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**Literacy in transition, literacy at the transitions:
(Dis)continuities in literacy's position in the broader curriculum**

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Literacy¹ has been conceptualised and reconceptualised, positioned and repositioned, backgrounded and foregrounded in myriad ways in Irish schools over the past decades and centuries. While it has always tended to dominate school timetables, the lack of variation seen in literacy's time allocation has not been replicated in the varied roles and purposes that it has held in different iterations of the school curriculum. From the initiation of the Payment by Results programme in 1872, through to the publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum* in 2015, the nation's priorities for literacy, as captured in the curriculum, have continued to evolve.

Yet one does not need to look *back* in time to uncover shifting conceptualisations of literacy. Surveying children's experiences of literacy in the current day, from the time they enter pre-school, to the time they leave post-primary school, we see further variation in the nature of literacy learning at different points in schooling. Varying conceptions of literacy span the spectrum of the formal education system in Ireland, particularly as literacy relates to the broader curriculum, and purposeful communication outside of 'formal' literacy time.

¹ While the terms 'literacy' and 'language' may connote different skills and conceptualisations of communication, in line with recent policy (e.g. the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and reviews of research (e.g. Kennedy et al., 2012), the current article uses both terms to refer to communication using both print and spoken language (as well as other products of language).

The current article adopts a longitudinal and cross-sectional lens to examine the role that literacy played, and plays, in the broader curriculum. It does not purport to be conclusive in findings about the nature of literacy instruction during a given time period, or at certain levels of schooling. Rather, it provides an illustrative account of *some* of the ways that literacy is and was conceived at points of major transition in Irish schooling; historical points of transition in curriculum, and contemporary points of transition in the school system. These transitions serve as an interesting and useful focal point for the consideration of literacy teaching, the broader curriculum, and the connection between the two.

Literacy in transition: From 1872 to 2018

The following section presents a critical overview of the connections that were forged (or indeed were not forged) between literacy and other areas of the school curriculum since 1872, as well as the role that literacy played in the curriculum at large.

Literacy during Payment by Results, 1872-1899

Few periods in Irish educational history illustrate the decontextualization of literacy skills as clearly as the Payment by Results era (1872-1899). During this period, teaching came to be characterised by didactic approaches and rote learning, with a significant emphasis on the three Rs (reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic).

There were ostensibly noble aims for changes to policy and practice in Irish schools during this period. On foot of significant concerns about the academic achievement of the young people in Ireland, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education in Ireland (1870) recommended the establishment of a new accountability system for national school teachers. Part of their salary was to be reserved for payment pending the satisfactory performance of children in their class on academic tests (Coolahan, 2009; Áine Hyland & Milne, 1987). The curriculum implemented during this period was notably narrow, consisting of reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic as the sole *core* subjects at all class levels, with no reference to speaking and listening skills. Children's competence in these aspects of literacy were examined annually by the local inspector. The relatively limited view and

purpose of literacy skills are captured in the following extract from the programme for Third Class (as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1987)

3. *Writing* – To exhibit in copy-books, as a rule, at least one hundred pages in round hand or elementary small hand, written on one hundred different days since the preceding annual inspection – each page to be signed and dated by the pupil; and to write, with careful imitation of the head-line, in presence of the Inspector, any one of those copies selected by him.

Demonstration of the above competence, by one child, would have supplemented the teacher's salary by one shilling and six pence. The focus on testable, constrained skills during this period was considerable. It is generally acknowledged that Payment by Results led to improvements in literacy nationally (Áine Hyland & Milne, 1987; Walsh, 2007); yet the degree to which these literacy skills were *purposefully* used (across the curriculum, or generally), with *understanding* is less certain. Inspector's reports at the time decried the mechanical nature of children's reading and lack of creativity in their writing (Coolahan, 2009). It is reasonable to conclude that literacy existed for literacy's sake; strong connections with the broader curriculum were neither an ambition nor a reality.

