UNIVERSITY OF WALES INSTITUTE CARDIFF

CARDIFF SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

AN EARLY EVALUATION OF THE CARDIFF LOCAL AUTHORITY LITERACY STRATEGY

Final Report to the Welsh Government New Ideas Fund

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report provides an early evaluation of the development and implementation of the Cardiff Literacy Strategy (2009 – 2012) that is currently being piloted in a number of schools in Cardiff Local Authority.

1.2 Schools in Wales have a long history of developing and implementing small-scale interventions to improve literacy levels in the student population, but despite these attempts poor literacy levels remain a major concern for schools, local authorities, employers and government.

1.3 In particular the Estyn Annual Report (2009 – 2010) states that although some improvements have taken place in literacy levels in Wales the following concerns remain:

- The high percentage of students entering Key Stage 3 with reading ages below their chronological age.
- Particularly low levels of writing skills throughout all Key Stages.
- The relatively low level levels of achievement of boys compared to girls.
- The large number of able and talented students who do not achieve higher levels of literacy.

1.4 A recent Statistical Bulletin from the Welsh Government (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011) records the percentage of students who achieve expected level of performance or above in English according to teacher assessment during 2009 - 2010. The results below show the levels attained in Cardiff by constituency areas and for Wales:

	Cardiff Central	Cardiff South	Cardiff West	Wales
KS1: % of pupils achieving Level 2 or above	85.1	83.1	83.2	82.9
KS2: % of pupils achieving Level 4 or above	81.5	79.7	83.9	81.9
KS3: % of pupils achieving Level 5 or above	82.0	68.2	74.1	72.5

1.5 Within Cardiff 21 primary schools have been involved in the pilot of the Literacy Strategy. The levels of literacy (expressed as 'functional literacy') of students in these schools and of all schools in Cardiff is shown below:

	% of Pupils considered to be functionally literate in Cardiff	% of Pupils considered to be functionally literate in 21 schools
March 2009	75.6%	54.5%
March 2010	76.2%	62.0%
	+ 0.6%	+ 7.5%

1.6 Prior to the implementation of the strategy the functional literacy levels in each of the pilot schools was that shown below:

School	2008/09	
	% achieving Functional literacy	No of children achieving FL
Allensbank	55%	17/31
Bryn Celyn	36%	9/25
Bryn Hafod	57.5%	23/40

Glan yr Afon	**48%**	**12/25**
Grangetown	64%	34/53
Greenway	37.5%	12/32
Herbert Thompson	44%	23/52
Hywel Dda	56%	24/43
Kitchener	**50%**	**23/46**
Lansdowne	**73%**	**27/37**
Meadowlane	**52%**	**14/27**
Mount Stuart	51%	19/37
Ninian Park	**44%**	**18/41**
Pen y Bryn	79%	19/24
Radnor	79%	22/28
Severn	72%	33/46
St Francis	28%	7/25
St Mary the Virgin	31%	5/16
St Paul's	66%	19/29
Willowbrook	61%	23/38
Windsor Clive	46%	21/46
Pilot schools total	54.5%	404/741

Schools highlighted participated in the first phase of the pilot and those not highlighted in phase 2.

1.7 As part of the School Effectiveness Framework the Welsh Government has identified the improvement of levels of literacy as one of its three main priorities. To this end a National Literacy Programme has been introduced at Key Stage 2. Following the disappointing PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results for Wales released in 2010, the Minister of Education has announced that a wider-scale literacy strategy is to be developed.

1.8 This increased emphasis on literacy at national and local authority level is driven by the awareness that low literacy levels are considered to be one of the prime causes of low educational attainment across Wales, particularly - as can be seen above in the data for Cardiff- for students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. In addition low levels of literacy amongst adults are seen to be one of the major causes of unemployment, low economic activity and social exclusion (Feinstein et al, 2008).

1.9 Cardiff Local Authority have, therefore, recognised the critical need to improve levels of literacy in its student population, particularly in some of its most socio-economically disadvantaged schools, many of which demonstrate relatively low levels of student achievement. In devising a long-term strategy designed to respond to this challenge it has investigated successful practice within its own schools, in a number of other areas in Wales and across the UK.

1.10 One of the other examples of effective practice that has strongly influenced the Cardiff Literacy Strategy has been the experience of the West Dunbartonshire literacy initiative in Scotland. The apparent success of this intervention has attracted considerable attention in recent years both across the UK and internationally.

1.11 The main features of the West Dunbartonshire strategy are:

- A strong focus on early and intensive intervention with students who are falling behind in their levels of reading competence.
- The use of a limited number of specified pedagogical approaches particularly synthetic phonics.
- Extensive and ongoing training for practitioners.
- The use of the concept of 'functional literacy' as a way of measuring student progress. It defines functional literacy (technically a reading age of at least 9 years and six months) as being a level of literacy that will 'allow satisfactory access to all key life requirements: reading newspapers, completing forms, having access to the full secondary curriculum, without the need for literacy support' (Mackay, 2007). Its aim is that all students will reach this level by the time that they progress to secondary education or as soon as possible thereafter.

1.12 As part of the initial development of the Cardiff Strategy undertook work with Professor Tommy MacKay the Educational Psychologist who had been the main influence on the West Dunbartonshire strategy.

