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An Exploration of the Place of Children's Literature in Early Reading Policy in the North and South of Ireland

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Abstract

This article focuses on a recent SCoTENS (Standing Conference on Teacher Education in the North and South of Ireland) collaborative project on children's literature within educational policy, in both the South of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It explores the place, profile, and prevalence given to children's literature in key curriculum and policy documents on the teaching of reading in the early years. The article begins by considering the extent to which teachers in both jurisdictions are encouraged to use children's literature when teaching early reading. It then discusses the availability of Continuing Professional Development to support teachers in this task. The findings of this desk-based exploratory study revealed implicit rather than explicit support for the use of children's literature in early reading instruction at curriculum policy level in both jurisdictions, and were used to inform a cross-border teacher-education conference.

Keywords: early reading, curriculum, reading comprehension, children's literature, the simple view of reading

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The position occupied by children's literature within key educational policy documents on both sides of the Irish border is the focus of this article. Specifically, it examines the extent to which children's literature is represented in these documents as a key component in the teaching of reading for four to eight year olds, particularly with regard to the development of vocabulary and comprehension skills. As such, it interrogates the extent to which teachers in Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland are encouraged to use children's literature in the teaching of early reading. It also explores the potential of rich and varied, authentic children's literature to promote deep and meaningful literacy learning and the need for teacher professional development to realise this potential.

Exploring the place of children's literature within curricula and associated policy documents is important because if the use of children's literature is *assumed*, rather than *prioritised,* within such documents, it is likely that the breadth and depth of young children's reading experiences involving literature will depend largely on the knowledge and expertise of individual teachers. As a result, there may be variation both within and across schools in terms of subject knowledge and quality of provision (Education and Training Inspectorate [ETI], Northern Ireland, 2018).

The article begins by outlining what is intended when referring to "children's literature". It then introduces a dominant theory of literacy known as the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) and how this is conveyed in reading curricula in both jurisdictions. Next, it considers children's literature as a modus operandi for implementing a balanced approach to literacy and the extent to which this is emphasised in curricula and other key policy documents. Finally, it discusses the need for professional development for teachers so that children's literature is used effectively in the teaching of early reading in classrooms in Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland.

Defining Children's Literature

As a first step, it is necessary to address the complex issue of what is meant by high-quality children's literature. Schneider (2016, p. 22) captures its essence succinctly by stating that it "is high art, extraordinary writing, and everything in-between". She goes on to problematise the fact that arriving at an agreed definition is difficult since this umbrella term encompasses multiple genres and modalities that fulfil a myriad of functions. According to Bearne and Styles (2010, p. 22), high-quality children's literature is "written to entertain the young", whilst "the most rewarding literature… informs, inspires, nourishes and pleases". When young children interact with such materials, their perceptions of the world, whether through lived or vicarious means, are widened and reshaped continuously (Kiefer et al., 2007).

To choose suitable top-quality literature, educators must know the hallmarks to look out for when searching for texts to populate their classrooms. The UK-based Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) (2020) provides a helpful guide that includes the following characteristics of a well-stocked classroom library:

- a broad and diverse range of authors, illustrators, and genres that mirror children's interests and enable self-reflection and perspective-taking
- multi-modal formats that present information in a range of appealing ways, complemented by high-calibre artwork
- language-rich texts that contain rhyme, rhythm, and pattern, which in turn encourage word play and exploration

- potential to support a variety of reading (and re-reading) experiences within and beyond the curriculum, allowing for a variety of creative and bespoke responses.

