LITERACY IN IRELAND
COUNTRY REPORT
SHORT VERSION

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Ireland is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: “ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference”.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG’s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate Long Reports for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published Short Reports covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels; both are to be found in the section “Good Practice”.

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1 For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
2 In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as “HLG report”.
3 This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf
4 “Equity” was added by ELINET.
2 General Information on the Irish Education System

As shown in Figure 1, in Ireland, early years education begins at age 3, while children may begin primary schooling at age 4. All children are expected to enrol by age 6. The first two years in primary school (the Junior and Senior Infant classes) are followed by Grades 1-6 (ages 6-12). Post-primary schooling extends from Grades 7 to 12 (ages 12-18) years, with Grade 10 functioning as an optional transition year between low and upper secondary schooling.

Figure 1: Structure of the Ireland school system

In Ireland all forms of early childhood education and care services (0-5 years) are optional. With the exception of state-funded classes for children in disadvantaged areas (Early Start) and programmes for children with special education needs, pre-school services are provided by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary interests and are described variously as crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools), playgroups and day care services. The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) was introduced in January 2010. Under the scheme, all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September of the relevant year are entitled to a free pre-school year (3 hours per day, 5 days per week for 38 weeks) of appropriate programme-based activities in the year prior to starting primary school. From September 2016, the programme will be extended, allowing all children to avail of the scheme from 3 years of age until they begin primary school (typically at age 5). Parents of pre-school children make separate arrangements with providers for time not covered by the ECCE scheme.

The primary education sector includes state-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. The state-funded schools include religious schools, non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium schools). For historical reasons, most primary schools are state-aided parish schools, although this pattern is changing. The primary school curriculum is divided into the following key areas: Language – Irish and English; Mathematics; Social, Environment and Scientific Education; Arts Education (including Visual Arts, Music and Drama); Physical Education, and Social, Personal and Health Education. Primary schools currently operate for 183 days per year.


The post-primary education sector comprises secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Secondary schools are privately owned and managed. Vocational schools are state-established and administered by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), while community and comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions. Post-primary education consists of a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary), followed by a two- or three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary), depending on whether students opt to attend the optional Transition Year (Grade 10) programme.

During the final two years of Senior Cycle students take one of three programmes, each leading to a State Examination: the traditional Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Performance on the Leaving Certificate Examination provides a basis for entry to higher education. Currently, post-primary schools operate on 167 days per year.

Further education covers education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system. A wide variety of schools, organisations and institutions are involved in the delivery of continuing education and training. Courses in literacy and numeracy for adults comes under the Further Education umbrella.

Higher Education in Ireland is provided mainly by 7 Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology and 7 Colleges of Education. In addition, a number of other third-level institutions provide specialist education in such fields as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music and law.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides for the education of children with special education needs through a number of support mechanisms. Provision may be in special schools, special classes attached to ordinary schools, or in integrated settings in mainstream classes. The National Council for Special Education\(^7\) is charged with improving the delivery of education services to persons with special education needs arising from disabilities, with particular emphasis on children. The Department of Education and Skills manages a scheme – DEIS or Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DES, 2005) - that provides additional programmes and resources to schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

\(^7\) See: www.ncse.ie.
3 Literacy Performance Data

Ireland has participated in IEA’s PIRLS study (which assesses 4th graders reading comprehension) in 2011, in OECD’s PISA study (which assesses 15-year-olds’ reading literacy) every three years since 2000, and in OECD’s PIAAC study (which assesses adults’ reading literacy) in 2012. This means it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers, and to compare relative reading levels for different age groups. Ireland took part only in the last PIRLS cycle: so no trends can be reported for that study.

Ireland performed well above the EU average in PISA 2012 (523 vs 489 EU average). The pattern of Ireland’s results over time is unusual: Irish students’ performance was very high in 2000, then declined significantly in 2009 (-31 score points) and increased again by 28 points in 2012, back to a significantly higher level of performance than the EU average. The gap between Ireland’s mean score and the EU mean in 2012 is the equivalent of nearly one year of schooling.

A limited proportion of pupils (9.6%) could be considered as low-performing readers in 2012. This is less than in EU countries on average (20%). These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text.

The proportion of low-performing readers has slightly decreased between 2000 and 2012 but, consistent with what was observed for overall scores, it increased between 2006 and 2009 (+6.2%), and then decreased again (-7.6%). The changes were not so great among girls but among boys, 13.5% were low performers in 2000, 23.1% in 2009 and 13% in 2012. The proportion of top-performing readers was 11.4% in PISA 2012, higher than the corresponding EU average (7%).