1.13 The strategy which Cardiff Local Authority eventually developed was introduced in two initial phases involving three clusters of primary and secondary schools in some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the city and indeed Wales.

1.14 The general aim of the Strategy is to raise standards of literacy for all learners in these schools with a particular aim to achieve functional literacy (reading age of 9 years and 6 months) by the end of Key Stage 2.

1.15 The key objectives of the strategy are to:

- Ensure the engagement of all stakeholders.
- Maintain and improve standards of literacy by supporting the implementation of the Foundation Phase, Curriculum 2008, The Skills Framework and a graduated response to identified needs.
- Support and develop community based initiatives to both improve literacy levels of the wider community and to foster community support for improving literacy levels of school-aged pupils.

1.16 The early evaluation reported upon below has been funded by the Welsh Government New Ideas Fund and has been undertaken by a team based at the Cardiff School of Education at UWIC and with the full support and cooperation of Cardiff Local Authority.

1.17 The aims of the evaluation were to report on the:

- Policy development process whereby Cardiff LA adopted and adapted the West Dunbartonshire literacy initiative and the efficacy of this.

- Early experience of case study schools and practitioners involved in implementing the strategy, including signs of early impact and suitability as an approach to improve literacy levels across all Cardiff schools.

1.18 The intended outcomes of the evaluation were that it would inform:

- The ongoing development of the strategy in Cardiff.
- Policy work in this area being undertaken by the Welsh Government.
- A possible longitudinal study of the strategy if funding could be secured for this purpose.

1.19 The evaluation and this report is based upon the following evidence:

- A focused literature review into research on literacy interventions.
- Consideration of a range of documents and data supplied by the local authority and by schools.
- Semi-structured interviews with the key local authority officers who have been involved in developing and leading the implementation of the strategy including the Senior Adviser for English, Literacy Advisory Teachers, the Head of Cardiff School Improvement Service and the Head of Inclusion.
- Semi-structured interviews with key staff in a sample (chosen by the local authority) of schools within each of the three clusters, including head teachers, other members of senior management, classroom teachers and support staff.
- A focus group with practitioners from a number of the participating schools drawn from the same sample as above.
- Participation in a meeting of the local authority Scrutiny Committee for the Strategy involving elected members and school governors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

2.1 An extensive body of educational research has investigated the relationship between low literacy levels, socio-economic inequality and equity of educational achievement. (Lupton,2005; Brooks,2007; Egan,2007; Richards, 2008; Frater, 2010).

2.2 The extent to which this association is an inevitable one that emanates from the socio-economic background and family circumstances of students or can to some extent be overcome through the effectiveness of teachers at classroom and school level has been one of the areas explored in this research (Lupton, 2005).

2.3 The relationship between educational attainment and literacy levels has been an area of consistent interest to educational researchers and policy makers. The rationale for this is that literacy is not only a conduit for students to improve their learning and to access the wider curriculum but also because it increases their levels of employability and can allow a greater opportunity for social mobility, particularly amongst children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds (Riley 2001).

Models of Literacy

2.4 Despite a relatively consensual understanding of what effects literacy levels and the need to raise levels of literacy, multiple interpretations of how literacy can best be developed in school-age students exist within the educational research field. This has tended to be problematic in establishing a consensus that can influence both educational policy and the work of professionals.

2.5 Two particularly well-known models for developing literacy are the:

- Searchlights Model of Reading.
- Simple View of Reading Framework.

2.6 The searchlights model of reading was utilised in the National Literacy Strategy introduced by the UK Government (1998). It suggests that there are four equally important components of reading: phonics; grammatical knowledge; word recognition and graphic knowledge.

2.7 In 2006 the UK Government set up a an investigation into literacy – the Rose Report - which concluded that this model offered only basic and limited support for practitioners and did not provide them with sufficient understanding of the intensity of each element of reading and specific stages of use: for example the importance of using a direct phonics approach during the early years of education.

2.8 Rose proposed that based upon more recent research on literacy an alternative model known as the 'simple view of reading framework' should be adopted. This subsequently became ensconced within the Primary National Strategy for teaching literacy in England (DfES 2006; Rose, 2006).

2.9 This approach champions high-quality phonics teaching to equip pupils with word recognition skills. Once achieved children can begin to read fluently thus enabling them to progress to the stage whereby the meaning of text can be achieved (DfES, 2006). This model highlights the progressive nature of reading and takes account of the variable acquisition of different skills.

2.10 As well as these two dominant models of how literacy can be developed Roberts (1995) and Street (2003) offer alternative approaches. The traditional definition of literacy as being 'reading and writing' is seen in these approaches as being too limited and as excluding additional skills such as communication and comprehension. Roberts (1995) argues that literacy needs to be thought about in quantitative, qualitative and pluralist contexts. Quantitative approaches are often adopted by statisticians and policymakers as they offer a relatively simple way of measuring literacy levels such as 'reading ages' through tests designed by

educational psychologists. The emphasis here is on what is called a 'functional' approach to literacy (Roberts 1995).

2.11 The quantitative model of literacy is framed around cognitive development and whilst offering a clear method for measuring levels of functional literacy it sometimes gives insufficient recognition to more extrinsic factors that can affect levels of literacy such as variable progression rates, different teaching pedagogies and socio-economic background. Street (2003) also is critical of approaches which suggest that cognitive development is the prime factor causing low literacy levels and that remediating this factor will axiomatically lead to improved economic prospects. Like Roberts he argues there is a fundamental flaw in the suggestion that only one causal factor determines literacy outcomes. Standardised tests, associated with the quantitative or autonomous model of literacy, have long been coined as culturally biased and providing an inaccurate understanding of literacy levels (Roberts 1995).

