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# Empowering Teachers to Promote Oral Language in Culturally Diverse Classrooms in Ireland

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The importance of oral language development among elementary school students is widely acknowledged, both in the research and in policy documents worldwide. Facility with one particular style of language, decontextualized language, is critical for success in the school context. This style of language is not readily accessible to all students. This study reviews literature findings which indicate that teacher knowledge is imperative for successful teaching of English and reports on an intervention case study in three schools in Ireland in designated disadvantaged contexts. The case study examined the impact of enhanced teacher knowledge on the oral language skills of students in elementary classrooms. Findings suggest that, when teachers are empowered with knowledge of the requisite content of language teaching, appropriate pedagogical approaches for students' oral language development, awareness of the style of language necessary for success in school, and the potential of parents to support their children's oral language development, students' facility with decontextualized language style is improved at all levels of the elementary school. The study concludes with recommendations for policy-makers underscoring the significance of improved teacher knowledge for effective oral language teaching among students in disadvantaged contexts.

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In recent decades, a clear and unambiguous recognition has emerged of the importance of oral language development for learning, acquisition of literacy skills, and ability to access the curriculum effectively (Riley, Burrell, & McCallum, 2004). This has resulted in a focus on oral language development which is manifest in the policy documents of education systems worldwide (Alexander, 2003; Department of Education and Skills, 2011b). There is mounting evidence that socio-economic disadvantage can result in differences in children's spoken language (Cregan, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004). These differences may impact on children's educational success, and may in fact "be a major factor in the *tail of underachievement* that is currently the cause of so much concern" (Locke, 2007, p. 217). The Irish Education system is one in which the overwhelming majority of students are natives of Ireland and L1 English speakers. Elementary schools in that system in which the majority of students come from contexts designated as disadvantaged continue to struggle with the successful implementation of policy in relation to the development of oral language skills among their students (Department of Education and Skills, 2011b).

This study examines the impact of teacher empowerment through enhanced knowledge of children's oral language skills in English-speaking contexts designated as disadvantaged where English is L1. This article will begin with an outline of

findings from the literature review in relation to teacher knowledge for the successful development of oral language skills in young children. It will go on to present findings from a case study which explored the impact of enhanced teacher knowledge on the oral language skills of students in schools participating in a program called Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). This is an integrated school support programme for schools in Ireland where the majority of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. While some of the students in these schools are speakers of English-as-an-additional language (EAL) learners, the majority of the students speak English as their only language (EL). Since the majority of the students in these schools are disadvantaged socioeconomically, important implications for supporting teachers who teach EL learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged will be drawn.

### **Teachers Can Make a Difference**

It is widely acknowledged that “of those variables which are potentially open to policy influence, factors involving teachers and teaching are the most important influences on student learning” (McKenzie & Santiago, 2005, p. 28). Reviews by Santiago (2002); Schacter and Thum (2004); and Eide, Goldhaber, and Brewer, (2004) all suggest that the most important school variable affecting student achievement is teacher quality. That teachers can make a difference is undisputed (Alexander, 2010; Coolahan, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Mortimer, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Tizard, Blatchford, Burke, Farquar, & Plewis, 1988). The work of researchers such as Tough (1977), Wasik, Bond, and Hindman (2006), and Wells and Mejía-Arauz (2006) have demonstrated that teachers can make a dramatic difference to the language development of children. Several studies have found that when oral activities involving the use of literate style language have been emphasised for children for whom this type of language knowledge is not well developed, literacy standards have improved (Galda, Shockley, & Pelligrini, 1995; LeFevre & Senechal, 1999). Significant impacts such as these do not occur by chance, however. Fundamental to successful practice is teacher knowledge, an important factor influencing teacher quality and effective practice. The following sections will focus on findings in the literature about specific knowledge elementary school teachers need in order to equip English L1 students in designated disadvantaged contexts with those language skills necessary for success in school.

### **Teacher Knowledge for Language Development**

Early studies of teacher knowledge for the teaching of English tended to focus on teachers’ knowledge about language - subject knowledge (Bearne, Dombey, & Grainger, 2003) and in the case of elementary teachers highlighted what these teachers appeared not to know, concluding that increasing teachers’ subject knowledge would improve the effectiveness of their teaching (Poulson, 2003). However, the pedagogical transformation of subject knowledge is a complex task in the case of elementary school teachers (Shulman, 1987) and “there appears to be little evidence of a clear relationship between well-developed formal academic knowledge of particular subject content and effective teaching in the primary phase of schooling” (Poulson, 2003, p. 56). The work of Shulman (1987) refers to the importance of “pedagogical content knowledge”, that is, knowledge of the content and additionally an ability to present it meaningfully to children (Poulson, 2003,

p. 55). Relevant findings (Alexander, 2003; Corden, 2007; Poulson, 2003; Riley & Burrell, 2007; Snow, 2003; Wyse & Jones, 2007) indicate that teacher knowledge for the successful teaching of English comprises even more than pedagogical content knowledge, requiring

- knowledge of **content**,
- knowledge of **pedagogy**, and also
- knowledge of **learners**,
- knowledge of the **curriculum**, and
- knowledge of one's **beliefs as practitioner**

Each of these layers of knowledge is acquired and built upon throughout the continuum of a teaching career, and additionally, each of these layers operates simultaneously. For the purposes of clarity, each will be considered in turn, over the next few sections in order to elucidate as precisely as possible the nature of teacher knowledge most likely to enable the successful transformation of appropriate knowledge into effective practice in elementary grade classrooms having an effective oral language focus.