The gap according to the pupils’ socioeconomic background was marginally lower than the EU average (85 vs 89 on average). The gap between native students and students with a migrant background was significantly lower than in EU countries on average (29 vs 38 EU-average) (though some immigrants were from Northern Ireland and other English-speaking countries). The mean score difference between those who spoke the language of the test at home, and those who spoke another language was significantly lower than in EU countries on average (34 vs 54), the equivalent of almost one year of schooling. Trends in the gaps relating to students’ characteristics tend to indicate that the Irish educational system is more equitable than EU countries on average.

In Ireland, the gender gap (in favor of girls) in PISA 2012 was somewhat lower (39 vs 44 on average) than the corresponding EU average difference. The decrease in reading performance observed between 2000 and 2009 was more substantial among boys (-37 score points) than among girls (-27 score points). Boys’ performance increased by 33 points between 2009 and 2012 while girls’ increased by 23 score points, going back mathematically to a gender score difference of 29 points, similar in size to that observed in 2000.

In conclusion, Ireland is a high-performing educational system where reading literacy is concerned: 15 year-olds perform better than EU countries on average. At first sight, results seem very stable over time, with overall scores being very similar in 2000 and 2012. Nevertheless, Irish students experienced a large decline in performance in 2009 before going back to their initial strong level. The proportion of low-performing readers showed the same pattern as overall performance, with a large increase in 2009. The improved performance in 2012 is linked with a low proportion of low-performing readers.
and a high percentage of top performers. The spread of achievement (the gap between low and top performing readers) is lower than on average across EU countries.

The gaps according to migration and language spoken at home tend to be lower in Ireland than in EU on average, though it must be acknowledged that some migrant students come from English-speaking countries, including Northern Ireland. The gap according to socioeconomic status was marginally lower than across EU countries on average. Ireland is more effective, and a little more equitable, than EU countries on average.

In PIRLS 2011, Ireland performed well above the EU average (552 vs 535 EU-average), and was among the strongest-performing EU countries. This good performance is linked to a proportion of low-performing readers below the EU average (15% vs 20%) and a proportion of high-performing readers that was higher than in EU-countries on average (16% vs 9%). The spread in achievement between high and low performers was higher than the EU-24 average difference (192 vs 180).

The gap according to the pupils’ socioeconomic background was close to the EU average (75 vs 76 on EU average) yielding a finding similar to that of PISA. However, as the indices of socioeconomic background are not the same in PIRLS and PISA, comparisons between the two should be taken with caution.

The mean score difference according to gender (in favour of girls) in PIRLS 2011 was somewhat higher than in EU-average (15 vs 12 points). The mean score difference between those who always spoke the language of the test at home, and those who sometimes or never did so was very close to the average for EU countries (25 vs 26).

As far as adults are concerned, Ireland performed below the EU in PIAAC (267 vs 271). It should be remembered that only 17 EU countries took part to PIAAC in 2012, so the comparison with other age groups should be taken with caution. The spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers – was very close to the EU-17-Average (116 vs 117 on average). The proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 in Ireland was 18%, slightly more than the EU-17 average (16.4%).

The performances of females and males were very close (265 vs 268); the gender gap was very close to the EU on average (2 score points) but it should be noted that in Ireland, the mean score difference was in favor of males which is in contrast to what was observed among students in PIRLS and PISA. The gap according to parents’ level of education was lower than in EU countries on average (288 vs 294), similar to what was found with regard to socioeconomic status in PIRLS and PISA. The gap according to the language spoken at home was lower than the EU-17-average (17 vs 28).

While performance on PIRLS 2011 and PISA 2012 in Ireland is strong relative to EU average levels, and national assessments at primary level suggest further improvement in performance since 2009, a number of subgroups continue to underperform. In particular, students attending schools serving large numbers of economically and socially-disadvantaged students (DEIS) underperform relative their non-disadvantaged peers. PIRLS 2011 also suggests that one in six boys in Ireland struggle with reading literacy skills. There is a clear need to build on gains made by students in the most disadvantaged schools in recent years, noting that disadvantaged boys, in particular, may struggle in acquiring basic reading skills. There is also a need to ensure that primary-level students who speak a language other than the language of the PIRLS test at home do not lag behind their peers who speak the test language at home.
The challenge with respect to PISA is to ensure that the levels of performance observed in PISA 2012 are maintained going forward. Again, there is clear evidence of underperformance among students of low socioeconomic status, and steps need to be taken to ensure that these students achieve at a level commensurate with their potential, and that they acquire adequate literacy skills to access the curriculum in all subject areas. With PISA moving to computer-based assessments, and definitions of literacy are changing, there is a need to ensure that all students acquire and can apply the requisite digital skills.