2.12 Reacting to this type of critique policymakers and educationalists for a time moved towards a more qualitative approach to literacy. Whilst reading ages were still regarded as an appropriate way of determining the functional literacy of a student other benchmarks and quantifiable measures of literacy were abandoned. In time, however, the lack of a clear definition of literacy in qualitative approaches that could be used to replace functional literacy led to it also being seen as an unsuitable model (Roberts 1995).

2.13 This in turn led to a pluralist approach to literacy being adopted whereby particular forms of reading and writing are seen to create multiple literacies such as cultural literacy, high order literacy and survival literacy (Roberts 1995). Such multiple perceptions of literacy prevent the restriction caused through the quantitative approach and allow the consideration of ever-changing social dynamics and circumstances. This created a situation, however, where it became ever more difficult to establish fair tests which allowed levels of functional literacy to be measured.

Literacy Intervention Strategies

2.14 In recent years in education there has been a move away from theoretical approaches to literary pedagogy of the type set out above to consideration of practical approaches of what actually appears to work in intervening to improve the literacy levels of students.

2.15 Brooks (2002), for example, provided an early evaluation of 25 wide-ranging literacy intervention schemes that were integral to the National Literacy Strategy in England. The conclusions of his report were:

- Work on phonological skills for reading should be discretely delivered within a   broad-based approach.
- Mainstream teaching alone does not enable children with literacy difficulties to catch up.
- Highly structured schemes are most effective for children struggling with spelling skills.
- Children's comprehension skills can be improved if directly targeted.
- Working on children's self-esteem and reading in parallel has definite potential.
- ICT approaches work but only if they are precisely targeted.
- Large-scale schemes, though expensive, can give good value for money.
- Reading partners are effective if they are given appropriate training and support.
- Success with some children with the most severe problems is elusive, and this reinforces the need for skilled, intensive, one-to-one intervention for these children.
- Interventions that last longer than one term do not necessarily produce proportionally greater benefits.

2.16 These interventions were confined to primary age students but in a further report in 2007 Brooks extended his purview to interventions in secondary schools (Brooks, 2007). Using both quantitative and qualitative evidence he concluded that several interventions that were either geared towards or that could be extended for

secondary-aged pupils were having a positive impact. As well as the conclusions presented in his 2002 report he noted that:

- Through continuing support, children who make gains should be better equipped to cope with the secondary curriculum.
- Building strong and trusting relationships between teacher and child are an essential prerequisite for accelerating learning.

2.17 In 2009 Brooks undertook a review of literacy interventions that had been adopted in Wales. A particular emphasis had been placed on the 'Catch Up' programme for pupils funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. His conclusions were similar to those he had found in England and in general he thought success was being achieved through these interventions although it was variable (Brooks 2009).

2.18 Increasing attention has been paid to interventions that target the development of reading through the use of synthetic phonics. In 2005 Johnston and Watson reported on their seven year longitudinal study into the use of synthetic phonics with a sample of around 300 children from Primary 1 (Year 2) from 13 schools in the Clackmannanshire area of Scotland. The students had been placed in one of three different groups characterised by different programmes: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, and analytic phonics with systematic phonemic awareness. At the end of the study, those children who followed the synthetic phonics programme were reported to be more advanced in terms of reading and spelling than the other two groups with a reading age 7 months ahead of their chronological age (Johnston and Watson 2005).

2.19 The Rose report (2006) accepted that whilst the Clackmannanshire research might have methodological flaws that it nevertheless established the importance of synthetic phonic approaches. Whilst it recognised that other approaches should also be adopted, particularly for those children facing the greatest difficulties, it argued that English schools should base their approach to literacy on:

- Discrete strategies for reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- High quality, discrete phonics work as the basis for teaching reading.

- Continuity between the Early Years Foundation Phase and National Literacy Strategy to allow continuity and progression of reading at an early stage.
- High quality teaching for all students and additional interventions that were compatible with mainstream teaching practice.
- School leaders ensuring that teachers prioritised phonic work at an early stage.
- An increased emphasis on high quality initial training and CPD for teachers in the area of literacy.

2.20 Further support for these approaches was provided by the outcomes of a ten-year programme in West Dunbartonshire that has claimed to have effectively eradicated illiteracy in its student population. The following abstract sets out the findings of this important study (MacKay, 2007; page iii):

Objectives: The aim of this study was to design, implement and evaluate a multiple-component intervention to address underachievement and illiteracy in West Dunbartonshire, taking full account of educational change processes in the context of real world research.

Method: A main study and four supporting studies were conducted. The main study involved the design and implementation through 10 years of a multiple-component intervention in 58 nurseries and primaries, using a cross-lagged design in which pre-intervention population cohorts served as controls for subsequent intervention cohorts of the same age. Children in the early stages (N = 3,000+ annually) were individually assessed on a baseline assessment designed for the study, while older pupils (N = 3,000+ annually) took group tests. The synthetic phonics study used a quasi-experimental design to compare two phonics programmes in 18 schools. The attitudes study was a long-term follow up of 24 children from an earlier randomised control trial. The declaration study designed, implemented and evaluated a novel strategy in 12 nurseries and primaries in another education authority (N = 565), using a quasi-experimental design. It served the purpose of informing aspects of West Dunbartonshire's intervention. The individual support study was a quasi-experimental study in secondary school (N = 24), followed by extension into 35 primaries and then into all secondary schools.

