teachers commented that prior to participating in the project, they didn't think the children could do as much as they now know they can.

Teacher **Pedagogy**

The consensus of findings in the literature in relation to approaches which support the development of language suggests that collaborative interaction through discussion, pair and group work, along with exposure to high quality literature and poetry, and experience of drama and play are effective approaches for meaningful language development in the classroom context. Survey findings indicate that all of these approaches are in use by teachers in DEIS classrooms, though not all are in evidence at optimum frequency for significant development of oral language skills. Teachers in the case study classes undertook to use these approaches more frequently than had been the case previously. The teachers were scaffolded during in-service sessions with support which included sample materials, direction on choice of literature and poetry, ways of engaging children actively in responding to literature, ideas, resources, and support for the teaching of drama, and support materials for implementing group-work (See Appendix C for in-service materials in full).

Teacher knowledge of appropriate pedagogy for the successful development of children's oral language skills was informed by two basic tenets – that children must **encounter** high quality language from a range of sources, and that children must have increased **opportunity to use oral language** in the classroom accompanied by appropriate feedback.

Encounter with Language

Teachers reported that their standard of language use when interacting with the children during the project was more challenging than would have been the case in the past. This was possibly a function of teachers' growing awareness of children's receptive ability - that the children can receive and understand language at a level considerably more advanced than their expressive

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ability.   Additionally, all teachers increased significantly the degree of exposure to literature and poetry and involved children in engagement tasks following this, requiring children to respond to the literary experience through oral language tasks. In addition to supporting and facilitating independent reading which was already in place in these classrooms, teachers at all levels read stories/novels aloud in their classrooms and presented children with a wide range of poetry on a regular basis. Reading aloud to children enabled teachers to choose high quality material which may not be selected independently by the children. Teacher reports were very positive at the effect of this experience on the children. One teacher reported the children indicating their displeasure because he got to read the poems and they didn't – *one girl found the poetry reading boring because I was reading them all … suggestion: let the children read some poems after teacher has modelled reading.* Other teachers remarked that they could see examples of words and phrases encountered during the reading aloud turning up in children's oral language and written work. Teachers reported that children loved the material read aloud and looked forward to the experience.

One sixth class teacher encountered some difficulty with a minority of pupils who found the change of atmosphere in the classroom and the new type of role played by the teacher during the more intimate experience of reading a story aloud difficult and were disruptive at times. In two of the sixth classes teachers reported that children's response to the experience of poetry was challenging at times – their lack of experience with this genre made it difficult for them to engage meaningfully with it and they also found it difficult to deal with the abstractions presented solely through the medium of words with no pictures to scaffold their understanding. One teacher recorded this as follows:

Reading a novel to the Class: this can sometimes pose a challenge as classroom management becomes a problem with particular students. It can take from the effectiveness of the reading if the teacher has to come out of "reading character" to correct a student or maintain appropriate behaviour during the reading process … The majority of the class, even those I would consider quite confident speakers are having difficulty responding to open-ended questions responding to a poem … these same children have no problem responding to a story with pictures. However, when there is no picture to visualise what the words are describing, these same pupils seem to have trouble internally visualising the story or message in a poem and in turn responding to it and answering questions that are open-ended.

A story which really fired the children's imaginations was *"Christy's Dream"* (Caroline Binch). This is a picture book with a theme suitable for older children, set in inner-city Dublin, and

clearly resonated well with the children both in terms of its content and the fact that there were illustrations to scaffold their imagination during the story encounter. Another teacher of third class reported having one child who never engaged with the story reading experience except when the story was dealing with material of interest or relevance to his life – *P had no idea what happened in the chapter (The Little Croker) today – he switched off completely and showed no interest although the class are loving it*. Some of the teachers, and in particular the sixth class teachers, reMarked on the difficulty for some children in their class to engage imaginatively with material – (the children) *need time in which to develop their imaginations. They can regurgitate what you teach them but they find it difficult to imagine places, situations, people because they have not been exposed to these things … whether through play, story etc.etc.*.

Some teachers reported having visitors into their classrooms during the project, another important form of encounter with high quality language. Teachers in some of the classrooms used computers regularly, again giving children an opportunity to experience high quality language. Some of the children went on field trips as part of school activities – e.g. children from one class visited a wind farm as part of the Green Schools committee. Another class followed the journey of the 'Volvo Around the World Sailing Competition' through a range of media and visited some of the ships while they were docked in Galway, meeting crew members and hearing first hand about the adventures on the sea. One teacher recorded an in-class activity which involved making vegetable soup with the children - vegetables were named, described and chopped the first day. The next day tables were arranged as for a banquet - one long table – and set with appropriate cutlery, napkins and candles. The soup was served along with a range of breads. Throughout this activity, the teacher used every opportunity to develop and extend children's language skills recording observations such as the following: *three-quarters of the children have never seen leeks before … M was able to recognise carrots and onions but not broccoli, parsnips, leeks or celery.* During this activity, one child characterised as weak by the teacher described a ladle as something *used to take the soup from the pot to the bowl.* Activities such as these contributed enormously to children's encounter with language. The importance of the role of the teacher in terms of an encounter with language for the children is summed up by a teacher as follows: *teacher must put effort into telling of story, reading of poem, conviction of argument* (in the context of a debate) *so that the child hears, sees the experience and internalises it.* It is clear from these examples that the children had significant encounters with high-quality language during the project and that teachers were very

aware of 'upping the ante' in terms of their own use of language and children's exposure to language.

Opportunity to Use Language

An awareness of the critical importance of giving children increased opportunity to express themselves orally for meaningful communicative purposes in the classroom was very much in evidence in teacher reports. One teacher said – *children <u>love</u> to 'talk' in our school. However, many have few opportunities to express themselves to meet the need for academic success. This project has created an awareness in teachers to get pupils <u>'actively'</u> engaged in structured oral language activities giving pupils opportunities to express themselves in a structured setting, with specific targets to achieve. Pupils need a 'role model'.* Another teacher remarked - *I know that getting the children speaking back to teacher or to each other is key to ensuring they will use vocabulary or language again.* One teacher expressed the view that *children are not given enough opportunities to talk – there are 22, 24, or even 20 of them in the classroom and you're getting one child to talk back to you … it's not enough.* Another teacher made this comment - *Children must be given every opportunity to speak and must understand exactly what they are speaking about;* and another - *the children get many opportunities for oral language development throughout many of my lessons.*

Teachers consistently indicated throughout the project that children were given many more opportunities to talk in the classroom - that talking tasks were an integral part of the learning that was taking place in their classrooms. This occurred most frequently through increased use of collaborative interaction in the form of pair and group work. One teacher commented that the *teacher's role is not to own the discussion or to love the sound of their own voice.* This teacher reported that *the children really enjoyed working in groups for debating, drama activities, brainstorming but the problem was at my level – handing over control to the children, letting them take control of the talk.* This difficulty on the part of all teachers was reiterated during the plenary discussion – all found what they represented as 'handing over of control' to the children difficult and found it challenging that children were talking more and teacher was talking less. However, teachers acknowledged that children welcomed opportunities to talk in the classroom and all found that pair and group work went well for the most part. One senior infant teacher reports – *Pair work is one element that I use in my teaching. This gives all pupils*

a chance to contribute and to listen to each other. I have found that pupils need to be taught how to work in pairs, to take turns and to listen to each other … after pair work, we generally take turns in giving feedback to the class. As time progresses I have found that the pupils are gaining in confidence and more willing to listen to each other. The following comment was made in a third class teacher's journal – *collaborative learning – very important – learning to communicate with one another in an appropriate manner – constantly used in my class – small number in my class made it very effective. Some of the children needed a lot of scaffolding at the beginning. I feel that this lessened. I particularly noticed this in the final term.* During the plenary discussion this teacher reported that she found the use of group work prior to a whole class discussion on a topic resulted in many more children being willing to participate in the discussion.

It emerged from discussion with teachers during in-service sessions that approaches were embraced differently by teachers. Some of the teachers found drama activities challenging because they were not particularly *au fait* with drama as an approach. For others drama proved to be a very rewarding experience, one sixth class teacher reporting amazement at children's responses to the challenge of drama and describing the children as *clamouring* for more! Other teachers enjoyed particularly the poetry experience with the children – *my favourite parts of oral language development are the areas of drama and poetry. I feel that they can be integrated quite easily and a huge amount can be learned from these areas – social skills, emotional skills, learning skills.* While all teachers used pair/group-work approaches, one sixth class teacher reported finding this challenging because of the lack of product – *can be a conflict between product and process. In sixth class it is hard to measure how the class has progressed or how much they have learned from lesson.* Another sixth class teacher found it difficult to keep children on task during group-work.

Senior infant teachers reported finding the use of board games as particularly successful for oral language development with the children – *I have really seen their* (board games) *importance over the last few months. The impact that simple games – e.g. "Guess Who" have on oral language is huge. Before this project I had never used them in an oral language lesson … I may have dismissed these games as 'play time' and not seen the full impact that these games can have on oral language development.* A second senior infant teacher reporting on the game "Charades" reported as follows: *I had never really tried this with children before but can definitely see benefits of playing this game. Initially children were slow off the mark – slow*

to volunteer an answer, slow to chance another answer … but once they got the hang of it there were words flying out of them. I could see the value of the game in two ways – to extend their vocabulary but also to use their reasoning skills. If they were guessing a word and I indicated they were close, it challenged them to think around that specific area/word. Huge enjoyment factor for children. The third senior infant teacher reported that an activity which the children really enjoyed was playing the games "Headbandz" and "Charades for Kids".

Two of the third class teachers found the activity around telephone talk very useful for oral language development and one that has potential for frequent use in the classroom context. Teacher awareness of the potential for oral language development across a range of resources was developed also as exemplified in the following comment by one teacher – *At the beginning I found it difficult to find resources but learned that the simplest picture can be of the greatest value.*

Many teachers reported that giving children an increased encounter with oral language and more frequent opportunities to use oral language in the classroom had implications for planning – *there is an increase in planning and preparation involved in oral language; planning is the key to success. As in any other subject, having key objectives is the only way to achieve something definite at the end of the lesson; I spend an increased amount of time planning for an oral language lesson.* In one school, the senior infant teacher and the resource teacher collaborated in planning and delivering an oral language topic in the senior infant classroom. The teacher reports that *for two weeks I collaborated with the resource teacher during our oral language lessons based on food. This was a great help and support as we were able to bounce ideas off of each other as well as model lessons to the group and hear most of the children speak.*

Impact on Teachers Participating in the Project: Summary

The learning curve in relation to knowledge about the content of language to be taught, and the approaches which best serve the development of oral language in the classroom is steep. Evidence from teachers suggests that substantial gains have been made in relation to their level of knowledge of the specific language content which needs to be targeted, objectives for oral language development, and appropriate methods necessary to bring about real language development on the part of the children. Teacher confidence also appears to have developed

as well as awareness of the fundamental importance of tackling the issue of oral language in DEIS classrooms. All of this has had a spin off effect in terms of teachers' perceptions of the difficulties of language development in these classrooms, with teachers showing evidence of feeling more empowered to deal with the issues, and less inclined to 'problematise' the children in the process. While all of the teachers would acknowledge that they have a lot more to learn and need more experience to hone their skills in this area, it is clear that important changes have been made which can only enhance professional development and its subsequent impact on children. One teacher sums up the benefits of increased knowledge of language and the language learning process - *I have really enjoyed being part of the programme. I will definitely do more of it in the future. I think knowing now what I know about how to teach it I would be better next year. As with everything you have to try something to find out where you are failing and what needs extra attention. I feel more confident about how to teach it now and can see how it spills into other areas.*

Impact on Parents

In a review of literature on the impact of establishing and maintaining effective collaboration between school, family and community, Henderson and Mapp report that "when schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students gain" (2002, p.8). Research findings indicate that successful and effective collaboration between home and school requires that parents are aware of the importance of what school is doing, believe that both school and children want them to be involved in supporting children's learning, and that school ensures clarity in relation to the role of parents in order to maximise the effectiveness of their support. Survey findings suggest that many teachers believe that parents are for the most part unaware of the significance of oral language development for their children. Also evident is that teachers generally speak to parents about their children's oral language development only during formal parent-teacher meetings once or twice yearly. General comments in the survey uncovered an awareness among many of the teachers that support from home is essential for the effective development of children's oral language skills, but very little evidence was presented to suggest that harnessing such support is commonplace in schools.

Given the critical importance in the literature attributed to parental support for oral language development, the case study sought to investigate the challenges and effects of reaching out to

parents and empowering them to become involved in their children's oral language development, and so to support the work of the teacher in the classroom. A letter to parents was drafted indicating the importance of oral language development for children and asking parents to support the work of the teacher in this regard. This letter was accompanied by some general suggestions for enhancing oral language development in the daily routines of the home. (See Appendix D for a copy of these materials). This initiative was organised before the Easter break and began immediately after the holidays. Two of the schools, one of the urban schools and the rural school, proceeded with this initiative during the final term of the school year amending the letter and accompanying materials as appropriate in the context of each school. Teachers were supported in this initiative through examples of topics which could be covered in school with indications of tasks which might be appropriate for parents to engage in with their children. The following general guidelines for teachers were also issued:

Parental Involvement – Ideas for Teachers

- Identify theme
- List main vocabulary to be covered based on the theme
- Suggest something associated with the theme which could form the basis of a conversation with someone at home
- Encourage interaction with a range of family members – parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.
- Indicate one oral task associated with the theme to be completed – e.g.

    ❑ read a story on the theme with a young child
    ❑ say a poem together
    ❑ make up a story based on the theme
    ❑ talk to the child about a book on the theme which is being read
    ❑ ask the child to narrate the story in his/her own words
    ❑ ask the child to explain something associated with the theme
    ❑ listen to the child tell about what they did/learned in school
    ❑ help the child to give an account of something for news in school
    ❑ use some of the vocabulary identified by the teacher when talking to the child

❑ encourage the child to be clear when talking and to expand and elaborate as much as possible

❑ ask the child to tell something about the theme/what is happening in school/in the family to someone outside the family .

The response of the teachers in one of the schools was to identify three themes which would be covered over a six-week period – Me, Myself and My Family; Television; Sport. Each week a note was issued to the parents as follows:

Dear Parents,

 The topic for oral language this week is: Me, Myself and My Family. At home this week we would be grateful if you would spend a few minutes each day discussing the following questions:

What did you do at school today?
Did you have a nice day?
Did you enjoy your lunch?
What did you have to eat?
Did you go outside to play today?
Who did you play with?
What lessons did you have today?
Did you enjoy school today?
What did you enjoy most?
Did you learn anything new today?

These questions could be asked on the way home, or at the kitchen table. Children should also be encouraged to ask: how was your day? did you have a good day? to parent, grandparents, siblings.
Vocabulary: (Day) Good, long, fast, short, fun; (Lunch) tasty, delicious, fresh; (Play) soccer, chase, running, singing, games, hurling, football, basketball, friends, boys, girls; (School) teachers, favourite subject, lessons, books, English, Irish, Maths, Geography …

Parents were asked to tick a box for each day this task was completed and children were asked to bring in a signed sheet at the end of the week. This was designed to keep parents and children on task as well as to monitor whether parents were becoming involved and the extent to which the involvement was sustained over the six-week period. Each week the tasks

built on and extended the vocabulary and requirements as evident in the second set of questions suggested for the second week of the topic Me, Myself and My Family

What did you do at school today?
Did you read any books?
Did you do any writing?
What was your favourite part of the day?
Did you see your friends, brothers, sisters at play time?
Tell me all about you!! Example: I have brown hair and blue eyes. My favourite sport is ….

