LITERACY IN IRELAND

COUNTRY REPORT

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

March 2016

Lifelong Learning Programme

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Ireland is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries[1]. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012[2]. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"[3].

The Country Reports about Children and Adolescents are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG´s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity[4]).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels;** both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"[5].

[1] For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
[2] In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.
[3] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/.
[4] "Equity" was added by ELINET.
[5] See: http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/.

2 Executive Summary

LITERACY PERFORMANCE DATA

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

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

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

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

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

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

In conclusion, Ireland is a high-performing educational system where reading literacy is concerned: 15 year-olds perform better than EU countries on average. At first sight, results seem very stable over time, with overall scores being very similar in 2000 and 2012. Nevertheless, Irish students experienced a large decline in performance in 2009 before going back to their initial strong level. The proportion of

low-performing readers showed the same pattern as overall performance, with a large increase in 2009. The improved performance in 2012 is linked with a low proportion of low-performing readers and a high percentage of top performers. The spread of achievement (the gap between low and top performing readers) is lower than on average across EU countries.

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

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

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

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

While performance on PIRLS 2011 and PISA 2012 in Ireland is strong relative to EU average levels, and national assessments at primary level suggest further improvement in performance since 2009, a number of subgroups continue to underperform. In particular, students attending schools serving large numbers of economically and socially-disadvantaged students (DEIS) underperform relative their non-disadvantaged peers. PIRLS 2011 also suggests that one in six boys in Ireland struggle with reading literacy skills. There is a clear need to build on gains made by students in the most disadvantaged schools in recent years, noting that disadvantaged boys, in particular, may struggle in acquiring basic reading skills. There is also a need to ensure that primary-level students who speak a language other than the language of the PIRLS test at home do not lag behind their peers who speak the test language at home.

The challenge with respect to PISA is to ensure that the levels of performance observed in PISA 2012 are maintained going forward. Again, there is clear evidence of underperformance among students of low socioeconomic status, and steps need to be taken to ensure that these students achieve at a level commensurate with their potential, and that they acquire adequate literacy skills to access the curriculum in all subject areas. With PISA moving to computer-based assessments, and definitions of literacy are changing, there is a need to ensure that all students acquire and can apply the requisite digital skills.

KEY LITERACY POLICY AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT (AGE-SPECIFIC AND ACROSS AGE-GROUPS)

Creating a Literate Environment

Pre-Primary Years

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

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

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

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

Children and Adolescents

Providing a literate environment in school: Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 98% of pupils in Fourth grade in Ireland were in classrooms which have class libraries – well above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73%. Eighty-seven percent were in classrooms with 50 or more library books, compared with an EU-24 average of 32%. (EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H2 in Appendix C[6]).

[6] Refers to Appendix detailing outcomes of PIRS 2011 for EU countries participating in ELINET (see http://www.eli-net.eu/).

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

The Junior Certificate School Programme, which is implemented in some disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, provides a broad range of resources to these schools, including the services of a professional librarian[7].

The tradition of strong co-operation of schools and libraries in Ireland should continue, as access to a large range of books is critical for developing students' interest in reading. There is a particular need to target adolescents, including boys, whose interest in reading often deteriorates after primary schooling.

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

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

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

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

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

Supporting family literacy programs: In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills produced a handbook, *Family Literacy: Guidelines for Providers*, which makes a distinction between family literacy (language and numeracy) programmes on the one hand, and family learning programmes on the other[8]. While family literacy programmes are defined as supporting the literacy, language and

[7] See http://www.askaboutireland.ie/libraries/public-libraries/other-libraries/school-libraries/post-primary-school-libra/.

[8] See https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/DEIS-Family-Literacy-Guidelines-2010.pdf.

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

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

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

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has been involved in developing materials to raise awareness and support parents in developing young children's literacy and numeracy. One initiative has been the website Help My Kid Learn[9]. This website is targeted at parents of children in the 0-12 years age range, and provides a range of activities designed to support parents in developing their children's literacy and numeracy.

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

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

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

[9] Can be accessed at: http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie/.

Improving the Quality of Teaching

Pre-Primary Years

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

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

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

Implementing preschool language and literacy curriculum: Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the Framework for Early Learning, is a national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. The Framework describes the types of learning that are important for children during this period in their lives, and as such sets out broad learning goals for all children. Aistear does this using four broad and interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Each theme identifies important dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. It can be used in different types of settings including children's homes[10].

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

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

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

[10] For further information, see: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Aistear_Toolkit/Aistear_Toolkit.html.

discussing children's development and growth with children themselves. Hence, the overall approach advocated by Aistear is informal.

Children and Adolescents

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

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

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

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

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

The development of new curricula in language at lower primary and in English at lower post-primary (Junior Cycles) is welcome. The implementation of these curricula, including the effectiveness of their

approaches to assessment, needs to be carefully monitored and adjusted as needed, with appropriate support available to teachers.

Early identification and support for struggling literacy learners: Students in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland who achieve very low scores on nationally-normed standardised tests (those scoring at or below the 10th percentile) generally access learning support (remedial teaching) with a specialist reading teacher in the students' own classrooms, or in a learning support room (DES, 2005b, Circular 0002/2005; DES, 2014, Circular 0017/2014). In PIRLS 2011, it was estimated that 20.1% of students in Fourth grade in Ireland were in need of learning support/remedial teaching, and that 16% were in receipt of such teaching.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Improving the quality of pre-service and inservice teacher learning: Since 2012, the Bachelor of Education programme at primary has increased from three to four years and leads to a level 8 qualification. The Professional Masters in Education programme (prmary) is now two years in length and leads to a level 9 qualification. Both programmes have substantial school placements throughout. For example, at St Patrick's College (Dublin City University), school placement on the B. Ed. programme is 3 weeks in Year 1, 5 weeks in Year 2, 12 weeks in Year 3, and 10 week in Year 4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

Pre-Primary Years

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children: the Free Pre-school Year scheme was introduced in January 2010. All children between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months can avail of a free school-year of appropriate activities in the year prior to starting primary school. While participation is voluntary, 67,000 or 94% of eligible children participated in 2011/12[11]. From September 2016 this will be extended to two years. Ireland does not belong to the half of the European countries where the entire period of ECEC is free. The Free Pre-school Year is open to all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. McKeown, Hasse and Pratschke (2015)

[11] See: http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/.

have found that the Free Pre-school Year has a limited impact on children's cognitive development, with many parameters of a child's development already set before they attend the year.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children and Adolescents

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

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

Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school: Children who speak a language that is different to the language of the school and are deemed to be in need of support, can access additional language teaching for up to two years. This support is generally provided by learning support/resource teachers. Where 20% of a school's enrolment

comprises pupils who require EAL (English as an Additional Language) support, the school may be granted an additional teaching position (DES, 2014, Circular 0007/2014). The English Language Support Programme at Trinity College in Dublin has developed a set of assessment profiles that allow teachers to gauge the proficiency of new-comer students at primary and post-primary levels (ILLT 2003a, 2003b).

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

Preventing early school leaving: According to Eurostat, in Ireland, the rate of early school leavers was 8.4 % in 2013, down from 9.7% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 8.0%[12].

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

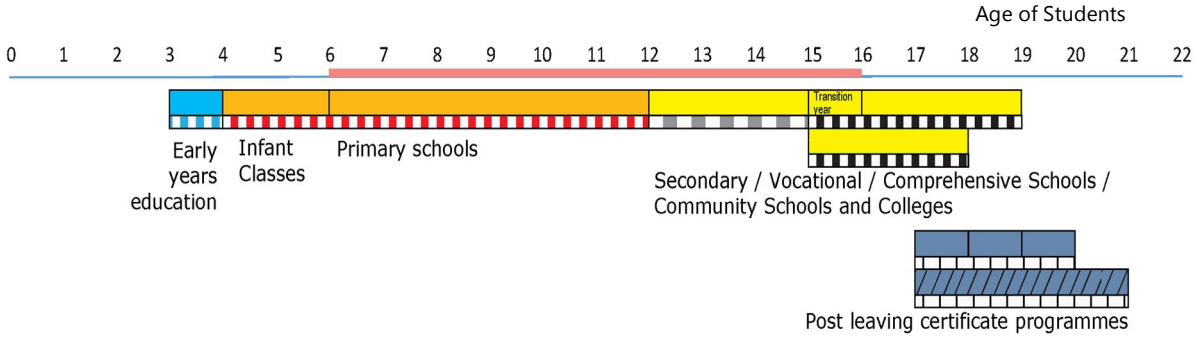
The government-funded School Completion Progrmame (SCP) is a set of cluster-based initiatives designed to ensure that students stay on at school as long as possible. The Programme involves primary and post-primary schools, including schools in the DEIS programme. A review of the SCP (Smyth et al., 2015)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

[12] See http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training.

3 General Information on the Irish Education System

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

Figure 1: Structure of the Ireland school system



Source: Eurydice (2014), p. 12.[13]

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

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

[13] See: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/facts_and_figures/education_structures_EN.pdf.

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

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

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

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

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides for the education of children with special education needs through a number of support mechanisms. Provision may be in special schools, special classes attached to ordinary schools, or in integrated settings in mainstream classes. The National Council for Special Education[14] is charged with improving the delivery of education services to persons with special education needs arising from disabilities, with particular emphasis on children. The Department of Education and Skills manages a scheme – DEIS or Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DES, 2005) - that provides additional programmes and resources to schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

[14] See: www.ncse.ie.

4 Literacy Performance Data for Children and Adolescents

4.1 Primary Children

The performance data for primary children are derived from the IEA´s PIRLS studies.

Inaugurated in 2001 and conducted every 5 years, **PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study)** is an assessment of pupils' reading achievement at fourth grade organised by the Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The survey was administered in 35 countries in 2001, 45 education systems in 2006, and 50 in 2011. PIRLS assesses different purposes for reading (literary and informational) and different reading processes (retrieve explicit information, make inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements). Both multiple- choice and open-ended questions are used.

Combining newly developed reading assessment passages and questions for 2011 with a selection of secure assessment passages and questions from 2001 and 2006, PISA 2011 allowed for measurement of changes since 2001. PIRLS 2011 also examined the national policies, curricula and practices related to literacy in participating countries, and included a set of questionnaires for students, parents/caregivers, teachers, and school principals to investigate the experiences that young children have at home and school in learning to read, in particular their attitudes and motivation towards reading.

For all PIRLS data used in this report, detailed tables with data for all participating countries in ELINET are provided, together with the EU averages (see Appendix C: PIRLS 2011 Data, Appendix D: PIRLS 2001 and 2006 Data).

4.1.1 Performance and variation in reading: proportion of low and high performing readers

Students in Ireland achieved an overall mean reading score of 552 (one-quarter of a standard deviation above the EU-24 average) in PIRLS 2011 (Table 1). Among EU-24 countries in the study, only Finland (568) and Northern Ireland (559) achieved significantly higher mean scores. Performance in Ireland was broadly similar across reading purposes (Literary, Informational) and reading processes (Interpret, Integrate & Evaluate; Retrieve & Inference) (Appendix C, Tables A2-A5), a pattern that was also observed on average across EU countries.

Table 1: Overall Performance on PIRLS 2011 – Ireland and EU-24 average

	Overall Reading – Mean Score
Ireland	**552**
EU-24	535

Significant difference (relative to the EU-24 Average) shown in **bold**.

In Ireland, 15% of pupils performed at or below the Low PIRLS benchmark on overall reading. This is lower than the EU average of 20% (Table 2). Though Ireland is behind countries such as Finland (8%), the Netherlands (10%) and Croatia (10%) in terms of the proportion of pupils at or below the Low benchmark, Ireland's standing relative to most EU countries on this indicator is strong. In Ireland, 16%

of students achieve at the Advanced benchmark. This is well above the EU average of 9%, but marginally behind countries such as Northern Ireland (19%), England (18%) and Finland (18%) (Appendix C, Table A6).

Table 2: Performance by PIRLS overall reading benchmarks 2011 - Percentages of pupils – Ireland and EU-24 average

	Below 400	400-475 Low	475-550 Intermediate	550-625 High	Above 625 Advanced
Ireland	3	12	32	38	16
EU Avg.	5	15	36	35	9

Significant differences are shown in bold.

Ireland's standard deviation of 75 is 5 points higher than the EU-24 average, indicating a slightly greater spread of achievement (Table 3). Among EU countries, Northern Ireland (76) and Poland (73) had similar standard deviations (Appendix C, Table A.8).

The difference between the scores of students at the 90th and 10th percentiles in Ireland – 192 points – is 12 points above the corresponding EU-24 average of 181, and is similar to the spread of achievement in Northern Ireland, where the difference is also 192 (Table 3).

Table 3: Spread of achievement – Standard deviation, 10th, 90th percentiles, and difference between 90th and 10th percentiles on overall reading – Ireland and EU-24 average

	Standard Deviation	10th Percentile	90th Percentile	90th-10th
Ireland	75	452	643	**192**
EU-24	71	440	621	**181**

Significant differences in bold

Ireland did not participate in PRILS 2001 or PIRLS 2006, so trends cannot be examined. On average across EU countries, performance between 2001 and 2011 increased by just one score point (Table 4).