Results: In the main study, comparison of cohorts showed year-on-year gains on all tests and across all age groups, with sustained post-intervention gains in later years. In each of the four supporting studies gains were found for the experimentals, pointing to benefits in the use of synthetic versus traditional phonics, in changing attitudes to reading, in making declarations of future

reading achievement and in the use of intensive individual support. The extension of the individual support study, together with the effects of the other interventions, resulted in the effective eradication of illiteracy from school leavers in the authority by summer 2007.

Conclusions: The interventions reported in this study have resulted in raised achievement, have effectively eradicated illiteracy in West Dunbartonshire and have developed a foundation for intergenerational change in attainment levels.''

2.21 In 2009 an independent National Literacy Commission set up in Scotland and drawn from representatives in the world of academia, business, politics, culture and education gave its support to the work led by Professor Tommy MacKay in West Dunbartonshire and proposed that it should become the basis for a national campaign to eradicate illiteracy in Scotland (Literacy Commission for Scotland, 2009). It suggested that all basic literacy schemes should include the following key elements:

- Commencement at an early age.
- Reliance on a highly structured phonics programme (normally involving synthetic phonics) as the approach to getting the great majority of children decoding successfully.
- Use of a range of other approaches to tackle cases of difficulty up to and including intensive individual tuition for children who continue to experience significant reading problems.
- Programmes of high quality professional development, regularly updated and consistently available.

2.22 Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Wales and In England have also conveyed similar messages in recent reports. Estyn in 2009 brought together its findings from a number of inspection reports on different aspects of effective literacy practice in the schools of Wales and supporting educational research to offer a compendium of good practice in different areas of literacy (Estyn, 2009). In relation to reading it recommendations to teachers were:

- o Be consistent in the way that phonics is taught throughout the school so that there is continuity in pupils' learning.
- o Ensure that there is frequent and regular delivery of the programme.
- o Make certain that there is a brisk pace to the teaching of the programme.
- o Take account of research evidence so that the place of phonics is recognised as a necessary but not the only condition for learning to read.
- o Make certain that staff have good knowledge and understanding of the learning and teaching of phonics.
- o Use motivating and interesting approaches to teach phonics.
- o Make skilful use of assessment to inform the next learning step.
- o Use a variety of ways to support pupils who make slower or insecure progress.
- o Make certain trainee teachers know how to teach phonics.

2.23 Ofsted have more recently undertaken a major survey of effective work in English primary and secondary schools, particularly in those schools where outstanding success has been achieved in challenging circumstances caused by the socio-economic disadvantage of students, issues to do with ethnicity and in the case of looked after children (Ofsted, 2011). They point to the following factors as being critical to success:

- Teachers with high expectations for pupils' achievements in literacy.
- An emphasis on speaking and listening skills from an early age.
- A rigorous, sequential approach to developing speaking and listening and teaching reading, writing and spelling through systematic phonics.
- Sharp assessment of progress in order to determine the most appropriate programme or support.
- Carefully planned provision to meet individual needs.
- Rigorous monitoring of the impact of provision.
- High-quality pastoral care to support learning in literacy.
- Highly effective use of time, staff and resources.

2.24 It can, therefore, be suggested that over the last decade and particularly in the last five years that this focus on what appears to work in developing student literacy has led to a significant and congruent body of evidence emerging on the factors making for success.

Critiques of Intervention Strategies

2.25 Some academic research literature continues, however, to question both the reliability and efficacy of this new body of knowledge on literacy. Wyse and Styles (2007) have for example questioned the validity of the Clackmannanshire research by pointing to possible methodological flaws in the study. They suggest that:

- The use of the Clackmannanshire Council School Deprivation Index to assess children's socio-economic backgrounds was an inadequate reflection of socio-economic background as individual family circumstances were not assessed.
- Very little information was provided about the schools.
- The experience of those implementing and the ways of implementing the programmes for the three groups were not detailed in Experiment 1.
- Experiment 2 was conducted by one of the authors who it appears favours the synthetic phonics approach. This may have led to potential bias and an inconsistency in how the three programmes were delivered.
- Reading comprehension was not significantly improved by the synthetic phonics approach.
- Comparison of the teaching methods of synthetic phonics versus analytic phonics was invalid as the three groups were taught variable amounts.

2.26 These concerns have been scrutinised by Brooks (2007), who was part of the Advisory team for the Rose Report (2006). Whilst Wyse and Styles suggest that each group received different amounts of learning, Brooks (2007) argues that this was not so. He also establishes that in fact one of the authors implemented all of the programmes to ensure consistency, although he accepts that this does lend itself to potential bias.

2.27 Brooks also accepts that there were flaws in Experiment 1, the claimed Randomised Control Trial, as students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds were allocated to the synthetic phonics group in order that gains could be seen to be at their most impressive.

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2.28 Brooks whilst believing that most of Wyse and Styles critique is inaccurate does agree with them that further evidence on the effectiveness of synthetic phonics is necessary and that Rose probably accepted the Clackmannanshire research too uncritically.