There is a need to interrogate the outcomes of PIAAC in Ireland, with a view to strengthening the focus on building reading skills in adults and, in particular, reducing the proportion of adults performing at the lowest reading proficiency levels.
4  Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development  
(age-specific and across age-groups)

4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

4.1.1 Pre-Primary Years

Providing a supportive home literacy environment: A number of indicators drawn from the PIRLS 2011 study and elsewhere point to a relatively strong environment for literacy in homes in Ireland.

Fifteen percent of parents in Ireland reported having ‘few’ home resources for learning (based on a composite PIRLS 2011 indicator that includes material resources such as the number of books at home in the home and access to the Internet, and human resources such as parents’ education). This was well below the EU Average of 25%. The difference in achievement between students in Ireland whose parents reported having many home resources (42%) and few resources was 92 score points – 13 points higher than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (79). This suggests that, while overall levels of resources for learning at home are high, children in homes with low levels of resources are at a particular disadvantage.

PIRLS 2011 also reported on the percentage of children whose parents (often, sometimes, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school (Mullis et al. 2012a) such as reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys and reading signs and labels aloud. In Ireland 50% of parents engaged in these activities often (EU average = 41%), while 49% did so sometimes (EU average = 57%), and just 1% never or hardly ever did so (EU average = 2%). The Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in grade 4. The average reading score of students in Ireland engaged often in these activities as pre-schoolers was 569, while, for students who were sometimes engaged in them, it was 542 points. The large proportion of parents in Ireland in the sometimes category points to room for improvement in the frequency with which parents engage in literacy-related activities with their children.

There is a need to build on activities in the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020 that are targeted at parents/careers of young children, to increase awareness of the importance of early language and literacy activities for all children. A range of measures should continue to be used to raise awareness including advertising in print, television and social media, and the provision of information to parents by doctors, and by staff in Early Childhood and Care Centres.

4.1.2 Primary children and adolescents

Providing a literate environment in school: Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 98% of pupils in Fourth grade in Ireland were in classrooms which have class libraries – well above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73%. Eighty-seven percent were in classrooms with 50 or more library books, compared with an EU-24 average of 32%. (EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H2 in Appendix C).

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8 Refers to Appendix detailing outcomes of PIRS 2011 for EU countries participating in ELINET (see http://www.elinet.eu/).
Like primary schools, post-primary schools throughout Ireland are linked with a library branch to encourage increased co-ordination and service provision. Partner libraries are required to provide free library services including class visits to the library; access to reading and curriculum support materials; young adult collections and online learning resources; study spaces within the library branch; and resources and assistance to students and teachers for school project work and research (Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020, Circular 0027/2015; DES, 2015a).

The Junior Certificate School Programme, which is implemented in some disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, provides a broad range of resources to these schools, including the services of a professional librarian. The tradition of strong co-operation of schools and libraries in Ireland should continue, as access to a large range of books is critical for developing students' interest in reading. There is a particular need to target adolescents, including boys, whose interest in reading often deteriorates after primary schooling.

There is a need (and an opportunity) for libraries to support schools in acquiring digital resources for teaching and learning across all curriculum subjects.

The Junior Certificate School Programme Library Initiative, which includes the services of an on-site professional librarian, provides a template for extending library services in schools.

**Offering digital literacy learning opportunities at school:** A literate environment can also be created by incorporating digital devices into the school environment. According to teachers' reports from PIRLS 2011, 56% of primary school students in Ireland have a computer available for student use in reading lessons, compared to the EU-average of 45% (Appendix C, Table I6). According to PIRLS 2011, 50% of students in Ireland use a computer at least monthly to look up information. This is above the EU-24 average (39%) but is considerably less than countries such as Denmark (75%) and the Netherlands (78%).

The relative under-usage of computers by primary students in Ireland is consistent with the outcomes of an EU survey of ICT-usage in schools in 2011. The survey found that teachers' use of computers was high in Irish primary schools, while student usage was low (European Schoolnet & University of Liege, 2012).