Literacy during the Revised Programme of Instruction, 1900-1922

Concerns about the over-emphasis on textbook use and a lack of emphasis on practical skills, as well as a growing recognition of the limits of the Payment by Results system, led to curriculum change at the turn of the nineteenth century (Áine Hyland & Milne, 1987; Walsh, 2007). The Belmore Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (1898, cited in Walsh, 2007) recommended that the array of subjects on offer in national schools should be broadened in order to counter the perceived bias in favour of literary content. This led to the inclusion of subjects like woodwork, domestic and agricultural science in schools' curricular provision. Little change was made to the substance of the curriculum for literacy, which was to consist of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and composition, though improvements in the general methods and atmosphere for the teaching of English were noted (Walsh, 2007). The implementation of the Programme was hampered by a lack of professional development and local contextualisation for what were, at the time, poorly trained teachers and under-resourced schools (Walsh, 2012). The curriculum *outside* of literacy received the most attention

during this period, as teachers grappled with subjects for which they were poorly prepared. However, this focus was about to change.

Literacy and nation building: The Irish Free State, 1922

Literacy, or language, was to take on entirely new role and complexion upon the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Áine Hyland & Milne, 1992; Walsh, 2016). The Programme of Instruction published by the new Government radically changed and shaped the way that literacy was to influence the broader school day. In an effort to strengthen the sense of Irish identity conveyed in the curriculum, and ultimately, to Irish school children, *Gaeilge* was given a minimum hourly allocation for the first time, and infants were to be taught entirely through the language. The curriculum was also narrowed, dispensing with the more extensive child-centred subjects associated with the 1900 Programme (Walsh, 2007).

Teaching through Irish had ramifications for the broader curriculum, most of which were not positive. Early amendments to the Programme forced an acknowledgement that the teaching of history and geography through Irish would have to be implemented on a phased basis, while a review of the Programme conducted by the National Programme Conference (1926, as cited in Hyland & Milne, 1992, p. 104) highlighted that “the effort to teach History, Geography, or Mathematics through Irish resulted in an indifferent teaching of these subjects, and, consequently, in giving colour to some adverse criticism of the general teaching standards of our schools”. The curriculum for English during this period was notably restricted, as seen in Figure 1, below.

STANDARD VI.

Oral English.

- (a) To read with intelligence a suitable reader or storybook. Conversation as in Standard V. Explanation. Spelling.
- (b) To memorise sixty lines of poetry.
- (c) Such elementary portions of grammar as are necessary for the correction of errors made by the pupils in speaking and writing. Easy exercises in analysis.

Written English.

- (a) Dictation.
- (b) Narrative. Simple description of familiar scenes and incidents. Letter-writing.

Figure 1: Extract from the Programme of Primary Instruction; Department of Education, 1956, p. 9)

During this period, language and literacy served to strength Irish culture and nationalism, not to serve as an aid to broader learning. This subservience of all other curriculum learning was noted by Walsh (2012, p. 182):

... the trend throughout the period was to focus less time on all subjects except the Irish language. This disregard for the broader education of pupils arguably had a detrimental effect on the general education imparted in the period and did little to prepare pupils for their future lives and careers.

Fortunately, with the introduction of the 1971 Curriculum, more holistic views of literacy and its role in children's learning were about to take hold.

Curriculum na Bunscoile (1971): Language and literacy in the two orange books

The 'new' curriculum (Department of Education, 1971) heralded a far more nuanced and integrative conception of literacy than any previous programme. Language was formally recognised as playing a pivotal role across the curriculum:

In the curriculum, every lesson is a language lesson and language should be taught in and through all aspects of the work. Here we think not of isolated "subjects" correlated to some degree, but of learning areas closely interrelated by a common bond - language. The language of instruction and learning is not merely a thing learnt but a means of learning: it permeates much of the child's activity inside and outside

school, and it profoundly affects him in the formation and expression of his thoughts and feelings. Thus, the development of the child's personality through language will be the teacher's first concern.

(Department of Education, 1971, p. 81)

The focus on language development was dotted throughout different parts and subjects of the two curriculum books; discussions and conversations on curriculum topics, in particular, were instanced on several occasions. Turning to print, the curriculum formally stated a role for *reading* in supporting learning and curriculum achievement:

Reading in the primary school is concerned in the first place with *learning to read* – with the drills and mechanics of the various skills involved and with the development of skill in comprehending what is read. Much more than this, however, the primary school pupil must acquire the skills of *reading to learn* – of locating and recording useful information, of organising it and integrating it in his total learning and in his written work. (p.89)

Similarly, writing was to support the completion of 'project work' in various curriculum subjects. Though the bifurcation of *learning to read* and *reading to learn* would not garner modern-day support, the curriculum clearly had noble aims for the role that literacy could play across its various subjects.