In the other school, teachers also collaborated on this initiative. Whereas normal practice in this school was to give children two pieces of written homework each night, teachers agreed that on Mondays and Thursdays one piece of homework assigned to children would be an oral task. The following day, instead of collecting written homework, teachers asked for feedback from the children on the oral task. As with the other school an initial letter along the lines of the draft letter was issued to the parents. Each week parents were given the topic for oral work for that week and were also given guidelines about speaking to the children on the topic for the week. Some examples of work given included :

- *Tell your parents in ten interesting sentences what you did in school today*
  (Reaction from parents – excellent!)

- *Choose from history, geography, or SPHE lesson this week and relay to parents what we are doing in school in ten interesting sentences*

- *Interview an older person at home about school long ago – school buildings, punishment, school yard games, subjects, school outings, teacher. Children were asked to talk for one minute on what they discovered – all were loud and clear and interesting*

- *Talk at home about experiences of dentist as a child* (in response to a story read aloud in class) *– interview a parent or grandparent*

- *Talk at home about ten things you are good at and why – well able to do it*

- *Discuss with parents what you learned from the visit of the fire-fighter to our school*

- *Prepare a report on Wild Animals of Costa Rica* (following a project done in school).

Parents were encouraged to help children prepare an oral report and children were videoed presenting their report to the class. Teacher recorded that *each child succeeded in talking on topic for one minute.*

This school used the opportunity to invite parents into the school in a number of formats, e.g. parents were invited into the infant classroom for a "language for fun" day (storying and talking

tasks conducted with the children – some of the parents managed the oral language station during the literacy activities).   A parent with a newborn baby was invited into one of the classrooms with the baby to talk with the children about the baby. Children were asked to prepare for this at home by talking with their parents about *preparing for a new baby, care of a baby, care mother takes beforehand …*

The response of the parents to this initiative was overwhelmingly positive and teacher reaction to parent response and its impact on the children was very positive. Teachers all agreed that the parental involvement, even though it was for a short period only, was of huge benefit in the process of scaffolding children's oral language development.   Teachers expressed astonishment that it was possible to give oral language as homework to the children. Teachers were also surprised at the level of response from the parents – a teacher in the rural school where parents of infant children were invited to the school for a "language for fun day" indicated that the school was *inundated* with parents on that day. Talking about parent involvement in literacy sessions in her classroom, one infant teacher recorded – *the parents also seemed to enjoy the sessions and many of the children, particularly the girls, loved having their parents coming into the school. One mother told me that she had taken a day's holidays from work to come into school on the insistence of her daughter!*   Some teachers indicated that children loved reporting back from the oral language task and others, whose parents may not have completed the task put pressure on parents to do so. Other children welcomed the opportunity to sit and chat with parents.

One Senior Infant teacher commented as follows:

It is quite clear that parents have really helped with the oral language programme. Each week the parents were given a letter and on this there were questions and guidance. A new topic was covered every two weeks. The parents signed the letters and it was clear in class that the children had completed each task. This was very easy to organise – the letter format was the same each week and questions were changed. This would be very easy to use as a whole school approach because of this. I feel that the parents enjoyed this. It was clear that the majority had taken part each week.

Comment from this teacher during the process:

This appears to be working very well. Children are questioned in class and discussions brought about based on children's answers. It is fair to say that the majority of the children are definitely completing the oral language tasks every week. I would never have given oral language as a piece of homework before. It works very well and I will continue to do so.

Comments from another Senior Infant Teacher:

We sent out a letter to the parents asking them to help out with the oral language programme. Each week the class teachers involved outline the theme for the week. With the infant classes I have based my themes on SESE lessons – history, science and geography. We have been covering life in the past in history and pupils were given three question interviews to carry out with their parents each night. The parents discussed the topics and filled in the questionnaires. The following day, the pupils were asked to report back on their findings. This has worked very well as the children have loved bringing stories from home and many of the parents are delighted to be chatting to their children about their own childhood.

Sixth Class teacher comments:

I tried to encourage/facilitate the process by discussing with the children the day before possible questions they could ask their parents and how to develop conversations and turn them from monosyllabic confrontations to easy-going intimate chats

…I have to admit that I never thought of giving class oral language homework before but do agree that it is an excellent idea … weaker students excelled at this exercise. They were more co-operative and enjoyed the exercise. One girl liked talking to her mother and found it a 'great idea' … some of the children remarked when asked after two weeks of talking – "good idea, bit boring"; "just another piece of homework"; "didn't like it". The children who found it boring were the children who liked English classes and writing stories. I think that the absence of something tangible i.e.story or piece of writing (something to show that they worked) led to this feeling.

Comments from the Resource Teacher on the Process:

Link with home topic per week:

- ❑ *Excellent idea for developing language*
- ❑ *Some senior pupils felt it was 'more homework' while many of the younger pupils enjoyed the 'contact time' with mum/dad*
- ❑ *Very focussed/structured for parents*
- ❑ *Something that could be developed throughout the school … a lot of organising/planning in addition to an already busy curriculum*
- ❑ *To engage in oral language activities linked with home would be hugely beneficial but in order for it to be sustained e.g. 4 weeks a term, notes could be circulated to parents*

❑ *Important that teachers seek feedback from pupils each week.*

General views expressed by the teachers during the plenary session indicated a very positive reaction to this initiative. Teachers were very supportive of the process, surprised at the level of response from parents, pleased at the impact this experience had on many of the children, in particular, weaker children. There was consensus also that this type of approach required a significant amount of work on the part of the teacher as preparation and took a substantial amount of time in the classroom as follow-up to the exercise. Teachers thought that it could not be sustained indefinitely by either themselves or the parents and considered having it as an approach for contained, defined periods of time over the course of the school year as the best approach. The quality of the ideas and support presented to parents by teachers during this initiative was extremely impressive. There is no doubt that these teachers reached out meaningfully to parents in this process, indicated clearly their wish that parents would come on board (as it seems did the children), and facilitated parents to support their children's oral language development in a very effective and meaningful manner. Parents responded very positively to the invitation demonstrating, as the literature has identified, a concern for their children's achievement and a willingness to collaborate with the school when appropriate supports are put in place. This initiative needed much more time and a more scaffolded approach than was possible given the time constraints of the project. The success of the initiative bodes well for similar initiatives on a larger and more structured scale in the future.

Impact on Children – Views from the Teachers

All of the teachers involved in the case study agreed that the children have improved as a result of the focus on oral language development in their classrooms. This is manifested particularly in children's levels of confidence and awareness that oral language is legitimate and is an important part of learning in the classroom. While not yet at the level of acceptance enjoyed by literacy, it appears that children are becoming more aware of the importance of oral language as a meaningful learning experience in the classroom context and more aware of oral language across the curriculum. Teachers reported that children enjoy the experience of talking and having their voices heard. Teachers commented that children love to talk and love getting opportunities to talk. One teacher suggested that *we have to give them the opportunity to talk!* Children are noted as being proud of their efforts and anxious to impress teachers with

what they can do with language . Teachers commented also that they believed that children learned from hearing what others had to say:

I noticed that the children <u>love </u>talking and being listened to;

Children definitely enjoyed the lesson – they were excited and enthusiastic about giving their sentence and proud of their own efforts. I considered it a success!

The children were able to string many sentences together. I found that the children learned from other children, talking about the smallest amount of detail;

Children also recognise the importance of talking. They love to impress you.

In relation to children's oral language development over the course of the project, teachers indicated that they noticed an improvement in children's clarity of expression and sentence structure, reporting frequently evidence of increased range of vocabulary knowledge, expansion of ideas, and use of increasingly complex sentences:

I have noticed a big improvement in the children's vocabulary and sentence building. Reporting on a drama lesson as follows: drama lesson – accidents of the road – empathising with people mourning – the children went into role delivering the bad news – D said "If there is anything that I can do, please do not hesitate to ask"; I feel that there is an improvement in clarity of speaking. When describing something there is much more order to their sentences and I am more likely to receive more than one sentence … There is less use of "then", "am, "what's it".

This week I noticed - more details; - better grammar;

They now love debating – we worked hard on the structure - how to deliver opinions, how to counterargue, how to conclude … they now love drama as they have found they are great at it … I love encouraging them, praising them but also helping them.

A senior infant teacher noticed the following in her class:

Children had a very limited ability to express what emotion is being shown. They almost always say "happy"/"sad". I have been working on developing this. When looking at a picture today some children were asked how the boy/girl was feeling. They answered

"happy, excited, delighted, wonderful, thrilled, sad, surprised, nervous, upset".

This is I feel huge progress.

A third class teacher talked about the improvement noticed in one of the weaker children in her class:

P – making great progress. I am aware of P's ability to give more complex, structured sentences rather than phrases of previous months – he gave answers with more than one

conjunction used. P spent the first term in trouble – no work done or fighting in the yard …
moreso he found it difficult to express himself orally in class … he has developed in self-
confidence this year. He was able to achieve in oral language class and became more
motivated to participate in class discussion. Bit by bit he became clear in his expression, and
enjoyed the challenges set. As a result, you could say that he has a positive school outlook
now and he appears to have improved in the school yard and homework is always done.
Another child in this class is described as follows: *S blossomed in imaginative oral language*
class. He showed a natural flair for fairytale dialogue – e.g. pretending to be the giant in Jack
and the Beanstalk, or one particular day we had an artist showing us her paintings and I asked
S to pretend he was the person in the portrait – could we interview him. He was brilliant – he
became totally engrossed in the character.

Teachers noted a marked improvement across the board in children in terms of self-confidence
– *sixth class got more confident in their questioning and moved from lower order questions to*
higher order questions. They reported that children were more willing to take a risk. Children
who would normally be reticent to express themselves were noted by teachers to ask
questions, to participate in discussions, to seek help when needed, e.g. *A has improved in*
asking for help …she has the structures learned to be able to come up and ask as questioning
was emphasised. One teacher observed that even the weaker children would now try to talk
and become involved in discussion in the class. A sixth class teacher gave anecdotal evidence
of a boy who began the year only looking at the ground when speaking to the teacher. This
boy gradually began to raise his head when speaking as the year progressed until by the end
of the year he was making and maintaining eye-contact when speaking. When asked to
comment on which children they felt had improved most, all teachers noted that the bright
children had benefitted a lot from the experience of focussing on oral language, some teachers
felt that the quieter children had benefitted significantly and most teachers felt that the weaker
children had benefitted considerably from the experience.

Impact on Children – Comparative Test Results

The impact of participation in the project on the oral language development of the children was
explored also using pre-/post-test comparisons on a sample of mixed-ability children from each
of the project classes. These results were then compared with those of a comparative mixed-
ability control group selected from a parallel stream of children in one of the urban schools.
The tests elicited oral language samples from the children in each class:

- an oral narrative task,

- a picture description task, and

- a word definition task.

ORAL NARRATIVE TASK FINDINGS

The samples of oral narrative elicited from the children were analysed broadly for evidence of change in terms of those features of language identified as characteristic of the academic/literary style of language necessary for success in the school context. (See an outline of these language features on page 28).

- **Interpersonal stance**: characterised in academic language by being detached and authoritative

- **Information load**: characterised by conciseness and density

- **Syntactic organisation of information**: characterised by embedded clauses which form part of another clause as distinct from hypotactic clauses which are clauses dependent on but not constitutive of other clauses (e.g. the party which ended before midnight was a total failure that we hope will not be repeated vs. I concluded that the party was a total failure because it ended before midnight).

- Organising of information involving **explicit Marking of text structures** using discourse and metadiscourse Markers and organising information into a stepwise logical argument structure

- **Lexicon** which is diverse, precise and formal

- Representational congruence realised, for example, through grammatical metaphors, using in particular **nominalizations of processes** (e.g. the increasing evaporation of water is due to rising temperatures is alarming)

   (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p.118-121).

Samples taken from the children at the outset were compared to samples generated at the conclusion of the intervention. Oral narrative samples elicited from a control group were used for comparative purposes.

Despite the fact that teacher support was delivered incrementally throughout the school year, and that there was only an eight-month period during which teacher support was delivered, comparisons of children's pre- and post-test oral narrative samples show signs of the beginnings of the development of a familiarity with features of academic style of language as

seen in the examples presented below. (Children's names have been changed to preserve confidentiality).

Senior Infant Oral Narrative Samples

Doggy Story
Angela – Pre-Test

there's a dog and there's paint
and am there's some …
and <u>at the other picture</u> <u>it's</u> spilling cos the dog is … is going to run <u>there</u>
and the dog is running <u>there</u> and <u>it</u> tumbled over
(it tumbled over ...and then ...?)
am and then <u>the thing</u> is all the way over and am
when … when <u>it</u> was over <u>it</u> all went on the ground and the puppy stepped into <u>it</u>
am and then the puppy went <u>over there</u> and then the paint am came out on one of the paws

Story Title*: Puppy Spilling*

Angela – Post-test

Am <u>a dog came out</u> …
***a dog** <u>ran</u> to **a <u>bucket of paint</u>** and **he** looked at **it** and he was going …*
and he put his foot on it
*and he tumbled it over and … and **<u>it was spilled</u>** <u>on the ground</u> and he stepped in*
and then <u>when he came out he was all full of footprints</u>

Story Title*: A Dog Puts Footprints*

Instead of an opening which describes what she sees in the picture, Angela begins the post-test sample with a stance which is clear and confident, setting the context for the story, and displaying considerably less hesitancy than is evident in the pre-test version of the story. The story contains greater elaboration than the initial sample and more clarity of lexicon, greater coherence and considerably less vagueness of reference (*a dog ran to a bucket of paint and he looked at it*). There is evidence also of greater syntactic organisation of information (*it was spilled on the ground).* No intervention was required to complete the post-test version of the story which contained story elements in the form of a clear statement of a problem (*ran to a bucket of paint …he tumbled it over,)* a climax (*it was spilled on the ground),* and coda material (*he was all full of footprints).*

Roísín – Pre-Test
The doggy have the black thing and he's running and he's going to try to jump over it but his two back legs are going to hit it and they did and then he walked on it and then he walked off of it and then there's a load of footprints behind him.

Story Title: *A Puppy*

Roísín – Post-Test
*There's **a** dog running for **paint** and then its out and then it hit the ground and then the dog **walked into it** and then he walked **out** of it and then **his** footprints were all over the place.
Story Title – **Inky the Dog**.*

The post-test version of this story has more precise lexicon (*paint vs the black thing; walked into it vs walked on it; walked out of it vs. walked off of it),* greater coherence (*a dog vs the dog; his footprints vs a load of footprints*), more density of information presented (*inky the dog vs the puppy).* The suggested story title for the post-test version of the story is not only more densely packed with information but also shows a strong creative element and capacity to play with language not evident in the pre-test story telling.