2.29 Wyse has continued his critique of the Rose Report and of the 'lobby' for synthetic phonics. He argues that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support its adoption as the preferred method for the teaching of reading. He believes that there is evidence to support the importance of systematic tuition in phonics but cites Torgerson et al (2006, p49) in suggesting that there is no evidence that 'any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other' (Wyse and Goswami, 2008).

2.30 What can be noted here is that whereas in relation to the Clackmannanshire research Wyse et al were challenging the veracity of the research process that produced the outcomes, in this instance it is not phonics but a particular form of phonics that is being questioned. The need to intervene, to use some form of pedagogical intervention that is based on a phonics-type approach and that involves extensive professional development of teachers seems to be uncontested.

Wider Considerations

2.31 Debates over literacy in education and how it is best developed within the student population have always recognised that whilst the education system has a critically important role to play that there are many other powerful influences upon literacy development. Young people spend no more than about 12% of their waking time in schools and for the other 88% they are exposed to and are involved in using various forms of literacy. Parents are known to be the single most powerful influence on the education of children and the effect of peer-group interaction and of the community in which students live can also have an effect on their aspirations, including their desire to develop their literacy, that is greater than the effect of the school and the classroom (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

2.32 For these reasons increasing emphasis is being placed in education research and practice on the importance of family and literacy programmes that can support

student learning. This has, for example, been a strong influence in Scotland in both the West Dunbartonshire literacy programme and in the recommendations made by the Scotland Literacy Commission. A recent evaluation of family literacy programmes found that they can make a 'significant contribution to narrowing the gaps between the attainment of disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils and their peers and breaking the link between social disadvantage and educational achievement'. Parental involvement can break down the barriers between home and school and enable them to play a 'full and positive part in their children's learning and development' (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2009; page 15).

2.33 The evidence is that such considerations also need to be taken account of in attempting to develop literacy initiatives at local authority and national level. One major review in Canada has suggested that in order to develop any successful 'national strategy' the following elements may need to be in place (Levin, 2007):

- Strong support from political leaders and from the public.
- A comprehensive strategy that includes schools and families.
- Sustained effort over time.
- Ambitious and broad but reachable targets.
- The right people and resources to support effective implementation.
- Building capacity and motivation rather than threats and accountability.

Conclusions

2.34 The above review of research literature on literacy development suggests the following conclusions can be reached:
- Literacy is critically important to the educational and personal development of students.
- There have been contested models of how literacy can best be developed in students particularly in relation to reading.
- In recent times there has been an increased focus in establishing what appears to work in practical interventions to improve literacy.
- This has produced a relatively new but nevertheless consistent and compelling body of knowledge which suggests that:

- ✓ The most effective interventions can work for nearly all students although some will need additional and highly personalised support.
- ✓ The most effective interventions involve the use of some form of phonics (including an element of synthetic phonics) in the teaching of reading as well as other supporting strategies.
- ✓ These interventions should be used consistently throughout the primary school, beginning in early years education and continue in secondary education where the focus should be on 'catch-up' type approaches.
- ✓ Both high quality mainstream teaching and specialist support are critical to achieving success with students.
- ✓ This requires high quality, up-to-date and readily accessible initial training and continuous professional development to be available to teachers and other professional staff.
- ✓ School leaders should ensure that these approaches are in place in all cases.
- ✓ Student progress should be closely monitored against ambitious but achievable targets.

- Whilst some academic researchers challenge at least part of these findings it appears that they do so from a position which does accept the validity of some form of phonics being used in the teaching of reading and of the importance of teacher competence and confidence. The need, however, for continuing research in this area is broadly accepted and existing knowledge should not be used uncritically.
- Family and community literacy programmes have an extremely important part to play in supporting the work of the education system in developing literacy.
- In order to develop effective local and national literacy strategies the following elements need to be in place:

- ✓ Strong support from political leaders and from the public.
- ✓ A comprehensive strategy that includes schools and families.
- ✓ Sustained effort over time.

✓ Ambitious and broad but reachable targets.

✓ The right people and resources to support effective implementation.

✓ Building capacity and motivation rather than threats and accountability.

3. ANALYSIS

Introduction

3.1 This section reports on the analysis of the evidence collected. It does so through consideration of the following aspects of the strategy:

- The policy process through which it has been developed.
- Its implementation.
- Early qualitative evidence on its efficacy and impact.
- Its sustainability.

The Policy Development Process

3.2 Local authority officers see the context for the strategy as follows:

- Significant problems exist in relation to the teaching of reading in Cardiff primary schools. The reasons for this are complex but they have led to weaknesses in learning and teaching pedagogy with a significant number of teachers perceived to be unconfident or unskilled in the teaching of reading. Some schools have already begun to address this prior to the strategy being developed and had enjoyed success.

- These problems had been masked for some time by the removal of national testing, particularly at the age of eleven and a reliance on teacher assessment. It is the view of the Authority that the SATS influenced teacher assessment and thereby produced similar outcomes. Once the SATS were removed improvements in teacher assessment continued particularly in speaking and listening leading to higher overall aggregated outcomes. When NFER tests began to be used with 11 year olds from 2009, however, this revealed that on

average about 25% of pupils were not reaching the functional literacy level of 9 years 6 months in reading age.