Of course, these aims may not have been entirely achieved. Walsh (2012) cites a number of studies conducted during the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum* which found a mismatch between the key ideas and principles of the English curriculum and teacher practice. These mismatches were also highlighted and delineated by the Report of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990), which, referring to Department of Education Inspectorate reports, highlighted that:

"in comparison with the emphasis on learning to read, the area of skills involving 'reading to learn' (study skills, reading in the content areas, skills of locating, organising and remembering key features) is less well catered for." (p.25) and subsequently recommended that "greater provision should be made for skills involving 'reading to learn'" (p.26)

Nonetheless, the 1971 curriculum provided the first formal direction to teachers to integrate literacy with the learning that was happening across the school day, week and year. This principle was to be re-endorsed three decades later, with the next major curriculum change.

Literacy integration at the turn of the 20th century: A 'broad and balanced' curriculum

The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) expanded the breadth of the subjects children would experience, yet it maintained many of the core principles of its predecessor. Notably, in the context of the current review, the English curriculum statement (Department of Education and Science, 1999) highlighted the need for children to *learn* language, but also to learn *through* language in primary school. This aim was praiseworthy, but its practical exemplification in the curriculum, and its actual realisation in classrooms fell somewhat short. For example, subject area documents explicitly omitted details of the language/literacy development that was expected in the documents. For example, the science curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 10) stated: "Language is such a pervasive influence in the teaching and learning process that particular examples of the integration of science with language are not delineated in the curriculum statement." While this explanation may be understandable, given the constraints of any one curriculum document, it meant that teachers were given little direction on how language and literacy could or should be developed across the curriculum. This lack of support led to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to the integration of English with other subjects, as well as associated time pressures, as noted in the first phase of the Primary Curriculum Review (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005, p. 22):

The integrated nature of the Primary School Curriculum should be exemplified for teachers to a much greater extent than it currently is in the curriculum documents. This should help alleviate the time pressures experienced by teachers and should also support the development of children's English language skills throughout the day, in all curriculum subjects, rather than in a discrete manner through English alone.

The role and place of language and literacy in the curriculum, and the nature of its relationship with other subjects, was to come under considerable scrutiny just half a decade after this review, when attention turned to children's literacy achievement in a particularly vociferous way.

Curricular Priorities: PISA and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Cited as a "black mark" on the education system, then TD Ruairi Quinn's comment, as reported in the Irish Times (Flynn, 2010), captured the overall sense of disappointment associated with the results of the 2009 Programme for International Assessment in Ireland (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). In response, the Department of Education and Skills published a draft Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2010) that had wide-ranging implications for the role literacy was to play in the curriculum. Controversially, this draft proposed the removal of drama as a discrete subject, and the alteration of other subject content to take account of time allocation reductions. The draft also stated:

While the curriculum emphasises the importance of an integrated approach, there is little evidence of a focus on literacy/numeracy development outside of the teaching of English and mathematics. (p.28)

While some of the more controversial proposals did not make it into the final draft, and a desire for a broad curriculum was clearly stated, the document nonetheless re-iterated a primacy for literacy skills above all others (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 44):

We have to acknowledge that understanding and using literacy and numeracy are such core skills that time for their development must be safeguarded, sometimes by delaying the introduction of some curriculum areas and always by ensuring that the teaching literacy and numeracy is integrated across the curriculum.

The strategy stated that teachers needed further support in integrating literacy with other subject areas, though professional development of this nature was not formally provided at primary level. In the absence of such CPD, and without formal changes to the actual curriculum, schools moved to reallocate time to literacy, and increase its integration with other subjects, without a coherent framework or specific guidance on how this might best be achieved. Concerns have been expressed

and about the erosion of the holistic vision for the curriculum articulated in 1999 (Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013), and to date, there is a dearth of research on how successfully and thoughtfully the integration of literacy with other subjects has been completed.