Sam – Pre-Test
The dog didn't see the paint and he kicked it by accident maybe and it… it spilled and he made footprints

Sam - Post test
*am the doggie was going in <u>to have some fun</u>
<u>he mustn't have seen the can</u> and knocked it over
and then <u>he fell and so did the can of oil</u> and then it got all over the floor
and <u>his paws were all oil</u>
he … and <u>then when he was getting out of it</u> he saw all footprints and he didn't know what to do
<u>he was going to get into trouble</u>*

While the pre-test version of this story is clear and concise, the post-test version contains much greater elaboration (*he fell and so did the can of oil; his paws were all oil; when he was getting out of it he saw all footprints*), more evaluative statements (*the doggie was going in to have some fun; he mustn't have seen the can; he didn't know what to do*). There is evidence of significant syntactic organisation of information (*he mustn't have seen the can; when he was getting out of it he saw all footprints and he didn't know what to do*). The consequences of the doggy's actions were spelled out clearly in the post-test version of the story indicating a clear conclusion to the story for the listener (*he was going to get into trouble).*

Amy – Pre-Test
He was having some fun. He knocked over the thing. It spilled.
(and?)
And all his footprints went on the floor.

Amy – Post-Test
The dog was running over and **he** knocked it and then he **ran** and then he stayed in it and went out. All footprints went over. Then am … it all spilled.
Story Title: *The Dog Spilt It.*

While no story title was offered during the pre-test telling of this story, the title given to the post-test version was clear and apt. The opening of the post-test version was strong, confident and clear apart from the absence of the critical word *paint*. No intervention was required to bring the story to a close during the post-test story telling.

Luke – Pre-Test

The dog is near to the bucket
the bucket …the wa …the black thing …the black water falls out of the bucket
the dog was standing in the black puddle
he has footprints all over the place

Luke – Post-test
*am <u>there's **a** dog</u>*
*and **he's** <u>j</u>umping all…*
*and then he <u>spilt</u> all the **<u>paint</u>***
and then he's in the paint
*and then he **made** footprints*

The post-test version of the story begins with a clear statement using an indefinite article to introduce the story character to the audience without assuming shared knowledge inappropriately. There is greater clarity of reference throughout this version of the story (*he's jumping; he spilt; the paint; he <u>made</u> footprints*).

Senior Infants Oral Narrative Samples – Control Group

Brenda – Pre-Test (Control Group)

I saw a dog and a farm. I saw …
(so what happened then)
the dog spilt
and then the dog got to stand on top of it
(and then what did he do)
he did an accident
(and what's in this picture)
standing on top of the wet
(and in this picture)

and he made footprints

Brenda – Post-Test (Control Group)

am he got a …
he found a bucket of that black thing
and then he pushed it
and he standing on it
and then he makes footprints.

While Brenda shows evidence of development over the course of the school year by narrating the story without intervention during the post-test, no evidence emerges of increased familiarity with the features of an academic style of language or with common story elements found in the narrative form.

Oral Narrative Samples – Third Class

Dog and Cat Story

Anthony - Pre-Test

There's this … ah dog chasing a cat and the cat jumped up on the tree and there was a boy
staring up at the cat and a lad runs into the shed … shed and gets a ladder out and he helps
the cat down and then … then the boy gives the cat some water
Story Title*: The Runaway Cat*

Anthony - Post-Test

<u>*Once*</u> *there was* **a** *dog chasing* **a** *cat and* **the** *cat was* <u>*really scared*</u> *and* **<u>the</u>** <u>*dog was mad*</u> *and*
the cat ran up the tree and <u>*the dog couldn't get*</u> **him**
and the **little** *boy saw the cat up on the tree and the little boy was* **worrie**<u>d</u>
he ran into the shed and got **a** *ladder and came back out*
and <u>*he got* **the** *ladder and put* **it** *on the tree*</u>
and then the little boy **climbed** *up and got the cat and* <u>*when the cat came down*</u> *the little boy*
gave the cat some water
Story Title: *The Friendly Boy*

The post-test version of this story has abundant evidence of an emerging facility with an academic style of oral language use. The story begins with the classic narrative opening (*once there was …*). The lexicon used is precise and diverse (*scared; mad; worried; climbed; friendly*). There is an interpersonal stance adopted from the outset (*once there was a dog chasing a cat*). Appropriate and clear referencing using pronouns is evident throughout the story, and where necessary full reference is repeated for clarity (*the cat ran up the tree and the dog couldn't get him*). There is an expansion of reference evident that is not in the pre-test

version (*the cat was really scared; the dog was mad; the dog couldn't get him; the little boy was worried; climbed up).* Syntactic organisation of information leading to density of expression is present also (*when the cat came down the little boy gave the cat some water).* The post-test version is delivered entirely in the past tense.

Paul – Pre-Test

The dog was chasing the cat on the road and he is … he is gone up the tree and your man is looking at him. He's gone into the shed. He … he has the ladder, he's gone up the tree. He's putting out his hands, he got the cat, he brought him back down, he put down the plate, got the cat and let him let him get water.
Story Title: *The Cat and the Dog*

Paul Post-Test

*The dog is chasing the cat and the <u>cat is going to **run** up the tree and the dog is trying to follow him</u>. <u>The boy is looking at the cat up in the tree on **the edge** of it</u> … and the boy is going into the shed getting something and your man <u>is bringing out **a** ladder **trying** to get down the cat.</u> Your man **grabbed** the cat <u>and now</u> he's coming down and now he has the cat left off and he's drinking milk.*
Story Title: *The Cat and the Dog*

These two versions of an oral narrative by a weak child with no exposure to a literary style of language outside of the school context show a clear emergence of a facility with that style when engaged in an oral narrative task. The post-test sample shows a much greater information load in the storytelling, evident in the density of expression (*the cat is going to run up the tree and the dog is trying to follow him; the boy is looking at the cat up in the tree on the edge of it; your man is bringing out a ladder trying to get down the cat).* A more precise lexicon is used in this version of the story also (*<u>run </u>up the tree; ; <u>trying</u> to <u>follow</u> him; on the <u>edge</u> of it; <u>grabbed</u> the cat).* There is a much clearer use of anaphoric reference in this version than was in the first version (pre-test: *he is … he is gone up the tree and your man is looking at him; he has <u>the</u> ladder, he's gone up <u>the</u> tree;* post-test: *the cat is going to run up the tree and the dog is trying to follow **him;** your man is bringing out **a** ladder trying to get down the cat).* Organising information into a logical structure can be seen in the post-test version also with the repeated use of *and now.* In both versions of the story the present tense predominates showing a lack of familiarity with the literary style of narrative. However, there is more than enough evidence of a growing awareness of audience and a need for clarity, coherence and organisation in the production of oral narratives from a comparison of the samples elicited from this child.

Anne – Pre-Test

*Once upon a time there was a dog chasing a cat **and** the cat got afraid **and** he went up the tree **and** the dog was barking at him **and** then the boy was looking up at the cat **and** he ran into the shed **and** then he went in **and** he came out with a ladder **and** he went up the ladder **and** he got the cat **and** he was coming down the ladder **and** he got the cat with him **and** then he put the cat on the ground **and** gave him some food and water.*

Story Title*: The Cat was Afraid of the Dog*

Anne – Post-Test

*Well, there's **a big angry dog** chasing the **little cat** and the little cat **got a fright** and he **ran** up the tree and the dog is barking at the little cat and <u>the boy **noticed** that the cat is up in the tree so he **decided** to go inside and look for something in the .. in the press</u> and **he found** a ladder and <u>he's **climbing** up the ladder to get the little cat down so he wont be stuck in the tree</u> <u>and now he's climbing back down the ladder with the little cat</u> and **the cat's happy** <u>because he's down out of the tree</u> and <u>now he's standing up looking at the cat drinking some milk</u>*
Story Title*: The Cat that got Stuck in the Tree*

The post-test version of the story presented by this child, who clearly demonstrates a reasonable proficiency for oral narratives in the pre-test version, shows a significant improvement in the syntactic organisation of information represented in the embedded clauses (*the boy noticed that the cat is up in the tree so he decided to go inside and look for something in the .. in the press; he's climbing up the ladder to get the little cat down so he wont be stuck in the tree; now he's climbing back down the ladder with the little cat; the cat's happy because he's down out of the tree; now he's standing up looking at the cat drinking some milk).* The word *and* is used in 13 out of the 98 words (13%) in the pre-test story but appears considerably less often in the post-test narrative – 9 words out of 120 (7%). The other striking development evident in this post-test story is the clarity and precision of the lexicon used as compared with that of the first telling (*a big, angry dog; little cat; got a fright; ran up the tree; the boy noticed; he decided; he found a ladder; he's climbing; the cat's happy).* A similar improvement in the density of information presented is evident in a comparison of titles generated for the story by this child – *the cat was afraid of the dog; the cat that got stuck in the tree.*

Squirrel Story

Similar features of an academic style of language use are evident in children's narrative about the squirrel and the fox as presented below:

David – Pre-Test

There's a squirrel and he wakes up and he collects some nuts and then a wolf comes along and says can I have some and then he picks up some mud and ...the squirrel says no. Then he picks up the fox picks up some muck and fires it at the squirrel and then the squirrel fires a few nuts at him and then he blocks them with his back and he then the wolf starts to eat them.

Story Title*: The Wolf and the Squirrel*

David – Post-Test
Once there was a squirrel that had loads of nuts *and then a wolf came along and he said to the squirrel can I have some of them nuts and the squirrel said no and the wolf went away and picked up some moss or dirt or something like that and threw it at the squirrel and then the squirrel threw his nuts at the fox or at the wolf and then all the squirrels nuts **were thrown down** at the fox and then the fox started eating the nuts cause he tricked the squirrel to throw down the nuts at him and then the squirrel got **really angry** and closes his eyes and shouts.*

Story Title*: The **Tricky** Wolf*

Robert – Pre-Test

The squirrel is screaming and then he's getting the acorns and then the fox is saying can I have some and then the squirrel is going no you can't and then the fox is getting kind of grass I think and then the he gets an ac… no it's from the grass and he throws it at the … the squirrel and he hits him and then the squirrel throws an acorn at the fox and he hits him and then they have a fight and then the fox … at last the fox gets some of the squirrel's acorns and he is eating them.

Robert - Post-Test

*The squirrel is putting down some acorns on a tree for **hibernation** and the fox wants them and the squirrel says no so the fox gets mud and grass and throws it at the squirrel and hits him in the eye and the squirrel starts throwing acorns at the fox and it hits the fox on the head and the fox starts eating the acorns and the squirrel starts shouting*

Oral Narrative Samples – Third Class (Control Group)

The increased evidence of features of a literary style of language present in the post-test versions of children's stories in the intervention groups is present to a considerably lesser extent in the stories generated by children from the control group as presented below:

Audrey – Pre-Test (Control Group)

*A dog is running after a cat
(*and then*?)
And then he's .. the cat is trying to hi(de)… run up on a tree so the dog can't catch him.
and then the cat is up on the tree and the boy a boy is looking at him with a … am ah … trying
to get a ladder to take him down
a boy was bringing out the ladder … the ladder
he climbed up to get the ladder
then he climbed back down to get the cat
then the boy gived him some milk*

Audrey – Post-Test (Control Group)

*There is a boy chasing after a cat no there is a dog chasing after a cat, the dog is trying to run
up the tree after the cat there is a boy trying to get the cat down he is looking at him he ran into
the shed and got a ladder to get the cat down and the boy came down off the ladder and gave
him some milk.*

Evan – Pre-Test (Control Group)

*there was a a a squirrel in a tree
he got some nuts
he kept them up up above in the tree
one day a fox came
he said can I have some and the squirrel said no
then the fox got some stones and started hitting the squirrel with stones
and then the am then the squirrel got the nuts and started hitting the am fox with the nuts and
the fox got all the nuts to eat and the squirrel am the fox is dodging the nuts and the and the
fox has all the nuts eaten
Story Title: The Squirrel that was not Clever enough*

Evan – Post-Test (Control Group)

*There is this squirrel with loads of nuts the squirrel doesn't want to give the fox any nuts am he
picks up his mud and he throws it at the squirrel the squirrel gets mad and throws his nuts at
the fox. The fox is getting hit with the nuts the fox isn't throwing his away and the squirrel is
crying.
Story Title: The Fox was too Smart for the Squirrel.*

Oral Narrative Samples: Sixth Class

The Boy, the Dog and the Thieves

In the samples which follow from the older children, the clearest evidence of a growing facility

with a literary style of language is seen in the reduced vagueness of reference, the increased

density of information presented in increasingly complex utterances as distinct from lists of descriptions joined by *and* or *and then*, more confident and authoritative forms of expression, to be observed particularly in the many confident story openings in post-test narratives, as well as an awareness of the need for clarity for the benefit of the listener.

Rachel – Pre-Test

*There's am a boy on his bike with his dog **and then** he's just cycling **and then** he's going to the library **and then** there's two men. They're robbing the library **and then** they go to the press and rob something. It is the piggy bank **and then** am then the dog comes in and just comes up and tries to stop them. **Then** … then he does **and then** they just run out the door **and then** the boy locks them in **and then** am the man that owns the piggy bank am said thanks*

Story Title: *The Bank Robber*

Rachel – Post-Test

There was a boy cycling home one day from school or something and he went to go to the room and he saw two thieves going to the wardrobe and they took out the piggy bank and then the dog ran in and frightened them and made them run to the wardrobe and then the boy locked them in

Story Title*: A Robbery*

Derek – Pre-Test

There's two thieves right they stole a car. And <u>he</u> gets two of <u>them</u> … there's … get the door and slam it in and then they're driving really fast and they see two police officers behind them and the police officers want them to stop and then there's like say <u>they cut up that way</u> and then (don't use your fingers at all just tell me) and out from behind <u>the</u> bus but the police didn't know which way they went and the police <u>they went up and they went the other way</u> and the police car crashed into the bus and <u>then they got there and they went in home but then two police officers they caught them and they arrested them</u>.

Title: The Thief and Runaway

Derek – Post-Test

<u>*These guys they took a car and they were driving really fast*</u>* and they crashed behind them and they wouldn't stop and <u>**a** bus nearly crashed into them but crashed into **a** police car instead</u> and <u>once they went home the guards were waiting for them and they got arrested</u>*

Story Title*: The Getaway*

Amy – Pre-Test

*There's a boy **and** he's going for a cycle **and** there's a little dog running after him **and** he's going into this place **and** there's two bad guys **and** I think they're robbing something **and** they*

*open the press they find a pi ... piggy bank **and then** the dog jumps up on them **and** the piggy bank kind of falls **and then** they run into the wardrobe press yoke **and** the dog starts barking **and** the little boy locked them in **and then** he … he talked to the detective **and** told him all about them.*

Story Title: The Discovery

Amy – Post-Test

am … <u>There's a boy on a bike and a dog chasing him</u>. They went into this place and there was two robbers and the two robbers opened a press and seen a piggy bank in there and <u>the dog jumped down on top of one robber </u>and <u>the two robbers ran straight into the wardrobe</u> and the little boy locked them in

Story Title: *The Boy and the Thieves*

Bob – Pre-Test

*<u>The</u> boy I'd say he's coming home from his friend's house **and** his dog is coming in the driveway with him **and** he went into up to his bedroom **and** he seen two robbers in there **and** they opened up the cupboard **and** seen his piggybank **and** they took it **and** they're about to take it but the dog runned in **and** jumped on them **and** knocked them back **and** then he started chasing them around the room **and** they ran into the cupboard **and then** the boy locked them in there **and then** am **and then** that day a load of reporters came **and** asked him about what happened.*

Story Title: *The Unlucky Robbers*

Bob - Post-Test

*am **<u>a</u> <u>boy is cycling home with his dog following him</u>** and <u>when he gets home he goes into a room </u>and am <u>there's these two men in there</u> **one with am money sack** and **one handing another man who's looking around with his eyes** and they go into a cupboard and they see a piggy bank and they take it out and they're looking at it and <u>they're .. I suppose … shaking it to see if there's money in it </u>and then **the dog comes in barking** and they … <u>he hits them and they fall over</u>. Then the piggy bank falls and <u>the dog keeps barking at the two thiefs</u> and they ran in to the cupboard and then the boy gets the key and locks the cupboard and then <u>he probably calls the guards</u> and then the news reporters come and ask him a load of questions.*

Cathy – Pre-Test

*One day Bob was cycling his orange bike **and** his dog Buster was running after him. He was going to the library. No he was going home, yeah. He was going to his uncle's house and he looked very excited to go. **And then** he got to his uncle's house **and** he could hear talking **and** rustling around in the house and he … he … him **and** Buster peered in through the door. There were two men one small and stubby, one small and tubby **and** one tall **and** skinny with masks over their eye with big bags rooting around the place. The tall guy had a black suit on with a white tie **and** the bald lad had am a stripy white **and** red t-shirt and a Jimet. He had a slight stubble on his face **and am** the other man had a slight moustache. Am they looked or they were rooting around in the cupboard. They broke open the cupboard **and** they took out …*

*they were looking at the piggy bank. They took the piggy bank out **and** started … started looking at it ...mischievously going to take out all the money in it. Just then Buster jumped out **and** barked as loud as he could and jumped on top of the two thieves. The piggy bank went flying as you can see there. Buster barked … scared them so much that they ran into … ran into the cupboard, ran into the cupboard. Bob got the key **and** locked the cupboard. They couldn't get out. A guy from the newspapers wanted to interview Bob and Buster on how they stopped the thief.*

Story Title: *Bob and Buster save the day*.