The results from the 2013 ICT Survey of Schools (Cosgrove, et al., 2014) as well as data from PIRLS and PISA contributed to the formulation of the recently published Department of Education and Skills' Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (DES, 2015). The action plan calls for increased integration of ICT into teaching, learning and assessment practice in schools. There is a need to ensure that students in primary and post-primary schools have access to broad range of relevant digital texts at school, and that they are supported in using them in all subjects across the curriculum.

**Supporting family literacy programs:** In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills produced a handbook, *Family Literacy: Guidelines for Providers*, which makes a distinction between family literacy (language and numeracy) programmes on the one hand, and family learning programmes on the other. While family literacy programmes are defined as supporting the literacy, language and

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numeracy abilities of parents and their children, family learning programmes focus more broadly on supporting learning within families, as well as in the broader community.

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (DES, 2011a) outlined various future aims with reference to family literacy and family learning in Ireland. These included:

- Target tailored information on supporting children’s literacy and numeracy to parents with literacy difficulties through adult and family literacy provision by Education and Training Boards (by 2016)
- Ensure schools encourage parents to avail of opportunities to participate in family literacy programmes organised in local libraries or provided by ETBs or community groups (from 2012)
- Continue to support family literacy initiatives in socially and economically disadvantaged communities (ongoing)

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has been involved in developing materials to raise awareness and support parents in developing young children’s literacy and numeracy. One initiative has been the website Help My Kid Learn11. This website is targeted at parents of children in the 0-12 years age range, and provides a range of activities designed to support parents in developing their children’s literacy and numeracy.

**Strengthening reading motivation, especially among boys and adolescents:** According to PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia (Mullis et al. 2012b), there is major emphasis on reading for enjoyment in the intended language/reading curriculum in Ireland. A new English (and) Irish Language Curriculum for Junior Classes (NCCA, 2015a), to be implemented from September 2016, also emphasises reading for enjoyment.

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy states that it is crucial for the curriculum to reflect the interests of all pupils, including boys, and allow them to have an access to a better balance of text types. According to the strategy, syllabi should provide for the development of literacy in a range of texts (literary and non-literary) and a range of media including digital media, and ensure that the reading tastes of boys are catered for (DES, 2011a). However, there are currently no specific national programmes designed to raise the literacy achievement of boys.

Efforts to maintain or increase current literacy standards need to focus more intensively on addressing underachievement among boys, including boys of lower socioeconomic status. These efforts should focus on broadening the range of texts that boys have access to, and increasing boys’ motivation to read and the range of reading strategies they can draw on. Efforts should also focus on a critical analysis of how gender is socially constructed in schools and classrooms, how gender is enacted in the texts that students read in different subjects, and the relevance of those texts to real life.

4.1.3 Adults

**Fostering literacy provision for adults:** In Ireland, each of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) runs an adult literacy service which allows people with reading and writing difficulties to gain access to literacy education. Literacy is understood to include numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The Adult Literacy Organizer (ALO) of each regional ETB is responsible for managing the delivery of the adult literacy service. The ETB adult literacy service involves literacy tutors

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11 Can be accessed at: http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie/.
providing tuition to adult students. In addition, the radio and television projects of the National Adult Literacy\textsuperscript{12}, and the website Literacytools\textsuperscript{13} can be used by people in their own homes.

Learners and tutors interact on an equal basis in the ETB adult literacy service and classes focus on the needs of the learner as an individual. The ETB adult literacy service is open to all adults who have literacy difficulties. Many trade unions also offer free literacy schemes to their members.

According to NALA, the budget for the Adult Literacy Service operated through the ETBs, is about €30 million and other measures in which literacy training is at least a component amount to another €3 million. Over 50,000 adults attend adult literacy courses nationwide. Instruction is provided by both paid and volunteer tutors, with about 2,500 volunteer tutors and 1,200 paid tutors. According to Kett and Lynch (2013), 42% of adult literacy participants in 2011 were males, and 58% females, and 40% were aged 24 to 44. Over one-third of all participants were unemployed.