Table 4: Trends in performance 2001-2011 (overall scale) – Ireland and EU-24 average

	2001	2006	Change (2006-2001)	2006	2011	Change (2011-2006)	2001	2011	Change (2011-2001)
Ireland	-	-	**-**	-	552	**-**	-	552	-
EU	534	534	0	534	535	1	534	535	1

Significant differences in bold

4.1.2 Gaps in reading

As in every European country, there are achievement gaps in Ireland between different groups.

Parent's educational achievement

Students in Ireland whose parents attended university or higher achieved a mean score (582) on PIRLS 2011 overall reading that was some 75 points higher than students whose parents completed lower secondary or below (507) (Table 5). The average difference across the EU-24 was 76 points, with

smaller gaps in countries such as the Netherlands (46), Finland (54) and Denmark (56). The data for Ireland point to a need for improved equity in reading and reading-related outcomes.

Table 5: Percentages of pupils with parents whose highest level of education was lower secondary, percentages who finished university or higher, and mean score differences – Ireland and EU-24 average

Level of Education	Lower Secondary or Below		University or Higher		Difference (Univ or Higher – Lower Sec)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Ireland	12	507	33	582	**75**
EU-24	18	495	30	571	**76**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

In Ireland, 84% of pupils reported that they always spoke the language of the PIRLS reading test (English) at home – slightly above the corresponding EU-24 Average (80) (Table 6). Sixteen percent of students in Ireland reported that they 'sometimes' or 'never' spoke the language of the PIRLS test at home. The corresponding EU-24 average was 20%. The difference in achievement between pupils in Ireland reporting that they always or sometimes/ never spoke the language of the test was 25 score points – about the same as the EU-24 average difference (26).

Table 6: Percentages of students reporting that they always or sometimes/never speak the language of the PIRLS test at home, and associated mean score differences – Ireland and EU-24 average

Language of the Test Spoken at Home	Always		Sometimes /Never		Mean Score Difference (Always – Sometimes/Never
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Ireland	84	556	16	531	**25**
EU-24	80	541	20	519	**26**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Gender

Girls in Ireland achieved a mean score on overall reading that was higher than boys by 15 points in 2011. This was marginally above the EU-24 average difference of 12 points (Table 7). Bulgaria and Romania also had a 15-point difference between boys and girls (Appendix C, Tables C1-C3). Related to this, in Ireland, the mean scores for both girls (559) and boys (544) in 2011 were above the corresponding EU-24 averages (541 and 529, respectively).

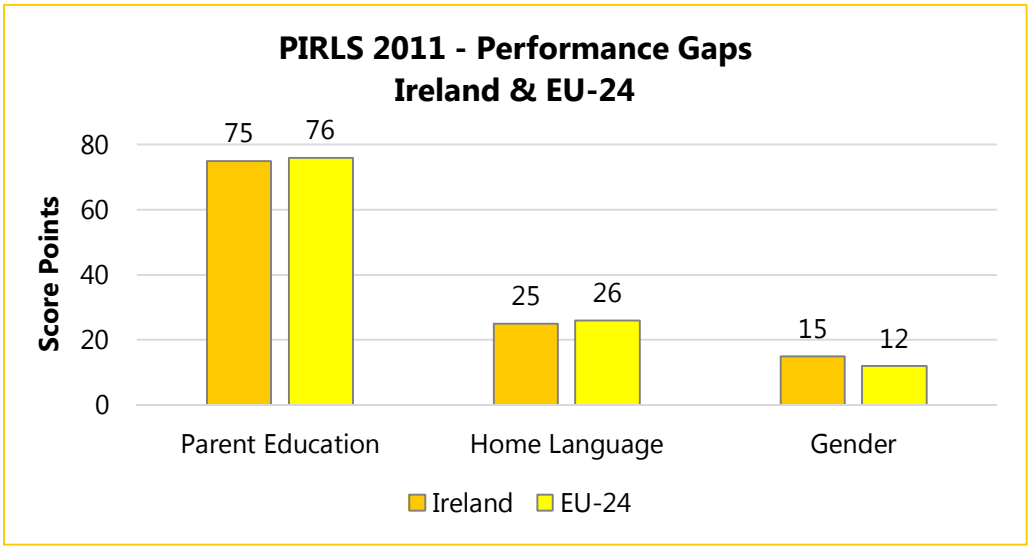
Table 7: Trends in performance by gender 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – Ireland and EU-24 average

	Ireland			EU-24		
	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys
2011	559	544	**15**	541	529	**12**
2006	-	-	**-**	541	528	**13**
2001	-	-	**-**	542	525	**17**

Significant differences in **bold**

Achievement gaps at primary level in Ireland and on average across EU countries are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Performance gaps – Gender, parent education and language spoken at home



Education: University vs. Lower Secondary/Primary education; Language: Student speaks language of the tests at home always vs. sometimes/never. Gender: girls – boys

Attitudes to Reading

There was a difference of 64 points between the top and bottom quartiles of the PIRLS Like Reading Scale in Ireland in 2011 (Table 8). On average across the EU-24, the difference between students in the top and bottom quarters of the scale was 50 points, indicating a relatively stronger relationship between liking reading and performance in Ireland.

In Ireland, more students (68%) 'strongly agreed' that they enjoyed reading (a component of the Like Reading scale), compared with the average across the EU-24 (55%) (Appendix C, Table D3). Marginally fewer students in Ireland (6%) compared with the EU-24 average (9%) 'disagreed a lot' that they enjoyed reading.

Table 8: Mean overall reading scores of students in the top and bottom quartiles of the PIRLS Like Reading scale – England and EU-24 Average

Like Reading	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Ireland	585	520	**64**
EU-24	563	511	**52**

Significant differences in **bold.**

Students in Ireland in the top quarter of the Confidence in Reading scale achieved a mean score (585) that was some 78 points higher than students in the bottom quarter (507) (Table 9). The average difference across the EU-24 was 80 points, indicating that the strength of the relationship between Confidence and performance is similar in Ireland and on average across the EU-24.

Table 9: Mean overall reading scores of students in the top and bottom quartiles of the PIRLS Confidence in Reading scale – Ireland and EU-24 average

Confidence in Reading	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Ireland	585	507	**78**
EU-24	570	490	**80**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold.**

4.1.3 National literacy surveys at primary level

The most recent national assessments of reading literacy in Ireland were administered to representative samples of students at the Second and Sixth classes (grades) in 2009 and in 2014. Overall performance at both class levels increased significantly – from 250 to 264 in Second grade (on a scale with a mean of 250 and a standard deviation of 50 in 2009), and from 250 to 263 at Sixth. Whereas 10% of students in Second and Sixth grades performed at or below Proficiency Level 1 in 2009, just 5% at each grade level did so in 2014. Conversely, the proportions performing at proficiency Level 4 increased from 10% to 14% at both grade levels. The gender differences in favour of girls on overall reading in 2014 (8 score points at Second grade, and 4 at Sixth) were statistically significant, though smaller than in PIRLS 2011. While students in the most disadvantaged schools (known as DEIS Band 1 schools) showed a significant improvement between 2009 and 2014 in Second class, and a higher score (though not to a significant degree) in Sixth, they continued to perform less well on average than students in schools outside the DEIS scheme.

A key factor underpinning the increases observed in 2014 may have been the **National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy** (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The Strategy, which was developed, at least in part, in response to the decline in reading literacy in Ireland in PISA 2009, included increased allocation of class time to the teaching of English (and Irish, in Irish-medium schools), an enhanced emphasis on literacy across the curriculum, a greater emphasis on literacy in school evaluation and planning, and a requirement to report aggregated standardised test results to the Department of Education and Skills on an annual basis for the Second, Fourth and Sixth grades. The Strategy also made provision for a greater focus on literacy in pre-service teacher education courses and in continuing professional development courses for teachers, and revision of curricula in English at primary and post-primary levels, though some of these elements have yet to take full effect. The Strategy also included initiatives designed to improve language and literacy at Early Childhood level.

It is noteworthy that implementation of the National Strategy began in September 2011, several months after the administration of PIRLS 2011 in Ireland.

A follow-up study of schools and classes in the 2014 National Assessments, which focused on factors related to reading (and mathematics) achievement at home, school, class and pupil levels, was recently (see Kavanagh, Shiel & Gilleece, 2015). The report included a number of recommendations intended to maintain gains achieved in the 2014 National Assessments, and to improve the performance of at-risk groups, including those who mainly spoke a language other than English or Irish at home.

4.2 Adolescents

The performance data are derived from the OECD PISA study.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led by OECD[15] **assesses the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students every three years in all OECD countries and** in a number of partner countries.

Since 2000, PISA has been testing students in reading, mathematics and science. The OECD assessment also collects information on students' backgrounds and on practices, motivational attributes and metacognitive strategies related to reading.

The PISA tests assess different aspects of reading literacy – retrieve information, interpret, reflect on and evaluate texts – and use a variety of texts – continuous (prose) and non-continuous (texts including graphs, tables, maps…). About half of the questions are multiple-choice, the other half open-ended (short or constructed answers). Results are reported on scales defining different levels of proficiency ranging from 1 (low performing) to 6 (high performing). Level 2 is considered as the level all 15 year-olds should reach, and will enable them to participate effectively in further education and in society. Since 2015, PISA has been administered on computers only in most participating countries.

There is some evidence that PISA is predictive of later outcomes in adult life. One example is the follow-up of students who were assessed by PISA in 2000 as part of the Canadian Youth in Transition Survey which has shown that students scoring below Level 2 face a disproportionately higher risk of poor post-secondary participation or low labour-market outcomes at age 19, and even more so at age 21, the latest age for which data from this longitudinal study are currently available. For example, of students who performed below Level 2 in PISA reading in 2000, over 60% did not go on to any post-school education by the age of 21; by contrast, more than half of the students (55%) whose highest level was Level 2 attended college or university (OECD 2010, S. 52).

4.2.1 Performance and variation in reading; proportion of low and high performing readers

Ireland has participated in PISA since 2000. It is therefore possible to describe the change in average reading performance over twelve years, according to different reader characteristics. In PISA 2012, Ireland performed significantly above the average across the participating EU countries, by 34 score points (Table 10).

Table 10: Reading performance in PISA 2012, Ireland and EU 27

	Mean	S.E.
Ireland	**523**	(2.6)
EU-27	489	(0.6)

S. E. = standard error; Significant differences between the country and the EU average are shown in **bold**

Table 11 below shows the reading performance of students in Ireland in the 2000, 2009 and 2012 PISA assessments and the corresponding EU-27 averages. The reading performance of students in Ireland remained relatively stable between 2000 and 2012, with a drop of 4 points. A larger decline of 31 score points was observed between 2000 and 2009, but performance improved by 28 points between 2009 and 2012.

[15] See: http://www.pisa.OECD.org.

Table 11: Trends in reading performance - PISA 2000-2012

	2000		2009		2012		Change 2000–2009		Change 2009–2012		Change 2000–2012	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
Ireland	527	(3.2)	496	(3.0)	523	(2.6)	**-31**	(6.6)	**28**	(4.7)	-4	(7.2)
EU-27	489*	(0.7)	486**	(0.6)	489***	(0.6)	-3*	(5.0)	**5****	(2.7)	3*	(6.0)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

A number of reasons have been put forward by national researchers for the decline in performance in Ireland between PISA 2000 and PISA 2009 (see Perkins et al., 2012). Having ruled out changes arising from sampling and scoring procedures, the reasons for the decline in performance in reading (which was accompanied by a smaller drop in performance in mathematics, but not in science) included:

- Changes in the implementation of PISA in Ireland, including the provision of incentives to students (participation in a draw for vouchers), and the involvement of teachers in tests administration for the first time;
- Demographic changes between 2000 and 2009, including the arrival of a proportionately large number of immigrant students to Ireland between these years, an increase the proportion of students with special education needs and a reduction in the proportion of early school leavers; there was also a change in the distribution of students across grade levels, with more students taking the optional Grade 10 Transition Year programme than in earlier PISA cycles.
- Changes in the characteristics of the PISA test and how students responded to the test, including changes in the distribution of items across item types.
- Aspects of PISA's approach to estimating and reporting changes in achievement, including a lack of stability and consistency in the distribution of item formats across PISA cycles and the likely underestimation of the link error used to infer the statistical significance of achievement differences across cycles;
- Lower levels of engagement in PISA 2009 by students in Ireland, compared with earlier cycles.

However, it was noted by Perkins et al. that these reasons did not, in and of themselves, explain the full extent of the decline in performance in Ireland. It should also be noted that there was no corroborating evidence of a decline in reading literacy performance (for example, in State examinations), and no new initiatives (such as new curricula) designed to reform the teaching of English had been implemented in schools between 2000 and 2009.

In PISA 2012, the spread of achievement between those students who performed at the 10th and 90th percentiles in Ireland was significantly lower than on average across the participating EU countries (Table 12). For girls in Ireland, the spread of achievement was 209 compared with 230 for the EU-27 countries, a difference of 21 score points. Similarly, the spread of achievement for boys in Ireland was lower (226) than the EU-27 average (259), by 33 score points. In comparison to the average across the participating EU countries, the difference between best-performing and lowest-performing students (90th and 10th percentiles) is relatively low in Ireland.