Cathy - Post-Test

*ok <u>Tom and his dog Nelly were on their way to Uncle Jim's house</u>. Tom cycled **while** Nelly ran after him. <u>When they peered in the door of the living room they saw two middle-aged men, one tall and narrow the other one small and plump … am … holding a bag in their hands</u>. **They were thieves**. They went over to the cupboard and peered in. They took out the piggy bank. **Suddenly,** Nelly jumped up and leaped on the two thieves and she chased them into the wardrobe and Tom came over and locked the door of the wardrobe. **Soon after**, the news reporter came and Tom told him the story.*

Story Title: *Nelly Saves the Day*

Karen - Pretest

there was two men called Noel and Jason getting into <u>the </u>car. Noel had orange hair and Jason was bald and they had two masks on getting into an orange car and they banged the doors and got in and they were driving off in the orange car and Noel looked through the windows of the car and the guards were behind them and they were too busy looking through the windows. They never saw <u>the</u> bus so the guards crashed into the bus and Noel and Jason got away and Noel and Jason walked into their house which was orange and green a green door and green .. … green around the sides of the windows and orange curtains and a black fence. So they went into the house which was purple and the guards were .. they were walking in and Jason had a little smile and Noel was had a little slight moustache and they walked in and the guards were there and they both had red cheeks with a frown.

Karen - Post-Test

*ok am <u>Jim and Joe **jumped** into a car **slammed the door** and drove off</u> and <u>they took a **glance** look at the mirror and saw the guards were behind em</u> and they were too busy looking through the mirror. There was <u>a </u>bus inside them ah in front of them and they never saw <u>it</u> and there was a big crash and the bus and the police car crashed and <u>while Jim and Joe were walking inside, they weren't expecting guards to be inside and then they got arrested</u>*

Story Title - *The Unexpected Crash*

Oral Narrative Responses (Sixth Class - Control Group)

Chloe – Pre-Test (Control Group)

One day a boy was riding his bicycle and was playing with his dog at the same time. When he went home am he saw two robbers am two robbers they were going up to steal something. He saw them opening the press and taking out the piggy bank and then the dog ... he told the dog to go after them and the dog chased them and he pushes them into the press and the dog's still barking at them and the boy comes along and closes the door on them and he locks it with a key.

Story Title: *The Boy who Saved the Day*

Chloe – Post-Test (Control Group)

*am the boy's playing outside with his dog **and** he goes back home and there are two robbers in the house **and** they are about to steal something **and** he takes the piggy bank **and** am the dog comes after them **and** he chases them into the wardrobe **and** the boy locks the door **and** he's talking to reporters.*

Mike – Pre-Test (Control Group)

There's two thieves. The .. they get into a car and they slam the door shut and they drive away really fast and the driver looks in the mirror and he sees the police chasing them. So then am they see a bus so they go faster. They go round the bus and the policeman are going very .. so fast that they drove into the bus and the thieves got away and they parked their car outside their house. They walked into … they opened the door and went into the house. Once they went into the living room the two police were there and they arrested them.

Mike – Post-Test (Control Group)

*am two thieves **and** they jump into a car **and** they slam the doors **and** they start speeding off **and then** they see am some cops in the through the mirror **and** the cops put on the siren so they know they are in trouble so they start picking up some speed **and** the cops go after them so they keep accelerating **and** they go past traffic lights **and** the cops are too slow so they crash into a bus so then <u>they go to his house</u> **and** they open the door to get in **and** when they arrive in the sitting room there's cops **and** they're waiting for them*

Open-Ended Oral Narratives – Sixth Class

The older children were asked to complete a second oral narrative task – an open-ended task where they were shown a picture, accompanied by a story title and a caption (Van Allsburg, 1984). Samples of responses to this more challenging oral narrative activity are presented below. Once again there is evidence among the children from the intervention group of a developing awareness of a more literary style of language, which is not as clearly evident in the narratives from the children in the control group.

John - Pre-test (open-ended story)

Just Desert

It was the magical pumpkin and as soon as she stabbed into it, it started to glow that much there was actually a spirit inside it and the spirit started going around the room and she chased it with the knife and it flew out the front door and she rang the guards and said what happened and … and then they called ghostbusters (chuckling!*) and they chased after it and caught it.*

John Post-Test – (open-ended story)

*am she was **intrigued** cos she didn't **realise** <u>what she had **stumbled upon**</u>. It was not just an ordinary pumpkin - it was a magical pumpkin. She put away the knife into the cupboard and she thought - would I tell anybody or would I keep this a secret. So she kept it she did and eh one day a visitor arrived. It was a witch, and she arrived and said - have you seen any pumpkins around here lately, and she said – no, and then the witch said - may I please come in, and she said - ok and … and the woman asked - would you like a cup of tea or something and she said - no I'll be fine and then she said - are you sure you don't want it, and the .. and the witch said – ah, go on then, and then <u>when she went out to the kitchen the witch started to search the house just looking for this magical pumpkin</u> and am she found it in am an **old closet** she did and <u>before the woman got back from the kitchen, she was already gone</u> and eh the woman was **really angry** and ah the woman **chased** after her <u>in her ford car which was quite old and needed a new engine</u> and the witch was still faster because she was on her broom and ah the witch **flew off into the sunlight** again and **she was never heard of again**.*

Sharon – Pre-test (open-ended story)

Just Desert

She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter

I'd say it was like Halloween night … and the girl was trying to carve a pumpkin but when she touched the knife off it, it all started to light up and she would have gotten scared and then she knew that there was something in the house and she was worried and it just kept getting brighter and brighter and she got scared and it's in the kitchen where all this happened so am (what do you think happened in the end)
am that there was a ghost there and they got the man who killed the girl.

Sharon post test – open ended story

She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter

*<u>The girl with the apron</u> put the knife into the pumpkin. The room was <u>bright as the sun</u>. The girl was **amazed**, now she never knew it would do something like that. …am … <u>With her hand clenched</u> on the knife she was just cutting pieces off and am some goo came out of it and this wasn't just ordinary goo - it was magic goo that made you am … big and tall and strong and everyone would **respect** you. But this girl didn't know about this, but she said that she'd try. So <u>she **shakily** put her hand on the goo and took a bit</u>. She thought to herself that it tasted very*

delicious so she kept eating it and eating it and then <u>as she kept eating it</u> she kept getting bigger but she didn't **notice** this at all and <u>after a while</u> she went up to bed <u>as it was late</u>. She <u>***dreamily*** fell off to sLaurencep thinking about what she had done</u>. She didn't **realise** that anything <u>had happened to her</u> yet except for when she woke up in the morning she looked and she couldn't see herself in the mirror. All she could see was her pyjamas and she looked down to realise that she was big, like the same size as the house … and <u>she went to run down stairs but she knocked her head off the wall so she fell and the whole house shook</u>. Her mother came up the stairs and <u>asked what was wrong but to her surprise</u>, she saw that her daughter was the size of the house. Her mother rang the ambulance and the ambulance **scurried** to the house - am … people came out - paramedics came out of the ambulance. <u>They found it hard to believe how big this girl was.</u> They couldn't put her on a stretcher - she was too big, so they put 4 in a line and 4 across. She eh she sat on it. She had a problem then - the ambulance would be too small, so they gathered together the citizens of the town and they pushed her to the hospital. They still didn't know how to get her in, so they knocked off pieces of the wall and put her in <u>when all they had to do was inject this fluid into her</u>. When the fluid was injected to her she shrank and shrank, so they lifted her up and put her on the bed and then when she woke up in the morning she told her mother – I'll never do that again!

Cathy – Pre-Test (open-ended story)

Just Desert

She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter

she lowered the knife and it grew even lighter. she lowered the knife and it grew even brighter. Now it was as if the pumpkin am … had a light bulb in it. It was glimmering on a Halloween night, on a cold Halloween night. Molly, that was her name, Molly raised up the knife and the light dimmed and she noticed again it got lighter. Just then, she cut straight down the middle of the pumpkin and there in the middle of it were little tiny fairies and they all came out and started attacking her and then she woke up.

Cathy – Post-Test (open-ended story)

She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter.

*<u>It was as if it was radioactive and any time the knife lowered it was coming closer to blowing up</u>. She took the knife away. **<u>Again it became dull</u>**. She lowered the knife again and it **glowed** a **magnificent** green. <u>Finally</u>, she decided to cut the pumpkin. She cut straight down the middle and it happened! <u>Out from the pumpkin came</u> a huge explosion that blew up the world … and the extinction of people.*

Oral Narrative Samples – Control Group (Open-Ended Stories)

Susan – Pre-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

Just Dessert
She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter

am I think maybe she might make a pumpkin pie out of it and she's cutting it up
(go on)
she makes pie for the pumpkin pie
she shares it with someone

Susan – Post-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

So, I think she left … she has powers and she's examining to see what see can do and she found out when cooking … and she can do magic on pumpkins

Edward – Pre-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

The Third Floor Bedroom

It all began when someone left the window open

Am someone could have came in through their window and stolen a few things then ah .. and ah … climbed out

(and what do you think happened)
ah the thieves got caught

Edward – Post-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

am …she was making pumpkin pie for a special occasion and she tried to cut it open and it grew bigger so she knew it was magical … that's it

Chloe– Post-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

(Note: Pre-test samples are not Amyilable for Chloe or Mark. Chloe and Edward are foreign nationals and even though they have been in Ireland a long time, appear quite reluctant to elaborate when talking, but both are quite able and willing to do so when scaffolded and encouraged).

I think its like an evil witch or something she's trying to make a soup out of the pumpkin or something the pumpkin might be alive {take your time and what do you think happened } *am something magical.*

Mike– Post-Test – Control Group (open-ended story)

when someone left the window open and they were gone out to the yard or something and while they were gone someone might have come in or an animal and wrecked the place and stole stuff and it looks like the animal took a knife.

For the majority of the children in the intervention group, indications of a beginning awareness of the oral features of decontextualised language are clearly evident from an analysis of the oral narratives. There is ample evidence from the samples above and across the full set of transcriptions to suggest that the presence of literary style features in children's oral narratives has increased over the period of the intervention. This is more Marked among the intervention group than among the control group. Not all of the children showed the same degree of improvement, but all of the children in the intervention group demonstrated an emerging awareness of a literary style of language in the post-test versions of their oral narratives. This was true for children of all abilities.

Word Definition Task

Following the outline presented by Dickinson & Tabors (2001, p.336), children's responses to the word definition task were categorised as **formal** –indicated by the use of a superordinate (highlighted in red) and often followed by a relative clause (indicated by an <u>underline</u>) – or **informal**. The quality of the superordinate and the relative clause was noted, as was the quality of the descriptive features (highlighted in **bold**). Of greatest interest in the exploration of children's responses was the extent and nature of change evident between pre-test and post-test responses. Sample responses are presented below:

Word Definition Samples – Sixth Class

John – Cutlery
Pre-Test - *you use it to eat, like a knife or fork or a spoon*
Post-Test - *cutlery is such **utensils** as forks, knifes and spoons and am **you can find em in restaurants and the kitchen***

Bob – Conditioner/Shampoo

Pre-test (conditioner) - *You ah… it's like shampoo but it makes your hair more soft*
Post-Test (shampoo) - *am shampoo is something **a type of liquid** <u>what you'd use to am put in your hair to make it smell nice</u> in your hair **when you having a shower and a bath and it also***

helps your hair from smelling very bad and looking bad am it is made up of all different types of liquid that make you smell nice and you can get all types of shampoo

Sharon – Farm
Pre-test - *where there'd be various kind of animals and maybe making money for a farmer*
Post-Test - *a farm it could be **a large area of land** or a small area of land - **you'd find animals on it a large number of animals sometimes like cows and ducks and pigs and horses and dogs am most farms have a barn for in the winter or bad weather they could put animals in there***.

Paul – City
Pre-Test - *its **a big place***
Post-Test - *A city is it is **a big place** and **there would be a lot of places like to shop***

Karen – Hair Conditioner
Pre-Test - *It's ... hair conditioner is it's **kind of like a cream** <u>that you put in your hair to make it not knotty</u>*
Post-Test - *am conditioner is like am **it's a cream** <u>that you put in your hair after the shampoo</u> and **you rinse it in good and then you've to wash it out** because your hair will get all…*

Cathy - Cutlery

Pre-Test - *Cutlery are what you use to eat your food ... **pick up the stuff instead of using your hands like a filthy vermin you use am a thing called a fork and a thing called a knife and a thing called a spoon.***
Post-Test - *its like **utensils** like knifes and forks <u>that you use to eat things</u>*

Stylist
Pre-Test - *A hair stylist is … sometimes they cut your hair … sometimes they just put highlights in it like mine am then … sometimes they just style up your hair ..girls like they pin it up with pins and stuff clips as well*
Post-Test - ***someone you go to** to get your hair pinned up for weddings or get it cut*

Word Definition Samples – Sixth Class (Control Group)

Susan – Family

Pre-Test - *Family is like **a son or a daughter and a mother***

Post-Test -*family is **parents with one child or many***

Mike – Cutlery/Conditioner

Pre-Test (Cutlery) - *it's knives and forks and am spoons*
Post-Test (Conditioner*) - like am you use it so soften your hair in a shower or in a bath*

Edward - Conditioner/Hair Stylist

Pre-Test (Conditioner) - *to make your hair softer*
Post-Test (Hair Stylist)- *a hair stylist it could be a barber he cuts hair to make it look better or shorten it maybe even trim it.*

In all of the samples of word definition analysed at sixth class level there is evidence of a degree of formality in the post-test definitions indicated by the presence of a super-ordinate. This is not present in the pre-test definitions to the same degree. This suggests an emerging awareness of a more academic style of language and an ability to use it appropriately in the school context. This awareness is demonstrated also by considerable elaboration in many instances in levels of description and detail provided by intervention children in their definitions in an attempt to clarify the definition for the listener. The quality of the super-ordinates varies from individual to individual, and some of the children had also used super-ordinates in their definitions at the pre-test stage. None of the control group included super-ordinates in either the pre-test or the post-test definitions provided and the degree of elaboration is substantially less in these definitions.