A review of adult literacy programmes in Ireland (Kett & Lynch, 2013) included the following recommendations:

- Priority in adult literacy should be given to ESOL (English as a second or other language) learners for whom tuition would bring them to a level of functional competency (A2 on the Common European Framework of References for Languages)
- Education and Training Boards (ETBs) should strongly promote group tuition as a first option, as opposed to 1:1 tuition, to new students.
- ETBs should deliver intensive literacy options to learners of at least 6 hours a week as part of their core service.
- The Department of Education and Skills should re-emphasise the potential to use mainstream Adult Literacy programme allocations to deliver family literacy programmes.
- Guidelines for the administration of formative assessment systems should also be developed alongside those drawn up for initial assessment.
- Every effort must be made to encourage and empower learners to avail of accredited options, including Levels 1 and 2 of the National Qualifications Framework.
- Every Adult Literacy provider should establish a formal protocol in respect of the Adult Literacy Programme and the Adult Education Guidance Service in order to assist and support progression.
- Existing good practice in relation to the integration of literacy into vocational specialism components at Levels 3 and 4 of the National Qualifications Framework should be identified and disseminated.

\textsuperscript{12} See www.nala.ie.
\textsuperscript{13} See http://www.literacytools.ie/.
4.2 Improving the Quality of Teaching

4.2.1 Pre-primary years

Investing in pre-primary education: According to Eurostat (2014a, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Ireland is 0.1%. Ireland is at the lower end of scale, relative to other EU countries. The figure for Ireland (which dated from 2010) did not include the Free Pre-school Year scheme introduced in 2010, which is to be extended to include a second free year from September 2016.

Raising the qualifications of preschool teachers and carers: The minimum required level to become a qualified carer (‘pre-school assistant’) working with older children in an ECCE setting is a post-secondary, non-tertiary certificate (ISCED Level 4) in Early Childhood Care and Education (Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). This criterion is currently being implemented on a phased basis in existing ECCE settings (deadline for compliance is September 2016. There is a higher (degree level) minimum qualification level for childcare leaders.

Continuing Professional Development is not obligatory for childcare assistants (Eurydice/ Eurostat, 2014b, pp. 104–105).

Implementing preschool language and literacy curriculum: Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the Framework for Early Learning, is a national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. The Framework describes the types of learning that are important for children during this period in their lives, and as such sets out broad learning goals for all children. Aistear does this using four broad and interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Each theme identifies important dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. It can be used in different types of settings including children’s homes.

Among the activities in Aistear are those relating to language development, concepts of print, language (phonemic) awareness, and engagement in book reading.

There is a particular need to ensure that the level of pre-school support and instruction provided to socio-economically disadvantaged children and other at-risk groups (such as migrant students) is sufficiently intensive to them to begin primary schooling the full range of skills required for success in becoming literate.

Improving early literacy screening: The Aistear framework defines assessment as ‘an ongoing process of collecting, documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 72). The framework suggests that assessment should focus on four broad areas: dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. Specific approaches to assessment include: self-assessment, conversations, observation, setting tasks, and testing. Carers/early childhood practitioners are expected to alert parents and other professionals (subject to parent consent) to difficulties encountered by the child if those difficulties are significant. The framework also points to the value of discussing children’s development and growth with children themselves. Hence, the overall approach advocated by Aistear is informal.

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14 For further information, see: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Aistear_Toolkit/Aistear_Toolkit.html.
4.2.2 Children and adolescents

Ensuring adequate instructional time for language and literacy in primary and secondary schools: While allocation of time to teaching the language of the PIRLS test in Ireland (176 hours) was less than on average across EU countries (241 hours), it exceeded curriculum specifications in Ireland (4 hours per week, or 146 hours over the school year (NCCA, 1999). In 2011, as part of a National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011–2020, and after PIRLS data had been collected in schools, teachers were asked to increase the allocation of instruction time to the main language of instruction (English or Irish) by one hour per week from January 2012 (DES, Circular 0056/2011). This could be done through increasing the time allocated to English (or Irish), or through strengthening the focus on literacy across the curriculum. At post-primary level, the focus has been on strengthening the emphasis on literacy in all subject areas, rather than increasing the time allocated to English, though schools have been advised to provide lessons in English on a daily basis (DES, Circular 0025/2012).

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: According to PIRLS 2011, Ireland is at or close to the EU–24 average on the frequency with which students engage in activities such as locating information in the text, identifying the main idea and explaining or supporting their understanding. A number of higher-order comprehension activities are practised infrequently both in Ireland and on average across the EU–24, including describing the style or structure of the text, and determining the author’s perspective or intention. There is a need to increase the focus on these skills in Ireland. PISA 2009 confirmed associations between students’ awareness of various reading comprehension strategies (including strategies to understand and remember texts, and to summarise them) and reading performance in Ireland and on average across EU countries.