The Simple View of Reading Theory

Despite decades of "reading wars" promoting one or other theory of reading development, there is now a general consensus in the research literature that children's early reading instruction should involve a combination of skills-based and meaning-focused teaching in a motivating and supportive environment (Torgerson et al., 2019). The Simple View of Reading (SVR), first developed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), which has now re-emerged in current literature (see, for example, Hoover & Tunmer, 2020; Moats & Rosow, 2020; Rose, 2017), constitutes a simple, quantifiable representation of the complex act of reading. Its formula states that reading comprehension is derived from the interaction between decoding and language comprehension. If either component is low or lacking, however, overall reading comprehension is negatively affected. In concert with Gough and Tunmer's (1986) message, a report of the influential US-based National Reading Panel concurred that phonics programmes that emphasise decoding exclusively and ignore the other processes involved in learning to read will "not succeed in making every child a skilled reader" (National Reading Panel & National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, 2000, p. 113). The consensus that successful and meaningful reading comprehension depends on the robustness of both components continues to be widely endorsed. This is despite the fact that the SVR has often been analysed, expanded upon, and updated (see for example Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Moats & Rosow, 2020; Scarborough, 2001), with Hoover and Tunmer (2018, p. 311) commenting that "there is much more to understand about reading than what is represented in the SVR".

While the SVR promotes a balanced, holistic approach to reading, it has often been misinterpreted in the literature (Catts, 2018), in the media (Hanford, 2018a, 2018b; Sohn, 2020), and in the classroom as emphasising an approach to reading that is decoding-focused *only*. While phonics is a very important aspect of reading instruction, it is also limited in that it represents only one part of the reading puzzle, which alone will not transfer to comprehension achievement (Suggate, 2016). As such, it must be complemented with the unconstrained skills (Paris, 2005) of comprehension and vocabulary development, from the earliest possible juncture, to create life-long readers (Shanahan, 2019).

The Teaching of Reading as Framed in Curricula

In the South of Ireland, the primary language curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2019) replaced the previous primary-school

curriculum specifications in Irish and English (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). Curriculum redevelopment was a priority emerging from the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life (2011–2020)* (NSLN) (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011b). The primary language curriculum encourages a balanced approach to early literacy teaching as its learning outcomes incorporate both constrained and unconstrained skills. Indeed, the curriculum emphasises that "unconstrained skills, such as comprehension and vocabulary, develop across the lifespan of the child" while "constrained skills, such as letter knowledge and conventions of print, are essential because they are fundamental to children's subsequent learning and development" (p. 18). However, to prevent the potential of over-emphasising decoding to the detriment of language comprehension in the early years of schooling, a useful precaution might have been to state explicitly within the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) that both sides of the SVR's equation need substantial attention. In the support materials that are available online, there is a more obvious acknowledgement of this principle. A guide for good practice published by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to support the curriculum, on the other hand, clearly outlines the need to balance constrained and unconstrained skills (NEPS, 2015).

Direct comprehension instruction, although a vital aspect of the reading process, can often be neglected, particularly in the infant classroom where a great emphasis is placed on phonics. However, the development of comprehension skills can be comfortably integrated with oral language lessons, reading, writing, and *Aistear*[1] (NCCA, 2009), ensuring time for all curricular areas (NCCA, n.d., p. 12). While the learning outcomes outlined in the curriculum documents refer to the full range of reading skills and strategies, it may be challenging for teachers to comprehend how much attention to give to each learning outcome label to achieve a balanced approach to early reading instruction. It is worth noting that although the progression continua give further details on all of the prescribed reading skills and strategies, these are not available in the hard copy of the curriculum.

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the primary curriculum document (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2007) does not contain the term "balanced literacy"; neither does it suggest a combination of instructional practices that cover whole language and phonics to varying degrees (Fountas & Pinnell, 2016) nor include a reference to the SVP. However, it does cite a range of instructional approaches, along with explicit reference to increasingly complex phonic skills and comprehension strategies, as cornerstones in the literacy repertoires of early years' teachers. Specifically, in the Foundation Stage (4–6 years), it is recognised that "children should have opportunities to listen to a range of interesting and exciting fiction, non-fiction, poetry and rhymes, retell familiar stories and share a wide range of books with adults and other children" (CCEA, 2007, p. 20). This philosophy is

1 Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in the South of Ireland.

extended in the Key Stage 1 (6–8 years) section, where mention is made of the need for children to "read and be read to from a wide selection of poetry and prose" while also having the opportunity to "read, explore, understand and make use of a range of traditional and digital texts" (p. 54). The document goes on to raise the expectation of engagement with texts by stating that children should be facilitated to "explore and begin to understand how texts are structured in a range of genres". Furthermore, they are required to "begin to locate, select and use texts for specific purposes" (p. 54). However, such directives rely upon teachers' own knowledge of a broad and varied array of suitable texts – including high-quality children's literature.