Table 12: Spread of achievement. Difference between 10th and 90th percentiles on the overall reading scale, all students and by gender – PISA 2012

	Difference 90^{th}–10^{th} for all students		Difference 90^{th}–10^{th} for girls		Difference 90^{th}–10^{th} for boys	
	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Ireland	**221**	(5.9)	**209**	(5.7)	**226**	(7.5)
EU-27	251	(1.3)	230	(1.2)	259	(1.6)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

In Ireland, the proportion of high-performing students is relatively high while the proportion of low-performing students is relatively low, compared to the corresponding EU-27 averages (Table 13). The percentage of low-performing students in Ireland in 2012 (9.6%) was half the average across the EU-27 (19.7%). The performance of students in Ireland appears to be clustered in the higher levels, which is consistent with the country's overall higher mean in reading performance, compared to the EU-27 average. This indicates that more students in Ireland are proficient readers, and therefore better able to deal with complex texts and achieve a deep understanding, than on average across EU countries.

Table 13: Percentage of low-performing (below level 2) and high-performing (levels 5 and 6) students - PISA 2012 – Ireland and EU-27 average

	Below level 2		Levels 5 and 6	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
Ireland	**9.6**	(0.9)	**11.4**	(0.7)
EU-27	19.7	(0.2)	7.0	(0.1)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of low-performing readers in Ireland decreased by 1.4%. This trend can be mainly seen among girls as the proportion of low-performing female students decreased by 2.2%, whereas the proportion of low-performing male students decreased by just 0.5%. However, as shown in Table 14, this trend was not consistent between assessment points. Between 2000 and 2009, the percentage of students in Ireland who performed below level 2 increased significantly, by 6.2%, before decreasing again in PISA 2012.

Table 14: Trends in the proportion of low-performers (below level 2) in reading, all students, and by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Proportion of students below level 2 in reading					
	All students		Girls		Boys	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
2000	11.0	(1.0)	8.3	(1.1)	13.5	(1.3)
2009	**17.2**	(1.0)	11.2	(1.0)	**23.1**	(1.7)
2012	**9.6**	(0.9)	**6.1**	(0.9)	**13.0**	(1.4)

Significant differences between consecutive assessment cycles in **bold**

4.2.2 Gaps in reading performance

Socio-economic status

In Ireland, the gap in reading performance according to the students' socioeconomic background is similar to the average across the participating EU countries (Table 15). The gap between those in the bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in Ireland is 85 score points, compared to the EU-26 average of 89 points. These figures indicate that, as on average across the EU-26, there is a relatively strong relationship between student socio-economic status and reading performance in Ireland.

Table 15: Difference in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status – PISA 2009

	Difference between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status
	Score diff.
Ireland	**85**
EU-26	**89**

Significant differences in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters in **bold**

Migration

In PISA 2009, the percentage of students in Ireland with an immigrant background (8.3%) was similar to that found on average across participating EU countries (Table 16). The performance gap between native students and those with an immigrant background was 29 score points, which is equivalent to less than one year of schooling. The corresponding EU-26 average was somewhat higher, by 9 score points. Thus, the relationship between immigrant status and reading performance is slightly weaker in Ireland than on average across the EU-26. It might be noted that some immigrants in Ireland come from English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland).

Table 16: Percentage of students and reading performance by immigrant status – PISA 2009

	Native students				Students with an immigrant background (first- or second-generation)				Difference in reading performance between native and students with an immigrant background	
	Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale			
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.	Score dif.	S.E.
Ireland	91.7	(0.6)	502	(3.0)	8.3	(0.6)	473	(7.1)	**29**	(7.3)
EU-26	91.7	(0.0)	490	(0.4)	8.3	(0.0)	452	(6.4)	**38**	(6.4)

Significant differences between native and students with an immigrant background in **bold**

Language spoken at home

In PISA 2012, 6% of students in Ireland did not speak the language of the test at home, compared to 13% on average across the EU-27 (Table 17). The gap in performance between those who did and did not speak the test language at home was noticeably lower in Ireland (34 score points) than the EU-27 average (54), by 20 score points. The gap in Ireland is equivalent to almost one year of schooling. Similar to the impact of immigrant background on reading performance examined above, the relationship between language spoken at home and reading performance is weaker in Ireland than on average across the participating EU countries. This may arise because of a somewhat different socioeconomic profile for immigrant students and speakers of other languages in Ireland, compared with other EU countries.

Table 17: Percentage of students and reading performance by language spoken at home – PISA 2012

	Speak test language at home				Speak another language at home				Difference in reading according to language spoken at home	
	Percentage of students	S.E	Performance on the reading scale		Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale			
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.	Score dif.	S.E.
Ireland	94.2	(0.9)	500	(3.0)	5.8	(0.9)	467	(13.7)	**34**	(13.7)
EU-27	86.7	(0.02)	494	(0.4)	13.3	(0.02)	441	(5.4)	**54**	(5.4)

Significant differences according to language spoken at home in **bold**

Gender

In PISA 2009, similar to the majority of countries, girls in Ireland significantly outperformed boys. The gender difference in reading performance was marginally lower in Ireland than on average across the participating EU countries (Table 18). On average, girls in Ireland performed 39 score points higher than boys, compared to the corresponding EU-26 average of 44 points.

Table 18: Mean reading performance by gender and gender differences – PISA 2009

	Boys		Girls		Difference (G - B)	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Ireland	476	(4.2)	515	(3.1)	**39**	(4.7)
EU-26	463	(0.5)	506	(0.4)	**44**	(0.5)

Significant differences between boys and girls in **bold**

Table 19 shows the variation in trends in reading performance between girls and boys in Ireland and on average across the EU-27, between 2000 and 2012. In Ireland, overall reading performance dropped by 4 score points between 2000 and 2012. Over the same time frame, the performance of both girls and boys in Ireland decreased by 4 points. Also, the same dip, and subsequent recovery, in performance for Irish students overall in PISA 2009 and 2012, was found for both girls and boys in Ireland. The trend is somewhat different on average across the participating EU countries: between

2000 and 2012 girls' performance increased by 5 score points while the boys' decreased by the same value.

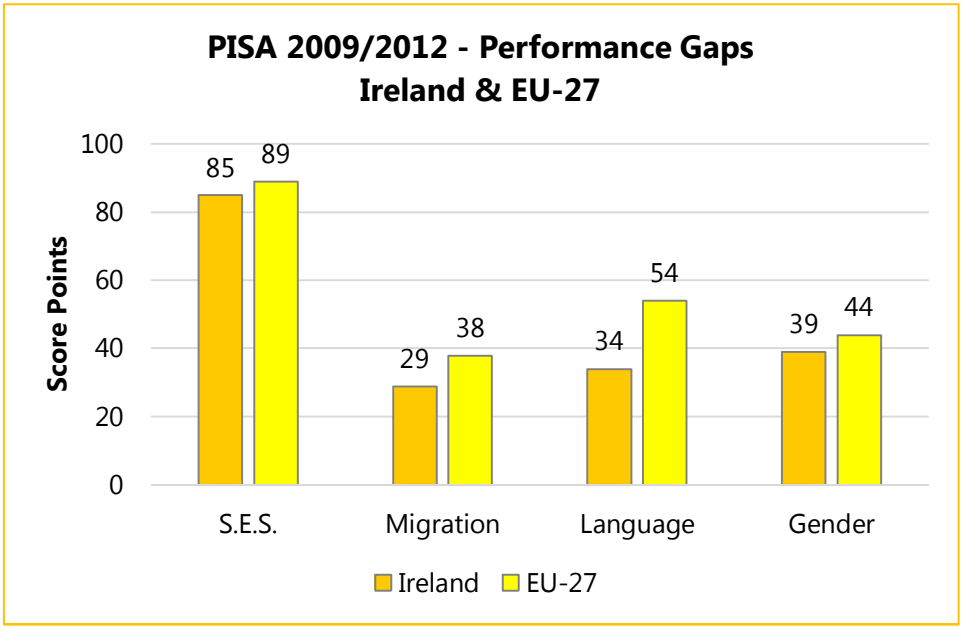
Table 19: Trends in reading performance Ireland, EU-27 by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Ireland				EU-27			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
2000	542	(3.6)	513	(4.2)	506*	(0.8)	473*	(0.9)
2009	**515**	(3.2)	**476**	(4.2)	507**	(0.7)	464**	(0.8)
2012	**538**	(3.0)	**509**	(3.5)	511***	(0.6)	468***	(0.8)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

The performance gaps described above are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Performance gaps: SES, migration, language spoken at home and gender – Ireland and EU averages



SES: Top – bottom quarter of PISA Economic, Social and Cultural Status scale; Language: Language of test spoken at home – yes – no; Gender: Girls – Boys.

Engagement and metacognition

In Ireland, students who reported being highly engaged in reading (those in top quarter of the PISA index of engagement in reading) achieved a mean reading score that was 120 points higher than that of students who reported being poorly engaged (bottom quarter) (Table 20). This gap is equivalent to three years of schooling. The difference between the most and the least engaged readers in Ireland is higher than the corresponding EU-26 average difference, by 21 points.

Table 20: Mean reading scores between students poorly engaged and highly engaged in reading – PISA 2009 – Ireland and Averages

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Ireland	445	(4.3)	565	(3.0)	**120**
EU-26	444	(0.8)	543	(0.8)	**99**

Significant differences according to the level of reading engagement in **bold**.

Additionally, analysis of PISA 2009 data found that in Ireland there was a gap of 90 score points between students who knew which strategies were the most efficient to use to understand and remember a text and those who had a limited knowledge of effective strategies (Table 21). This gap is equivalent to more than two years of schooling. On average, across the participating EU countries, the gap is somewhat higher (98 score points). These differences reflect how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

Table 21: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of understanding and remembering strategies

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Ireland	450	(4.8)	540	(3.4)	**90**
EU-26	433	(0.8)	531	(0.8)	**98**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of efficient reading strategies (understanding and remembering strategies) in **bold**.

Furthermore, in Ireland, students who knew which strategies were the most efficient to use to summarise a text performed 96 score points higher than those who had a limited knowledge of the most effective strategies (Table 22). This gap is equivalent to almost two and a half years of schooling. The corresponding average across the EU-26 was slightly lower, at 90 score points, a difference of 6 points. Again, these performance gaps between students in the bottom and top quarters of summarizing strategies reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

Table 22: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of summarizing strategies Ireland, EU-26

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Ireland	445	(4.3)	540	(3.4)	**96**
EU-26	440	(0.8)	530	(0.7)	**90**

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of reading strategies (summarizing strategies) in **bold**

4.2.3 National literacy surveys at post-primary level

In Ireland, there are no national literacy surveys at post-primary level. All students take state examinations at the end of Junior Cycle (Grade 9) (the Junior Certificate Examination) and Senior Cycle (the Leaving Certificate). Both examinations include exams in English, Irish and foreign languages. Students in Ireland (15-year olds) also participate in PISA. The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy (2011-20) (DES, 2011) indicates that, within the lifetime of the strategy, all schools will be required to administer standardised tests to students at the end of Grade 8. If, as occurs at primary levels, schools are required to submit their data to the Department of Education and Skills, the resulting data may be used to track performance from year to year.

Challenges/ Need for Action: While performance on PIRLS 2011 and PISA 2012 in Ireland is strong relative to EU average levels, and national assessments at primary level suggest further improvement in performance since 2009, a number of subgroups continue to underperform. In particular, students attending schools serving large numbers of economically and socially-disadvantaged students (DEIS) underperform relative their non-disadvantaged peers. PIRLS 2011 also suggests that one in six boys in Ireland struggle with reading literacy skills. There is a clear need to build on gains made by students in the most disadvantaged schools, noting that boys, in particular, may struggle in acquiring basic reading skills. There is also a need to ensure that primary-level students who speak a language other than the language of the PIRLS at home do not lag behind their peers who speak the test language at home.

The challenge with respect to PISA is to ensure that the levels of performance observed in PISA 2012 are maintained going forward. Again, there is clear evidence of underperformance among students of low socioeconomic status, and steps need to be taken to ensure that these students achieve at a level commensurate with their potential, and that they acquire adequate literacy skills to access the curriculum in all subject areas. A key issue to consider with respect to future PISA cycles is that PISA is now administered in most countries on computer and that, over time, texts and questions on PISA will make every-greater demands on students' digital literacy skills. There is a need to ensure that all students acquire and can apply the requisite digital skills, not only to ensure continuing strong performance on PISA, but also to ensure that they have adequate skills to deal with the reading demands of real life.

5 Policy Areas

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012, p. 38) recommended that all EU Member States should focus on the following areas as they craft their own literacy solutions:

- Creating a more literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion and equity (with the term "equity" being added by ELINET).

The following parts refer to these three key issues, though some overlap may occur.

5.1 Creating a literate environment for children and adolescents

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to **creating a more literate environment**:

> Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where **reading for pleasure** is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole" (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children's emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children's language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure by establishing school and classroom libraries, offering a wide variety of books and other reading material in different genres, providing sheltered and comfortable spaces for individual reading activities (like reading clubs), and leaving it up to children as to whether they wish to express and exchange their individual (intimate) reading experiences. However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Parents may provide role models and influence children's attitudes towards literacy practices. Also, libraries have a vital role if they offer free books, especially for families who cannot afford to buy books. Regional or national campaigns may inspire children and their parents to engage in reading activities. (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff.)