There needs to be a continuing emphasis on the development of reading comprehension skills at both primary and post-primary levels. The range of strategies that are taught needs to be extended to include digital reading strategies. There is also a need to ensure that students engage in strategies such as co-operative learning and dialogic reading (reading discussion groups) to develop their understanding of text, and enhance their ability to discuss what they read.

Curriculum and assessment reform: Revised curricula in English at primary and post-primary levels are currently being implemented. A Revised Primary Language Curriculum for Junior classes (up to the end of Grade 2) (NCCA, 2015a), will be implemented from September 2016. In 2014, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2015b) launched a new syllabus for English at lower secondary level (Grades 7–9). It is expected that, in 2017, students will sit the state exam in English based on the new syllabus for the first time.

The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), which was first piloted in 1996, has now been extended to all post-primary schools participating in DEIS scheme for disadvantaged schools, as well as Special Schools, Children Detention Schools, Traveller Training Centres, and Youth Encounter Projects. The programme offers schools and teachers a flexible approach to teaching and learning in the context of the Junior Cycle curriculum, including English.

The development of new curricula in language at lower primary and in English at lower post-primary (Junior Cycles) is welcome. The implementation of these curricula, including the effectiveness of their approaches to assessment, needs to be carefully monitored and adjusted as needed, with appropriate support available to teachers.
Early identification and support for struggling literacy learners: Students in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland who achieve very low scores on nationally-normed standardised tests (those scoring at or below the 10th percentile) generally access learning support (remedial teaching) with a specialist reading teacher in the students’ own classrooms, or in a learning support room (DES, 2005b, Circular 0002/2005; DES, 2014, Circular 0017/2014). In PIRLS 2011, it was estimated that 20.1% of students in Fourth grade in Ireland were in need of learning support/remedial teaching, and that 16% were in receipt of such teaching.

The level of support that an individual student accesses will depend on the severity of his/her difficulty. The tied support model (DES 2005b, Circular 0002/2005) outlines how the level of support changes based on the student’s response to the interventions offered, including his/her assessed performance. Learning support comprises either in-class small group support, withdrawal in small groups and/or individually, or some combination of the two. It is intended that individual support is additional to regular classroom instruction in reading (DES, Learning Support Guidelines, 2000; DES, 2007), though in practice this is not always the case.

An additional qualification in literacy is not a requirement for learning support/remedial teachers, but, many such teachers will have completed a diploma or series of courses dealing with reading difficulties. The costs of some courses, such as the post-graduate diploma in special education needs (PGDSEN) are paid for by the Department of Education and Skills.

A number of specialist programmes are available to children with difficulties in reading, especially those who attend school in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Among these is the Reading Recovery programme, which includes specific training for teachers involved in teaching it.

There are a number of special reading schools and reading units in ordinary schools for students with specific learning difficulties, including severe dyslexic difficulties.

Support, in the form of assessment and/or recommendations for intervention for children with possible dyslexic difficulties of a severe nature, is provided by psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS).

Support services available to post-primary students include any or all of the following (among others): assessment of students, psychological services, guidance and counselling services, and technical aid and equipment (for example, laptops for students with dyslexic difficulties).

There is a need to ensure that learning support services in schools are sufficiently resourced to address literacy (and numeracy) difficulties and the needs of children who do not speak the language of instruction at home. This can be achieved by evaluating the effects of learning support programmes, and adjusting the scope and content of programmes in line with need.

Improving the quality of pre-service and inservice teacher learning: Since 2012, the Bachelor of Education programme at primary has increased from three to four years and leads to a level 8 qualification. The Professional Masters in Education programme (primary) is now two years in length and leads to a level 9 qualification. Both programmes have substantial school placements throughout.

For example, at St Patrick’s College (Dublin City University), school placement on the B. Ed. programme is 3 weeks in Year 1, 5 weeks in Year 2, 12 weeks in Year 3, and 10 week in Year 4.

Entry to initial teacher education at second level for those who follow a concurrent model (i.e., study subjects to degree level and prepare as teachers) is, like primary level, based on points achieved in the
Leaving Certificate exam. The points for each course vary and some also involve an interview (e.g. entry to Art School).

In State institutions (universities), the numbers of places available are capped. However, private operators whose course are recognised by the Teaching Council establish their own caps.