- The introduction of the Foundation Phase could not in itself resolve these problems. Indeed both the local authority and head teachers have become aware that the advice provided by WAG to Early Years Advisers and disseminated to schools is at odds with that offered to them by the Advisory Team for Literacy, which includes both Early Years and Key Stage 2 specialists. This has at least threatened to worsen the situation in schools and is already being picked up by the new Estyn inspection cycle.

- Cardiff has, therefore, begun to advocate to its schools that a balance needs to be struck between the child and play-centred pedagogy of the Foundation Phase and more formal teaching to develop literacy and numeracy. To this end it has insisted that the literacy strategy is one that commences within the Foundation Phase. Whilst further development will be needed in KS2 and catch-up work will be required in both KS2 and KS3 it was, therefore, essential that early intervention was undertaken once indications of weakness in pupil competence and lack of progress was apparent.

- As a result of the above situation significant numbers of students were proceeding to Year 7 with difficulties in literacy that prevented them accessing the curriculum, leading to disengagement and low achievement. These weaknesses were not picked up at Key Stage 3 and students were not assisted in catching up. The Authority also believes that Teacher Assessment at Key Stage 3 has not been sufficiently robust to indicate these weaknesses by the time students arrive at the age of 14.

3.3 In responding to this situation the local authority have taken note of where success was already being achieved in their schools, by other local authorities in Wales (particularly Newport) and elsewhere. In particular they became interested

in the achievements of West Dunbartonshire in Scotland and have linked closely with them and the work of Professor Tommy McKay. From their own experience and that of West Dunbartonshire they became persuaded that the approaches often used successfully by Inclusion specialists should be adopted in mainstream provision.

3.4 Interviews with practitioners generally confirmed these perspectives. The strategy was unanimously welcomed by all primary and secondary school interviewees as levels of functional illiteracy remained both a problem and high priority for all schools. In particular both primary and secondary head teachers described the adverse effects of students entering secondary school without the levels of literacy needed to access the curriculum.

Implementation

3.5 The key elements of the Cardiff Literacy Strategy as identified by local authority officers are:

- An unrelenting focus on the development of practitioner (teachers and teaching assistants) pedagogy in the teaching of reading as the key driver of improvement. At the heart of this pedagogy is the adoption of synthetic phonics as the central approach to be followed in teaching reading. It is not, however, the only approach and it is not intended that this be adopted in a prescribed way such as has been introduced in England. By contrast, Cardiff are following West Dunbartonshire (and thereby a significant body of educational research in this area) in believing that teacher confidence, expertise and reflection are the key to success and not the unquestioning adoption of an approved pedagogy that may gain short-term success but is not the basis for a highly skilled professionalism.

- A significant emphasis on the strategy having the support of all key parties and stakeholders. This includes elected members of the local authority and corporate officers and of the City as a whole including the community and parents. As in West Dunbartonshire this can be seen to represent a moral determination to eradicate illiteracy and the negative socio-economic associations it has for individual and community wellbeing.

- The need for committed leadership at school and local authority level in taking the strategy forward. This is based on a perception that weaknesses in leadership were and are a significant factor in explaining the literacy problem that has arisen.

3.6 The strategy currently embraces Key Stages 1-3. In primary schools it has generally been embedded through intensive, school-based, CPD for all staff. This is valued by staff and is thought to be a key ingredient of the success that is being achieved. In secondary schools the model is different with only a limited number of staff identified by the school being trained and the leadership of the intervention also varying between the High Schools involved.

3.7 The strategy was introduced through two phases and schools had a different experience depending on when they became involved. Teachers involved in Phase 1 described the 'big launch' that had taken place and appreciated being involved at the very start with guest speakers present, such as Professor Tommy McKay, to deliver a comprehensive background and rationale to the strategy:

'A prestigious conference and everyone in County was there so if you were there you felt special. There was a professor there who gave such a motivational speech and told us all these things about the research behind it and it really made you feel part of it.' **(Teacher)**

3.8 Practitioners who joined in Phase 2 experienced a more modest introduction to the strategy which was either disseminated externally on an INSET day or

internally through school management or colleagues. Those teachers and support staff seemed to be less informed and have a lesser understanding of the objectives of the strategy.

3.9 Head teachers and practitioners believe that the level of implementation depended on the success of the school's own previous interventions. The majority of head teachers and practitioners appeared pleased that the strategy not only allowed flexibility so that new interventions associated with the literacy strategy could be 'added on' to existing good practice and that it could be adapted to meet the individual needs of the school.

3.10 There has also been some marked differences between the way that implementation was introduced in primary compared to secondary schools, reflecting differences in pedagogical approaches. In primary school settings head teachers valued the fact that all practitioners were trained either at authority level or through in-school training provided by staff who had been trained centrally and/or by Advisory Teachers. In the secondary setting a smaller, specialist, group of staff were trained centrally with some learning support assistants claiming they were not trained at the outset and were required to 'get up to speed' with the literacy strategy.

3.11 There were also differences in the pedagogy promoted through the training. Primary school practitioners described a more directed and focused approach which appeared to integrate comfortably into the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2. For secondary schools there was a less focused and specified approach. This inevitably means that there is limited continuity in the pedagogy utilised in Key Stages 2 and 3.