Adolescence is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term *identities and self-concepts* which include media preferences and practices (*media identity*). In this perspective, it is of great importance that families, schools and communities offer young people rich opportunities to encounter the *culture of reading* and develop a stable *self-concept as a reader/writer* and member of a literary culture. This includes providing access to a broad variety of reading materials (in print and electronic forms) and stimulating literate environments in and outside of schools; it also includes opportunities to get actively involved in engaging with texts, and communicating, reflecting on and

exchanging ideas about texts with peers and ´competent others´, such as teachers or parents (Ibid., pp. 45f).

5.1.1 Providing a literate environment at home

The **home learning environment**, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Brooks et al. 2012). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

Several indicators are used to describe the literate home environment of very young children in this report, drawing on data from international sources (PIRLS) that are comparable across countries. It is important to acknowledge that some of the PIRLS data are self-reported and may be biased by social desirability and the ways in which questions are interpreted by parents and others within countries.

Parental attitudes to reading

PIRLS 2011 developed the "Parents Like Reading Scale" based on parents' responses to seven statements about reading and how often they read for enjoyment. The figures are presented below with the percentage of students whose parents "like", "somewhat like" or "do not like" reading" as reported by PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.4 – Parents Like Reading, p. 120). These are shown for Ireland, and for the average across EU countries.

- Like: 48.0% (EU average 35.3 %)
- Somewhat like: 43.1% (EU average 52.6 %)
- Do not like: 8.9% (EU average 17.9 %)
  (For an overview of European countries see table B1 in Appendix B).

The percentage of pupils in Ireland whose parents have positive attitudes towards reading is higher than on average across EU countries. The importance of parental attitudes to reading is shown by the fact that in Ireland there is a significant difference in average reading performance at grade 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 571) and those who do not (average achievement 524)

Home educational resources

Fifteen percent of parents in Ireland reported having 'few' home resources for learning (as defined by PIRLS) – well below the EU Average of 25%. Similarly, a 9 percentage points gap between the EU Average (25) for 'many' resources, and the Irish average (34) indicates that students in Ireland have greater access to home resources. The difference in achievement between students in Ireland whose parents reported having many home resources and few resources was 92 score points – 14 points higher than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (78).

Table 23: Percentages of students whose parents reported having few or many home resources for learning, and corresponding mean overall reading scores – Ireland and EU-24 average

Level of Home Resources	Few Resources		Many Resources		Difference (Many - Few)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Ireland	15	503	34	595	**92**
EU-24	25	495	25	573	**78**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

In Ireland, 10% of students reported having 10 or fewer books at home, compared with an EU-24 average of 11%. More students in Ireland (15%) reported having over 200 books than on average across EU countries (12%) (Table 24). The mean score difference in favour of students with 200 books, compared with those who had 10 or fewer books was 100 points in Ireland and 82 on average across the EU-24. Hence, the relative association between number of books and reading achievement in Ireland is somewhat stronger than on average across EU countries.

Table 24: Mean overall reading scores of students with 0-10 books at home, and those with more than 200 Books – Ireland and EU-24 average

Books in the Home	None or Few Books (0-10)		More than 200 Books		Mean Score Difference (More than 200 – None or few)
	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	Percent of Students	Mean Reading Score	
Ireland	10	491	15	591	**100**
EU-24	11	482	12	563	**81**

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Number of children's books in the home

The PIRLS 2011 database provides the figures below on the number of children's books in the home as reported by parents (the data in Table 24 above relate to all books in the home as reported by students). Compared to the EU average, the availability of children's books in the home is higher in Ireland. Seven percent of students in Ireland reported that they had 10 or fewer books at home, which is below the EU average of 12% (for an overview of European countries see table B2 in Appendix B). At the top end, 25% of students in Ireland reported that they had more than 100 children's books in the home, almost 10% above the EU average.

- 0-10: 6.8% (EU average 11.8%)
- 11-25: 15.3% (EU average 19.7%)
- 26-50: 27.0% (EU average 29.4%)
- 51-100: 26.0% (EU average 23.4%)
- >100: 24.9% (EU average 15.7%).

Early Literacy Activity Scale

PIRLS 2011 reports the percentage of students whose parents (often, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school (Mullis et al. 2012a, exhibit 4.6 - Early Literacy Activities Before Beginning Primary School, p. 126). Nine activities are

considered: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games, writing letters or words, and reading signs and labels aloud.

The figures for Ireland in the composite score for all these activities are below (for an overview of European countries see table B3 in Appendix B):

- Often: 50.4% (EU average 40.7%)
- Sometimes: 49.0% (EU average 57.4%)
- Never or almost never: 0.7% (EU average 1.9%).

This means that, in Ireland, nearly all parents engage often or sometimes in Early literacy activities, and do so to a greater extent than on average across EU countries. The Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in grade 4. The average reading score of students in Ireland who were engaged often in these activities as pre-schoolers was 569, while, for students who were sometimes engaged in them, it was 542 points. These figures point to the importance of the time devoted to literacy-related activities in early childhood and their association with achievement in Grade 4.

While the Early Literacy Activity Scale provides a composite score, it is of interest to look at single items. If the category "often" is considered only, the percentages of pupils in Ireland whose parents engaged in literacy-related activities with them before the beginning of primary school are higher for each activity when compared with the corresponding European average:

- read books to them often: 69.7% (EU average 58.4 %)
- told stories to them often: 63.5% (EU average 51. 5%)
- sang songs to them often: 61.4% (EU average 50.6%)
- played games involving shapes (toys and puzzles) with them often: 63.5% (EU average 63.5%).
  (For more details and an overview of European countries see table B 4 – B 7 in Appendix B).

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

5.1.2 Providing a literate environment in school

Resources teachers use for teaching reading

Since the type of reading materials teachers use in literacy instruction may influence the motivation of students, it is of interest to have a closer look at this matter. PIRLS 2011 provides some data. Thirty-eight percent of pupils in Ireland are taught by teachers who use a variety of children's books as a basis for reading instruction, compared with an EU-24 average of 29%. Pupils in Ireland are also more likely to be taught by teachers who use textbooks as the basis of reading instruction (74%), just above the EU-24 average of 70%. Only 6% of students in Ireland are taught by teachers who report that computer software is used as a basis of reading instruction. This is similar to the EU-24 average (5%),

but less than countries such as Austria (9%) and the Netherlands (10%). However, 62% of students in Ireland are taught by teachers who report using computer software as a supplement, compared with 47% on average across participating EU countries (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 8.12, p. 236, EU averages obtained from Table H1 in Appendix C).

Availability and use of classroom library

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 98% of pupils in Ireland were in classrooms which had class libraries – well above the corresponding EU-24 average of 73% Appendix C, Table H2). Eighty-seven percent were in classrooms with 50 or more library books, compared with an EU-24 average of 32%. Similarly, almost all pupils in Ireland (94%) were given time to spend in the class library or reading corner at least weekly, well above the average across participating EU countries (61%). Although just 42% of students in Ireland were in classes whose teacher took them to a library other than the class library at least monthly, compared with an EU-24 average of 65%, this may be because, in Ireland, classroom libraries (and school libraries) are reasonably well-stocked in the first instance (EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H2 in Appendix C).

5.1.3 Providing a digital environment

Digital environment of primary students

A literate environment can also be created by incorporating digital devices into the school environment. According to teachers' reports, 56% of primary school students in Ireland have a computer available for student use in reading lessons, compared to the EU-average of 45% (Appendix C, Table I6).

According to PIRLS 2011, the percentage of students in Ireland who engage in specified computer activities during reading sessions at least monthly are:

- to look up information: 50% (EU-24 average = 39%)
- to read stories or other texts: 42% (EU-24 = 32%)
- to write stories or other texts: 43% (EU-24 = 33%)
- to develop reading skills and strategies with instructional software: 29.8% (EU-24 = 27%).

In Ireland, 50% use a computer at least monthly to look up information. This is above the EU-24 average (39%) but is considerably less countries such as Denmark (75%) and the Netherlands (78%). In Ireland, fewer than half of students (43%) use a computer to write stories or other texts at least monthly. Although this is above the corresponding EU-24 average (33%), it nevertheless suggests relatively low usage of computers by students. If the trend is towards greater use of computers in teaching and learning, Ireland has considerable work to do to match usage levels in countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands.

The relative under-usage of computers by students in Ireland is consistent with the outcomes of an EU survey of ICT-usage in schools in 2011. The survey found that teachers' use of computers was high in Irish primary schools, while student usage was low (European Schoolnet & University of Liege, 2012). In 2013, a national survey of ICT use in schools found that the ratio of computers to students at primary level was 4.6 to 1 (Cosgrove, et al., 2014). However, when confined to computers or devices that were specifically for student use the ratio was 11.1 to 1, indicating the tendency for computers to be designated for teacher or administration use, rather than student use. Principals identified pressure to cover the prescribed curriculum as the main obstacle preventing the integration of ICT into teaching

and learning. This suggests both a need to improve infrastructure so that students have access to more computing devices, and a need to ensure that teachers access the types of CPD that will enable them to integrate computers more effectively in children's learning activities.

Digital environment of secondary students

Despite high expectations and increased resources, ICT use in Secondary schools across Ireland remains low.

The 2013 national survey on ICT use in schools reported an average ratio of 3.1 students to each computer. However, when the analysis was confined to computers or devices that were specifically for student use, the ratio was less favourable at 8.8 to 1. Similar to the primary level, a relatively high proportion of computers in post-primary schools were likely to be designated for teacher or administrative use, rather than student use. These findings are consistent with the EU survey of ICT-usage in schools in 2011, which notes the imbalance between the heavy usage of ICT by teachers and low usage rates by students (European Schoolnet & University of Liege, 2012). Despite investment by the Irish Government, principals in the national survey commented on a need for additional ongoing funding to keep up with technological developments, while technical maintenance of ICT infrastructure has also been an issue (Cosgrove, et al., 2014).

Principals in the national survey reported mainly positive effects of ICT use on teaching and learning, noting increased student interest and engagement. However, they identified insufficient time for planning and preparation, insufficient technical support, and insufficient teacher knowledge of how to use ICT effectively, as the main barriers to the effective use of ICT to support teaching and learning at post-primary level (Cosgrove, et al., 2014).

The 2013 survey also reported teachers' views on using ICT in the classroom, which were consistent with didactic teaching approaches (Cosgrove, et al., 2014). Post-primary teachers reported that they were most likely to use ICT to prepare resources for class lessons or to present information or give instructions to students. The report noted that teachers were less likely to use aspects of ICT that support the development higher order thinking skills in students. A majority of principals (66%) and 43% of teachers identified a need for Continuing Professional Development courses to target how to use ICT as a teaching and learning tool across the curriculum.

Challenges: The results from the 2013 ICT Survey of Schools as well as data from PIRLS and PISA contributed to the formulation of the recently-published Department of Education and Skills' Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 (DES, 2015). The action plan calls for increased integration of ICT into teaching, learning and assessment practice in schools, stating that meaningful ICT integration is the responsibility of all stakeholders and is central to the development of a high-quality 21st century education system. The strategy recognises that schools need guidance and support to achieve ICT integration alongside improvements in ICT infrastructure. Furthermore, it acknowledges that principals and teachers are central to ensuring ICT integration and proposes an increased emphasis on ICT training during ITE, induction and CPD. However, the strategy does not address the practicalities of implementing change in schools and classrooms, and more needs to be done to support teachers in integrating ICTs more effectively into teaching and learning across all subject areas including languages.

There is a need ensure that students in primary and post-primary schools have access to broad range of digital texts at school, and that they are supported in using them in all subjects across the

curriculum. Libraries are well placed to support schools in acquiring digital resources for teaching and learning across all curriculum subjects.

5.1.4 The role of public libraries in reading promotion

Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion.

Public libraries and primary schools

In Ireland there is a strong tradition of cooperation between the public library system and schools. Each school is linked to a public library, and the following supports are available:

- Class visits to the library branch can be arranged
- A teacher's library card for all teachers in a school can be provided, enabling them to borrow books for their class.
- A presentation on the library services can be delivered by library staff to teachers, students or parents in a school, or can be included as a component of teacher staff development.
- A range of library services can be provided to schools, on request, including reading and curriculum support materials, online leanring resources, and resource and reference support for school projects
- A reading space and access to electronic resources can be made available on request
- A library branch can provide reference resources and resesarch assistance to pupils and their teachers for school project work
- Parents can be introduced to a range of library resources and activities available to support their children's literacy (and numeracy) skills
- Students can avail of ongoing library programmes and initiatives throughout the school year, including an annual summer activities programme designed to support continuing development of literacy (and numeracy) skills
- A library branch can provide information on local history, including maps, photographs, documents and information. (Source: http://www.librariesireland.ie/services-to-schools/)

The Summer Reading Programmes offered by libraries encourage students to engage in reading during the summer months when schools are closed. Programmes include:

- The Summer Reading Adventure[16]
- The Summer Reading Buzz[17]
- The Summer Reading Challenge[18]

Cooperation between secondary schools, families, libraries and other agents in literacy promotion for adolescents

Building links between schools and the wider communities allows for greater coherence in approaches to literacy and increased opportunities to facilitate learning experiences and encourage participation in school and education (National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, DES, 2011).

Like primary schools, post-primary schools throughout Ireland have been linked with a library branch to encourage increased co-ordination and service provision. Partner libraries are required to provide

[16] See: http://www.librariesireland.ie/summer-reading-adventure/.
[17] See: http://www.summerreadingbuzz.ie/.
[18] See: http://summerreadingchallenge.org.uk/.

free library services including class visits to the library; access to reading and curriculum support materials, young adult collections and online learning resources; study spaces within the library branch; and resources and assistance to students and teachers for school project work and research (Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011-2020) Circular 0027, 2015).