The Primary Language Curriculum – Recent Curriculum Reform in Literacy

On foot of recommendations from the NLNS (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) significant curriculum reform has been undertaken in recent years. Extensive reviews of the extant literature (Kennedy et al., 2012; Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012; Shiel, Cregan, McGough, & Archer, 2012) provided the basis for development of the *Primary Language Curriculum* for junior infants to second class (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2015). However, it is worth noting that some of the recommendations and conclusions from the former reports did not make their way into the latter curriculum, and indeed, that some aspects of the final draft of the curriculum had little or no footing in the same research reports. Each of the reports highlighted the contribution that cross-curricular activities could make to language and literacy development, while Ó Duibhir and Cummins (2012) placed particular emphasis on the role that Content and Language Integrated Learning could play in the promotion of *Gaeilge*. While this cross-curricular language development is acknowledged in the Primary Language Curriculum as one of three types of integration, both qualitatively, and quantitatively, far more attention is given to *cross-lingual* transfer or integration. There is arguably *less* of a cross-curricular language and literacy learning focus for first language English settings in the 2015 curriculum than there was in the previous curriculum. The curriculum focuses almost entirely on second language learning, through CLIL, with only sporadic explicit references to first language English learning in other curriculum subjects. An obvious response to this criticism is that any or most of the learning outcomes for oral language, reading and writing could be *applied* in a cross-curricular sense. However, the foregoing review has made clear that implicit curricular principles may be neglected in the crucible of practice, particularly as they relate to the integration of language and literacy with other curriculum subjects.

Literacy in transition: What can we learn from recent (and not-so-recent) curriculum, policy and practice?

Three tentative conclusions can be made in light of the forerunning review; that the relationship between language, literacy and other curriculum subjects has been characterised by tensions at various points in the past 150 years, that our conceptions of language and literacy in the broader curriculum have evolved substantially over time, and that ‘mention’ of cross-curricular language and literacy in a document does not necessarily mean that it will be meaningfully integrated in practice. These points need to be borne in mind in upcoming curriculum review and professional development for teachers. We also need to consider how meaningful and non-hegemonic links can be forged between literacy and the broader curriculum, in a way that bolsters holistic, integrated learning for children (Burke & Welsch, 2018).

Literacy at the transitions: From pre-school to higher education

When we look up and down the different stages of the formal education system in 2018, three key transition points emerge; from pre-school to primary school, primary school to post-primary school, and post-primary school to higher education. Literacy has a particular role to play in each major transition.

Ensuring continuity between pre-school and primary school requires careful consideration (Kennedy et al., 2012), but conceptions and beliefs around literacy may not be similar in both settings. A nationwide survey conducted by Ring and colleagues (2016) on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs revealed differences in opinion on priorities for literacy development on either side of the pre-school/primary school transition. When reviewing the importance of different academic skills for school readiness, educators working in early years settings were significantly more likely to state that children should be able to read and write letters than their counterparts in primary schools. Analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data led the authors to conclude that early years educators were more likely to value formal literacy skills as a component of school readiness, when compared to primary school teachers, and that different conceptions existed around the purpose each professional had in supporting children’s literacy development. Ring and colleagues (2016) suggest that an over-extension of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy has led to early years educators commencing commercial phonics schemes in an effort to support literacy development,

despite the fact that primary school teachers were likely to discourage this practice. Primary school teachers felt they may have to “unteach” skills learned in early years settings (Ring et al., 2016, p. 151). Ring and colleagues concluded that “there was little communication between the educators in both sectors” on the issue of formal academic skill development on either side of the pre-school/primary transition (Ring et al., 2016, p. 151).

Literacy also plays a large role in the next major transition. Children’s attitudes to literacy at the age of nine, in primary school, are predictive of their attitudes at age 13, in post-primary school. Analysis of data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey (Smyth, 2017) highlights that earlier engagement or non-engagement with literacy skills carries through to post-primary school. The importance of literacy skills in this transition was underscored by Smyth (2017, p.75), who noted that “acquiring positive attitudes to reading ... at primary level was significantly related to liking school after the transition to second level”.

Teachers at primary and post-primary level may, at times, have limited understanding of the nature of teaching and learning on either side of the sixth class – first year boundary, particularly as it relates to the curriculum (Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, 2008; Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004). On foot of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the NCCA (2014) has invested significant effort into supporting the transfer of information from primary to post-primary school, via the ‘Education Passport’. This report offers far more transfer information than was previously required, yet the information conveyed about literacy is relatively narrow in nature, as seen in Figure 2.