3.12 Despite this secondary school head teachers stressed the importance of literacy as a priority for all departments and not just English. They accepted that, therefore, it was necessary to disseminate the strategy across the staff of their schools.

3.13   The experience of primary school practitioners confirmed the perception of the local authority officers noted above in relation to tensions between the advice being offered to schools in the Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2. There is a view that the Early Years Advisory team and Literacy Advisory team provide different messages in relation to pedagogy. The play-centred pedagogy of the Foundation Phase could be seen to be at odds with the more formal and directive pedagogy of the Literacy Strategy.

3.14   It was accepted, however, that whilst it was difficult, it was not impossible to incorporate these different approaches and messages. Foundation Phase practitioners felt that the literacy strategy fitted with their 'philosophy of learning' and were provided with particularly useful and supportive resources such as the 'Toolkit' and 'Continuum of Learning':

'All our staff have been on intensive foundation phase training and they have come back thinking that what they had been told was the way forward to teach foundation phase and that is what we have done on the advice of the advisory teachers. We have had conflicting views because we have now found out through Her Majesty's Inspectorate that they have gone too far away from the more formal, structured way of teaching literacy and so now we have to go back and re-address the way we teach literacy in the foundation phase. We have to now have conversations with the advisory team to address the inspectors concerns over the over-emphasis on continual provision and not enough direct teaching.' (Head teacher)

'Yes the foundation phase caused an over-exaggerated shift away from direct teaching but we see no reason why the two cannot co-exist to ensure children have the readiness to learn, the social skills and then more focused literacy teaching.' (Head teacher)

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Efficacy and Impact

3.15 Local authority officers accept that the strategy is at an early stage of implementation. They are, however, positive about the quality of the intervention and the early successes it is achieving which they believe to include:

- Improved percentages of students who are functionally literate by the end of Year 6.
- Significant improvements in the pedagogy and confidence of primary practitioners in the teaching of reading and of secondary staff in continuing to build upon the pedagogical approaches used by their primary colleagues in developing the literary competence of students.
- Improvements in student attitude and behaviour.

3.16 Head teachers from both primary and secondary schools report an improved working relationship with one another which allowed for a more successful transition from Year 6 to Year 7. Secondary head teachers reported that they had greater communication with Year 6 teachers to discuss the progress and needs of individual students. The strategy was said to have created a better working relationship between secondary schools and feeder primary schools due to the cluster approach and in particular teachers felt the implementation of the Rainbow Readers scheme facilitated an easier transition for students.

3.17 This has led to practitioners seeking to share effective practice within and across clusters:

'We have a good connection with our feeder schools now and we all seem to know what each other are doing which is really useful. We have much more information about individual pupils and they often bring their reading book with them so we know exactly where they are. We now have regular contact with the Year 6 teachers before they come up to secondary schools so we can target them straight away. It's no good letting them slip through the net until

Year 8 –that's too late, we need to hit the ground running in Year 7.' **(Secondary head teacher)**

3.18 There appears to be some ambiguity over what pedagogical approaches have been introduced specifically as a result of the strategy. Both teachers and support staff found it difficult to identify which particular reading interventions were specifically associated with the literacy strategy and which already existed within the school as a previous intervention.

3.19 Not only does this suggest the need for greater clarity but also that the literacy strategy may have been lost in the context of its predecessors indicating 'intervention fatigue'. It was the perception of some senior leaders and local authority officers that the use of a number of different approaches to literacy in the past had contributed to the lack of teacher confidence:

'there has been initiative overload and it has taken confidence away from them (teachers), especially those who have been teaching for years because they start to wonder whether what they have been doing has been wrong and so on. Through absolutely no fault of their own they are left dumbstruck by all these different ideas and ways of teaching literacy.' **(Deputy Head)**

3.20 Many of the schools reported that they were currently enjoying the success of improving literacy standards and welcomed the additional intervention, whilst others regarded the strategy as timely and fitting with their schools' action plan:

'..our approach of teaching literacy before the strategy was not meeting the needs of the individual children and we had nowhere to go with it so we were really excited about the strategy.' **(Teacher)**

'I think the main difficulty is that it is a disruptive strategy in that you have lots of groups of pupils leaving the classroom during just one lesson and it's difficult for teachers because they have to keep track of what pupils need to maybe catch up on what they have missed and it keeps you on your toes. It was really frustrating at first but I think we are all getting used to it and now we

are starting to see the benefits you just have to deal with it.' **(Primary teacher)**

3.21   Secondary schools were appreciative that they had been included in the strategy unlike previously when interventions often terminated at the end of primary school. However, it was strongly perceived by practitioners that often the resources associated with the strategy were not age-appropriate for the secondary children especially post Year 8. Adaptations of resources were deemed necessary to ensure the resources were suitable for all ages. This was regarded a problem especially for secondary school boys and practitioners were concerned that the lack of age-appropriate resources for secondary school pupils could potentially have a negative effect on their motivation and willingness to learn literacy.

3.22   Overall, therefore, the evidence at this early stage is that the strategy is having a perceived positive impact in a number of areas including:

- An increase in the number of functionally literate students transferring into secondary schools:

'We've seen many schemes but never one that has taken off like this – we are seeing improvements already with pupils.' **(Secondary support staff)**

- The improved confidence and pedagogy of primary and secondary practitioners:

'The strategy has given us a real clarity on literacy and directed focus which is what we needed.' **(Primary head teacher)**

'For us the transition is a particularly strong part of the strategy as others seem to stop at primary whereas there is more of a continuation' **(Secondary support staff)**

- Significant improvements in student's attitudes towards reading, their more general engagement with learning and classroom behaviour.