The National Library of Ireland offers online resources to both Primary and Post-Primary students and their teachers, as well as providing tours and workshops that can be tailored to class requirements.

The Junior Certificate School Programme, which is implemented in some disadvantaged (DEIS) schools, provides a broad range of resources to these schools, including the services of a professional librarian[19].

5.1.5 Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

Family literacy programs

Family literacy programmes for migrant parents are reported under "Participation, Inclusion and Equity".

The Department of Education and Skills (2005), through its Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme for disadvantaged schools, supports the implementation of family literacy programmes. In 2010, the Department produced a handbook, *Family Literacy: Guidelines for Providers*, which makes a distinction between family literacy (language and numeracy) programmes on the one hand, and family learning programmes on the other[20]. While family literacy programmes are defined as supporting the literacy, language and numeracy abilities of parents and their children, family learning programmes focus more broadly on supporting learning within families, as well as in the broader community.

Family learning programmes encourage and support parents in their own development in the context of their children progressing through the education system. Thus, parents are given an opportunity to develop their own skills or knowledge, and the support to engage more with their children's learning and development. For example, the Clare Family Learning Project offers a range of family learning courses including homework and study skills and books and stories, thus helping parents help their children.

The **Family Literacy: Guidelines for Providers** describes a range of programme models including:

- Family learning and play, including child development
- Parents' roles as teachers and linking with the school
- Language development
- Comprehension and story telling
- Choosing books
- Reading and the learning process, including the "Storysacks" model
- Family Learning and Maths

[19] See: http://www.askaboutireland.ie/libraries/public-libraries/other-libraries/school-libraries/post-primary-school-libra/.

[20] See: https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/DEIS-Family-Literacy-Guidelines-2010.pdf.

- Programmes relating to home and family in areas such as cookery, food and nutrition, gardening, local history, and Art
- "Dads and Lads" (Programmes with a specific focus on the involvement of fathers)

The main organisations involved in family literacy in Ireland include:

- The Limerick and Clare Training and Education Board, which oversees the Clare Family Learning Programme (established in 1994)
- The Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board

Furthermore, The National Adult Literacy Agency supports local Education and Training Boards to provide courses for parents struggling with literacy. The organisation also provides distance education programmes and support tutoring over the phone. These programmes, which may include a family literacy component, are available to parents who wish to avail of them[21].

The **National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy** outlined various future aims with reference to family literacy. These included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Target tailored information on supporting children's literacy and numeracy to parents with literacy difficulties through adult and family literacy provision by ETBs (formerly VECs) (by 2016)
- Ensure schools encourage parents to avail of opportunities to participate in family literacy programmes organised in local libraries or provided by ETBs or community groups (from 2012)
- Continue to support family literacy initiatives in socially and economically disadvantaged communities (such as those served by DEIS schools); in allocating support, priority will be given to projects (at early years and school level) that have been evaluated and proven to be effective through evaluations (ongoing)

Programmes for introducing parents and children to libraries and bookshops

Most public libraries offer programmes targeted at children and/or their parents. Primary schools are partnered with library branches, which provide a range of services to introduce children to libraries. There are also mobile libraries and school library vans which visit primary schools (not close to a library branch) on a regular basis.

Children's Books Ireland offers various events and projects throughout Ireland to foster reading engagement, including Book Clinics, which introduces parents and children to Book Doctors who offers them advice and recommended books which can be borrowed from their local library.

There are various awards programmes to encourage the production and quality of children's books. They also highlight children's books for parents, teachers and children. These include:

- The CBI Book of the Year Awards (formerly the Bisto Awards)[22] and
- The Literacy Association of Ireland Book Awards[23]

[21] See: https://www.nala.ie/.
[22] See: http://www.childrensbooksireland.ie/cbi-book-year-awards.
[23] See: http://www.reading.ie/content/literacy-association-ireland-children%E2%80%99s-book-award-2015.

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents

There are a number of online, community centre based and library book clubs that aim to encourage positive attitudes towards reading in children and adolescents. Online book clubs include setantabookclubs.ie's Kids Club, the Bord Gais Energy Book Club[24], and Club Leabhar[25], which aims to promote reading in the Irish language. Accessible online blogs and reviews also target children and young adults, encouraging them to engage with reading.

Other initiatives include Little Readers, supported by Bord Gais Energy, which provides children aged between 0 – 5 with a free book, to encourage a love of books and reading from an early age[26]. Similarly, Bookbag is a children's book gifting initiative, involving a collaboration between Brown Bag Films and Children's Books Ireland, which targets children attending disadvantaged schools[27].

In 2014, Children's Books Ireland launched the "Let's get reading – Stories are for everyone" annual campaign, which features events and activities around the country to encourage children to enjoy the experience of reading[28].

Readingchampions.ie is a new website which promotes positive role models for children's reading. The website aims to increase awareness of the benefits of reading for pleasure and to celebrate reading and libraries.

Furthermore, storytelling events, and family and children's workshops at public libraries aim to attract families and children to libraries, and encourage reading engagement.

Offering attractive reading material for children and adolescents in print and non-print

The 2010 study Young People and Public Libraries (YPPL) (McGrath, Rogers & Gilligan, 2010) was conducted to see what could be done to bring more young people to libraries. It shows that librarians across the country are well aware of young people (13-17) as a target group. Key findings include:

- Just half of the library authorities surveyed reported having formal written collection development policies that guide their spending on books and other materials. Only 3 of these library authorities included specific plans for young people's stock, while 2 others had provisions for children and young people combined.
- Fewer than half of the library authorities surveyed provided magazines for young people; only 5 libraries reported providing magazines in all their branches. One library reported having to cancel subscriptions to magazines for young adults due to budgetary constraints.

This study is in itself a good practice example on how to tackle the difficult relationship between youths and public libraries.

Public Libraries

Libraries provide not only books and materials to facilitate the acquisition and development of literacy skills, but also provide additional resources and information in a free, open and informal setting. Ongoing investment in the public library service in Ireland has improved the availability and quality of

[24] See: https://www.bordgaisenergybookclub.ie/.
[25] See: http://www.clubleabhar.com/?Lang=en.
[26] See: https://www.bordgaisenergybookclub.ie/kids/little-readers/.
[27] See: http://www.childrensbooksireland.ie/bookbag-2016.
[28] See: http://www.childrensbooksireland.ie/reading-campaign.

multi-media and ICT services in libraries. There are 359 library branches across Ireland, as well as 30 mobile libraries, which provide a range of services (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government). In addition to the print books on offer in local branches, public libraries in Ireland offer online services, including access to out-of-print resources, digital books and a selection of online business and general reference sources. It is also possible to request books, renew loans and check borrower information online. Many library websites also provide content specifically targeted at children, for example the "Children's Zone" section of the South Dublin Libraries website, which provides access to children and young adult collections online. The website also provides access to storytelling online, and resources to help children with their homework.

All library branches have dedicated signed areas for children and young people, with collections of reading materials, including books, graphic novels and magazines. A majority of libraries are also comfortably and colourfully furnished, with displays of posters and leaflets of interest to young people. Furthermore, many libraries host family workshops and children's workshops, as well as storytelling events.

Challenges: The tradition of strong co-operation of schools and libraries in Ireland should continue, as access to a large range of books is critical for developing students' interest in reading. There is a particular need to target adolescents, including boys, whose interest in reading often deteriorates after primary schooling.

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

The Junior Certificate School Programme Library Initiative, which includes the services of an on-site professional librarian, should be extended to more post-primary schools.

5.2 Improving the quality of teaching

To improve the quality of teaching, important aspects need to be considered:

- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly-qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Especially crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the McKinsey report "How the world's best performing school systems come out on top" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) states: "The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (p. 13).

5.2.1 Quality of preschool

While early childhood education has long been neglected as a public issue, nowadays early childhood education and care (ECEC) is recognised as important for "better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large" (OECD 2012, *Starting Strong III,* p. 9). In Ireland and in all the other European countries, pre-primary education is an important part of political reflection and action.

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated:

> Increasing investment in high-quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe's future human capital. 'High quality' means highly-qualified staff and a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children's natural developmental stages (High Level Group, 2012a, p. 59).

While there is no international or Europe-wide agreed concept of ECEC quality, there is agreement that quality is a complex concept and has different dimensions which are interrelated. In this report we focus on *structural quality* which refers to characteristics of the whole system, e.g. the financing of pre-primary education, the relation of staff to children, regulations for the qualifications and training of the staff, and the design of the curriculum. There are some data concerning structural quality, but there is a lack of research and data about process quality, practices in ECEC institutions, the relation between children and teachers, and what children actually experience in their institutions and programmes.

Annual expenditure on pre-primary education

According to Eurostat (2014, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Ireland is 0.1%. The range is from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland to 1.01% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table D1 in Appendix B). The figure for Ireland is likely to increase as the Government recently announced an extension of the Free Pre-school Year scheme to include a second free year.

Ratio of children to teachers/carers in pre-primary school

No data are available for Ireland in international publications (for an overview of European countries see table D2 in Appendix B). Source: Education at a Glance 2014 (OECD 2014, p. 451). In its publication, National Standards for Pre-school Services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, no. date), a ratio of 1:8 is given for children aged 3 to 6 years in full- and part-time care centres. For 2-3 year olds, the ratio is 1:6.

Percentage of males among preschool teachers

No internationally-published data are available for Ireland (for an overview of European countries see table D3 in Appendix B). According to an article, Men in Childcare, in the Irish Independent on May 28, 2009, it was estimated that just 1% of childcare workers in Ireland were males. An organisation, Men in Childcare in Ireland, has been established to increase the proportion of males in early childhood care and education.

Preschool teachers' (carer's) qualifications

The minimum required level to become a qualified carer ('pre-school assistant') working with older children in an ECCC setting is a post-secondary, non-tertiary certificate (ISCED Level 4) in Early Childhood Care and Education (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). This criterion is currently being implemented on a phased basis in existing ECCE settings (deadline for compliance is September 2016), while it is a requirement for those working in new settings. Existing childcare assistants who are due to retire within 7 years are not required to meet the minimum qualification.

There is a higher minimum qualification level for childcare leaders.

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

Preschool language and literacy curriculum

The design of the kindergarten curriculum is an important aspect of quality; therefore it is included in this section and not in the next section "Literacy curricula in schools". This also takes into consideration that young children have learning needs different to those of school children. Pre-school programmes should focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience, not by systematic training in phonics and teaching the alphabet. There is no evidence that formal instruction of reading in preschool has any benefit for future learning (Suggate 2012).

Aistear, the Framework for Early Learning, is a national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland. The Framework describes the types of learning that are important for children during this period in their lives, and as such sets out broad learning goals for all children. Aistear does this using four broad and interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Each theme identifies important dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. It can be used in different types of settings including children's homes[29].

[29] For further information, see: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Aistear_Toolkit/Aistear_Toolkit.html.

The framework provides a number of aims and associated activities consistent with an emergent literacy approach to literacy development. Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. We consider the following to be key components: oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness (for more information see the frame text of country reports). All these components are included in the Aistear Framework of Early Learning in Ireland.

Oral language development and vocabulary learning and grammar. As part of the Communicating strand in Aistear, a central aim is 'Children Will Use Language'. Under this, there are a number of subsidiary aims. In partnership with the adult, children will:

- interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation
- explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language
- use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning
- use language with confidence and competence for giving and receiving information, asking questions, requesting, refusing, negotiating, problem solving, imagining and recreating roles and situations, and clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings
- become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages
- be positive about their home language, and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations.

A variety of activities, many of which are play-based, are suggested to support implementation of these aims.

Familiarisation of children with the language of books (e.g. reading and telling stories. According to the Communicating theme in Aistear, children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language, includes the following sub-aims relating to book reading (though they are presented in a somewhat broader context than reading on its own):

- use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world
- build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others
- become familiar with and use a variety of print in an enjoyable and meaningful way
- have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way

These aims are supported with proposed instructional activities, described in documents such as: *Supporting Learning through Play* and *Learning and Development through Interaction*[30].

Engaging and motivating children in literacy-related activities. For young children in the early years' classroom, the curriculum supports language and literacy development through activity time. This

[30] See: http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/.

could be teacher-directed activity, or child-initiated activity (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 206). Among the proposed activities are those which include book reading, processing story content, retelling the story, creating a story, and reading to other children (p.40). In general, children are motivated to use reading and writing in their play situations (NCCA, 2009, p. 40)

Providing a literacy-rich environment. The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework provides guidelines for creating a print-rich environment which enhances young children's interest in books. In this context children are provided a variety of books (NCCA, 2009, p. 40).

Concepts of print. Aistear states that children should become familiar with print through various writing tools or by using different types of printed materials, and have opportunities in play situations to write either by scribbling or using 'invented spelling'. It also states that children should be aware of the direction of print and that print carries the message and that children should understand the concept of upper and lower case letters and be able to use ICT for creating messages (NCCA, 2009, p. 39; Eurydice 2011, p. 55).

Language awareness. Teachers are expected to draw children's attention to letters and their sounds as part of their daily activities, play and routines and help them to find and create words (whether real or nonsense) that rhyme such as *man, tan, ban, dan, chan, wan* or say tongue twisters. Furthermore, children should be able to break down speech into small units and blend syllables or sounds in sounds (NCCA, 2009, p. 39; Eurydice, 2011, p. 55).