There is a need to ensure that teacher education in Ireland continues to attract strong candidates. The current situation, in which graduates of teacher education programmes may struggle to find suitable employment, may ultimately detract from the attractiveness of the profession, and impact in a negative way on literacy levels.

**Inservice teacher education/Continuing professional development:** In Ireland, teacher CPD is mainly voluntary, but it becomes mandatory when it relates to a curriculum change (for example, the implementation of new curricula in English).

Teachers in Ireland have access to a broad range of CPD experiences. In the case of reading literacy, these include conferences, seminars, courses leading to qualifications including certificates, diplomas and Masters degrees, and school-based activities that involve literacy, such as Whole School Evaluation and School Self-evaluation.

It is a matter of concern that 38% of students in Ireland were taught by teachers who reported that they had attended no professional development related to reading in the two years prior to PIRLS 2011. The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 includes a commitment to supporting teachers’ professional practice and building capacity in school leadership (DES, 2011a) and there is a recommendation that teachers should engage in CPD in literacy/numeracy for at least 20 hours every five years in order to renew registration with the Teaching Council. This has yet to be implemented.

While recent work by the Teaching Council (2011) in defining professional pathways for teachers is important, there is a need to ensure that all teachers have access to and avail of a range of courses designed to improve the teaching of literacy. Suitable opportunities need to be available on an ongoing basis, as well as when new curricula are being implemented.

**4.2.3 Adults**

**Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers:** There is no national inspection service that monitors the quality of adult education providers. However, all ETBs must provide the option of accreditation as part of their literacy programmes. In order to do so, their programmes must be validated by the QQI and include a quality assurance plan. NALA in conjunction with providers and learners has devised an evolving framework for quality in the adult literacy service. The Department for Education and Skills provides operational guidelines for adult literacy programmes which reference quality and accreditation. ETBs have recently been transferred under a newly created further education and training authority, SOLAS, and submit service plans for approval to the authority to receive funding.

**Developing curricula for adult literacy:** There is no national literacy curriculum framework for adults: however, there a number of resources which inform curriculum development in line with learners needs. A participative curriculum can be developed through a process involving the learning partners such as tutors and students, with support from organisers, managers and others involved.
While there is no national curriculum, there are national standards for adult literacy at NFQ levels 1-3 (EQF levels 1-2). Providers validate programmes which outline content and assessment for learners to achieve the national awards.

**Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy:** People who work in adult literacy in Ireland are not called teachers and do not share their more privileged terms and conditions: tutors are less well paid and most work on a part-time basis.

One-to-one tutors are voluntary and they have made a major contribution to the development of adult literacy services in Ireland; indeed, the use of volunteer tutors is often the only feasible way to provide one-to-one tuition. Increasingly, adult literacy services are adopting a volunteer protocol. This sets out the rights and responsibilities of one-to-one tutors so that they are clear about their own commitment and the support they can expect from the organisation.

Statutory qualification requirements remain to be determined for adult literacy tutors. There is a requirement for certain adult literacy practitioners (managers) to hold a NFQ Level 6 qualification (European Qualification Framework Level 5). The ETBs have determined that adult literacy tutors should hold higher education Level 6 qualifications.

In order to provide tutors with opportunities for professional development, formal qualifications at Higher Certificate (NFQ Level 6) to honours degree level (NFQ Level 8) have been developed by NALA and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The NALA / WIT accreditation project offers a flexible, modular approach to study and increasingly adult literacy work is becoming a career option for people interested in education. Previous work experience in the field and an NFQ Level 5 qualification (European Qualification Framework level 4) is normally required for entry to the adult literacy tutoring qualification provided by Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). SOLAS pays for the training of set number of adult literacy tutor participants annually. However most tutors participate on their own time and pay a registration fee.

Turning to continuing professional development, NALA offers training events and conferences to Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs), tutors and resource workers. These events are aimed at adult literacy practitioners to highlight new initiatives and ideas in adult literacy practice and to demonstrate best practice and initiatives which have worked. NALA has been doing this for 30 years. The main professional development events include an Adult Literacy Organisers’ Forum, a National Forum for Adult Literacy Tutors, an ESOL conference, a Family Learning conference and a Numeracy conference. ETBs also provide a small amount of continuous professional development (CPD) to their adult literacy staff.
4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

4.3.1 Pre-primary years

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children: the Free Pre-school Year scheme was introduced in January 2010. All children between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months can avail of a free school-year of appropriate activities in the year prior to starting primary school. While participation is voluntary, 67,000 or 94% of eligible children participated in 2011/12. From September 2016 this will be extended to two years. Ireland does not belong to the half of the European countries where the entire period of ECEC is free. The Free Pre-school Year is open to all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. McKeown, Hasse and Pratschke (2015) have found that the Free Pre-school Year has a limited impact on children’s cognitive development, with many parameters of a child’s development already set before they attend the year.