### **Teacher Knowledge of the Content of Language Learning**

It is widely acknowledged that having appropriate *content knowledge* may not necessarily result in successfully teaching such content to students. However, it is accepted that a teacher needs to have *subject knowledge* in order to teach effectively, and where high standards of teaching are reached teachers display considerable levels of content knowledge in the subject they are teaching (Corden, 2007). In the absence of such knowledge Corden warns that “without a fundamental grasp of those elements of language study that are expected to be taught in primary schools, there is a real danger of teachers relying on ‘off the shelf’ textbook activities and returning to ... arid decontextualised exercises” (p. 117).

Invoking the prevailing situation where there are “tremendous pressures on children to become skilled users of language in school” (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003, p. 9), these researchers argue that teachers need “a thorough understanding of how language figures in education” (p. 9). The multiplicity of functions in which a teacher engages which are mediated through language underpin the rationale for their argument. The teacher as a *communicator* needs to know that patterns of discourse are culturally determined and that all patterns of discourse are equally valid. The teacher as an *educator* needs to know about and understand the basics of language and child language development so that appropriate language content and relevant activities and resources are selected to promote language development in the classroom. The teacher as an *evaluator* needs to be aware that all assessment is ultimately an assessment of language and so must realise how sources of variation in language use may impact children’s assessments. The teacher as an *educated human being* needs to have a personal facility with language. The teacher as an *agent of socialisation* must facilitate successful interaction with the system of school for all children regardless of linguistic or cultural background (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003).

Much attention is given in this argument to the significance of teacher knowledge in relation to oral language proposing that ‘despite its importance for learning, many teachers know much less about oral language than they need to

know' (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003, p. 20). Specific aspects of language knowledge required include:

- knowledge of the basic units of language (phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, discourse);
- knowledge of processes of vocabulary acquisition and the importance of accurate definitions and explanations when introducing vocabulary;
- awareness of dialects and an appreciation of their validity and complexity;
- understanding of academic style of language – its existence, its significance, and its characteristics (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2003, pp. 20-33).

Snow (2003) clarifies that such knowledge is necessary to enable teachers to understand and support students as learners and readers.

One specific type of language knowledge, *knowledge of academic style of language*, has been found to be particularly important for students to succeed when engaging with the system of school. Much research points to the link between poor achievement in literacy and difficulties with this academic style of language (Pilgreen, 2006; Schleppegrell & Columbi, 2002). In spite of this, however, relatively little research attention has been given to the “challenges faced by native speakers in learning the rules, the structures and the content of academic English” (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 113).

Given the importance attaching to a clear articulation of expectations for language use in the classroom, particularly expectations for formal, academic or literate style of language use by students (Schleppegrell, 2001), it would seem critical that teachers would have knowledge of the specific characteristics of this style of language. The academic style of language expected in the classroom context is one which involves an authoritative presentation of ideas heaving with new information. This authoritative style uses apt vocabulary and complex grammatical structures which are expanded appropriately with a high degree of organization. The ideas must also be presented from an impersonal stance with regard to both the speaker and listener (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Michaels, 1981; Schleppegrell, 2001, 2004). Snow and Uccelli (2009) condense the features of academic language style revealed by linguists and educational researchers as:

- *Interpersonal stance*: characterised in academic language by being detached and authoritative in the style of language used
- *Information load*: characterised by conciseness and density of language
- *Syntactic organisation of information*: characterised by the use of embedded clauses
- *Organising of information* such that information is presented coherently and logically
- *Lexicon* characterised by vocabulary choice which is diverse, precise and formal

(Snow & Uccelli, 2009, pp. 118-121).

In order to facilitate successful oral language development, in particular in contexts designated as disadvantaged, it is imperative that knowledge of the characteristics of academic language is available to all elementary school teachers.

Snow (2003) acknowledges the enormity and complexity of knowledge required by teachers of language, which is accessible since all teachers can speak a language, but is complicated by the level of technical knowledge required in what is an intuitive process (p. 129). She recommends that all teachers need to develop a curiosity about words and suggests that “the first benchmark en route to mastery of the domain of language for teachers should perhaps be defined as familiarity with the dimensions on which words and language might vary and an unrelenting willingness to learn more” (p. 130).

### **Teacher Knowledge of Pedagogy**

The role of the teacher in successfully empowering students in the construction of meaning as active agents in their own learning is a feature of the work of Cummins (1986), cited in Au (1998). Empowered students are described as “confident in their own cultural identity, as well as knowledgeable of school structures and interactional patterns” (Au, 1998, p. 304) thus enabling them to participate successfully in learning activities in school. Students from diverse backgrounds may be disempowered in the school context by virtue of a lack of connection between schooled knowledge and their personal experience (Demie & Lewis, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2004).

The poor academic achievement of students of diverse backgrounds has been attributed in part to the low status accorded to the home language of such students (Au, 1998) which may be ignored or denigrated or used as a basis for negative judgements of cognitive ability (Hoff, 2006; Michaels, 1991; Roth, 1986). Cummins (1986) argues that this can best be countered where teachers incorporate the language and culture of such students into the school programme, reach out to their communities, and engage in pedagogy which encourages them to use language to construct their own knowledge (in Au, 1998; also see McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001). This viewpoint is reiterated by Poplin and Phillips (1993) arguing that “an appropriate education must respect who children are, their communities, their language, and their histories and help them become the best they can be rather than simply requiring them to become like the rest of us” (p. 253). This is best realised through a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

### **Social Constructivist Pedagogy**

The pedagogy deriving from the socio-cultural nature of learning is that of social constructivism – “Because reality is seen to be created through processes of social exchange, historically situated, social constructivists are interested in the collective generation of meaning among people” (Au, 1998, p. 299). This paradigm is consistent with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of development (Pantalco, 2007).