Some work, largely at a conceptual level, has been done in integrating interventions for day care centres and kindergartens, and linking them to programmes provided by the Health Service in Ireland. These efforts are supported by Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and

The recently announced extension of the free pre-school year to up to two years from September 2016 for pre-primary children and the requirement for higher qualification levels among early childhood carers should bring greater cohesion to the nature of children's literacy-related experiences in a range of early childhood settings. This will be supported by inspections of early childhood settings by the inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2015) has just completed a revised language (English and Irish) curriculum for 3-8 year olds. Implementation will begin in September 2016. This curriculum is intended to build on Aistear, and therefore ensure continuity between the literacy experiences children have in early childhood education and care settings and in kindergarten classes in primary schools.

Improving early language and literacy screening and training in ECEC (Early care and education)

Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. ELINET identifies the following as key components: oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness (for more information see the framework for the country reports).

The Aistear framework defines assessment as 'an ongoing process of collecting, documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning' (p. 72). The framework includes a strong rationale for engaging in assessment with young children, and suggests that assessment should focus on four broad areas: dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, and knowledge and understanding. A range of sources that can be drawn on to document children's learning and development are described including samples of children's work, notes, photographs and video/audio recordings, stories, daily diaries/records of care, and checklists and reports. Specific approaches to assessment include: self-assessment, conversations, observation, setting tasks, and testing. Carers/early childhood practitioners are expected to alert parents and other professionals to difficulties encountered by the child (subject to parent consent). The framework also points to the value of discussing children's development and growth with children themselves.

Hence, the overall approach advocated by Aistear is informal. However, teachers implementing Aistear in the infant classes in primary schools may, in line with school policy, administer early screening tools for literacy (and numeracy).

Assessment of oral language tends to be more informal. The revised Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015) for children in Junior Infants to Second class includes learning continua for oral language, reading and writing, which teachers can draw on to support their informal assessments of children's language and literacy.

Challenges: Considerable progress has been made in recent years in ensuring that all children can access age-appropriate Early Childhood Care that includes a strong educational component. The introduction of a second free preschool year from 2016 means that all children can benefit from a range of pre-reading experiences. The challenge is to ensure that child carers are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills, including a working knowledge of Aistear that will enable them to provide children with developmentally-appropriate experiences in the areas of language and emergent literacy.

There is a particular need to ensure that the level of pre-school support and instruction provided to socio-economically disadvantaged children and other at-risk groups (such as migrant students) is sufficiently intensive to ensure that they begin primary schooling the full range of skills required for success in becoming literate. While Early Start (an intensive pre-school programme for children in disadvantaged communities) continues to be available, there is a risk that early childhood programmes outside this context may not be sufficiently intensive to address the needs of pre-school children in areas of socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

5.2.2 Literacy curricula in schools

Curricula provide a normative framework for teachers and a guideline for their teaching aims, methods, materials and activities. However, one should keep in mind that there is a difference between the intended curriculum, as outlined in official documents, and the implemented curriculum – what actually happens in the schools.

Primary schools curricula

Reading for pleasure in the intended language/reading curriculum

According to PIRLS 2011 Encyclopaedia, there is major emphasis on reading for enjoyment in the intended language/reading curriculum in Ireland. Ireland is among a group of 9 countries participating in PIRLS 2011 which reported major emphasis on reading for pleasure in the curriculum, though not all of them perform highly. Four of the EU-24 countries in PIRLS 2011 reported that reading for pleasure was given a little or no emphasis and 11 countries that it had some emphasis (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 9, p. 36).

Although the current (1999) English curriculum (DES/NCCA 1999) does not list reading for pleasure as an aim, the following broad objective is included: To gain pleasure and fulfilment from language activity (p. 11). Also, under the Reading component of the Competence and Confidence strand, reading for pleasure (and information) is referred to in Grades 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6.

Several of the learning outcomes in the Revised Primary Language Curriculum for Junior classes (up to the end of Grade 2) (NCCA, 2015), which will be implemented from September 2016, refer to motivation and engagement. Examples are:

- Take part in and enjoy listening to, reading and talking about the meaning and interpretation of written words and illustrations with others
- Choose, read and communicate about text in a range of genres for pleasure and interest.
- Take part in and enjoy writing to communicate with others

Addressing strategies and practices for tackling reading difficulties

In Ireland, current curricula for English and Irish do not contain advice on strategies for tackling reading difficulties. However, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), the body charged with supporting teachers' ongoing professional development needs, provides advice to class teachers on addressing reading difficulties, and introduces them to strategies that are consistent with the curriculum. This information is delivered through workshops and consultations with advisors. Resources are also made available online on the PDST website[31]. In addition to courses provided by the PDST, many teachers avail of additional courses at university level, often to gain an additional qualification such as a post-graduate diploma or Master's degree. Literacy can feature heavily in such courses. Many of the learning support (remedial) teachers in primary schools have completed additional coursework in literacy, and share this knowledge with class teachers. Finally, teachers may also be advised by psychologists who are working with students in their classes who have or may have special education needs[32].

Literacy curricula in secondary schools

In 2014, the National Council for and Assessment (NCCA, 2015b) launched a new syllabus for English at lower secondary level (Grades 7-9). It is expected that, in 2017, students will sit the state exam in English based on the new syllabus for the first time. The primary aim of the syllabus is: "to develop students' knowledge of language and literature, to consolidate and deepen their literacy skills and

[31] See: www.pdst.ie.

[32] See, for example, http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/NEPS-Home-Page.html.

make them more self-aware as learners" (p. 5). Hence, there is a recognition that literacy continues to be important and continues to develop at post-primary level. Specific aims of the syllabus are:

- to be creative through language and to gain enjoyment and continuing personal growth from English in all its forms
- to develop control over English using it and responding to it with purpose and effect through the interconnected literacy skills of oral language, reading and writing
- to engage personally with and think critically about an increasingly broad range of spoken, written and multimodal texts
- to develop an informed appreciation of literature through personal encounters with a variety of literary texts
- to use their literacy skills to manage information needs, and find, use, synthesise, evaluate and communicate information using a variety of media
- to gain an understanding of the grammar and conventions of English and how they might be used to promote clear and effective communication. (p. 5).

The specification for Junior Cycle English focuses on the development of language and literacy in and through the three strands: Oral Language, Reading, and Writing. The elements of each of these strands place a focus on communicating, on active engagement with and exploration of a range of texts, and on acquiring and developing an implicit and explicit knowledge of the shape and structures of language. Within each element, there are specific learning outcomes.

The term 'text' is broadly defined to include all products of language use—oral, written, visual, or multimodal.

Examples of learning outcomes in the reading strand for the element *exploring and using language* are:

- Engage in sustained private reading as a pleasurable and purposeful activity, applying what they have learned about the effectiveness of spoken and written texts to their own experience of reading
- Read their texts for understanding and appreciation of character, setting, story and action: to explore how and why characters develop, and to recognise the importance of setting and plot structure
- Select key moments from their texts and give thoughtful value judgements on the main character, a key scene, a favourite image from a film, a poem, a drama, a chapter, a media or web based event.

It is unclear at this time what form assessment of the new syllabus will take as the Department of Education and Skills is still in negotiation with teacher unions on this matter. However, it is envisaged that assessment (that is, Junior Certificate grades) will be based on a combination of class work and a written examination. Prior to 2017, all assessment of English has been carried out by written examination only.

As noted in the overview of the Irish educational system, the entire curriculum at Junior Cycle is now driven by eight key skills, including literacy and communication. Hence, it is expected that these skills will be developed not only in language classes, but across the curriculum as a whole.

A related initiative has been the identification in all post-primary schools of a literacy link teacher who is responsible for promoting and developing literacy at whole school level (that is, in all areas of the curriculum).

There is a separate syllabus for upper secondary level, which is assessed as part of the Leaving Certificate Examination that students take at the end of post-primary schooling (i.e,. at the end of Grade 12).

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

All the students in the programme must be entered for the Junior Certificate examination. Students follow the same courses as their peers in the examination subjects they have selected. On completion of the programme students receive an individual Student Profile which is a cumulative record of their achievements and is validated by the Department of Education and Skills. This is in addition to any grades they achieve in the Junior Certificate examination[33].

The development of new curricula in language at lower primary and in English at lower post-primary (Junior Cycles) is welcome. The implementation of these curricula, including the effectiveness of their approaches to assessment, needs to be carefully monitored and adjusted as needed, with appropriate support available to teachers.

5.2.3 Reading instruction

While most literacy researchers have clear concepts about effective literacy instruction, we do not know much about what is actually going on in classrooms in Ireland or in other European countries. In order to describe the practice of reading instruction we would need extensive observational studies. There is a noteworthy shortage of data on actual reading instruction in school. Only PIRLS offer some internationally-comparable data for primary schools, albeit based on self-reports by teachers (PIRLS) which might not be valid and may be biased by social desirability. Many countries also implement similar assessments at primary and post-primary levels that may provide information on instructional practices in classrooms.

In PIRLS 2006, fourth-grade reading teachers reported about instructional materials, strategies and activities. In a latent class analysis Lankes and Carstensen (2007) identified 5 types of instruction:

Type 1: Teacher-directed instruction in the whole class without individual support
Type 2: Individualized child-centred instruction, seldom whole-class instruction
Type 3: Whole-class instruction with little cognitive stimulation and little variety in methods, without individual support
Type 4: Variety of methods with high individual support
Type 5: Highly stimulating whole-class instruction with didactic materials.

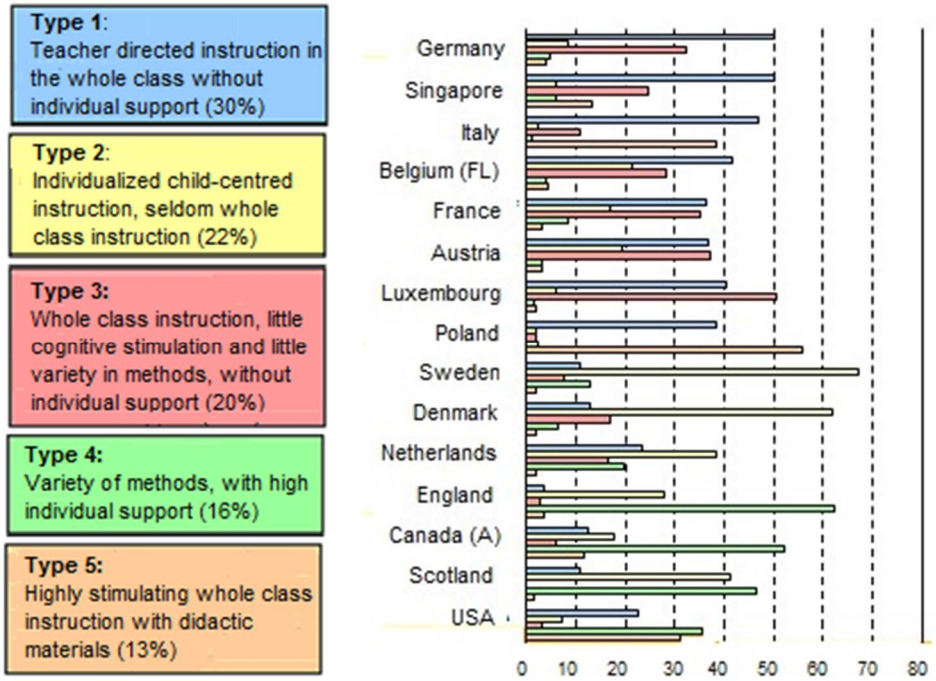
There were significant differences between countries concerning these types of instruction (Lankes & Carstensen 2007). In the case of Denmark, for example, there was a stronger emphasis on individualised child-centered instruction. This contrasted with other countries in the study, including

[33] Information on this programme can be found at: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Junior_Certificate_School_Programme/The_revised_JCSP_Programme_Statement_pdf.
The literacy component of the JCSP is described at http://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/Literacy.pdf.

Germany, Italy and Begium (Fl), where there was a relatively strong emphasis on whole-class teacher-directed instruction without individual support.

PIRLS 2011 teacher self-reports also point to differences in approaches to reading instruction in European countries (Mullis et al., 2012a, Tarelli et al., 2012).

Figure 4: Distribution of types of Reading Instruction (PIRLS 2006 data)



Source: Adapted from Lankes & Carstensen 2007

In PIRLS 2011, principals and teachers provided some information on language and reading instruction. Concerning the **instructional time spent on language and reading**, the following results are of interest. In 2011, pupils in Ireland spent about the same number of instructional hours in schools (854 hours per year) as students on average across EU-24 countries (850 hours), and allocation of time to teaching the language of the PIRLS test in Ireland (176 hours) was less than on average across EU countries (241 hours), though it exceeds curriculum specifications in Ireland (4 hours per week, or 146 hours over the school year (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999). The average number of hours allocated to teaching reading each year in Ireland as part of language instruction (56 hours) was below the EU-24 average (68), though the EU average is itself low relative to, for example, the United States and New Zealand (both 131 hours). Teachers in Ireland report allocating marginally more time to teaching English reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (159) than on average across EU countries (147 hours) (Source: PIRLS 2011 (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 214, Exhibit 8.4). EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database (see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix C Table I3).