An intensive pre-school programme, “Early Start”, is provided to some children at risk of educational disadvantage. Early Start involves an educational programme designed to offset the effects of disadvantage. Parental involvement is a core component.

There is a need to document the effects of the Free Pre-school Year and of Early Start to ensure that these initiatives are effective, especially where disadvantaged children are concerned.

Identification of and support for preschool children with language difficulties: There is no systematic assessment of all children in order to identify language development problems in Ireland. However, children with apparent difficulties can be referred by their school or general practitioner (doctor) to the Health Service Executive for comprehensive assessment by a speech and language therapist, with support available for those who need it. Private assessments and tuition is also available. An outcome of an assessment may be that a pre-school child will work with a speech and language therapist to address identified problems.

General language enhancement is one of the priorities of “Early Start”, referred to above.

There is a need to ensure that all children, including those whose parents have limited economic means, can access the assessments and support that they need in areas such as speech and language therapy.

Addressing language differences: According to PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, exhibit 4.3 - Students Spoke the Language of the Test Before Starting School, p. 118), the proportion of children speaking a different language at home from the one used at school is significant in Ireland, at 6.6%. Not unexpectedly, there is a quite significant performance gap in reading competence at grade 4 in Ireland between children who spoke the language of the test before starting school (mean reading score 558) and those who did not speak the language (mean reading score 519). While some groups in Ireland provide pre-school services in languages such as Polish, in general, there limited access to early learning opportunities in languages other than English and Irish.

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4.3.2 Children and adolescents

Support for children with special needs: A range of supports are available to children with special education needs, including classes and units within ordinary schools, as well as special schools. Children with specific reading difficulties such as severe dyslexic difficulties can avail of a range of supports (depending on availability and the severity of their difficulties), including help from a learning support/resource teacher within their school, and/or attendance at a special reading unit or special reading school (ages 8-12).

The assessment process is a phased one, with initial adjustments of instruction by the class teacher, and, if warranted, provision of support by the learning support/resource teacher. Assessment by a psychologist may also be recommended. There is a need to ensure that teachers can recognize signs of difficulties such as dyslexia, and that they can implement appropriate teaching interventions.

Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school: Children who speak a language that is different to the language of the school and are deemed to be in need of support, can access additional language teaching for up to two years. This support is generally provided by learning support/resource teachers. Where 20% of a school’s enrolment comprises pupils who require EAL (English as an Additional Language) support, the school may be granted an additional teaching position (DES, 2014, Circular 0007/2014). The English Language Support Programme at Trinity College in Dublin has developed a set of assessment profiles that allow teachers to gauge the proficiency of new-comer students at primary and post-primary levels (ILLT 2003a, 2003b).

There is a need to ensure that support levels for children who speak a language that is different from the language of instruction are sufficiently intense that they enable children to access the full curriculum in primary and post-primary schools.

Preventing early school leaving: According to Eurostat, in Ireland, the rate of early school leavers was 8.4 % in 2013, down from 9.7% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 8.0%16.

In Ireland, 150 Youthreach centres aim to provide early school leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and to progress to further education, training and employment. Youthreach targets young people (aged 16 – 20 years) with poor qualifications and who are unemployed.

The government-funded School Completion Programme (SCP) is a set of cluster-based initiatives designed to ensure that students stay on at school as long as possible. The Programme involves primary and post-primary schools, including schools in the DEIS programme. A review of the SCP (Smyth et al., 2015) made a number of recommendations designed to increase its effectiveness.

4.3.3 Adults

Increasing offers for second-language learners: English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) is mainly made through the adult literacy service and other further education programmes. The service has expanded in recent years due to increased demand. The Department of Education and Skills and the Reception and Integration Agency of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform commissioned an independent review of provision, to assist in the development of a national English

language training policy for legally resident adult immigrants in Ireland, but this is yet to be implemented. All ESOL provision is funded out of the adult literacy service budget and delivered by specialist teachers working to a separate curriculum. The adult literacy service provides ESOL tuition for literacy development in the English language, but does not cover literacy development in the first or native language of the adult migrant.
5 References