The interrelationship between spoken language and learning has led psychologists and educationalists to advocate pedagogy in which discourse is centrally involved in the search for meaning (Barnes, 1992; Bruner, 1986; Wood, 1988). Influenced by the work of Vygotsky who argued that thought is not just expressed in words but comes into existence through words, these researchers see talk as central for learning in the context of school. Having discourse as a central pillar in teaching and learning, is the lynchpin of social constructivist pedagogy.

Barnes (1976) reported on two major pedagogical styles in classrooms: transmission and interpretation. In the transmission model, teachers emphasise

information transfer, determining what is to be taught, transmitting information, and testing children to ensure that it has been learned. In the interpretation model teachers are concerned more with open-ended, interactive discourse, involving exploratory and reflective learning, pupils taking risks, and sharing thoughts and ideas. The transmission model of teaching is characterised by the teacher initiating the discourse with a question to which the pupil responds, followed by feedback in the form of an evaluation from the teacher (Mehan, 1979). This model, known also as a "recitation script: (Wells & Mejía-Arauz, 2006), has been found to disadvantage those children whose out-of-school culture does not expose them to this pattern of interaction (Heath, 1983; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), provides no link between the patterns of everyday language use and those more formal patterns required in the school context (Lemke, 1990), and gives children minimal opportunity to voice their own ideas or to respond to the ideas of others (Wood, 1992; also see Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

In their survey of teacher-pupil discourse Galton, Simon, and Croll (1980) found that in classrooms, pupils gave limited responses to predominantly closed questions and rarely initiated exchanges or explored issues. Student work was found to take place largely independently and individually and teacher intervention was usually restricted to giving information or correcting that student work. A repeat of their 1980 survey in 1999 (Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Pell, 1999) found that at this time there was even less emphasis on active learning and more time was spent on direct instruction. This corroborates findings from other studies that the transmission mode of instruction, where an asymmetrical discourse sequence predominates and which, therefore, of necessity minimises interaction, continues to prevail in many classrooms (Alexander, 2010; Cole, 1996; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

The transmission model of teaching is, according to Wells (1992, p. 289) completely incompatible with the concept of constructivist learning. According to Corden (2007) the essence of constructivist learning is that pupils will gain through social interaction with others, where they share perceptions, extend their knowledge base, and develop conceptual understanding through being exposed to other, sometimes conflicting, views of the world.

This model of learning, which is essential if an oral language perspective is to be promoted in the classroom, requires a re-balancing of the traditional model involving the triadic dialogue of Initiation-Response-Evaluation to a context where knowledge is also dialogically co-constructed (Wells & Mejía-Arauz, 2006). This context requires students to explore content in dialogue which has greater symmetry between participants. Alexander (2003, p. 33) identifies four criteria or conditions of dialogic teaching as:

- *Collective*: pupils and teachers address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation;
- *Reciprocal*: pupils and teachers listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- *Cumulative*: pupils and teachers build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and inquiry;

- *Supportive*: students articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings.

In such a context the teacher is required to take on a range of roles – facilitator, manager, instructor, and assessor (Fisher, 1992); to use a range of strategies – modelling, demonstrating, supporting, and scaffolding (Bruner, 1986); and to engage in an interactive process of teaching and learning focussed on collaborative learning and the joint construction of knowledge (Corden, 2007). The pedagogical implications of such an approach include increased emphasis on group work and exploratory learning through talk, exemplified in discussion opportunities, exchange of ideas, sharing information, and problem-solving. This is supported by scaffolded dialogue premised on structured questioning designed to guide the learner. An encounter with literature and poetry, along with increased participation in play and drama activities are among the strategies recommended (Alexander, 2003; Corden, 2007; Grainger, 2004; Mercer, 2004; Wyse & Jones, 2007).

### **Teacher Knowledge of Learners**

Teachers' perceptions of their students' capacity for learning and achievement may be affected by issues of social class, gender, and ethnicity (Filer & Pollard, 2000; Roth, 1986). In the classroom context, some children, experience "synchronous interaction with the teacher" (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 433). Others, however, whose variety of language, although equally complex and valid, is not the standard variety, encounter discontinuity of experience by virtue of a mismatch between the spoken language of the home and that expected and demanded by the school (Edwards, 1997; Irish National Teachers Organisation, 1994; Mac Ruairc, 1997).

This in turn may contribute to the underachievement experienced by these children in the context of school and in the development of literacy skills. Children may come to school as competent speakers and listeners in their home environments, but, because of the pre-eminence of one variety of language, both spoken and written, as the medium of all educational exchange these children may be judged negatively in terms of both their linguistic and cognitive abilities (Cook-Gumperz, 2006, p. 9).

A study by Riley and Burrell (2007) found that for effective early language teaching, teachers need to have knowledge of the particular skills of children, most especially those children from diverse backgrounds (p. 183). The study suggested that the extent to which teachers enabled children to progress varies considerably due to a lack of knowledge of the variety of language skills children bring with them into the school context. A compelling case was made in that study for the use of an oral narrative assessment tool by teachers to improve teacher knowledge of learners with a view to enhancing teacher impact on children's oral language development.

In a previous study (Cregan, 2007) findings from teacher focus group discussions revealed perceptions of children's language skills as '*poor*', '*weak*' or '*very weak*' (teacher comments, Cregan, p. 156), and extended to deficit perceptions



of children's general cognitive ability which was often characterised as not as well developed as it would be if the students were raised in a middle-class context –

they're not as able because they don't get the same opportunity – if these children were compared with children in a similar class in a middle-class school they would be way behind – lots of important development takes place before the child starts school – that's all happened before they even come to school so they've missed out already (Teacher comment, Cregan, 2007, p. 157).