Word Definition Samples – Third Class

Anne - City
Pre-test - *it's ah … it's **like a town** and there's **lots of am houses and stores and there's loads of people shopping** and stuff*
Post-Test – *a city is **like a big town** but with a **load of lights and loads of kind of shopping centres** and everything*

Paul – Farm

Pre-Test - *a farm is where you have loads of cows and you probably have horses and you'll have a quad and you'll have a tractor and you'll have a slurry tank and you'll have am probably a slatted unit*
(what's that)
a slurry tank underneath the ground where you have loads of cows

Post-Test – *A farm is eh loads of cows are on it and eh you can have horses on it too and there's a slurry pit there with slurry in it and you could have eh a pig in the shed and there could be tractors with it too and there's lots of land on a farm and there is lots of animals living on it and there's… there could be bulls in it and there could be a yard scraper in the middle of it going down the middle of it and there could be lots of big bulls there and they could kill you and that's what I know about a farm.*

Seamus (Pre-Test - furniture/orchestra; Post-Test – orchestra/city)

Pre-Test (furniture) - *furniture is where you sit on it and where you probably go to sLaurencep on it*

Pre-Test (orchestra) - *an orchestra is a … a thing that goes am … loads of people go to it and **they have instruments***

Post-Test (orchestra) - *An orchestra is **where there's bands**… everything … **there would be trumpets that you'd have an orchestra leader and there would be a condition … a con**…(conductor)*

Post-Test (City) - *a city is **loads of traffic** and **they keep on beeping horns and ah ambulance are going around and police cops keep on saying pull the vehicle over and you might have been speeding and sometimes people speed across and just go flying and don't press the brake and don't ah … ah and skid and what do you call it there's buses, cars everything… there would be famous people in the cities like in New York and ah … there's would be …and that's all I know.***

Laurence – Family

Pre-Test - *A family is par ...a mother and a father and children and **they live in the same house***

Post-Test – ***where people** a mammy and daddy and children **are with each other** all the time and **they don't want to leave them … they bring them with them***

Cathy – Vehicle/Orchestra

Pre-Test (Vehicle) - ***It's a thing that like moves** and it could be like **it could have four wheels or two wheels or it could have wings***

Post-Test (Orchestra) - ***an orchestra is like a band** who like **plays** in church or and they sing and there's am a person who tells them what notes to play and there could be musical instruments like a keyboard or a pEvano*

Anthony – Orchestra/City

Pre-Test (Orchestra) - *instruments -there's **all these people who play instruments** … **they make up a song and what is it one person might have a violin and the other person might have a harp and there's a man with a stick and what is it he moves the stick around and he goes like that all the music has to stop***

Post-Test (City) – ***it's a big massive town** with big buildings and lots of lots of people live in them and there's lots of shopping centres and it's a city it's a county*

David - Orchestra

Pre-Test - ***where people have instruments** and there's **this person has a stick** and he goes like that (making gestures like a conductor!!!)*

Post-Test - *an orchestra is where there's a person with this kind of stick and **there's people with all kind of different instruments** and there **all in the drums might be in one row and***

the violins might be in another and the man moves the stick and the orchestra starts playing.

Terence – Family

Pre-Test - *a family is am* **people** *who am well it's like well family is people* <u>*who am respects you who brings you to places who takes care of you*</u> *who am there's a word I'm trying to think of - rears you* (thinks of word himself!!!)
Post-Test - *a family is …* **there is a mother there is a father there is brothers and there's sisters you can have your own family like have your own child,** *your own wife, and your* **grandparents are your family ... your cousins are your family***.*

Robert – Orchestra

Pre-Test - **people who play instruments** *and they are very they* **have loads of people to play them and they have high music and low music**
Post-Test - *an* **orchestra is where there is loads of people and they are playing different instruments** *like* **the trEvangle violin and the accordion and the … you stand you … and you play that thing… double bass … this guy that has a stick and goes like that.**

Word Definition Samples – Third Class (Control Group)

Ken – Orchestra

Pre-Test - **it's this band** *… i***t** *plays music and there's all kind of different instruments like a trombone or a …*
Post-Test – **it's like ah..a band** *or something and* **they have lots of instruments like a trumpet and like this big drum and they smack … and there is this person singing and the background are all the instruments.**

Avril – City/Family

Pre-test (City)
a city I think has loads of places and it like has loads of people going around the city buying stuff

Post-Test (Family)
A family is where you have a brother a sister a mother a father sometimes – **you don't have to have a father**

Audrey – Family
Pre-Test
You have all your mam and dad and your aunties and your brothers and your sisters
Post-Test
A family is where you have a mom, a dad and **maybe you would have no children** *or just a boy and a girl that's what a family is.*

Evan – Farm

Pre-Test - *a farm is am with **loads of animals on it am and it would have loads of bales for the cows to feed***

Post-Test – *a farm is where you have **loads of cows and calves and pigs and hens and horses and there is loads of fields and trees and you normally have a tractor or something there**.*

Differences in quality of word definitions between pre-and post-test were not as Marked at third class level as they had been at sixth class level. Children in the intervention group often included super-ordinates in the pre-test definition given and again in the post-test definition. In some cases the quality of the super-ordinate was better at the post-test stage, mostly in terms of the level of detail provided. In some cases also the amount of descriptive detail included in the post-test definition was greater. Relatively little difference in ability to give word definitions was observed between pre-and post-test definitions in the control group of children.

Word Definition Samples – Senior Infants

Luke – Farm

Pre-Test – *a farm is where farm men live*

Post-Test - ***there's a shed and lots of animals horses, calves, sheeps, and ducks, and there's a farmer on a tractor, and some people help the farmers**.*

Rita – City

Pre-Test – *town*

Post-Test – ***load of cars and bikes and trucks, buildings, cars***

Deirdre – Farm

Pre-Test – *you put loads of horses in and cows and sheep*

Post-Test – *you go up the fields and get the horse and bring him down the yard and play with him.*

Roísín – City

Pre-Test – *there's a lot of windows and then there's a big massive building*

Post-Test – *a city is that … it is am … **big,** big am … **shops** and it would be like it would be … **a city would have shops in it** and **it would have houses in it and more shops and it would have maybe a dinner place in it and it might have maybe a playground**.*

Angela – CityFarm

Pre-Test (City)– *a city is a town*

Post-Test (Farm) – *it's, it's **a big place** with fences and it has loads and loads of animals like new cows and hen and pigs and and sheep and <u>and there's a farmer who minds all the animals and puts and feeds them and milks cows.</u>*

Eucharia – Farm/City

Pre-Test (Farm) – ***a place where** all the animals get feeded and looked after*

Post-Test (City) – ***it's a place where** there's **loads of houses and theres' two storey houses and there's shops joined up to the houses.***

Amy – Furniture

Pre-Test – *where you sit down*

Post-Test – *furniture is where you sit down and **you have a rest to watch telly***

Word Definition Samples – Senior Infants (Control Group)

Richard – City/Farm

Pre-Test (City) – *It's a big thing with lots and lots of buildings and cars going beep-beep, beep-beep*

Post-Test (Farm) – *A farm is **a place** where they keep animals and you got to see the animals.*

Richard – Furniture

Pre-Test – *it's a thing like when you're inviting someone to have a barbecue with you and I'd a barbecue once with my granddad and I had chicken and burgers.*

Post-Test – *it's ah stuff where you eat or sit down or look at or lie down in or sit on or do all kinds of stuff.*

Christine – Farm/City

Pre-Test (Farm) – *There is some boys and girls taking care of the animals and there is pigs and ducks and dogs and vegetables*

Post-Test (City) – *A city means there's houses and buses and cars and trains and airplanes and all that kind of stuff.*

At senior infant level, the greatest change evident in a comparison of the pre- and post-test versions of intervention children's word definitions is the increased amount of descriptive detail

in many of the post-test definitions. Only two of the intervention and one of the control group used a super-ordinate at either the pre-or post-test stage. This is almost certainly a developmental ability which is more manifest among the older children. Relatively little difference in ability to give definitions is evident among the younger children at either stage of testing.

The ability to define words formally would appear to be a slowly emerging one such that evidence of formal word definitions is not available among younger children for the most part. Definitions at third class level show a capacity for some level of formality by some of the children and many of the intervention children demonstrated an ability to expand on their definitions at this level. This was also evident among many of the control group. The greatest difference in ability to give clear and formal definitions was seen at sixth class level where there was a distinct difference in quality and clarity of definition both between pre-and post-test definitions and between the definitions of the intervention and control groups. Clearly, at this stage of development, exposure to academic style of language use may have the effect of differentiating among children in terms of their emerging facility with use of that more formal style of language when and where appropriate.

Picture Description Task

The linguistic features of interest in the picture description task focussed on a comparison of the total number of words used, the number of adjectives, verbs and locatives used, and the ability of the children to include 'specificity Markers' (Snow et al., 1995, p.40). Analysis of children's contributions explored also the extent to which children needed intervention and scaffolding to complete the task. Children's contributions were compared from pre-to post-test for quality of lexicon used, complexity of utterances, presence of such linguistic features as **adjective, locatives,** and levels of coherence in terms of appropriate use of **definite and indefinite articles** and **pronouns**. The quality and degree of change was then compared with that of the control group.

Picture Description Samples – Senior Infants

Tim - describes a picture of a Farm – Pre-Test

I can see somebody playing in the horse and I can see a duck running around and I can see a cat trying to catch the mouse. I can see a chicken and I can see a little girl hopping and I can see somebody getting into a tractor and I can see a horse shed … and I can see sheep and I can see.
(Can you see anything else?) a chicken playing with the sheep
Yeah, the girl washing the cow
and I can see someone feeding the pig
And I can see .... (Doesn't know the word – cabbage)

(And what's that)
A tractor trying getting
ready to drive
(and who is this)
A man getting into the tractor
(What kind of a man would get into a tractor)
a farmer
(can you see any more)
A dog running … running to the horse.

Tim - describes a picture of a Farm – Post-Test

*There's a girl washing a cow and a **baby** calf **behind it** and **a** dog watching **the** girl cleaning the horse and a farmer giving **some lettuce** to the pigs and a baby pig **near** the farmer and a sheep there and a hen there and a cock-a-doodle-doo and there's a baby and there's a farm there's some silage coming up and there's a farmer driving a truck … that's all and there's a cat chasing the mice mouse … it could be mouse or a rat … that's all I can see.*

Rita – Picture Description (At the Park/The Farm)

Pre-Test – At the Park

The girl's flying a kite. There's people in the pond. There's swings, a roundabout. There's a see-saw. There's a slide. There's a fox. There's a squirrel. The man, the mouse, the rabbit, the ducks, the mammy, and the boy going in the duck pond, the lawn, the trees.

Post-Test – The Farm

*I can see **a girl** milking the cows {that's excEuchariat what else can you see}. I can see **a girl that's** brushing the horse and **a** boy feeding pigs. The goat is eating the grass. The farmer is going into the tractor.   The hen is laying the eggs.   The girl is going around collecting the eggs. {excEuchariat girl -go on- what else}. The sheep is running around. The dog is looking at the horse. The cat is chasing the mouse {is that it}. I can see the duck staring at the horse. The sheep is looking down.*

Eucharia – Picture Description - The Farm/In the Garden

Pre-Test – The Farm

A lady milking a cow
and a man going into a tractor
(What do we call that man)
a farmer
chicken
a cat catching a mouse
a hen laying eggs
the sun
a little puppy
a horse
a pig
a goat
(tell me what's happening with the horse)
a lady is brushing it
(Can you see any more)
a duck

Post-Test – In the Garden

*There is a squirrel in a tree and a spider is coming **down from** a web and then the table has a cat **on** and there's a bee **buzzing around** and there's a dog walking and there's **a little** girl **with her mammy** **planting** stuff and there's **a** man that is **gardening** and there's a butterfly flying **around** and there's and there's a ladybird **on** the tree and there's and the caterpillar going **up** ah flower and eh there is worms going around in the **soil** and there's em flowers and a dog walking around and **smiling** and there's a bird and there's two purple flowers and there's a caterpillar.*

In all of these samples from the senior infants (taken from children in each of the three schools) there is a shift in the picture description task from a mere listing of the elements seen in the picture to a presentation which is coherent, developed, integrated and organised. There is a clear development in terms of the quality of lexicon used, the complexity of the syntax present, the degree of expansion, the number and quality of locatives used in the picture description task from the pre-test to the post-test samples (e.g. Tim, - There's a girl washing a cow and a **baby** calf **behind it** and **a** dog watching **the** girl cleaning the horse; Rita - I can see **a** girl that's brushing the horse and **a** boy feeding pigs; Eucharia - a dog walking around and **smiling**) . Most of the children required less scaffolding during the post-test and demonstrated increased confidence in the completion of this task. This type of development is evident in the vast majority of samples taken at infant level in the intervention classes but not present to the same extent in the samples taken from the Control Group as presented below:

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Picture Description Samples – Senior Infants (Control Group)

Jim – The Farm/The Garden

Pre-Test – The Farm

I can see a girl taking milk out of a cow.
(What else can you see)
I can see a pig
(and)
a dog
(and what else)
ducks
and a girl coughing
and i see a tractor
and sheep
(and what else)
all people
(where is it all happening)
in the farm

Post-Test – The Garden

*A squirrel is **up in** the tree and a dog walking in the grass and birds flying and a butterfly and a cat **down** and a fella digging and a girl picking up a snake and there's a bee **flying under** the squirrel under the tree.*

Richard – The Park/The Garden
Pre-Test – The Park

There's people rowing (keep going)
there's a playground
there's a man sweeping up the place
there's people flying a kite
there's a girl playing with a boat
and there's a lawnmower
there's a wheelbarrow.
there's ducks
there's fox mouse rabbit
and there's am a squirrel
another boy playing with his boat
and there's trees and that's all I can see
(do you see where the rabbit is - can you tell me a bit more about the rabbit)
Yeah, he can hop
(what can you tell me about the rabbit in the picture)
he's hiding in the bushes
(What's this - pointing to lake - child mentions boat first but identifies lake when prompted further)
A lake
(and tell me about the boat on the lake)
you can do fishing in it

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(and what are the people in the boat doing)
they're just rowing out having some fun

Post-Test – The Garden

*There is a **little** girl and the mammy **gardening** and daddy's <u>putting on vegetables in the</u> <u>garden</u> and the birds are flying and the bees are buzzing and the butterflies are flying and the spiders are **going down** and the fox is watching and the dog is walking and am the cats sLaurenceping and the caterpillars **crawling up** and am I can see seeds there.*

Christine - The Farm

Pre-Test – The Farm

I can see a horse, a dog, some ducks and one person
(tell me what's happening in the picture)
am there's a farmer going cutting the grass I think and the girl is going to pick some eggs
the other girl is going riding on the horsey and the other is milking the cow and the sun is coming up and the sheep are on the field and the hen is on the fence and the man is going to make some dinner to the pigs and the cat is chasing the mouse and the man is riding the tractor.
(Do you know what that man is called)
am a farmer
(What is this a picture of - is it in the park)
No
(where is it)
It's in the farm.