Children's Literature in Curriculum and Policy Documents

Children's literature can contribute to a child's linguistic competence, which will enhance their comprehension of text, the ultimate goal of reading (the product of the SVR's equation). Studies that used dialogic reading with children's literature have reported significant, positive effects on children's language, phonological awareness, print concepts, comprehension, and vocabulary outcomes (Hall & Burns, 2018; Swanson et al., 2011). Indeed, the potential of high-quality children's literature in reading instruction may be best understood in the context of *Scarborough's reading rope* (Scarborough, 2001), which expands upon Gough and Tunmer's (1986) SVR. Within Scarborough's (2001) model, language comprehension is explained in terms of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and knowledge in relation to genre and conventions of print, all of which can be taught explicitly within the context of high-quality children's literature (Cabell & Hwang, 2020).

A number of research papers underpin the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) in the South of Ireland, and these consistently communicate the need to ensure that teachers use high-quality children's literature in their teaching of reading. It is deemed a powerful vehicle through which learners "encounter a standard and style of language not readily available in typical interpersonal interaction, which benefits not only first language learners but also children who are learning English as an additional language" (Cregan, 2019, p. 27). The emphasis in such papers may have emerged from concerns related to a review of the implementation of the previous English curriculum (DES, 1999). The review (DES, 2005) revealed a limited number and range of books in one fifth of classrooms, with inspectors reporting that poor provision and use of resources were hindering implementation of the English curriculum in these classrooms. Significantly, difficulties with regard to the teaching of reading were identified in one quarter of the classrooms observed. In these instances, there was evidence of mechanical reading of texts and a lack of variety in the reading material provided. In addition, there was a lack of emphasis on higher-order questioning or on the use of reading material such as children's literature as a stimulus for discussion and analysis.

Despite the prominence given to children's literature in the research reports commissioned during curriculum redevelopment, the primary language curriculum itself (NCCA, 2019) does not explicitly refer to the use of children's literature as a crucial resource in the teaching of early literacy. Instead, it refers to "texts", which are defined as "all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, Braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital" (p. 20) and to "genre", which refers to a "selection of oral and written forms in order to recount, explain, entertain, inform, give instructions, narrate, persuade and justify opinions. Oral forms include, but are not limited to, storytelling, drama, poetry, speeches, debates, film and digital media such as podcasts, videos, advertising, television and radio broadcasts" (p. 20). While the definitions of these terms are useful in terms of their holistic connotations, they may not be direct enough to ensure that children's literature is a widely used resource in Irish classrooms now and in the coming years. The context report from the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) in 2014 (Kavanagh et al., 2015) indicated that published reading schemes were used on most days to teach reading in just over three quarters of second classes, while two in five pupils were in classes in which workbooks or worksheets were used with the same frequency. Commercial reading schemes were used three times as often as children's literature in teaching reading, with almost one quarter of teachers reporting using children's literature once a month or less. Given these findings, it would have been beneficial to specify the use of high-quality children's literature in the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) and in the NSLN (DES, 2011b), especially since the latter stipulates that "all learners should benefit from the opportunity to experience the joy and excitement of getting 'lost' in a book" (p. 43).

In Northern Ireland, a pilot study influential in the restructuring of the first two years of the primary curriculum grew out of concern that children in socially deprived parts of Belfast were not thriving on a formal approach to teaching in general and to reading in particular. The experts who reviewed this project, known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum, advised the postponement of formal reading instruction and of the use of commercial reading schemes. However, while they suggested that children avail of more "oral language and emergent literacy activities" instead (Sproule et al., 2005, p. 2), there was no mention of the use of children's literature to support this goal. This pilot project informed the creation and design of the subsequent Foundation Stage when the curriculum was redeveloped in 2007. Although a variety of reading materials and experiences are prescribed within the primary curriculum, children's literature, per se, is mentioned only three times – once in Key Stage 1 (6–8 years), and twice in Key Stage 2 (7–11 years).