Such perceptions of children may result in teachers having lower than appropriate expectations for some children, which may lead to lower than appropriate levels of achievement on the part of such children (Archer & Weir, 2005; Kennedy, 2009). In terms of knowledge of learners, critical knowledge for teachers to acquire includes an awareness of the existence of variation in language style among children, the complexity and validity of all varieties of patterns of language use, and the implications of children's language variety for achieving success in the school context (Cregan, 2007).

### **Teacher Knowledge of the Curriculum**

In the elementary school context in Ireland, evidence of difficulty for teachers in successfully implementing the Revised Primary Curriculum (English) (Department of Education and Science, 1999) is presented in the Primary Curriculum Review, Phase 1 (National Council for Curriculum Assessment, 2005). This review found that “teachers reported difficulty in understanding the English strands and using them to plan for and to teach the English curriculum” (p. 2). One of the main recommendations arising from this finding was that “the organisational framework (strands and strand units) for the English curriculum should be revised to ensure the English curriculum is presented in a manner that is accessible to teachers and that enables them to plan for, and to support children's learning in the primary school” (p. 3). Numerous recent reports have highlighted problems for teachers in planning, target-setting, and curriculum implementation in relation to the teaching of language and literacy in elementary classrooms (Department of Education and Science, 2002, 2005b; Department of Education and Skills, 2010, 2011a). This suggests that some teachers are experiencing difficulty with implementing the English curriculum and using the curriculum for effective planning. Teacher knowledge of the curriculum is central to effective implementation of policy. Consequently, the English Curriculum for early childhood education in Ireland is currently under review.

The scholarly sources surveyed in this first section of the article underscore the role of teacher knowledge in promoting the language proficiency of students, in particular of those with fragile access to academic language. First, permeating all of the teacher knowledge outlined above is a belief system through which various kinds of teacher knowledge related to language learning is accessed and developed. Clearly, this belief system is as important as the knowledge itself (Twiselton, 2003). Teachers' sense of professional identity, explained as “how teachers define themselves to themselves and others” was found to be fundamental to their effectiveness, influencing such factors as motivation, job fulfilment, commitment and self-efficacy (Sammons, Day, Kington, Gu, Stobart, & Smees, 2007, p. 687). This study found that the pupils of teachers with a positive sense of professional identity

had levels of attainment which exceeded those of teachers who did not (p. 699). Thus, how teachers view their role in the context of the classroom impacts fundamentally on the content they teach and the actions they take. Reflection on the goals of education and the role of the teacher in achieving them must be central in the development of a teacher's sense of identity such that "teachers need to see their primary role in the classroom as a catalyst for learning – the link between pupil, curriculum and subject, task and learning, classroom and the world beyond it" (Twiselton, 2003, p. 73).

Second, competence in developing student proficiency in language at elementary school level requires an abundance of knowledge on the part of the teacher. This is not confined to knowledge of language itself, but also, knowledge of the particular style of language required in the context of school. Also required is knowledge of the extent to which this style of language is available to a range of students from diverse backgrounds, and knowledge of how best to realise this learning in the classroom, with a clear understanding of curriculum targets. In the next section, findings from a case study undertaken to explore the impact of supporting teachers in acquiring this knowledge are presented.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Given the importance of the teacher in enhancing students' learning, this study sought to explore the impact of empowering elementary teachers through enhanced knowledge, on developing students' oral language ability in DEIS schools in Ireland. The focus of the investigation was on the following questions:

1. What is the impact of teacher support on oral language teaching and learning in a DEIS context?
2. What are the messages for policy makers that can be derived from the experience in this research?

Specifically the study focussed on the following sub-questions:

- What supports do teachers need in the classroom context to facilitate the development of students' oral language skills?
- What impact, if any, does teacher support have on the teachers, and the community of learners and their parents being served by the school?
- What has been learned in this process that can be disseminated more widely and how can this be done most effectively?

This study used a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to expand understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2003). A context for the qualitative case study was established through quantitative data gathered from a previous nationwide survey of elementary teachers in DEIS schools (urban and rural), which was designed to uncover prevailing perceptions and practice. The purpose of this survey was to elicit teacher perceptions of students' oral language skills and to document broadly teacher knowledge of the content of language teaching and the types of pedagogical

approaches used by elementary teachers in response to the perceived needs of the students in their classrooms.

The understanding derived from this quantitative survey was then expanded by means of a qualitative case study method of generating data. The baseline data from the survey revealed the challenges of oral language teaching and learning in DEIS schools as perceived by teachers, and significantly, provided a context in relation to teachers' practice, forming an important backdrop for the case study which followed. The focus of the case study was on the delivery of an intensive programme of support for oral language teaching and learning in three DEIS elementary schools in Ireland with a view to learning more about improving practice in oral language teaching and learning in the context of these schools. This paper will present details of the case study undertaken and its findings.

### **Case Study**

The goal in this study was to explore more extensively the support needed by elementary teachers in designated disadvantaged schools for the development of the oral language skills of the students in their classes and to investigate the effects such support might have on the whole school community – teachers, students, and parents. The study used an intervention case study design, where the researcher adopted the role of a non-participant observer (observing self-reported teacher practice through professional support sessions) and intervened as appropriate to enhance classroom practice (Cohen & Manion, 1998). This support was realised through a series of professional development sessions with the teachers. Teachers reported their practice and identified areas of support required.