Post-Test– The Farm

*The girl has a egg at the gates **on** the fence and that girl is watering the … and the sheep is running and the farmer is **going into** the truck and the chicken has some eggs and the cat is chasing a mouse I think and the dog is looking at the horse and the girl is brushing the horse and eh he's feeding the pigs and a goat's eating and a pig is running.*

Picture Description Samples – Third Class

Paul – The Circus

Pre-Test
The elephant is putting a picture up and down and the there's two hula hoops up and there's ah
(long pause)
(move on to something else if you can't finish that)
there's a monkey blowing through a horn and there's a snake in front of him in a wrapped up and there's ah two people in front of him am
there's one on a horse on top of it and there's one beside the horse
and there's something behind the one, a ladder and he's holding on and
there's loads of people around and there's someone on the ...there's balloons and there's
(looking at tightrope but doesn't have the word)

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(do you see all those people along there, what do we call them)
ah,
(people who are watching the show)
audience
(where's this all happening)
it's happening in the zoo
ah,
(you're close, its not the zoo though it's the c..)
cinema
ah,
(see the word written up in the corner)
circus.
(have you ever been to the circus)
no
(have you seen it on television)
Yes

Post-Test

*I can see **a** person **up on** a bar and he's standing on one bar and he's holding onto **the two sides** of **it** and I can see a person **up on** a horse and he's going and he's standing … and I can see a tiger **going through** two hoola hoops and … and I can see an elephant sucking a chicken and he's **right beside** a lion and **a** monkey and there is a snake **in front of the** monkey and the snake is curled up and he has two eyes and the monkey is blowing a trumpet and a person is going up … beside … a going up a ladder eh **beside a ladder** and he's **near** all the chickens and there's lots of balloons in it and there's **a** person that has **his** leg **on** the swing and he's **facing down** the ground and he's swinging off it and that's all I know about the picture.*

Anthony – The Circus

Pre-Test

I see a lad on a … I see a lad on a trampoline bouncing, doing tricks
I see am a lad on a piece of string walking
I see a clown on a horse with… with a man in a suit
and I see a woman on big sticks
and I see I see a monkey playing in a … a trumpet
a snake coming out of a … a pot
and I see tigers … a tiger jumping through hoops
and I see a lion on top of a box and a elephant in a suit

Post-Test

*There's a **acrobat** on the ropes and there's a man on the trampoline **doing flips** and there's a monkey **playing a pipe** while the snakes are coming out of the bag. There's a tiger jumping through circles and there's a elephant carrying a bird and a man on the trunk and a clown and there's a clown on a horse and a horse is doing the horse is gal.. galloping around and there's **a** woman with a pink dress and a hat **with** two feathers sticking out and **she's** on these massive sticks and there's a man in a black and white suit with a green bow and a black cat*

and there's a man on a rope doing all tricks and <u>there's a lion in a big box looking up at the man on the rope </u>that's all

Cathy – Halloween Picture

Pre-Test

There's a dragon flying up in the sky
and there's a witch on the broomstick
and her cat is down on the ground and there's another cat on her broomstick
and they're celebrating Halloween
It's night-time and there's a there's a moon out and there's a scarecrow
and in the field and there's ghosts
and there's a cauldron
there's graves and … am fire and a calendar and bats in the sky and stars in the sky and an owl on the tree and I can see a face and eyes and a nose, an angry face on the tree

Post-Test

*there's a bat flying in the sky … and <u>there's a witch **with** a broom stick and a black cat and she's wearing a blue dress and a yellow top and a blue hat</u> and there's a dragon flying in the sky and <u>there's a scare crow **at the back of** the field and there's a ghost flying around it</u> and there's an owl **up in** the tree and there's two cats **on the** ground and there's a spell book and a witch and a fairy … and the tree is alive.*

Seamus – Halloween/At the Park
Pre-Test - Halloween

I can see a witch …ah… a guy that looks like he's from Christmas. There's this big pot with bubbles. There's this little dragon …there's a cat… there's a book … there's a frog …there's two crosses… there's ghosts … there's stars … there's owls … there's a mammy dragon … <u>there's a witch on a broom and a cat on the on her side …   there's a fairy behind the tree</u> there's a tree … there's a… a mouse … there's a fly and there's a glass… am there's this glass thing with bubbles in it.

Post-Test – At the Park

*<u>There are kids **in the** playground watching an act</u> - people playing instruments and singing and the crowd are sitting **on** chairs and clapping and there's children and a man holding balloons and <u>there's a girl **on** a ladder cutting a tree into a shape of a animal</u> and there's two people **on** bikes and <u>there is a family **near** a tree having a picnic</u> and two birds **in** the tree singing and there's an elephant **in** the zoo and there's two people **on** a swing and one person **on** a bench on his own and there's a water fountain and the boy's shouting and there's a man cutting the grass and there's a phone box and **on the street. T**here is … am an ambulance in a hurry and*

*there's am a guitar singer **out on the street** and people are giving money **into** a hat and there's a boy and the bee stung his tongue and there is a boy and his balloon burst and **a** baby in a buggy and a man walking a dog and pushing **the** baby in the buggy at the same time.*

Picture Description Samples – Third Class (Control Group)

Evan – The Circus/Halloween

Pre-Test (The Circus)

*I can see animals doing tricks. I can see clowns **performing**. I can see crowds. I can see hoola hoops. I can see balloons. I can see a man (what's he doing) He's walking ah on a rope. There's a woman walking on two sticks and there's a monkey playing a trumpet and there's a clown on a horse and there's a tiger jumping in through two hoola hoops.*

Post-Test (Halloween)

*There's a scarecrow. There's a witch … ah … **her** broom and a cat, a dragon, a brown … ah … tree, a black cat a black pot and frogs, a fire, ghosts, there's a kind of monster sitting on a rock and there is a girl pretending to be a witch with a wand and there is a boy with some kind of cloth in his hand and there's a moon and bats and an owl and that's it.*

Audrey – Halloween/The Circus

Pre-Test (Halloween)

I see a witch on a … broom stick. I see a (what is it - it's a big ...) *pot (*do you know the word for that pot - neither child knew the word but recognised it when they heard it*)*
*I see bats. I see an owl. I see a ghost. I see a halloween cake. I see a cat. I see a frog, a book am (*what do you think is in the book*) halloween stories*
I see a dragon. I see a spider
*(*what's around the spider*)*
a spider web

Post-Test (The Circus)

There's a fire, a rope … he is climbing … an elephant. There's a snake in a basket. There's a horse. There's a lady. There is a man there and swings. There is a monkey with a … (tell me what is he doing?) …he is blowing a …. (blowing a trumpet, can you see anything else) … there is a lion with hula hoops and …

Avril - Halloween/The Circus
Pre-Test
I can see a dragon that can fly, a witch on a broom with a cat. I can see am a scarecrow. I can see the witch's pot. I can see a witch with a wand beating a bat. I can see an owl. I can see a

ghost, two ghosts and I can see a fairy. I can see a frog and flowers and a book. (What kind of a book do you think that is)
a spell book
(what do you think is happening in this picture)
I think there's a witch on Halloween night. I think they're in am the oh - I can't remember what it's called - I'm thinking of a graveyard

Post-Test (The Circus)
*There is a ladder. There is an elephant, a tiger, a lion , <u>a monkey who is playing a kind of tin whistle,</u> <u>a basket with a snake</u> **inside it,** <u>a horse with a clown on it</u>, a musicEvan, a trampoline and <u>a guy swinging off the roof with a stick</u> and a girl standing on sticks and loads of crowd and there is hula hoops and balloons.*

Ken - The Circus/Halloween

Pre-Test (The Circus)
I can see a clown and a fella riding a horse and a tiger going through the hula hoops and a elephant which is blowing a … bird up and a monkey doing a back flip and a man up in the audience thing and a man doing the thing where he goes swinging on and a woman walking on stilts.

Post- Test (Halloween)
<u>*I can see a tree that looks* **angry** *with an owl on it*, *a spider* **hanging** *off one of the branches*</u>. *I can see stars, a witch with her broom, the dragon, the moon. I can see bats. I can see ah … ghosts. I can see films. I can see cats. I can see a wizard. I can see a helper for the wizard. I can see a light bulb I think it is, and the … the red thing, and there is like a little small little tiny bee for the wizard, frogs, there's ants in a type of jar and a mouse. There is a grey and a magic book and an antidote.*

As with the children in Senior Infants, the third class response to the picture description task reveals a clearly emerging facility with an academic style of language from the children in the intervention group. Their responses show a clear ability to take an interpersonal stance and take the listener's needs into consideration, there is ample evidence of an increased information load characterised by utterances which while, concise are dense with information, a use of a wide and varied range of explicit and expanded reference, and a level of cohesion and organisation in the presentation which makes their expression clear and comprehensible regardless of their relationship with the listener. While a development in ability to express with clarity and precision is evident in some of the responses from the control group (most notably Ken and Avril), there is considerably less use of this type of language style in evidence and for some of the children it is not evident at all.

Picture Description Samples – Sixth Class

John – Diner

Pre-Test

*Well there's a man and a wo ...(don't use your finger at all). Well, there's a man and a child…
well, a child and two women. The man is kind of … and the wo...... girl is kind of …looks really
cheerful …they do …looks like they're doing something with their hand and the woman's ho ...
one of the women right beside the woman is holding her … and the other woman across the
way … across on the table is sitting down and she looks a bit happy as well and beside the
man there's plant pots and it looks like they're inside a restaurant or a pub or something.*

Post-Test

*ah … what I can see is <u>they're in a diner or a restaurant and there is a cup of tea or coffee on
the table and they all look quite happy</u>, they do and … am <u>I think that the restaurant there is
quite tidy</u> **although** <u>the table that they're at doesn't seem too clean</u>. There's four people at the
table and …eh two .. two women, one little girl and a … eh man. It looks like the woman
beside the little girl … I think that the little girl, the woman and the man are a family I'd say, and
I'd say that the other woman is probably **a family friend** or relation {why do you say that } am
because like **normally** families kind of sit together like.*

Bob – Kitchen

Pre-Test

*There's a man holding a baby in the kitchen while the mother's cleaning up. (Long pause)
There's a picture crooked in there (long pause)*
(What else can you see. Do you want to tell me about the woman)
she's pregnant
(what equipment can you see)
*well you can see a boiler and a fridge and a microwave and all the pots on the fridge instead of
in cupboards*

Post-Test

*ah <u>it looks like the woman here is cleaning out the kitchen.</u> She's also pregnant I'd say and the
daddy is holding the baby while the mother is cleaning and she's laughing ah… am it looks like
the baby is doing something funny and she's laughing at it, so is he am { and what room are
they in} ah I'd say the kitchen which is **attached** into a sitting room I'd say.*

Paul – In the Cafe

Pre-Test

*The father is helping the child and I'd say he's only after drinking a mug of tea and I'd say the
child could be opening a drink or something but this one here doesn't seem kind of happy that
much and it's in the olden days cos it's black and white.*

Post-Test

*well it's a black picture and there's 4 people in it and there's a man, there's a child and there's a woman, and the man is playing with the child and the woman's holding it, and there's another woman over the **opposite side of the table** and she's looking at the …am … the two adults playing with the child and there's milk on the table and there's a cup and there's butter or something on the table and there's 3 tables and there's chairs like they're old chairs like old tables that chairs are stuck onto and there's windows up on the what do call it eh …*

Sharon – In the Kitchen

Pre-Test
well that girl is having a baby and I'd say that's the husband and that's another child and she is just after doing the washing up or is just washing (has to be reminded here not to point)
and there's blinds in the … on the window and they're net kind of ones. There's saucepans and cups on top of the fridge
am there's a picture on the wall and it's kind of slanted and there's a couch in the kitchen

Post-Test
*ah   well there's first there is a **frame** but its not straight at all and there's a man in a pair of jeans and black t-shirt holding a baby with a bib on it and I think that's his wife and she's having another baby and she's with a very… I'd say … a damp cloth wiping the counter down … ah there's milk on top of the microwave and the saucers are very … they're clean and there's netted curtains on the window and there's a white pot with something like flowers or something like that design on it … am the girl is wearing a **polka dot top** and a tracksuit am …*

Antoinette – In the Kitchen

Pre-Test

There's a father holding a little child and am a woman is at the sink and she's smiling and the father is looking down at the little child am the woman looks like she's pregnant. and am …

Post Test
*am the picture is black and white. There's a woman and she's pregnant. There's a fella and he's holding a child. There's … the woman is leaning up against the drain. There's a couch behind the fella. There's two presses **behind** the woman and a microwave **on top of** one and **beside that** there's a fridge with loads of pots and **up above that at the side** there's a picture frame kind of tilted to the side.*

Sheila – In the Café
Pre-Test

They're in like a cafe. There's … that's the man, that's the child, that's the father
(imagine that nobody can see this picture put your fingers away and just tell me what's in it)
there's four people - three girls and a man.
there's a table but it's kind of like a bench. There's a cup and little milk holders and tissues.
the little girl is smiling. So is the boy.

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Post-Test

*There's four people - there's two of them, a child that's a boy, a man and they're sitting down in a café at a table. The man, woman and child are sitting **at one side** and the **other** girl is sitting at the other side … am they are laughing and the mom and dad are holding hands and there's a cup and a milk tray on the table **with** tissues and there's two tables **behind** them and there's flower pots **over at the other side***

Picture Description Samples- Sixth Class (Control Group)

Edward – In the Café
Pre-Test

They're in a diner or a restaurant and am they're having fun. That's all I can see
(just imagine that you're telling me about this picture and somebody is listening but they can't see the picture)
well first of all there's people in a restaurant or a diner. ah there's one kid and a mum and dad and a friend I think and am they're playing with the kid and they're all having a lot of fun.

Post-Test
the family is having a good time in the restaurant and there's a girl … ah a man, a wife, a girl, another friend maybe and a child.

Susan – In the Kitchen

Pre-Test

There's a man and a woman and they're in a house and the man is carrying I think it might be his daughter. Am that's all I can say
(try a bit more)
Am
(what about the woman)
am the woman she looks a bit pregnant
am that could be her husband
(where are they)
long pause ...a house?
(what room do you think they're in?)
the kitchen
(can you make a guess at the time of the day)
or the day of the week - what it might be)
it might be morning
probably up early in the morning

Post-Test

am there's a father, a daughter and that could be the wife I think and I think she's pregnant am I think she's just cleaning up and she's coming to say hi to the daughter.

Chloe – In the Kitchen
Pre-Test

I see a Mom and a dad and the dad's playing with the baby and the Mom's smiling. And the Mom was cleaning the sink

Post-Test
am the lady is just at the sink there in a kitchen or something and there's a baby in the kitchen

Mike – In the Café
Pre-Test

They're in a cafe. Tis ....Mother holding ah … her kid and he's laughing - the dad's laughing as well and there's I think a plant and thing on the by the window ... there's on the table there's a cup and there's milk two small milk and cups and there's a woman just sitting across from them.

Post-Test

am there is a café and there is two people and a child and the dad has a cup of tea of coffee and they are having a good time.

At sixth class level there is some evidence of children being able to engage in this task at the post-test stage with greater elaboration and precision of language than is evident at the pre-test stage among the intervention group which is not available for the control group. However, the older children seem to have found this task boring and many in both the intervention and control group were reluctant to engage meaningfully with the task.