Several years later, a national literacy and numeracy strategy document entitled *Count, read: Succeed* was launched by the Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland (DE, 2011). Despite its broad and comprehensive perspective on how to raise standards in these two key areas, the promotion of literacy skills using children's

literature was expressed generically. That is to say, although pupils were expected to "use language associated with texts", "recognise some forms and features of texts", and "use evidence from texts", the authors defined "texts" as materials that "refer to ideas that are organised to communicate and present a message in written, spoken, visual, digital and symbolic forms" (p. 68). In addition, it is perhaps noteworthy that the strategy only mentions the word "enjoyment" once in the beginning (draft) levels of progression, in relation to the cross-curricular skill of communication. Interestingly, enjoyment is referred to more directly with regard to the function of school and public libraries as opposed to the use of literature in class. It is noted that library facilities can provide pupils with "free access to a wide range of high-quality information and reading resources…to improve their reading and also foster their imagination, natural curiosity and an enjoyment of reading" (p. 15). The Chief Inspector's 2016–2018 report (ETI, 2018, p. 64) cautioned that "where children's reading and writing are confined to a narrow range of texts and genres, the development of comprehension skills, including inference, is compromised and there is limited opportunity for the children to articulate, refine or justify their reasoning".

Thus far, we have discussed how curriculum and policy documents in the South of Ireland and in Northern Ireland approach the teaching of reading in the early years, and specifically how these relate children's literature to the teaching of reading more broadly. We now narrow the lens to focus on how children's literature might be used to teach different aspects of the language comprehension component of the SVR, while examining the extent to which a requirement to do so is communicated in curricular policy in both jurisdictions.

Vocabulary Development and Children's Literature

High-quality children's literature can have a significant effect on young children's vocabulary development as it exposes pupils to sophisticated and complex language, which can enhance their language comprehension (Serafini & Moses, 2014). It also presents the teacher with opportunities to enhance their pupils' vocabulary development within an engaging and meaningful context (Gamble, 2019). Cregan's (2019) report, *Promoting oral language development in the primary school*, which underpins the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) in the South of Ireland, contends that book reading enhances vocabulary development. More specifically, it is argued, book reading presents opportunities to repeatedly expose children to vocabulary items, which can strengthen vocabulary learning, especially in the case of unfamiliar words that children tend not to use in their conversational speech.

Research has shown that the quality of book-reading interactions during the early school years predicts vocabulary outcomes and that these in turn can predict later reading outcomes (van Kleeck, 2008). It is critical that the book discussion is dialogic and interactive in nature, however, with feedback provided by the teacher (Reznitskaya,

2012). This form of book discussion is recommended in *Oral language development in early childhood and primary education 3–8* (Shiel et al., 2012), another document underpinning the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019). Analysis of the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) teacher questionnaire data for Ireland showed an increase in the amount of vocabulary instruction that pupils in fourth class in primary school receive (Delaney et al., 2022). The nature of the instruction involved is not clear, however. It is possible that the frequently used reading schemes, workbooks, and worksheets reported by Kavanagh et al. (2015) are the instructional materials in question, rather than high-quality children's literature.

In the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019), the learning outcome related to vocabulary is labelled with reference to the acquisition of "appropriate vocabulary to support the comprehension of text" (p. 26). Within the support materials, there is an oral language outline related to a story drawn from a children's literature text in which teachers are guided in how to use children's literature to maximise oral language development. Support material that focuses specifically on vocabulary recommends that vocabulary is best developed through interaction within meaningful contexts, such as pretend play, read aloud, guided reading, shared writing, and writing workshop (NCCA, n.d., p. 78). At the time of writing, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is providing a suite of webinars on a range of topics that incorporate vocabulary instruction (https://www.pdst.ie/primary/literacy/plc-webinars). Vocabulary instruction itself does not have a dedicated webinar, however, which is hardly ideal given its critical importance in reading development (Lindsey, 2022). There are some slides and one video available from 2014 (https://pdst.ie/primary/literacy/vocabulary) but further support, in the form of additional webinars and videos of good practice, would enhance the likelihood of teachers actively using children's literature as an effective tool to develop vocabulary.