Findings from the review of the literature and the survey informed the focus and approach taken in the case study. Three schools were selected on the basis of membership of the DEIS school support programme (two urban schools, and one rural school) and a willingness to participate in the study. The study was conducted over a period of one school year (academic year 2008/2009). Nine elementary classroom teachers were involved actively over the period of the school year in emphasising oral language development in their classrooms: three kindergarten teachers, three third class teachers, and three sixth class teachers (the use of the term *class* in the Irish context is equivalent to *grade* in the United States). The focus of the intervention throughout the study was to empower the teachers in the schools through enhanced knowledge, and in this way, to improve oral language provision in their classrooms. This empowerment was realised through a series of professional development sessions led by me, as the researcher, and responding to the needs, concerns, and issues raised by the teachers in an interactive, organic, and evolving process. Six focussed professional development sessions were planned and delivered to the teachers in the three schools over a period of eight months. Each professional development session took place in the school during the school day. Teachers' classes were supervised by other teachers and sessions often ran into lunch-time. Sessions lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours and involved a combination of researcher-led topics and responses by the researcher to teachers' areas of concern. The content of these sessions focussed on expanding teacher knowledge of language, pedagogy, and outreach to parents, with the goal of empowering teachers to engage in a form of practice designed to maximise the development of students' oral language proficiency.

For the duration of the study, teachers were required to:

- Commit to having regular dedicated, discrete teaching time for oral language development in their classrooms (two 30 minute sessions per week at third and sixth class levels, and one daily ten minute session in kindergarten),
- Plan systematically and in a structured way so that it would be clear to them what their targets were and whether they had been achieved,
- Prioritise oral language so that opportunities throughout the day would be seized to develop oral language skills was required,
- Regularly engage students in oral tasks as part of the learning experience,
- Emphasise broadening students' experiences (real and vicarious) on which talk could be based,
- Include a strong focus on the development specifically of that language style - academic style of language use - found to be important for success in the school context and particularly necessary for students coming from non-mainstream backgrounds was recommended,
- Ensure that students encountered and engaged with literature, poetry, and drama, on a regular basis, and
- Use interactive pair and group-work as an approach whenever possible.

To monitor the impact of changes in teacher knowledge on the students and their language development over the course of the project, teachers completed a reflective journal throughout the period of intervention. Entries in the journal were made at the discretion of the teachers. Teachers were encouraged to focus in their entries on challenges and successes they experienced over the period of the study, with particular reference to changes in their knowledge of the content and pedagogy of language teaching, changes in their perceptions of the students' language skills, and their awareness of the potential of parental involvement in the process of oral language development. In addition, data were derived from a full-day seminar involving all the teachers, designed to elicit feedback on perceived changes at the end of the intervention.

At the outset of the study, four students from each class, representing a range of ability, were randomly selected by the teachers. Developments in the language skills of these students were the focus of particular attention by the teachers and relevant observations were noted in teacher journals as the year progressed. These observations were at the discretion of the teachers.

These students, with parental consent, also took part in pre-/post-testing to establish whether their language skills, in particular their decontextualised language skills, had changed in any observable way. The pre-/post-testing of the students took the form of elicited production techniques as developed by Underhill (1987). The students were taken in pairs from their classroom to a quiet room and presented with some fun games to play which involved talking. The focus of the talking tasks, designed to elicit oral responses, was on those oral language skills thought to be important for success in the school context and related to the development of literacy skills. The types of tasks selected were similar to those in the SHELL test battery (Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, & Kurland, 1995) which explore children's ability to produce oral decontextualised language. One of the tasks in the

SHELL test battery involves children producing oral narratives, an oral language skill linked with later literacy development (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008; Riley & Burrell, 2007; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001) because “the ability to narrate orally encompasses a range of complex language skills and is an important predictor of later language and literacy achievements” (Riley & Burrell, 2007, p. 183).

Tabors et al. (2001) also argue for the important connection between ability to produce formal definitions and later literacy achievement. For the purposes of robust comparison, a definition task was included in this study as it was in the SHELL test battery. The final task in the SHELL test battery is a picture description task which is also included in this study. Students completed the same tasks in the pre-test and the post-test for comparative purposes. (See Appendix A for sample materials used to elicit oral responses from the students).

Students’ Oral Narratives were analysed for evidence of change in terms of those features of language identified as characteristic of academic/decontextualized style of language necessary for success in the school context (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Word Definitions were analysed for change in the level of formality of the definition: characterised by the presence and the quality of superordinate used in the definition, as well as the use of a relative clause structure and the extent of elaboration presented. The linguistic features of interest in the Picture Description task focussed on a comparison of the total number of words used, the number of adjectives, verbs and locatives used, appropriate use of definite and indefinite articles and pronouns, and the ability of the children to include “specificity markers” (Snow et al., 1995, p. 40).

## Case Study Findings

The focus of the intervention in the case study was driven by (1) findings from the literature around the importance of *knowledge* for effective implementation of policy in a meaningful and effective manner, and (2) data generated from an analysis of teacher responses to the nationwide survey. This analysis revealed (a) overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the language ability of many of the children, often presented from a deficit perspective, (b) inadequate setting of appropriate targets for language learning, (c) poor frequency of use of those pedagogies most facilitative of oral language development, and (d) very little parental involvement in the development of children’s oral language skills.

Case study data generated insights on the impact of support on teachers in relation to their:

- Knowledge about language
- Perceptions of the language skills and ability of the children, and
- Pedagogy knowledge about approaches and strategies, planning, resources, co-operation.

Case study data also explored the impact which the teacher support had on the *community* served by the school and the teachers, i.e. the students in terms of learning and their parents in terms of involvement with children’s learning.