From the data presented above, there is evidence in relation to all age and ability levels, that children in the intervention group were better able, and more likely to use an academic style of language in the picture description task than their counterparts in the control group.

Summary of Case Study Findings

Findings presented in this chapter relate to the three schools in which the study was conducted. These findings may not be generalised to the population of DEIS primary schools in Ireland, and as such, serve only as potentially indicative findings. A summary of the findings, outlining progress made by teachers and pupils involved in the study, and what they learned while participating in the study follows.

As a result of participating in the study, teachers reported an increased awareness of the importance of

- **Prioritising oral language** development in their classrooms, committing to maintaining oral language as a priority into the future

- Increased pair/group **collaborative interaction** in their classrooms

- Expanding children's **encounter with high quality literature** and poetry, along with **more drama work** for children in their classrooms

- Focussing specifically in their teaching, on **explicit development of the use of literate/academic style language features** in the school context.

Progress made by teachers and what they learned from participating in the project is evident in terms of:

Increased teacher knowledge about the content of language teaching, specifically teacher knowledge of the components of language, features of literate/academic style of language, and target language skills for particular focus in the classroom

Changed teacher perceptions of children's oral language ability. Teachers could identify more precisely children's specific language needs and were aware of their responsibility to respond to these needs and what they could do to improve children's oral language skills. The effect of this learning was to reduce teachers' negative focus on children's language ability, and to empower them to focus instead on their role in improving children's language skills.

Teachers were often surprised at just how much children could do with language when scaffolded appropriately.

Wider use of those pedagogies associated with enhanced oral language development – greater encounter with literature, more opportunity for talk in general in the classroom, and particularly through increased opportunity for pair/group collaborative work, and more frequent use of drama in the classroom,

Awareness of the impact of supportive outreach to parents. Teachers who participated in this initiative as part of the project reported being surprised at the level of willingness of parents to engage with their children's learning in the home when scaffolded appropriately, along with the significance of such parental participation on the language learning of children, in particular that of weaker children.

Progress made by children in the case Study Schools, as reported by teachers confirm that these children

- Grew in **self-confidence** – they were more willing to take risks, to ask questions, to participate in discussions, to seek help from the teacher

- Became more aware of talk as a legitimate part of the **learning** process in the classroom

- Enjoyed talking and having their **voices heard**

- Demonstrated improved **clarity** of expression, more **complex** sentence construction, broader range of **vocabulary** knowledge, and greater **expansion** of ideas through talk that had previously been the case

- **No behavioural difficulties** were reported during talking tasks in these classrooms.

Close comparative scrutiny of the pre-and post-test results and comparison with the results of the control group produced compelling evidence to the effect that an emerging facility with academic/literate style of language use was being developed among the children in the intervention classes.

This was shown through analysis of children's **oral narratives** where it was found that in the post-test narratives of the children in the intervention classes there was

- greater elaboration

- more clarity of lexicon

- increased coherence

- less vagueness of reference

- more complex syntax

- better organisation of information

Analysis of the children's **picture descriptions** also presented evidence of a developing facility with academic/literate style of language in terms of the quality of lexicon, complexity of syntax, degree of expansion, number and quality of locatives used at senior infant level. At third class level there was, in addition, an increased ability to take an interpersonal stance, greater density of information, increased cohesion and organisation in children's oral presentations.

In the **word definition** task, differences emerged at sixth class level in the quality and clarity of definitions given between pre- and post-test definitions as well as between intervention and control group. These differences were manifest in the increased use of super-ordinates and greater expansion of descriptive detail included in the definition.

Based on a comparative analysis of the three oral tasks it is clear that while the improvements in terms of facility with academic style of language are small, these differences exist between the pre-and post-test language samples of the children in the intervention group in a way and to a degree not evident among the control group. This would suggest that the improved knowledge of the teachers in terms of enhanced knowledge about language and pedagogy, along with the informed prioritising of oral language development in the classroom may have had an impact on the oral language abilities of these children. It would also concur with the perceptions of the intervention teachers in relation to the improvements in children's language observed over the course of the project. The implications of these findings will be considered in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The triangulated design of this study resulted in data which was derived from three sources: consensus in the literature about the status of oral language development, findings concerning knowledge, perceptions, and pedagogy of oral language development from a nationwide survey of teachers in DEIS schools, and evidence of the challenges of oral language development in action, in a case study involving three schools in the DEIS programme. This data was interrogated in relation to the central questions in the study –

What challenges does the DEIS context (i.e. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School – those schools in the School Support Programme in Ireland**) present for oral language teaching and learning? (Literature Review and Survey)**

What is the impact of teacher support on oral language teaching and learning in a DEIS context? (Case Study)

What are the messages for policy makers that can be derived from the experience in this research? (Conclusions)

Using the sub-questions as a framework, conclusions arising from the data about the questions of central concern are drawn in this chapter.

- What supports do teachers need in the classroom context to facilitate the development of children's oral language skills (Literature Review, Survey and Case Study)
- What perceptions and practices currently prevail in classrooms in the development of children's oral language skills (Survey)
- What impact, if any, does teacher support have on the teachers, and the community of learners and their parents being served by the school. (Case Study)
- What has been learned in this process that can be disseminated more widely and how can this be done most effectively. (Case Study and Conclusions).

Challenges of Teaching and Learning Oral Language in the DEIS Context

In recent decades, a clear and unambiguous recognition of the **importance** of oral language development for learning, acquisition of literacy skills, and ability to access the curriculum effectively has emerged. This has resulted in a focus on oral language development which is manifest in the policy documents of education systems worldwide. Translating such a policy,

which advocates the development of children's oral language skills, into effective practice in the classroom appears to be problematic. Of particular concern in this study is that in the Irish education system, and particularly in those schools serving contexts of disadvantage in Ireland, successful implementation of policy in relation to the development of oral language continues to be challenging.

Teacher responses from the nationwide survey of teachers at junior, middle and senior class levels of schools in the DEIS programme revealed that

- Teachers are aware of the importance of oral language development in classrooms in contexts designated as disadvantaged and

- Teachers are acutely aware of the impact of oral language abilities on children in the school context, and

- Teachers are also aware of their need for support when tackling children's oral language skills in these contexts.

Central to successful implementation of policy is the need for skilled implementers. Among the pre-requisites for teachers as successful implementers of policy is appropriate knowledge. The kind of knowledge required for successful development of children's oral language skills is complex and multi-layered, built up over a lifetime of learning and experience. Successful teachers of oral language have **knowledge about language** and how language is mediated in the educational context (including, for example, content knowledge about language such as knowledge of the basic units of language, principles of word formation, awareness of language for communication, language of socialisation, language in the context of assessment). Teachers also need to know about the particular language style required in the context of school, academic/literate language style – its importance, its characteristic features – and crucially, a non-judgemental awareness that this style of language is not immediately accessible to all children. Findings in this study highlight that in the context of DEIS schools in Ireland

- Many teachers appear to be **vague in terms of their content knowledge of language**. Teachers' responses to questions about the content of their language teaching, planning, and targets for language teaching in their classrooms were often

vague, non-specific, sometimes verbatim reproductions from published documents which many teacher reported finding difficult to access, or at times non-existent.

- The vagueness in relation to knowledge about language among teachers was particularly in evidence in terms of knowledge of the specific characteristics of literate/academic style of language. Teachers are aware that language requirements in the school context are different to those in an out-of-school context, but the specific characteristics of the style of language needed to negotiate the school system successfully were not clearly articulated by many teachers.

Such lack of clarity on the part of teachers about knowledge of specific language skills to be targeted in their teaching has important implications for the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning of language in the context of DEIS schools, a context where oral language development is seen to be most critically required.

An aspect of teacher knowledge necessary for effective development of oral language skills in the classroom is that of **knowledge of the learners**. Teachers' awareness of the existence, validity, and challenges of the variety of language styles brought by children to the school context is central to successful implementation of policy on the development of appropriate oral language skills.

- Survey responses from teachers in DEIS schools revealed overwhelmingly **negative perceptions of the language ability of many of the children**, often presented from a **deficit** perspective.

- The perceptions of teachers in urban contexts were significantly more negative than their rural counterparts in relation to almost all aspects of children's oral language skills.

- Teachers with more experience of teaching in a disadvantaged context, and those teaching junior classes also had significantly more negative perceptions of children's facility with some aspects of oral language than teachers with less experience of teaching in a disadvantaged context, and teachers of middle and senior classes.

The implications of such negative perceptions of children's oral language abilities, presented from a deficit perspective, are profound. Teachers in these schools self-report to having lower expectations for these children, and 'dumbing down' their teaching, with the result that children

may fail to achieve their potential.   These negative perceptions potentially have the effect of paralysing teachers into inaction, their attention focussing on the perceived deficits of the children rather than on ways of supporting children towards meaningful language development.

Consensus in the literature with regard to pedagogy for the development of oral language skills suggests that a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning in the form of an interactive classroom context where collaborative group work focuses on the joint construction of meaning, provides a context which offers optimum opportunity for successful nurturing of children's oral language skills. Teacher **knowledge of pedagogy** requires teachers to engage frequently in tasks such as pair and group work, scaffolded, exploratory learning, and exposure to literature and drama, among others.

Findings from the teacher survey indicate that the **majority of teachers use these approaches** in their classrooms. However, in line with earlier findings by the NCCA (2005) – see p. 26 of this document – and the DES (2005) – see p.12 of this document

- many teachers report using these approaches *sometimes* rather than *often*, for example, almost half of the teachers (49.1%) reported using group work 'sometimes' rather than often (see also NCCA, 2005), and

- a substantial minority of teachers appear to use some of these approaches quite infrequently - 21% use drama less often than once per week, and 23% have children listening to poetry less than once per week (see also DES, 2005)

- teachers report that DEIS classrooms are very well resourced for oral language learning but again a substantial minority of teachers (25%) indicated that children are not in classrooms where a range of enrichment activities are freely and easily accessible and

- an even larger percentage of teachers reported that the layout of the classroom does not change frequently (48%), reducing children's access to a variety of interactional contexts on a regular basis.

- The number of teachers in DEIS contexts at both junior (59.3%) and senior class (40.7%) level continuing to work to teacher-pupil ratios above the optimum level is

disconcerting. This undoubtedly militates against the type of pedagogy essential to the development of oral language skills in these contexts.

These findings suggest that while the majority of teachers are aware of and use appropriate pedagogical approaches in their classrooms, the findings corroborate those of the NCCA (2005) and the DES (2005), that a substantial number of teachers are not engaging in these approaches with sufficient frequency, and for some children optimum conditions for oral language development in terms of pupil-teacher ratio and classroom environment are not in place.

Research findings are unequivocal that parents can make a difference to the success of their children in school. Because variation in home patterns of interaction can lead to differential preparation of children to engage with the system of school, it is important that teachers would have **knowledge about parents** - what parents can do to support children's oral language development, and how this support can be generated and sustained. It is clearly articulated in the literature that to harness parental support, schools need to reach out to parents in ways that signal a desire for meaningful partnership, that indicate a belief by teachers (and children) that parents *can* help, and that schools provide the necessary support for parents to fulfil this role.

- **Very little evidence of sustained, meaningful school-parent partnership** was evident in the survey responses received.

- Formal interaction with parents about children's oral language development occurs predominantly through parent-teacher meetings once or twice annually

- Teachers' perceptions of parents are that the majority are either reasonably or very interested in the academic progress of their children yet

- Parents rarely initiate interaction with teachers about children's academic development

- Teachers' perceptions of parents are that parents are not as aware as they might be of the importance of oral language development for their children yet

- **Very little evidence emerged of an attempt by teachers to communicate this knowledge to parents outside of formal parent-teacher meetings, or to facilitate parents to support children in their developing language skills**

- In those few instances where schools indicated an attempt to reach out to parents, generally teachers reported that this was positively received.

School-parent partnership is fundamental to successful development of children's oral language skills. Ideal conditions for the promotion of oral language skills (e.g. exposure to language and literature, opportunity to use language for meaningful communicative purposes, feedback when interacting with others) are such that they are best delivered when the school works in conjunction with the home for the benefit of the child. In line with findings from an NCCA (2008) study on school-parent contact in disadvantaged contexts, findings from this study, which highlight the low frequency of school-parent contact about children's language development, are cause for concern. Given that parents are reported to be interested in their children's academic progress and respond enthusiastically when school outreaches to them, but rarely initiate interaction with the school on that basis, it would appear that schools need to devise means of reaching out to parents more frequently, especially those parents who are willing and interested in helping their children, to support such parents in a way that will contribute to their children's development.

In the context of developing children's oral language skills, many **challenges** for both teachers and children in DEIS schools were highlighted by teachers.

- Teachers acknowledged having *lower expectations* for many of these children,

- Teachers talked about *dumbing down* their use of language in the classroom, and

- Teachers reported experiencing *difficulties with classroom management*.

The impact of the frustration of poor facility with the required language skills in the classroom on many of the children, as reported by teachers, included

- *Reduced achievement* of potential for these children,

- Significant *communication difficulties*,

- *Low self-esteem*,

- *Lack of confidence*, and

- *Poor behaviour*.

Findings indicate that teachers perceive the language skills of many of the children as poor, many are not sufficiently clear about the content of language teaching required to alleviate the mismatch which occurs for these children in school, may not engage sufficiently frequently in those pedagogies which are found to develop oral language skills effectively and fail to reach out meaningfully to parents in an attempt to garner support for the development of children's oral language skills. In many cases, high levels of frustration are experienced by both teachers and children as a consequence. It is abundantly clear from the survey findings that teachers are aware of lacunae in their knowledge about the development of children's oral language skills. Teachers call repeatedly for **support** in relation to the content and pedagogy of oral language teaching in the survey findings, and express frustration with curriculum documents in terms of the level of support they offer.

It is clear that there are significant challenges facing teachers of children in contexts designated as disadvantaged, and that many of these challenges are associated with children's facility with the kinds of oral language skills required in the school context. It is clear also that teachers need to be supported when dealing with these challenges. It appears that this support must come at least to some extent, in the form of improved teacher knowledge of language in all its facets.

Impact of Teacher Support

Given findings about the importance of teacher knowledge in the literature, and the indications from the survey of insufficient levels of knowledge among teachers for effective development of children's oral language skills in contexts designated as disadvantaged, the impact of providing support to teachers was explored using a case study approach.

Teachers in the case study confirmed findings from the survey that the oral language challenges of DEIS contexts are very much in evidence. Supporting teachers to overcome these challenges through improved knowledge of language had a powerful impact on these teachers. Teacher support took the form of building teacher content knowledge about oral

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language, and encouraging teachers to introduce changes to practice which would facilitate oral language development. The result of this intervention support was that all case study teachers improved in terms of knowledge of language and the pedagogy of language, many of them indicating that they now know a lot more about the language skills they are trying to promote in their classrooms.

- Teachers were much more aware than previously of what needs to be taught in oral language and of how that teaching and learning can best occur.