In Northern Ireland, the fifth strand specifically outlined in the Talking and Listening element of the Foundation Stage literacy curriculum is entitled, An Extended Vocabulary. As well as providing opportunities to listen, respond, and interact with others using fiction and non-fiction texts, teachers are encouraged to create "focused experiences to introduce or generate vocabulary". It is anticipated that by doing so, children will "express themselves with increasing clarity and confidence, using a growing vocabulary and more complex sentence structure" (CCEA, 2007, p.19). The use of such an expanding and increasingly precise vocabulary range is also expected to spill over into their discussion and writing as they move up into Key Stage 1. Similarly, the cultivation of cross-curricular vocabulary is stipulated as part of the statutory requirements in primary school. So while there is an expectation that vocabulary is taught, there is no specific reference to the use of children's literature as a teaching resource.

Comprehension Instruction and Children's Literature

Children's literature creates authentic, engaging contexts for comprehension instruction (NEPS, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2010). The read aloud format provides a context for introducing comprehension strategies that children will later employ when reading independently. Research has established the benefits of text-based discussion for comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2017) for all pupils, including those reading in a second language, as cognitively challenging discussion supports inferential thinking which is essential for text comprehension (Collins, 2016).

In the South of Ireland, PIRLS 2016 teacher questionnaire data revealed that over two thirds of fourth-class pupils listened to their teacher read aloud almost daily, which may indicate that this is a common practice in Irish primary schools at least at some class levels (Delaney et al., 2022). While this might positively influence children's comprehension development, the data also revealed that longer fiction books (such as novels) were used daily in reading instruction by only one third of teachers. This could reflect a preference for commercial reading schemes for the teaching of comprehension, especially when considered in light of the NAMER 2014 data suggesting that commercial reading schemes were widely used in Irish classrooms (Kavanagh et al., 2015). While these studies do focus on older children (and took place before the primary language curriculum was in place), their findings may contain clues to a broader leaning amongst Irish teachers towards commercial readers over children's literature when teaching comprehension.

The primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) states that pupils in the junior classes should be required to "draw on background knowledge as well as a range of comprehension strategies to engage and create meaning when working with a range of texts" (p. 27). However, as previously noted, the use of high-quality children's literature is not mentioned in the core policy document, so, understandably, there is a risk that only levelled texts or class readers, rather than children's literature, would be used to achieve this learning outcome. That said, the research papers supporting the curriculum do explicitly state the importance of reading children's literature aloud in developing comprehension skills and strategies (see for instance Kennedy et al., 2012). The support materials related to the primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) also contain some useful resources for teachers that promote the use of children's literature in the development of early reading skills. Most notably, there is a suite of videos on critical thinking and book talk, developed by Mary Roche (NCCA, 2015). There are also useful resources in relation to the use of picture books and wordless picture books when introducing and supporting new comprehension strategies (NCCA, n.d., p. 6).

Prior to the introduction of the primary language curriculum, the PDST created a series of workshops focused on comprehension based on the Building Bridges model (Gleeson & Courtney, 2010) and a video focused on effective practice for reading aloud. The PDST publication, *The reading process* (PDST, 2014), emphasised that "a

wide variety of texts…including picture books can be used for comprehension strategy instruction" (p. 12) and samples are presented of high-quality children's literature.

In Northern Ireland, the primary curriculum (CCEA, 2007) refers to the need for children at Key Stage 1 and 2 to "use a range of comprehension skills, both oral and written, to interpret and discuss texts" (p. 54). Individual strategies, namely predicting and inferring, are mentioned only in passing, however. The complexity and richness of understanding required on behalf of the reader when engaging with texts is not fully captured in the wording of this document, it seems. In terms of support materials, the CCEA website, updated and restocked in February 2020, does contain a swathe of video clips, exemplifying reciprocal reading skills in action, with teachers making use of high-quality children's literature.

From this review of children's literature in curriculum and policy documents in both Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland, it seems there is much implicit support for the idea that children's literature can enhance the teaching of early reading in many ways. However, teachers need to feel confident in choosing and using children's literature for reading instruction. This points to the importance of considering the professional development needs of primary school teachers in the early years' classroom.

