

'A SECOND REPLICATION OF A SURVEY OF READING COMPREHENSION IN DUBLIN CITY SCHOOLS*

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The survey reported here is the third in a series of surveys of the reading attainment of eleven-year old pupils in Dublin schools. The first survey was carried out in 1964 using the NS6 Reading Attainment Test. A replication carried out in 1969 revealed no significant change in standard over the five preceding years. In the present study, carried out in 1974, eleven-year old pupils (N 1,327) in a representative sample of Dublin city schools again took the same reading test. A significant difference in attainment between the 1969 and 1974 samples, in favour of the latter, was recorded.

Until the 1960s no attempt had been made to measure objectively reading attainment among Irish school-children. The dearth of empirical data in relation to a key area of the curriculum contrasted unfavourably with the situation elsewhere. In England and Wales, for example national surveys of reading comprehension conducted by the Ministry of Education in 1948, 1952, 1956 and 1961 (2) and by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 1955 and 1960 (5) had established national standards and indicated that these standards were steadily improving. Against this background, the Teachers' Study Group, in 1964, conducted a survey of reading comprehension among eleven-year olds in Dublin city national schools (3). This pioneering survey, using the NS6 test which had been used previously in British studies, indicated that the level of English reading comprehension among Dublin children was considerably lower than in England and Wales (The Dublin mean was 87.14 as compared with an English/Welsh mean of 100). At the same time, the NS6 test was re-standardized for a Dublin population, thus enabling the survey findings to be used as a basis for future comparison.

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In 1969, the Teachers' Study Group replicated their 1964 survey and found that there had been no significant change in standards in the intervening years (4). The survey reported in this paper was carried out in May 1974. It is the third in the series and examined levels of attainment in English reading comprehension of Dublin children of the same age-range as those tested in 1964 and 1969 to determine if any changes had occurred in the meantime.

METHOD

Sample

The population consisted of all primary schools in the Dublin City areas, as defined by the Department of Education in February 1974, excluding special and hospital schools and schools catering exclusively for infants. The 211 schools thus included were divided into four size categories. The criterion of size used was the number of teachers who taught pupils of standard two upwards in a school. A 12½% sample was randomly selected from within each category, yielding 26 schools in all. It was not possible to carry out testing in one school in the 1-2 teacher category thus reducing our sample to 25 schools (Table 1).

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS ACCORDING TO SIZE IN POPULATION
AND IN SURVEY SAMPLE

Size of school (i.e., no. of teachers in school)	Schools in Dublin area	Schools in sample
1 - 2	22	2
3 - 6	82	10
7 - 12	67	8
13+	40	5
	211	25

All children aged 10 years 9 months to 11 years 8 months attending these schools were selected for inclusion in the survey (N 1,405). This was the age-range tested in the surveys of 1964 and 1969. A total of 1,296 (973 boys and 523 girls) was present on the testing date. Of the absentees, 31 (17 boys and 14 girls) were tested subsequently. The total number tested was thus 1,327.

Test

The test used was the NS6 Reading Attainment Test designed and standardized by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales and used by that body in national surveys in 1955, 1960 and 1970/71 and by the Teachers' Study Group in the previous surveys of this series. It consists of 60 incomplete sentences, the missing word to be selected from five given alternatives *

Procedure

Test administrators were appointed for each school and were carefully briefed regarding the background to the survey and the testing procedure to be followed. These administrators were either members of the Teachers' Study Group or teachers in the school concerned. Testing was carried out in the majority of the schools on the morning of 22 May 1974, and in the remaining schools within seven days of that date. Absentees were tested on their return to school if they returned within seven days.

RESULTS

The results of the present survey were compared with those of the 1969 one. In the latter survey, the mean of 99.12 ($SD\ 15.47$) had been found not to differ significantly from the norms established in 1964 ($M\ 100, SD\ 15$). The mean recorded in the present (1974) survey, however, was 106.74 ($SD\ 15.91$). Based on the calculation of a confidence interval around the 1969 mean, the 1974 mean was found to differ significantly, at the 0.1 level, from the earlier one (cf. 1, pp. 151-153).

TABLE 2

FREQUENCIES OF SCORES IN THREE SCORE RANGES
1964, 1969, 1974

Score range	Percentage scoring within range		
	1964	1969	1974
115+	15.87	15.62	31.50
85-114	69.10	69.29	60.70
-84	15.03	15.09	7.80

* On this occasion approximately one in three (N 420) of the achieved sample also took the vocabulary sub-section of the Drumcondra English Test, Level III, Form A. The equating of results from the two tests creates the possibility, in future replications of the survey, of replacing the NS6 with a newer, Irish designed and nationally normed test.

A comparison of the frequencies of scores in different score ranges for 1964, 1969 and 1974 indicates that the improvement in test performance in 1974 occurred right across the range of reading ability

The mean score for boys (N 790) in the present survey was 107.11 (SD 17.120) and for girls (N 537), it was 106.20 (SD 13.947). Since the mean for boys was found to fall within the confidence interval of the mean for girls, it is concluded that the difference in scores between the sexes is not statistically significant. Neither was there a significant difference between the performance of 31 absentees (M 106.88, SD 16.70) and the performance of the rest of the sample (M 106.74, SD 15.90).

Finally, the performance of pupils in schools of different size was examined. The following were the size categories of schools used: small (1-2 teachers), medium (3-6 teachers), moderately large (7-12 teachers) and large (13+ teachers). An analysis of variance of attainment score by school size yielded a significant F-value (F 34.35, df 3,1323, $p > 0.001$). Scheffé post-hoc comparisons indicated that pupils in small schools performed significantly less well than pupils in the other three categories. Pupils in the medium-sized schools performed significantly less well than pupils in the remaining two categories, but there was no significant difference between the performance of pupils in the moderately large schools and the performance of pupils in the large schools. It must be pointed out, however, that in the case of the small school category, the number of pupils participating in the survey (N 15) renders unreliable any conclusions drawn from their relatively poor test performance.

DISCUSSION

The results of a series of surveys of the reading attainment of eleven-year old pupils in Dublin schools over a period of ten years suggests that, whereas there had been no improvement between 1964 and 1969, a significant improvement did occur between 1969 and 1974. Any discussion of possible causes for this improvement would necessarily have to proceed within a frame of reference wider than that of the present study. It might be suggested that the improvement is due to changes in classroom practice following the introduction in 1969 of the new primary school curriculum. Or perhaps wider societal factors may have been effective in 1974 as opposed to 1969 or 1964.

Since the more recent British surveys (6) have indicated that standards among British children have stopped improving and may, in fact, have begun to drop, it is clear that a considerable narrowing of the gap (revealed by the 1964 Dublin survey) between standards in Britain and standards in Ireland had occurred by 1974. It is to be hoped that the next survey in this series scheduled for 1979, will indicate a continuation of this trend.

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