## Teacher Knowledge about Language

Teachers agreed that as a result of support given, they are clearer than before on the primacy of oral language in the classroom. They recognised that oral language needs time to be adequately developed in a DEIS context and do not resent giving this time because they can see the effects of improved oral language skills on children.

From taking part in this project I can clearly see how valuable oral language is and how undervalued it is in the average classroom ... It is no good speaking to/"talking at" the class for 20 minutes and calling it oral language. ... Successful oral language lessons should be well planned (Kindergarten Teacher, School A).

All of the case study teachers increased time dedicated to oral language development, frequently used clear, appropriate teaching and learning strategies, and demonstrated a high level of awareness of the desired language outcomes.

I am teaching for 20 years and ... up to this year I felt slightly out of my depth as to what I should be doing in my oral language classes .... Now I know how to structure the lesson and am more willing to do group work and paired work (Third Class Teacher, School B).

Teachers acknowledged their importance in this process as a role model for the students, and through scaffolding the students with appropriate structures, direction, and support in oral tasks. None of these teachers simplified language for the students because they realised that students can engage with more complex language than would have been thought previously.

I have had to change my attitude and thoughts about oral language drastically ... I would have been guilty of dumbing down language and vocabulary for the children ... I could never have imagined how language could have been developed in such a systematic way (Kindergarten Teacher, School B).

One teacher remarked during the seminar discussion –“I think it’s probably the teachers that actually learned the most!” (Sixth Class Teacher, School C).

## Teacher Knowledge about Learners

At the outset of the intervention, teachers acknowledged that the students have needs in relation to language development.

(The children) find it very difficult to tell a story – continue to talk ... elaborate – very poor; describe (poor); sequence stories; show good manners/refined language/speak in low, calm voices – often very loud; poor to make eye-contact or maintain eye contact (Sixth Class Teacher, School C).

However, following the intervention, instead of judging the children negatively and perceiving children as deficient in some way, teachers recognised the needs specifically, and showed an awareness of their responsibility as teachers to respond appropriately to these needs.

The empowerment of understanding students’ needs, identifying precisely what these needs are in the context of language development, and being in a

position to respond meaningfully to the needs had the effect of reducing negative perceptions teachers may otherwise have of these students arising from their language skills.

With very little skill-teaching we expect children to be good at communicating with others (this will change!!!); ... these children are as good as any child their own age and they have to believe that. You do that by believing it yourself! (Kindergarten Teacher, School C).

Teachers expressed surprise at the ability of the students when scaffolded in their language skills, e.g., "Children have a huge capacity for language." (Third Class Teacher, School A); "Children said many words." (Kindergarten Teacher, School B); "Children amazed me in how they described it." (Third Class Teacher, School C).

### **Teacher Knowledge of Pedagogy**

Teacher knowledge of appropriate pedagogy for the successful development of students' oral language skills was informed by two basic tenets – that students must encounter high quality language from a range of sources, and that students must have increased opportunity to use oral language in the classroom accompanied by appropriate feedback.

Teachers reported that their standard of language use when interacting with the students during the project was more challenging than before. Additionally, all teachers increased the degree of exposure to literature and poetry and involved students in engagement tasks requiring a response to the literary experience through talk. As well as supporting and facilitating independent reading which was already in place in these classrooms, teachers at all levels read stories/novels aloud in their classrooms, and presented children with a wide range of poetry on a regular basis.

Teachers consistently indicated throughout the project that talking tasks were an integral part of the learning that was taking place in their classrooms. This occurred most frequently through increased use of collaborative interaction in the form of pair and group work. One teacher commented that the "teacher's role is not to own the discussion or to love the sound of their own voice." (Sixth Class Teacher, School A). This teacher reported that "the children really enjoyed working in groups for debating, drama activities, brainstorming but the problem was at my level – handing over control to the children, letting them take control of the talk." (Sixth Class Teacher, School A). This difficulty on the part of all teachers was reiterated during the plenary discussion – all found what they represented as handing over of control to the students difficult and found it challenging that students were talking more and teacher was talking less. However, teachers acknowledged that students welcomed opportunities to talk in the classroom and all found that pair and group work went well for the most part.

I have found that pupils need to be taught how to work in pairs, to take turns and to listen to each other. As time progresses I have found that the pupils are gaining in confidence and more willing to listen to each other (Kindergarten Teacher, School A).

## **Impact of Teacher Knowledge on Parental Involvement**

Given the critical importance in the literature attributed to parental support for oral language development, the case study sought to investigate the challenges and effects of reaching out to parents and empowering them to become involved in their students' oral language development. This initiative took the form of assigning oral language tasks for homework, e.g., "Tell your parents in ten interesting sentences what you did in school today." (Reaction from parents – excellent!) (Third Class Teacher, School C).

General views expressed by the teachers indicated a very positive reaction to this initiative. Teachers were very supportive of the process, surprised at the level of response from parents, and pleased at the impact this experience had on many of the students, in particular, weaker performing students. However, there was agreement among the teachers that such initiatives involved a significant amount of work on the part of the teacher (preparing tasks and materials, communicating with parents, following up with students during school) and could only be sustained for short periods of time. Parents responded very positively to the invitation demonstrating, as the literature has identified, a concern for their children's achievement and a willingness to collaborate with the school when school directs them on how best to support their children's learning.

## **Impact of Teacher Knowledge on Students' Oral Language Skills**

All of the teachers involved in the case study agreed that the students had improved oral language skills as a result of participation in this study. This was manifested particularly in students' levels of confidence and awareness of oral language as a legitimate and important part of the learning process. Teachers reported that students enjoy the experience of talking and having their voices heard. Teachers commented that students love to talk, e.g., "I noticed that the children love talking and being listened to." (Kindergarten Teacher, School A); "Children also recognise the importance of talking. They love to impress you." (Sixth Class Teacher, School B).