Continuing Professional Development for the Teaching of Reading

Teachers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practice (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011). The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) in its 2009 publication, *Occasional paper on literature and literacy in primary education,* proposes that teachers have an obligation to "help each other build a richer conception of literacy learning, one in which creativity and the imagination have central roles" (p. 3). The UKLA postulates that this challenge can be met through comprehensive approaches to reading that include both "efferent" and "aesthetic" goals. That is to say, by employing a wide and exciting range of high-quality children's literature, it is possible to teach children about concepts, facts, and the meaning of texts read, while also evoking in them emotional responses during the reading of such materials.

In the South of Ireland, the NSLN (DES, 2011b) emphasises the need for teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to ensure that literacy is being taught effectively. The NSLN increased the number of summer professional development courses that focused on literacy. Also, specific units on the teaching of literacy were developed and included within the induction programme that is now available to all newly qualified teachers during their probationary period (DES, 2011a).

The primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2019) was initially developed for junior

classes only, with a version being released for consultation in 2014. Following this, the NCCA compiled an interim report on the issues related to its dissemination (NCCA, 2014). The most frequently suggested improvement related to effective communications about the curriculum. Many respondents to the consultation also suggested that comprehensive professional development would be required moving forward including online demonstrations, online toolkits, and online tutorials. Teachers, particularly, wanted guidance on comprehension, oral language, and phonics. No data have been gathered on whether or not the current available suite of resources is deemed adequate by teachers. To date, most resources are either in written document format or in demonstration video format, with a comparative lack of resources in presentation format to support the teaching of reading. In-service support for implementation of the primary language curriculum (2019) was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but is currently being rolled out in some schools. It consists of a series of webinars, facilitated by school-closure days for CPD, and sustained remote support by PDST advisors. The NSLN (DES, 2011b) is currently being updated and consultation with stakeholders is nearing conclusion. The emerging observations report (Government of Ireland, 2023) found that there was an almost unanimous call from stakeholders for comprehensive supports for schools and early learning and care settings to enable staff to implement the successor Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy Strategy effectively. Respondents to the consultation also highlighted the need for professional development opportunities based on evidence-informed approaches, with a focus on "just-in-time professional learning that is tailored to the specific role of staff" (p. 5).

In 2016 in Northern Ireland, *Learning leaders: A strategy for teacher professional development* was launched (DE, 2016). The out-workings of this document were halted, however, with the collapse of the Northern Executive in January 2017. The strategy was to be relaunched in 2020, but was postponed due to the restrictions necessitated by the pandemic. Currently, a conceptual framework has been issued for public consultation (see Campbell et al., 2022). The framework is based on the vision that "every teacher is a learning leader" (p. 4) and, to this end, there are 15 policy commitments. Its objective is to provide "a structured framework for teacher professional learning; [to] develop the leadership capacity of teachers; and [to] provide practice-led support within communities of effective practice" (p. 10).

In the meantime, the Northern Ireland Education Authority has sourced professional reading materials and resources along with an array of CPD online training opportunities for educators to access on their website (https://www.eani.org.uk/). That said, those related to reading tend to have a special educational needs focus or lean toward other aspects of literacy provision such as spelling instruction. Anecdotally, some schools are buying in the expertise of educational consultants to fill this gap. In the academic year 2018–2019, CCEA produced a report outlining findings from its ongoing curriculum-monitoring project. Among the report recommendations, there is a pledge to increase the quantity and accessibility of professional learning opportunities as well as to

make resources easier to navigate (CCEA, 2020). As previously mentioned, the CCEA website resource portal was upgraded in 2020 and further support is offered there.

In response to the desk-based research reported in this article, the authors organised an online teacher-education conference on September 16, 2021, entitled, An Exploration of the Use of Children's Literature in Early Reading Within a Balanced Literacy Framework in the North and South of Ireland. Discussion at the conference, attended by over 100 highly enthusiastic teachers, confirmed the critical need for professional development on the use of children's literature in early reading. Sharing their current practices in a conference survey, the majority of attendees reported using children's literature for purely motivational purposes, with very few reporting that they had used children's literature to develop comprehension strategies or vocabulary in a focused manner. A majority also reported feeling obliged to spend most of their instructional time on word recognition activities to the detriment of language comprehension and ultimately reading comprehension. For a full discussion on the findings of the survey, see Concannon-Gibney and Magennis, 2022.