It should be noted that, in 2011, as part of a National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020, teachers were asked to increase the allocation of instruction time to the main language of instruction (English or Irish) by one hour per week from January 2012 (Department of Education and Skills, Circular 0056/2011). This could be done through increasing the time allocated to English (or Irish), or through strengthening the focus on literacy across the curriculum.

PIRLS 2011 provides information on the frequency with which teachers in Ireland engage students in specific reading comprehension activities. The following are the percentages of students in Ireland and on average across the EU-24 who engage in specified comprehension activities 'every day or almost every day':

- Locate information within the text: 62.6% (EU-24 = 65.5%)
- Identify main ideas of what they have read: 60.1% (EU-24 = 55.5%)
- Explain or support their understanding of what they have read: 64.9% (EU-24 = 61.6%)
- Compare what they have read with experiences they have had: 64.9% (EU-24 = 34.7%)
- Compare what they have read with other things they have read: 26.5% (EU-24 = (22.4%)
- Make predictions about what will happen next in the text: 46.3% (EU-24 = 22.4%)
- Make generalisations and inferences: 36.8% (EU-24 = 36.5%)
- Describe the style or structure of the text: 17.8% (EU-24 = 22.7%)
- Determine the author's perspective or intention: 15.3% (EU-24 = 21.0%)

Ireland is at or close to the EU-24 average on the frequency with which students engage in activities such as locating information in the text, identifying the main idea and explaining or supporting their understanding. A number of higher-order comprehension activities are practised infrequently both in Ireland and on average across the EU-24, including describing the style or structure of the text, and determining the author's perspective or intention. Hence, there may be a need to increase the focus on these skills in Ireland and in other EU countries.

It is well documented in research studies that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies may improve reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. While there are no data available for secondary schools, PISA data on students' awareness of strategies for understanding and summarizing texts (see above) suggest that there is value in supporting students in learning and applying instructional strategies in reading.

A recent programme implemented in some primary schools in Ireland, Building Bridges of Understanding (Courtney & Gleeson, 2010) has played an important role in drawing the attention of schools and teachers to the importance of teaching reading comprehension strategies to students on a systematic, ongoing basis in a way that develops metacognitive knowledge[34].

Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

In primary and post-primary in Ireland, computers and other ICTs are integrated into the regular curriculum. However, as noted earlier, while teachers make extensive use of ICTs in teaching, students use them less frequently in language and other lessons. There are a variety of reasons for this. They include difficulties with infrastructure in schools, including problems with technical support, lack of confidence on the part of teachers, and a need for more continuing professional development (CPD) (Cosgrove et al., 2014). The Irish Department of Education and Skills recently launched a Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, in which it expressed an intention to address some of these issues (DES, 2015).

[34] See: http://www.cdu.mic.ul.ie/Newresource/default.html.

The new Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) should also go some way towards broadening the use of ICTs at lower secondary level. It identifies the following among eight themes which are to be addressed in all subject areas at Junior Cycle:

- Being literate – including exploring and creating a variety of texts, including multi-modal texts; and
- Managing information and thinking – including gathering, recording, organising and evaluating information and data.

These key skills are also reflected in the learning outcomes for Junior Cycle English, which include:

- uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner
- communicates effectively using a variety of means in a range of contexts
- creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts

Revised curricula in language (English and Irish) at primary level (NCCA, 2015) and at lower-secondary (Junior Cycle) level are or will soon be implemented in schools. Both include broad definitions of text that incorporate digital texts. At primary level, for example, text is defined to include all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital. At lower-secondary level, several of the learning outcomes refer to multi-media and digital texts.

As curricula in other subject areas are revised at both primary and post-primary levels, it is likely that there will be an increased emphasis on the use of digital texts and multi-media. However, ultimately, it may be the role that computers play in state examinations at the end of Grades 9 and 12 that will determine the extent to which digital literacy becomes a key focus across all curriculum areas. At present, most state examinations do not use technology.

5.2.4 Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners

Effective assessment tools upon entry to primary school will help teachers identify literacy skills from the very beginning of formal education. Regular formative assessment throughout primary school will ensure that literacy problems do not continue to go unrecognised, and that students receive the support they need through education that matches their learning needs. This should prevent children leaving school with unrecognised literacy problems (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012a, p. 67).

Standards as basis of assessment of reading difficulties

Standards of reading achievement, allowing teachers, parents and school leaders to understand the rate of progress of learners and to identify individual strengths and needs, should be integrated in the curriculum and should be the basis of assessments. The High Level Group pointed out that there is a need to establish minimal standards of literacy achievement (benchmarks) for each grade, and to administer regular tests based on these standards, to allow for identification of struggling readers/writers (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012a, p. 43).

In almost all EU countries, standards are linked to learning objectives in reading to be reached at the end of primary and secondary education cycles. However, only a few Member States have detailed standards (benchmarks) at each grade (school year) which form the basis of assessment, allowing for early identification of reading difficulties and subsequent allocation of attention and resources. These

standard-based assessments allow teachers and school leaders to judge children's progress and to target additional reading support.

Assessment standards and methods are prescribed by the language/reading curriculum in half of the European countries that participated in PIRLS 2011 (Mullis, Martin, Minnich et al., 2012, p. 99, Vol. 1, Exhibit 7). In PIRLS, Ireland is a country in which goals and objectives, instructional methods or processes, and assessment standards and methods, but not instructional materials, are identified as being prescribed in the language/reading curriculum, though this interpretation of the curriculum might not be widely shared.

Teachers in Ireland currently use a combination of formative and summative assessment to assess outcomes in language and literacy. Formative assessments include self-assessment, conferencing, portfolio assessment, concept mapping, questioning, teacher observation and teacher-designed tasks and tests (NCCA, 2007). Teachers are required to report to parents on their children's progress at least annually, using a Report Card template[35]. One scheme suggested by the NCCA for summarising student performance on a report card is to rate performance in aspects of English (and other subjects) using the following scheme: experiencing significant difficulty, experiencing some difficulty, managing comfortably, capable and competent, highly capable and competent. The areas of English to which teachers could apply this grading scheme are: listening comprehension, oral expression, reading and writing. Teachers are expected to use the outcomes of formative assessment for planning (NCCA, 2007).

The new language curriculum for 3-8 year olds (NCCA, 2015), which schools and teachers will implement from September 2016, includes learning outcomes for to be achieved by students at the end of Senior Infants (approx. age 6) and Grade 2 (approx. age 8), as well as learning milestones. These will allow teachers to assess and document levels of performance across oral language, reading and writing. The milestones may allow for the identification of learning difficulties in the early years of formal schooling. Students may be assessed against the milestones at the end of Senior Infants, and again at the end of Second class.

Screening for reading competence to identify struggling readers

Since 2012, teachers are required to administer commercially-available nationally-normed standardised tests of reading (in English in all schools, in Irish in Irish-medium schools) towards the end of the academic year to students in Second, Fourth and Sixth grades (classes) (Department of Education and Skills, Circular 0056-2011). In practice, teachers administer standardised tests at all class levels from First to Sixth, while teachers of kindergarten children (Junior, Senior infants) administer screening measures that have a diagnostic component. Students who are selected for learning support (remedial instruction) on the basis of low performance on a standardised test or for other reasons (see below) may then be administered diagnostic tests of reading by a learning support teacher (reading specialist) to better identify their specific learning needs in reading and associated areas (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension etc.) where additional support is required.

Many schools have systems in place to identify pupils' strengths and needs as they first enter a post-primary school. These screening systems may serve many functions, including enabling grouping of students (to ensure mixed ability groups or to ensure group setting according to ability), planning for provision, identifying those at risk of learning difficulty and monitoring progress over time

[35] See www.ncca.ie.

(Department for Education and Skills, 2009). Most recently, there has been a shift away from groping students by ability in English until Grade 9 (the final year of lower-secondary education).

Most pupils in the compulsory lower secondary schools, called the junior cycle (12-15 year olds), take courses leading to a state examination – the Junior Certificate. Pupils from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds or those at the risk of dropout, may follow the Junior Certificate School Programme, which, as noted earlier, offers a more flexible approach to teaching and learning within the national curriculum (NCCA, 2014). It is expected that, in the near future, both teacher assessments and performance on an external exam will contribute to students' grades in English and other subject areas in the Junior Certificate Exam. However, at the time of writing, teachers' unions are split in their support for this, and it is unclear how soon it will be implemented.

In addition to screenings, struggling readers can be identified by transferring information concerning previous educational needs and support from primary schools to post-primary schools, and monitoring student progress, at individual and school levels (Department for Education and Skills, 2009). Since spring 2015, the transfer of students to post-primary schooling has been strengthened by the requirement that students must bring an educational passport with them to their post-primary school. The passport is described as "a suite of materials to support the reporting of pupil information from Primary to Post-primary schools" (DES, Circular 0042, 2015, page 1). The elements of the passport are:

- A teacher's report on the standard Sixth class Report Card Template, which must be completed by the school.
- A child's report – The primary school supplies My Profile Sheet, which must be completed by students while still in primary school, and shared with their parents upon completion
- Parent/guardian's report – The parents complete My Child's Profile.

Upon confirmation of enrolment, the Primary school will send all relevant materials to the Post-Primary school.

Monitoring primary students´ progress in reading

In PIRLS 2011, teachers were asked how much emphasis they placed on specified assessment tools to monitor students' progress in reading. Table 25 shows that 86% students in Ireland, compared to 84% on average across the EU-24 are taught by teachers who placed a major emphasis on evaluation of student work to monitor their progress in reading. Slightly fewer students in Ireland (42%) were taught by teachers who placed a major emphasis on use of class tests, compared with the corresponding EU-24 average (51%). Forty-one percent of students in Ireland were taught by teachers who placed a major emphasis on the use of national or regional achievement tests, more than on average across the participating EU countries. The majority of students were taught by teachers who placed some emphasis on both classroom tests and national or regional achievement tests. A negligible percentage of students in Ireland were taught by teachers who placed little or no emphasis on the assessment tools referred to by PIRLS.

Table 25: Percentages of students with teachers reported placing varying levels of emphasis on the use of specified tools to monitor students' progress in reading – Ireland and EU-24 average

	Ireland			EU-24		
	Major Emphasis	Some Emphasis	Little/No Emphasis	Major Emphasis	Some Emphasis	Little/No Emphasis
Evaluation of student's ongoing work	86	14	0	84	16	1
Classroom tests (e.g., teacher-based tests)	42	56	2	51	45	5
National or regional achievement tests	41	56	3	25	52	24

Source: PIRLS 2011 database (see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I8)

Monitoring Secondary students´ progress in reading

Ongoing student assessment in post-primary schools is the subject teacher's responsibility. All schools organise tests, usually called 'house exams', before Christmas and towards the end of the school year. These school-based examinations are generally formal in nature and are set by the subject teachers, individually or increasingly as part of a collaborative subject departmental process.

Many teachers also give regular tests within class periods to stimulate the learning process. The majority of the schools also organise formal tests a few months prior to the sitting of the Junior Certificate examination. The purpose of these 'pre-examination' tests (or mocks) is to assess the performance levels of students, as well as to allay examination nervousness. The Junior Certificate examination, at the end of the compulsory period of education, is an important form of state-certified student assessment and it is currently undergoing change, as noted above. Most schools also provide formal, 'pre-Leaving' examinations a few months prior to the Leaving Certificate for those in Year 6 in order to give an assessment of performance levels and to allay nervousness.

On completion of senior cycle, students either sit for the established Leaving Certificate, the LCVP (Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme) or the LCA (Leaving Certificate Applied) examinations. In the main, these students are assessed by means of a terminal examination, although some subjects (such as Art and Music) also have a practical dimension.

In addition to tests administered by subject teachers, guidance counselors and/or learning support teachers may administer screening tests, for example at the beginning of First year (Grade 7). The screening tests may be ability tests or tests of reading/literacy.

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-20 (DES, 2011) indicated that students in Second year in post-primary schools would be required to complete standardized tests of English reading, mathematics and science, and, in the case of Irish-medium schools, Irish as well. However, this initiative has not been fully implemented yet.

A range of new approaches to assessments are likely to be put in place as new curricula in language at primary level, and in English at post-primary level are implemented. It is important to ensure that teachers have the requisite skills to implement the new assessment tools and use them effectively to monitor progress in literacy acquisition and identify students who are struggling. Subject teachers at

post-primary should be provided with support to address their needs of students who struggle with reading and writing

Supporting struggling literacy learners

Number of struggling readers receiving remedial instruction

Students in primary schools in Ireland who achieve very low scores on nationally-normed standardised tests (those scoring at or below the 12th percentile) generally access learning support (remedial teaching) with a specialist reading teacher[36] i.e., a specialist reading teacher (remedial teacher) in the students' own classrooms, or in a learning support room (DES, 2005, Circular SPED 02-2005). In practice, more than 12% of students access learning support or resource (special) teaching in any given year, and this reflects a level of flexibility in relation to resource provision within schools.

PIRLS offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools. One question was whether all pupils in Fourth grade who need remedial instruction receive it. Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2011, it is estimated that 20.1% of students in Fourth grade in Ireland are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction. It is also estimated by teachers that 16.0% are in receipt of remedial reading instruction. Hence, there is a shortfall of almost 4% between those in need and those in receipt.