Teachers indicated that they noticed an improvement in students' clarity of expression and sentence structure, reporting evidence of increased range of vocabulary knowledge, expansion of ideas, and use of increasingly complex sentences. "I have noticed a big improvement in the children's vocabulary and sentence building. When describing something there is much more order to their sentences and I am more likely to receive more than one sentence." (Third Class Teacher, School C).

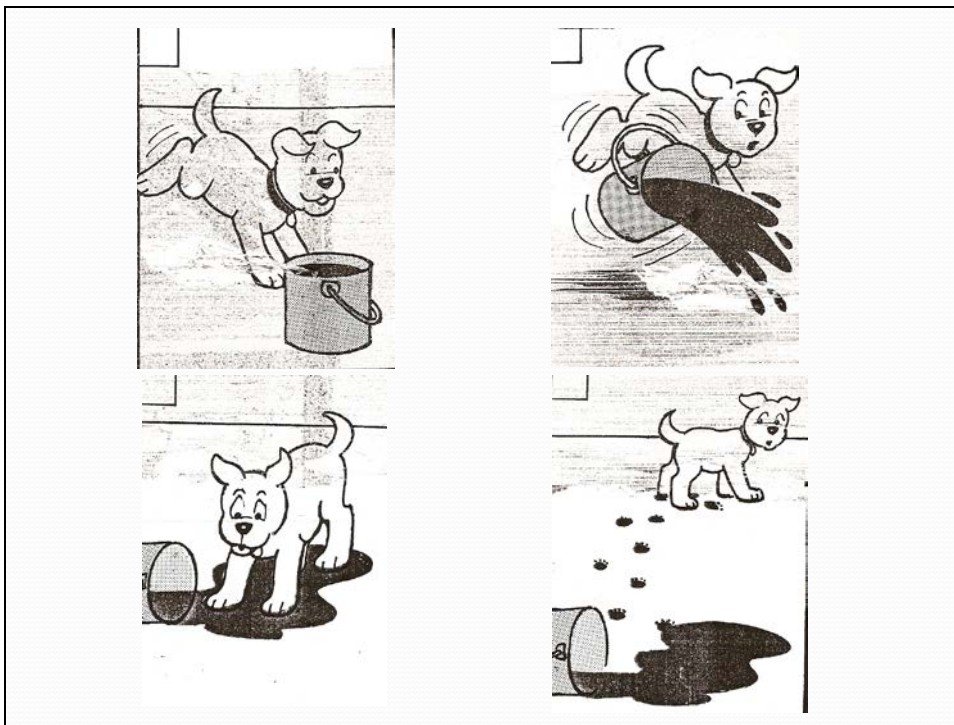
Teachers noted a marked improvement in students' self-confidence. "Sixth class got more confident in their questioning and moved from lower order questions to higher order questions." (Sixth Class Teacher, School A). Children who would normally be reticent to express themselves were noted by teachers to ask questions, to participate in discussions, to seek help when needed. "Student A has improved in asking for help ...she has the structures learned to be able to come up and ask as questioning was emphasised." (Third Class Teacher, School C).



## Impact on Students: Comparative Test Results

Close comparative scrutiny of the pre-and post-test results produced compelling evidence to the effect that an emerging facility with academic/decontextualised style of language use was being developed among the students in the intervention classes. This was shown through analysis of students' Oral Narratives (e.g. Kindergarten: Doggy Story, see Figure 1) where it was found that in the post-test narratives (see Table 1) of the students there was

- greater elaboration
- more clarity of lexicon
- increased coherence
- less vagueness of reference
- more complex syntax
- better organisation of information



*Figure 1: Kindergarten Doggy Story*

Table 1

*Angela's Oral Narrative*

| Angela – Pre-Test  | Angela – Post-test   |
|--|--|
| Angela's suggested story title: Puppy Spilling   | Angela's suggested story title: A Dog Puts Footprints  |
| there's a dog and there's paint  | am <u>a dog came out</u> ...   |
| and am there's some ...  | <b>a dog <u>ran</u> to a <u>bucket of paint</u></b> and <b>he</b> looked at <b>it</b> and he was going ... |
| and <u>at the other picture it's</u> spilling cos the dog is ... is going to run <u>there</u>          | and he put his foot on it  |
| and the dog is running <u>there</u> and <u>it</u> tumbled over   | and he tumbled it over and ... and <b>it was spilled on the <u>ground</u></b> and he stepped in            |
| (it tumbled over ...and then ...?)   | and then <u>when he came out he was all full of footprints</u>   |
| am and then <u>the thing</u> is all the way over and am  |  |
| when ... when <u>it</u> was over <u>it</u> all went on the ground and the puppy stepped into <u>it</u> |  |
| am and then the puppy went <u>over there</u> and then the paint am came out on one of the paws         |  |

Instead of an opening which describes what she sees in the picture, Angela begins the post-test sample with a stance which is clear and confident, setting the context for the story, and displaying considerably less hesitance than is evident in the pre-test version of the story. The story contains greater elaboration than the initial sample and more clarity of lexicon, greater coherence and considerably less vagueness of reference (*a dog ran to a bucket of paint and he looked at it*). There is evidence also of greater syntactic organisation of information (*it was spilled on the ground*). No intervention was required to complete the post-test version of the story which contained story elements in the form of a clear statement of a problem (*ran to a bucket of paint ...he tumbled it over,*) a climax (*it was spilled on the ground*), and coda material (*he was all full of footprints*).