English	P	1	2	3
	Communicates with others in a clear and effective way			
Understands what is said by others				
Reading				
Writing				

Standardised test scores			
	STen Score		
	2nd class	4th class	6th class
Maths			
English reading			
Irish reading*			

STen scores: 1-3 Well below average, 4 Low average, 5-6 Average, 7 High average, 8-10 Well above average
 *Irish reading test for Irish language medium primary schools only.

Figure 2: Transfer information on literacy in the Education Passport (NCCA, 2014)

Once children *do* transfer to post-primary school, it is worrying to note that many subject-area post-primary teachers tend not to view the development of literacy skills as part of their job description. McMahon (2014) reported that post-primary teachers included in his study tended to have narrow conceptualisations of literacy, passing responsibility for its development to special education teachers, and paying little heed to the way that literacy served to construct and de-construct knowledge in particular subject areas. The compounding of literacy difficulties at post-primary level may contribute to challenges at the next transition, with some concerns expressed about the literacy skills of students entering higher education (Aine Hyland, 2011).

Literacy at the transitions: What can we learn from current practice?

While the review above is brief, it does signal a number of challenges for the development of children's literacy across their school-going years. Looking cross-sectionally at the school system, we see that at least some professionals working with children at different points of schooling tend *not* to fully understand where children are coming from, and where they are going when it comes to their literacy development. Though transition points in schooling have received markedly increased attention in recent times (Aine Hyland, 2011; O'Kane, 2016; Smyth, 2017), and literacy has been noted as an important focus at each point of change, less attention has been given to the precise nature of teaching and learning in literacy from sector to sector.

Implications for current and upcoming curricular change

When we look at historical curriculum change at primary level, the line of development is punctuated by sometimes radical shifts in priorities and understanding, particularly as they relate to literacy in the curriculum. In years to come, the current period will be noted as another important point in the evolving understanding of literacy's position in the broader curriculum. If the period is to be reflected upon favourably, what do we need to get right?

At the time of writing, the Primary Language Curriculum for third to sixth class (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2018b) has been released for consultation. The draft makes more explicit references to the use of literacy "across the curriculum" than its junior infants to second

class equivalent, but the success of such teaching and learning will depend on the resources and professional development made available to teachers in its implementation. As noted previously, while there has been a general acknowledgement for many decades that literacy has a pivotal role to play in the broad curriculum, the way this is represented in curriculum documents, and ultimately enacted in schools, is not always in line with a given curriculum's principles and vision. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy called for greater integration of literacy with other subject areas, but to date, concrete scaffolding for this integration has not been captured in any curriculum or policy document. The potential for greater literacy integration at the senior of the primary school is extensive (Burke & Welsch, 2018); policy and practice need to reflect this in the coming years.

Of perhaps equal, if not greater significance are plans to considerably alter the overall structure and time allocation of the primary school curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2016). These proposals include a move to a primary curriculum delineated more clearly into stages, alongside more flexible use of curriculum time, decided at a local level by the school. While these proposals are at a nascent point of development, an emerging preference for a three stage model (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2018a) would see children transition from an integrated, play-based curriculum in pre-school and junior primary school to a curriculum based on broad subject areas in middle primary school, and through, finally, to a subject-based curriculum in senior primary school. Rethinking how literacy is represented across the curriculum, at each stage, will be important to ensure that children's literacy learning is broad-based and meaningful at each point, and also, that further discontinuities are not introduced as children progress from one stage to the next. It will also be important to ensure that the flexible allocation of time to literacy will allow for its integration with other subjects in a way that actually transfers to practice. Communication of the changes in approach at every level will be crucial. Increased awareness of goals for literacy at each stage will be necessary if we are to avoid inconsistencies in approach and understanding from one educational setting to the next.

Meaningful and purposeful literacy in a broad curriculum

Appropriately capturing and explaining literacy in the curriculum is a complex endeavour. A full conceptualisation of literacy must draw on a range of sometimes competing perspectives, from the sociocultural to the cognitive (Kennedy et al., 2012). Yet few would disagree that constructing and conveying *meaning* is a key tenet of literacy teaching and learning. Billman and Pearson (2013, p. 30) argue that we must “make certain that students are using literacy to do good things”; isolated and decontextualized literacy teaching may provide a flawed view of literacy’s purpose for learners. As we face into a period of further transition, we must keep this principle to the fore of the debate on literacy’s position in the broader curriculum.

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