'Aw the children absolutely love it. They are so much more engaged with reading and it's given them higher levels of independence. Children love it so much that when they hit functional literacy they don't want to leave the strategy. We have never experienced attitudes towards reading like that!'
(Primary teacher)

3.23   Perhaps the biggest concern that has been noted by primary practitioners has been a narrowing of the curriculum. Incorporating the strategy into the curriculum has necessitated additional literacy sessions. Head teachers and practitioners accept that this is necessary but that it does come at a 'cost to the wider curriculum'.

Sustainability

3.24   The strategy requires considerable funding. Whilst elements of this have been provided by grant support from the Better Schools Fund and the Basic Skills Strategy the majority of funding has come from Authority revenue sources. Current changes to both grant and revenue funding provide challenges for future sustainability. These challenges were recognised by head teachers and classroom teachers:

''It is a priority we need money and sustained money because the strategy has excellent resources which assist with teaching children to read but it costs a lot of money and I'm not sure how long they will keep it up for.'

3.25   The Authority believe that, therefore, the strategy will have to become more self-sustaining relying on networks of effective practice and dissemination and training at school level following planned greater delegation of funding to schools. Given that one of the strengths of the current model has been the high

quality of training provided by LA staff this is also likely to be a sustainability issue.

3.26   As the strategy moves from its focus currently on the most disadvantaged schools it will have to ensure that it is aligned and suited to schools in different contexts in the city. The fact that it is seen to be a flexible approach and that it has a central focus on practitioner quality and school leadership should enable it to be adapted for these contexts.

3.27   It is also recognised that significant attention will need to be given to pre-school education through programmes such as Language and Play, Flying Start and Families First so that in the most disadvantaged parts of the city children can enter school ready to benefit from the approaches in the strategy.

3.28   There is also an acceptance that the community based aspects of the strategy will need to be strengthened so that families, the community, employers and the voluntary sector can support the strategy in the way that has been critical to success in West Dunbartonshire.

3.29   Secondary school teachers believe that it will be essential that they further develop the literary competence of students, particularly the most able, if they are to be successful in their education:

I think a lot of teachers feel and we certainly feel that the functional literacy level of 9.6 is uninspiring for those achieving that level and we not only need to strive higher than this level if possible to ensure pupils are reaching their full potential but must be careful to not neglect those who were at risk and had to go through the intervention – to me they are still at risk of slipping back' (**Secondary head teacher**)

3.30   Overall, head teachers and practitioners could not envisage any reasons why the strategy would not be suitable to implement throughout Cardiff schools.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

4.1 The findings of this early evaluation of the Cardiff Literacy Strategy can be summarised as follows:

- The Cardiff Literacy Strategy has drawn upon a wide evidence base on successful literacy interventions including the experience of West Dunbartonshire in Scotland. It, therefore, represents a robust, evidence-based approach to meeting the challenges faced in the schools of Cardiff and has considerable resonance for the wider work being undertaken by the Welsh Government in this area.

- In particular it is centred upon a model of intensive, school-based, professional development of teachers and support staff that is seen to be highly effective and which draws heavily on evidence of successful interventions in improving literacy standards.

- The strategy and the professional development programme associated with it are founded upon an approach to literacy which makes a particularly strong use of synthetic phonics. Whilst this evaluation has not gathered evidence on the actual impact of this approach on student achievement it is one that head-teachers and practitioners generally welcome.

- The contribution made by local authority school improvement and advisory staff to this professional development was viewed by teachers as a particular strength.

- Initially some primary teachers were concerned about finding curriculum time in which to integrate the strategy and a potential narrowing of the

curriculum. These concerns have generally been overcome and given the importance of improving standards of literacy were seen to be acceptable.

- Overall, Local Authority Officers, head teachers and practitioners perceive the strategy to be having a positive impact not only on levels of literacy but also more generally on attitudes towards learning.

- Head teachers and practitioners believed the strategy could be suitable for all Cardiff schools;

- Support for the strategy from head-teachers and the School Governing Body is thought to be critically important.

- Head teachers and practitioners were concerned about the sustainability of the strategy both in terms of finance and ongoing teacher professional development.

Recommendations:

4.2 The following recommendations are made for the further development of the strategy:

- It should be fully embedded in the schools that have been involved in the first phase of the strategy.

- It should be extended to other schools.

- It should be fully supported and sustained by the local authority in order that it can make a significant contribution to addressing literacy problems in the schools of Cardiff.

- The model developed in Cardiff should receive close consideration by the Welsh Government as part of the emerging National Literacy Programme for Wales.

- In order to fully assess the impact of the strategy Cardiff Local Authority should commence a longitudinal research and evaluation study.

- In order to sustain the strategy in the medium and longer term a business case should be developed that will ensure that sufficient resource is allocated at local authority level for Advisory team support and at school level for ongoing training and teacher development.

- Effective practice should be more fully developed and disseminated within the authority through networking between schools and professionals.

- If the full impact of the strategy is to be achieved it is critically important that parental and community support and involvement is more fully developed.

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