Conclusion

This article sought to explore the presence of children's literature within educational policy around early years' literacy in both the South of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Analysis of key curriculum documents indicates that curricula across Ireland encourage attention to both aspects of the SVR (word recognition and language comprehension). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of explicit reference to how these components should be balanced and, in particular, to how high-quality children's literature might be used to teach the language comprehension aspect in a practical sense. Perhaps this is the reality of trying to corral an animal as unruly as curriculum development, despite policymakers' best efforts. What is written in the curriculum may be open to interpretation for classroom practice (Kennedy, 2014) and curriculum implementation can remain elusive. Consequently, it is possible that children's literature is not as widely used as one might hope in the early years' classroom in relation to the teaching of reading. While there are some useful support materials available to teachers in both jurisdictions, the effectiveness of these in developing reading instructional practices in line with current research is reliant on teacher time and understanding, as well as interest. Input on initial teacher education programmes will therefore have a significant impact. The availability of CPD is an ongoing challenge in Ireland (both North and South) (Government of Ireland, 2023; King 2015). Even so, it is still necessary to pursue any professional development opportunities to facilitate educators to interrogate the intentions of the curriculum in light of current research and support materials at their disposal.

As an attempt to offset what could be perceived as curricular shortcomings, a secondary aspect of this SCoTENS-funded project involved the development of a

teacher-education conference. Its purpose was to encourage teachers, both North and South, to use more children's literature in the teaching of early reading, with a view to ensuring that both aspects of the SVR equation are recognised in instruction. The conference was perceived as timely, and was well attended by teachers. Most notably, as a form of CPD, teachers commented on how the conference had enhanced their confidence to make more time for children's literature, and to use it to fulfil a wider range of learning outcomes in their classrooms than many had previously considered.

While children's literature can provide a meaningful and joyful forum for the development of language comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and reading comprehension, it cannot be regarded as a silver bullet for early reading instruction. Indeed, criticism of the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) has pointed to causes of reading difficulty independent of word recognition or language comprehension, and the need to also consider the role of self-regulation and metacognition in reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). It seems reasonable, however, to argue that early years' classrooms that do not use children's literature to maximise children's reading growth are lacking in some respects, as every child deserves to join "the literacy club" in a joyful and meaningful manner (Smith, 1988). Reading aloud, using high-quality children's literature, has been described as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills [children] will eventually require for learning to read" (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 23). Children who love having books read to them today are the children who tomorrow are engaged in lessons with books and who eventually become lifelong readers (Gamble, 2019).

The Public Library Strategy 2013–2017 (DES, 2015) in the South of Ireland, that aimed to provide a wide range of resources and activities to support primary schools in developing children's literacy, creativity, and communication skills, may have helped to support teachers in developing their knowledge and expertise in the area. Children's Books Ireland provide ongoing webinars, resource and activity packs, and helpful reading lists for teachers. The recent School Library Grant issued in 2022, which provided €20m in funding to schools to purchase books, may also help to ensure that more children's literature features in classroom instruction. This welcome development could facilitate an increase in the number of print books per child in primary classrooms above the 12:1 ratio reported in NAMER 2014 data (Kavanagh et al., 2015). In Northern Ireland, the charity BookTrust NI (https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/booktrust-ni/) works with multiple organisations to provide children and their families with books, resources, and support in the promotion of reading in its many forms. Very little is known about the direct impact of such provision within the primary sector in Northern Ireland, however, the most recent research having been published over a decade ago (Devlin & Crossey, 2010).

Teachers working in the early years' classroom can make literacy learning engaging, enjoyable, and most importantly meaningful. Louisa Moats (2020), one of the foremost

voices in the field of reading instruction in the US in the last 40 years, distils the essence of learning to read (and write) by stating that, "the common denominator… is the ability to recognise, analyse, and produce language in all of its forms". In other words, code breaking and meaning making are "reciprocal and interactive" in nature (p. 10). In what better way can teachers achieve such a fundamental and complex goal than through the use of high-quality children's literature?

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