Analysis of the students' Picture Descriptions also presented evidence of a developing facility with academic/decontextualised style of language in terms of the quality of lexicon, complexity of syntax, degree of expansion, number and quality of locatives used at senior infant level. At third class level there was, in addition, an increased ability to take an interpersonal stance, greater density of information, increased cohesion and organisation in children's oral presentations (3<sup>rd</sup> Class Picture Description, see Table 2).

Table 2

*Anthony's Picture Description*

| Anthony – Pre-Test   | Anthony – Post-test   |
|--|---|
| <p>Circus Picture</p> <p>I see a lad on a ... I see a lad on a trampoline bouncing, doing tricks</p> <p>I see am a lad on a piece of string walking</p> <p>I see a clown on a horse with... with a man in a suit</p> <p>and I see a woman on big sticks</p> <p>and I see I see a monkey playing in a ... a trumpet</p> <p>a snake coming out of a ... a pot</p> <p>and I see tigers ... a tiger jumping through hoops</p> <p>and I see a lion on top of a box and a elephant in a suit</p> | <p>Circus Picture</p> <p>There's a <b>acrobat</b> on the ropes and there's a man on the trampoline <b>doing flips and there's a monkey playing a pipe while the snakes are coming out of the bag</b>. There's a tiger jumping through circles and <u>there's a elephant carrying a bird and a man on the trunk</u> and a clown and there's a clown on a horse and a horse is doing the horse is gal.. galloping around and <u>there's a woman with a pink dress and a hat with two feathers sticking out and she's on these massive sticks</u> and <u>there's a man in a black and white suit with a green bow</u> and a black cat and there's a man on a rope doing all tricks and <u>there's a lion in a big box looking up at the man on the rope</u> that's all</p> |

In the Word Definition task, differences emerged at sixth class level in the quality and clarity of definitions given between pre- and post-test definitions. These differences were manifest in the increased use of superordinates and greater expansion of descriptive detail included in the definition.

### 6<sup>th</sup> Class Word Definition

#### 1) John – Cutlery

**Pre-Test** - *you use it to eat, like a knife or fork or a spoon*

**Post-Test** - *cutlery is such **utensils** as forks, knives and spoons and **am you can find em in restaurants and the kitchen***

#### 2) Bob – Conditioner/Shampoo

**Pre-test** (conditioner) - *You ah... it's like shampoo but it makes your hair more soft*

**Post-Test** (shampoo) - *am shampoo is something **a type of liquid** what you'd use to am put in your hair to make it smell nice in your hair **when you're having a shower and a bath and it also helps your hair from smelling very bad and looking bad am it is made up of all different***

*types of liquid that make you smell nice and you can get all types of shampoo*

## **Policy Implications**

In an effort to translate existing policy around the importance of oral language development into meaningful, and effective practice in primary classrooms in DEIS contexts in Ireland, it is apparent from the findings in this study that new policy implementation structures need to be set by the Department of Education and Skills. These structures fall broadly into two categories:

- Teacher Professional Development
- Enhanced Home-School Partnership

Teachers' acquisition of the requisite knowledge for oral language development in DEIS classrooms should not be discretionary. Teacher continuing professional development is central in this process. It is recommended that professional development for teachers in relation to the content of language for teaching and learning, with particular focus on the development of academic/decontextualized language style, should be prioritised. Further research on the challenge of developing these language skills among students in our classrooms for whom English is an Additional Language is recommended.

No meaningful difference in students' oral language skills can be accomplished without the support of parents working in tandem with teachers in the classroom. Policy from the Department of Education and Skills must support schools in reaching out meaningfully to those parents who wish and are able to become more involved in their children's education. Parents must know what the classroom teacher is trying to accomplish, why it is important, that they have a vital role to play, and what they can do to fulfil this role. Parents of students for whom English is an Additional Language will require particular support which needs to be the focus of further research. Supporting parents will require considerable planning on the part of teachers. Strengthening the role of the Home-School-Community Liaison teacher in the school is vital in this regard, as is the importance of supporting schools to dedicate at least one post of responsibility to the development of English language skills throughout the school.

## **Conclusion**

*The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it (Michaelangelo).*

This study was exploratory in nature and small in scale. However, its findings were unambiguous and incontrovertible. The impact of facility with oral language in the context of school is unquantifiable. To scaffold the development of requisite oral language skills in students for whom they may not be immediately accessible is mandatory. Enhanced teacher knowledge is key in this process. The knowledge required is complex and multi-faceted, but developing this knowledge among our teachers is imperative. The rewards deriving from such knowledge are far-reaching

into the future lives of many of our students – we owe it to them to aim high. This project took a first tentative step on that road and found that it is possible.

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## Appendix A

### **Oral Narrative Task**

Students were shown a series of pictures (4 pictures for kindergarten, 8 pictures for 3<sup>rd</sup> class) which told a story and asked to narrate the story orally.

Students in 6<sup>th</sup> class were shown a picture accompanied by a story title and the first line of the story (Just Desert: *She lowered the knife and it grew even brighter*) from *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. (Chris Van Allsburg, 1984. Boston: Houghton Mifflin) and asked to narrate the story orally.

### **Word Definition Task**

Explain the following words:

Furniture, city, farm (kindergarten)

Orchestra, vehicle, city, farm, family (3<sup>rd</sup> class)

Cutlery, conditioner/shampoo, stylist, family, city, farm (6<sup>th</sup> class)

### **Picture Description Task**

Children were shown a large picture and asked to describe what they saw in the picture.

At the Park/On the Farm/In the Garden (Kindergarten)

The Circus/Hallowe'en (3<sup>rd</sup> Class)

In the Café/In the Kitchen (6<sup>th</sup> Class)