- Teachers indicated improvement in planning and target-setting

- Teachers' awareness of the importance of oral language became more acute

- Teachers were more willing as a consequence to devote time to oral language in the classroom and to seize opportunities as they presented for oral language development

- Teachers used a wide variety of approaches systematically and frequently, designed to maximise oral interaction through collaborative learning in their classrooms

From reflections in teacher journals and during a plenary seminar at the conclusion of the intervention, the impact of improved knowledge of language in the form of empowerment among the teachers was manifested in abundance. Teachers were energised, enthusiastic, invigorated and confident in facing the challenges of oral language development in their schools and classrooms in a knowledgeable, focussed and systematic manner. When support is Amyilable, teachers, aware of the importance of oral language development, are anxious to work on it, open to learning about it, and willing to take risks trying out new content and approaches in their classrooms. This suggests that:

Not only do teachers need knowledge about language (literature review), and want knowledge about oral language development in the classroom (survey), but they welcome such knowledge when it is available in an accessible way, and are empowered through this knowledge to find renewed vigour and confidence to face challenges and implement policy (case study).

A significant effect of empowerment through knowledge on these teachers was recognition that the oral language challenge is an issue that must be tackled by schools and teachers – not a problem to be blamed on children and their families.

- Teachers in the case study readily recognised that the power to alleviate the challenges of oral language in DEIS schools lies firmly in their hands and repeatedly articulated this.

- Knowledge of language enabled teachers to see the difficulties children were presenting with, to recognise that these are not issues of special needs, but language issues that arise predominantly as a consequence of the meeting of different sets of experiences and expectations, and to have confidence to work around the children's needs.

- Children in these classes were not judged negatively, but supported by knowledgeable practitioners to be the best they could be.

- Teachers were often surprised and even amazed at what children could actually do with language when scaffolded and facilitated in the process.

Some of the challenges of working with oral language in the DEIS classroom identified in the survey were faced through the support given to teachers in this project.

- Teachers became aware of the fact that they had been 'dumbing down' and simplifying their language when interacting with the children. For many of the teachers the quality of their interaction with the children improved.

- Teachers also became aware of the extent to which they may have had reduced expectations for these children. This changed during the course of the project and teachers could see from children's responses to the oral language tasks that there was far greater potential to be developed in the children than they may have thought previously.

Children, too, benefitted from the impact of teacher support in this study. All of the children in the intervention group

- encountered more high quality language through literature, poetry and from the teachers over the course of the project

- had many opportunities to use language for meaningful communicative purposes, through pair and group-work, drama, and collaborative learning in a range of curricular areas

- received feedback when they spoke, from teachers who were aware of the need for scaffolding to extend and develop children's contributions as well as to elicit the best quality contribution the children could make and

- were exposed to and encouraged to introduce features of academic style of language frequently in their classroom talk.

Among the children, teachers reported

- increased levels of confidence and self-esteem,

- much enjoyment in the talking activities in the classroom, and

- greater willingness to talk up.

- behavioural difficulties did not feature as a consequence of increased interaction in the classroom for the majority of the teachers – on the contrary, children relished the opportunity to engage in talk as part of the learning process in school.

Teachers gave many examples of how the quality of children's language improved over the course of the project, and all were satisfied that children's language skills were enhanced by the process.

Children in the intervention group showed clear evidence of a range of characteristics of academic style of language use when engaged in typical school-type talking tasks. The importance of this study is that it is apparent that this learning can take place given appropriate conditions.

Findings from an analysis of the oral language samples elicited from the children present clear and compelling evidence of oral language development, particularly development of academic style of language among the children who participated in the project. A comparison of pre-and

post-test samples of oral narratives, word definitions and picture description tasks indicated that in these oral language tasks children in the intervention group spoke with

- greater elaboration

- more clarity of lexicon

- increased coherence

- less vagueness of reference

- more complex syntax

- better organisation of information

While the improvement was undeniably small, nonetheless it was there, and it was considerably more in evidence among the children in the intervention classes than it was among the control group of children. It is to be expected that the development of facility with such a language style would of necessity take longer than one school year to acquire.   The extent to which children in the study displayed evidence of a developing facility with this style of language would suggest that the nature of change in teacher behaviour as a consequence of improved knowledge may have had an impact on the oral language development of the children' language skills.

The impact of teacher support on parental involvement featured as a focus of interest in this study also. While the parental involvement initiative was short, it yielded much information on the importance of reaching out to parents, relating to them meaningfully as partners in the process of their children's education, highlighting their awareness of the importance of oral language development, and facilitating them effectively in fulfilling a supportive role. The outcome for all involved was positive, and all teachers involved reported an intention to repeat the process during the next school year:

- Parents were very supportive of the initiative to become involved, and large numbers took up the challenge to work with their children in enhancing oral language skills, and maintained this involvement over the period of the initiative.

- Teachers were delighted at the enthusiasm of the parents' response to the initiative and convinced of the efficacy of having oral language activities not just as an integral

part of what happens in the classroom, but as a meaningful way of linking classroom activity with home activity for children.

- Children were happy to have a teacher-parent partnership forged so that a connection between home and school was established.

The findings from the Case Study in the three DEIS schools which participated in this study were overwhelmingly positive, from the point of view of the teachers, the children and the parents. These findings were derived qualitatively and refer only to the particular schools participating in the project. However, the fact that similar findings emerged across all three schools presenting with different profiles, in different locations, and the degree of enthusiasm for the process indicated through in-service sessions and noted in teachers' reflective journals, certainly suggests that, as in the work on literacy of Kennedy & Shiel (2010), customised provision of meaningful in-service support for teachers in contexts designated as disadvantaged can have a powerful impact on the entire school community.

Lessons for Policy Makers: Recommendations of Study

Responses to the nationwide survey highlighted the severity of the frustration experienced in many classrooms in DEIS schools in relation to oral language development. The consequences of the frustration on both the teacher and children are profound. Findings in the literature suggest that significant teacher knowledge is required for effective teaching of oral language in school. The experience of the case study in this project indicates that when teachers were empowered with knowledge about language, the practice of oral language development improved, with the consequent effects of enhanced oral language skills on the part of the children and reduced levels of frustration on the part of both teachers and children. Survey teachers called repeatedly for support in the teaching of oral language. This support is needed in order to ameliorate the prevailing situation regarding the development of oral language skills for children in DEIS schools in Ireland.

Arising from findings in this study, the following recommendations are presented.

Professional Development for Teachers – Subject Matter

Specific findings in this study highlight the urgent need for strong, supportive professional development for teachers which will help them to implement policy on oral language development in primary classrooms in DEIS contexts. The strength of the findings from the study is that they provide first-hand evidence from teachers in the system of education in Ireland which

- emphasises the urgency of the need for this support, and

- points more precisely to the specific nature of professional development required in order to maximise the return for enhanced development of children's oral language skills.

Conclusions based on findings from a synthesis of research on professional development to improve student achievement suggests that "teacher professional development can improve student achievement when it focuses on teachers' knowledge of the subject matter and how students understand and learn it" (AERA, 2005, p.3). Findings from this study lead to the following recommendations:

❖ **Teacher professional development needs to emphasise building teacher knowledge of the content of language**.

Findings clearly point to this lacuna in teacher knowledge as having strong implications for learning in schools in the DEIS context in Ireland. Teachers need to be clear on the content of their language teaching – **discrete language skills to be developed, and specific targets to be set**; on the importance of giving enough focussed, dedicated time to oral language activities in the classroom; and on the potential of oral language as a tool for learning so that not all learning centres around written activities.

Teachers need to become familiar with the existence, legitimacy, and significance of language variation and its impact on learners in the school context. The deficit view of many teachers in relation to the language skills of the children they teach is counter-productive. Teachers need to be empowered with knowledge of **the characteristic features of literate/academic style of language required for success in the school context**, and to be aware of the need for formal, explicit targeted teaching of the features of this style of language where appropriate.

❖ **Teacher professional development needs to focus on how children learn**

Teacher knowledge of the pedagogy of language teaching and the very important role of home-school partnership in enhancing children's oral language development needs to be a focus of teacher professional development. Teachers need to be reminded of the critical importance of a **social-constructivist approach to the pedagogy of oral language development** and to be encouraged through professional development to emphasise an interactive rather than a transmission model of teaching.

It is enormously important that teacher knowledge of the **role of home-school partnership for enhanced oral language development** would be advanced. Teachers need to be enabled to reach out for parental support in children's oral language development. Teachers need to communicate with parents about the development of children's oral language skills - informing parents of its importance, indicating to them that a home-school partnership is to be welcomed, and providing parents with support on an ongoing basis which enables them to fulfil this role. Not all parents will respond, but many will, and very many will welcome the opportunity and support to contribute to their children's educational progress.

Professional Development for Teachers – Delivery

Support for teachers comes through a number of channels, all of which need to examine ways of up-skilling teachers such that requisite professional expertise is developed.

At **pre-service** level, curricular English is one of a large number of curricular subject areas which form part of a three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Education Degree Programme, offered in five colleges of Education in Ireland. Given findings on the significance attaching to language development in the primary school experience of children, and the urgent need on the part of teachers to be equipped with as much professional knowledge on the subject as possible, it is recommended that

❖ **At pre-service level, time allocation for curricular English would be increased, that it would be dispersed throughout the three-year cycle of pre-service education, and that class sizes would be reduced**

to facilitate meaningful engagement by undergraduate students with the subject matter of curricular English – oral, reading and writing. It is suggested that the time allocation for curricular English in colleges of Education would reflect proportionately that time allocation

recommended for the teaching of English in the curriculum documents (See Primary School Curriculum, Introduction, p. 70).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that learning to teach is a continuous process, not confined to initial teacher education (e.g. Conway et al., 2009, p.xviii) and that the concept of 'knowledge' is not fixed or absolute (e.g. Friere, 1972, p.46). Thus, the critical supportive role of **continuing professional in-service development** (OECD, 1991, cited in Coolahan, 2007, p.7) must be harnessed in tandem with pre-service provision to offer maximum support to practising teachers for the delivery of high quality language teaching to children in DEIS contexts.

Current provision for the professional development of teachers in schools in Ireland is the remit of the Teaching Council, which in Section 7(2)(h) and 39 of the Teaching Council Act sets out that it "shall advise the Minister in relation to … the professional development of teachers", this to include promoting the continuing education and training and professional development of teachers. This commitment, however, has not yet been commenced by the Minister for Education and Science (See http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/section1/default.asp?NCID=558). The work of the Primary Professional Development Service provides support for teachers currently in relation to Oral Language Planning. (For an outline of recommendations, see http://ppds.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=223&Itemid=325). In the context of DEIS schools, it was indicated at the outset in an Action Plan (DES, 2005) that "extra resources will be made available for intensive professional development programmes for teachers" (DES, 2005, p.39). A commitment to extending the availability of the First Steps programme (Speaking and Listening, 2nd edition, 2006), a research-based approach which offers "teachers an accurate means of assessing and monitoring children's competencies and progress in oral language, reading, writing and spelling" (ibid., p.40) was also made in the action plan. While much support has been offered to schools to date, the support is heavily weighted in favour of developing reading and writing skills. This year, 2010, is the fifth and final year of the DEIS Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. To date, 25 teachers have been trained as tutors in the oral language component of the First Steps programme as compared with 334 teachers who have been trained as writing tutors and 161 teachers who have been trained as speaking and listening tutors. In line with recommendations by the NESF (2009, p.161) that support for literacy should be given a high priority in the professional development for teachers

by the Teaching Council and others responsible for continuous professional development of teachers, findings from this study lead to a recommendation that

 ❖ **the delivery of professional development for teachers in the area of oral language development in DEIS contexts would be prioritised as a matter of urgency by all agencies responsible for teacher professional development in Ireland.**

Requisite knowledge will not be developed solely through either pre-service provision or one-off, voluntary attendance at a summer in-service course. Therefore, it is recommended that

 ❖ **continuing professional development support should be delivered in DEIS schools on a mandatory basis during the school year, so that all teachers are up-skilled on an ongoing basis and that**

 ❖ **optimum conditions for the development of this teacher knowledge would take the form of on-site delivery where the whole school-staff is involved**.

It is most urgent that this

 ❖ **support should be targeted as a priority in urban contexts, with particular emphasis on teachers of junior classes and those teachers with more than five years teaching experience in disadvantaged contexts, where teacher perceptions of children's language are most negative**.

Clearly, there are cost implications for such an undertaking, which are not calculated in this report. It is recommended that the possibilities of e-learning and peer mentoring might be examined as potential cost effective and efficient ways of delivering professional development to teachers. The long-term impact of the extent to which professional development for teachers will effect change in practice over time would need to be assessed.

To facilitate outreach by teachers and schools to parents for the development of children's oral language skills, teachers need time to prepare and collaborate with other teachers, most notably with Home-School-Liaison teachers – to prepare materials for parents, to review parent responses, and to get feedback on the process from parents and children. To that end, it is recommended that

 ❖ **improved support for schools in the DEIS category is provided so that teachers can reach out meaningfully to the parents of the children they teach.**

The role of the curriculum documents in supporting teachers to implement oral language policy in DEIS schools needs to be addressed also. Findings from this study suggest that it is important to

❖ **revisit curriculum documents in English, such that issues of accessibility of these documents are improved, as well as consideration given to the specific challenges of curriculum delivery in the context of disadvantage.**

Findings from this study also point up a number of issues which need to be addressed to enhance the practice of oral language development in DEIS schools. The following recommendations are made in relation to these issues:

It is of critical importance that

❖ **optimum teacher-pupil ratio would apply in all schools in the DEIS category**

in order to maximise the possibility of meaningful interaction in these classrooms. Reduced pupil-teacher ratio, combined with increased numbers of classroom assistants could have a significant impact on the quality of language learning taking place in DEIS classrooms.

To counteract the high turnover rate of teachers in DEIS schools, and to ensure that teachers in those schools remain energised and invigorated, it is recommended that

❖ **the sabbatical leave option as originally envisaged in the DEIS action plan (DES, 2005, p. 12) should be introduced with immediate effect**

The impact of frustration due to oral language skills in many classrooms as reported in the survey findings is such that it appears necessary to recommend in line with recommendations in the NESF (2009) report, that

❖ **in DEIS contexts, where oral language skills are particularly challenging, teachers would be facilitated to allow more time for the teaching of English as required.**

The fundamental significance of having facility with appropriate language skills for learning, for the acquisition of literacy, and to access the curriculum effectively is such that the development of such skills needs to be prioritised in those contexts where it is militating against the achievement of children's potential. In addition to increasing time allocation, which may be implemented with approval of the DES, it is suggested that increased emphasis on oral language in subjects throughout the curriculum would be encouraged.

To co-ordinate and manage the successful development of oral language skills throughout primary schools in DEIS contexts in Ireland, it is recommended that

❖ **schools would be encouraged to dedicate a post of responsibility to the development of children's language skills.**

The role of such a post-holder would be to ensure that teachers have access to the requisite knowledge for successful oral language development, that teachers are supported in reaching out to parents, and that a coherent, progressive approach to oral language development is established and maintained throughout the school.

This study was exploratory in nature and small in scale. However, its findings were unambiguous and incontrovertible. The impact of facility with oral language in the context of school is unquantifiable. To scaffold the development of requisite oral language skills in children for whom they may not be immediately accessible is mandatory. Enhanced teacher knowledge is key in this process. The knowledge required is complex and multi-faceted, but developing this knowledge among our teachers is imperative. The rewards deriving from such knowledge are far-reaching into the future lives of many of our children – we owe it to them to aim high. This project took a first tentative step on that road and found that it is possible …

It has been a journey for me, yet I feel I am only starting out. I am excited at the prospect of doing it again next year. I guess it really is true – the more you know, the more you know you don't know! (final quote from one teacher's journal).

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