In Ireland, 15% of students in Fourth grade performed at or below the PIRLS low benchmark on overall reading. Hence, the percentage of students in Ireland in receipt of remedial reading instruction is about the same as the percentage who performed poorly on PIRLS. On average across EU countries, 18.1% of students in Grade 4 are identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13.3% are identified as being in receipt of such teaching.

Kinds of support offered

It is crucial that teachers provide support measures to help struggling readers. European countries differ widely in their approaches, from in-class support with additional support staff (reading specialists, teaching assistants or other adults) working in the classroom together with a teacher, to out-of-class support where speech therapists or (educational) psychologists offer guidance and support for students with reading difficulties.

Primary

PIRLS 2011 offers some information, based on teacher responses, to a series of questions regarding the support of struggling readers. 78% of students in Ireland are in classes where there is always access to specialised professionals to work with students who have reading difficulties, while 21% are in classes where there is access sometimes (Table 26). The corresponding EU averages are 25% and 42% respectively, indicating a higher level of access in Ireland. Twenty-seven percent of students in Ireland are in classes where there is always access to teacher aides to work with children with reading difficulties, while a further 21% are in classes where there is access sometimes. Corresponding EU averages are 13% and 34%, indicating relatively greater use of teacher aides in Ireland. It is unclear whether the teacher aides to which Irish teachers report that they have access are the special needs assistants (SNAs) who are assigned to individual students with assessed learning disabilities, and may,

[36] Most specialist learning support (remedial) teachers are primary school teachers who may have an additional qualification in assessing and teaching literacy. However, this is not a requirement for the position.

in some cases, be asked to work with students to whom they are not officially assigned. Access to volunteers to work with children with reading difficulties is broadly similar in Ireland and on average across EU countries.

Table 26: Percentages of students in classrooms with access to additional personal to work with children with reading difficulties, Ireland and EU average

	Ireland			EU-24 Average		
Access to...	Always	Sometimes	Never	Always	Sometimes	Never
Specialised professional	78	21	1	24.9	41.8	33.3
Teacher aide	27	32	47	13.2	33.6	53.2
Adult/parent volunteer	2	14	84	2.8	17.5	79.7

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K2-K4

According to responses provided by teachers in PIRLS 2011, 74% of students in Ireland are in classes where the teacher arranges for students falling behind in reading to work with a specialised professional such as a reading professional (Table 27). The corresponding EU average is lower at 55%. Similar percentages of students in Ireland and on average across the EU-24 (37% in both cases) report that they wait to see if performance improves, when a student falls behind in reading. It is unclear why teachers of students in Grade 4 would wait when a difficulty arises. Such a strategy seems more relevant when working with very young children.

Eighty-nine percent of students in Ireland are taught by teachers who spend more time working on reading individually with a student who falls behind – almost the same as the EU-24 average (90%). Similar proportions in Ireland and on average across the EU-24 (95% and 97% of students respectively) are taught by teachers who seek the support of a student's parents when s/he is experienced a reading difficulty. These strategies, of course, assume that teachers and parents have the requisite skills and knowledge to be effective in addressing reading difficulties.

Table 27: Percentages of students in classrooms where teachers engage in specified activities to support students who begin to fall behind in reading, Ireland and EU average

	Ireland (Yes)	EU-24 Average (Yes)
I have students work with a specialised professional	74.0	55.2
I wait to see if performance improves with maturation	36.6	36.6
I spend more time working on reading individually with the student	88.7	90.1
I ask the parents to help the students with reading	94.6	96.9

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K5-K8.

The level of support that an individual student accesses will depend on the severity of his/her difficulty. The tied support model (DES, Circular SPED 02/05) outlines how the level of support changes based on the student's response to the interventions offered, including his/her assessed performance. Learning support, which is generally available to students performing poorly on annual standardized tests of reading, comprises either in-class small group support, withdrawal in small groups and/or individually, or some combination of the these. It is intended that individual support is additional to regular

classroom instruction in reading (DES, Learning Support Guidelines, 2000), though in practice this is not always the case.

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

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

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

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

Secondary

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

In addition, student support teams are a part of schools' support system. They aim to co-ordinate the support available for students in the school, facilitate links to the community and other non-school support services, enable students with support needs to continue to access a full education, assist staff to manage those students effectively, ensure new staff members are briefed about policies and procedures relating to student wellbeing and support, and advise school management on the development and review of effective student support policies and structures (Department of Education and Skills, 2014).

In 2014 1.3 billion euros was allocated by the Government to support children with special needs (approximately 15% of the total budget of the Department of Education and Skills).

Support for struggling readers – a legal right?

Primary

Children who score at or below the 12th percentile on a nationally-standardised test of reading are entitled to access learning support, in addition to their regular classroom instruction in reading. Though this is not enshrined in law, schools are required to provide such support and, in general, are provided with the teaching staff to do so.

Students with assessed special education needs (including severe dyslexic difficulties) are legally entitled to special education services appropriate to their needs (Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act, 2004). In practice, all schools are expected to implement a tiered model of support, with levels of additional support depending on the student's response to the interventions that are offered. Schools are required to develop an Individual Profile and Learning Programme (IPLP) for each student in receipt of additional support for reading. Parents and teachers contribute to the IPLP, which includes targets covering a 13-20 week instructional term, and may be extended.

Secondary

As at primary level, students with assessed special education needs (including severe dyslexic difficulties) are legally entitled to special education services appropriate to their needs (Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act, 2004).

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

5.2.5 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of Teachers

There are frameworks of competences for teachers working at primary and general (lower and upper) secondary levels. These competence frameworks are detailed and have been recently revised. "In Ireland, apart from guidelines for providers of initial teacher education, there are also codes of professional conduct for teachers" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe). The profession is regulated by the Teaching Council which is responsible for the registration of teachers, devising the professional codes of conduct for teachers and providing advice to the government on teacher education policy. The Teaching Council (2011) policy on the continuum of teacher education is underpinned by three key pillars of innovation, integration and improvement across the continuum from initial teacher education to induction to continuous professional development.

Entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education

Primary

Entry to third level education in Ireland is based primarily on results of the Leaving Certificate state exam taken by students at the end of secondary schooling and is highly competitive. Students take papers in each subject at either Ordinary or Higher levels and exams are marked by a team of independent assessors who assign grades based on a national marking scheme. Grades are currently assigned on a sliding scale from A1 Higher level (100 points) to D3 Ordinary level (5 points), with students' best six subjects counting. Bonus points (25) are available for students who achieve a grade D or higher on Higher-level mathematics.

While the minimum entry requirements to the four-year Bachelor of Education degree programme (B.Ed.) are a Grade C or higher on Higher-level English and Irish and a D or higher on Ordinary level mathematics, typically, the points range between 460 and 480, requiring a high level of academic success on the Leaving Certificate exam. Special consideration is given to the students from Gaeltacht communities (students whose home language is Irish). Colleges may reserve up to 10% of places for these students and entry points are somewhat lower (425 in 2015). Some colleges of education reserve a small number of places for mature students. In these cases, applicants who meet the minimum entry requirements on the Leaving Certificate Exam and are at least 23 years old are eligible to interview for a place. These atypical applicants complete two interviews, one in English and an oral exam in Irish.

Entry to initial teacher education can also be achieved through the Professional Masters in Education which is a two year post-graduate programme leading to a qualification in teaching. It is open to

graduates who already have a degree. Entry to the course is by interview in English and an oral exam in Irish. Minimum academic entry requirements are the same as for the B.Ed. programme but entrants also hold an undergraduate degree (minimum H2.2 honours level)[37].

Secondary

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

Those who follow the consecutive model (degree programme, then teacher education), study for what is now known as the Professional Masters of Education (post-primary). There is a requirement for candidates to hold a relevant under-graduate degree (or higher) which enables them to teach at least one curricular subject at the highest level (usually Leaving Certificate) within the post-primary school curriculum. Following completion of an initial degree, candidates compete for places on a Professional Masters in Education (see http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Teacher-Education/Initial-Teacher-Education/Entry-to-Initial-Teacher-Education/). As part of the selection process, points may be awarded for academic performance and relevant professional or voluntary experience, with the highest scorers selected for interview. In State institutions (universities), the numbers of places available are capped. However, private providers whose courses are recognised by the Teaching Council establish their own caps.

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

Level of qualification and length of the required training for primary teachers

Since 2012, the Bachelor of Education programme at primary has increased from three to four years and leads to a level 8 qualification. The Professional Masters in Education programme is now two years in length and leads to a level 9 qualification. Both programmes have substantial school placements throughout. For example, at St Patrick's College (Dublin City University), school placement on the B. Ed. programme is 3 weeks in Year 1, 5 weeks in Year 2, 12 weeks in Year 3, and 10 week in Year 4.

The role of literacy expertise in Initial Teacher Training

Primary

Teachers of students in Fourth grade in PIRLS 2011 provided some data on their initial teacher education in the area of language/reading. In Ireland, 85.2% of students in fourth grade were taught by teachers who reported that the language of the PIRLS test (English) was an area of emphasis in their teacher education course, compared with an EU-24 average of 73.7%.

[37] See: http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Teacher-Education/Initial-Teacher-Education/Entry-to-Initial-Teacher-Education/

Equivalent data for other aspects were:

- Studying reading pedagogy: 47.5% (EU-24 average = 59.2%)
- Studying reading theory: 35.6% (EU-24 average = 29.6%)
- Second language learning: 10.7% (EU-24 average = 13.5%)
- Assessment of reading: 30.0% (EU-24 average: 4.4%)
- Remedial reading: 13.7% (EU-24 average = 21.7%)

While percentages for Ireland are generally higher than the corresponding EU-24 averages, care should be exercised in interpreting them, as teachers in different countries may vary in their interpretation of what constitutes 'an area of emphasis', compared with 'an over-view or introduction to the topic'. In addition, teachers' responses need to be considered in the context of life-long professional learning, where areas such as remedial reading (learning support) may receive greater emphasis beyond initial teacher education.

Table 28 confirms that most teachers in in Ireland have completed an undergraduate degree or higher. Just 2.6% of students in PIRLS 2011 were taught by teachers with a certificate/diploma beyond upper-secondary, but not a degree (EU-24 average = 13.6%) and no students were taught by teachers who have gone no further than upper secondary education (EU-24 average = 6.1%). It should be noted that primary-level teacher education prior to 1974 involved a two-year diploma course, and that some teachers who took the diploma course, and did not subsequently upgrade to a B. Ed. degree, may have been teaching classes in PIRLS 2011.

Table 28: Percentages of students taught by teachers with varying education qualifications

Highest Qualification	Completed University Post-grad Degree	Completed Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent	Completed Post Secondary Education but not a Degree	No Further than Upper Secondary
Ireland	18	80	3	0
EU-24	27	53	14	6

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills has a wide range of support structures in place across the primary and post-primary sectors to enable teachers to meet the ever-evolving needs of the education sector and to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning generally. A national network of Education Centres is supported and appropriate groups, bodies and institutions are empowered to design, develop and deliver Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes from which teachers can select courses appropriate to their needs. While it is not yet mandatory for teachers to attend CPD events run by these bodies (though mandatory professional development is currently under-consideration by the Teaching Council of Ireland (see Cosán: A Draft Framework for Teachers' Learning, Teaching Council, 2015), they are encouraged to attend and there is no charge for events provided by agencies funded by the Department e.g. Professional Development Service for Teachers, Special Education Support Service etc. Places on a limited number of specialised post-graduate programmes are available in some targeted areas such as special education needs.

Since 2011, teachers in primary and post-primary schools are required to spend one hour per week engaged in on-site non-class contact activities that can include CPD (the 'Croke Park' hours).

Traditionally, primary-level teachers have availed of week-long summer courses to raise their skill levels. These courses are voluntary, and are offered by a range of groups at the end of each school year, or at the beginning of the following school year. In exchange for attending, teachers can claim up to three days of additional personal leave during the following school year.

The Teacher Education Section of the Department of Education and Skills coordinates the resourcing of state provision for teacher education for primary and post-primary teachers at local and national level and, in doing so, seeks the maximum involvement of teacher and managerial bodies, the NCCA, Education Centres and others. A key body for delivering CPD to schools is the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), which, under the direction of the Teacher Education Section, is responsible for delivering CPD in schools. This body will have extensive involvement in CPD around the revised primary English curriculum for Junior classes (NCCA, 2015), which will be implemented in schools from September 2016.

Universities and third level institutions in Ireland also play a supportive role with regard to the promotion and implementation of new ideas and new policies in education. They have a long tradition of supporting the teaching profession and providing continuing professional development for teachers through a wide range of post graduate courses. For example, hundreds of teachers participate in postgraduate, masters and doctoral programmes every year which place a strong emphasis on the enhancement of practice in general, and on pedagogic practice in particular.

Is it compulsory to participate in CPD?

In Ireland, teacher CPD is mainly voluntary, but it becomes mandatory when it relates to a curriculum change.

The Teaching Council's (2011) Professional Conduct for Teachers sets out the standards of professional knowledge, skill, competence and conduct which are expected of registered teachers and states that the teacher should take personal responsibility for sustaining and improving the quality of their professional practice by:

- actively maintaining their professional knowledge and understanding to ensure it is current;
- reflecting on and critically evaluating their professional practice, in light of their professional knowledge base;
- availing of opportunities for career-long professional development".

Recent legislative changes provide an enabling mechanism for the Teaching Council to require teachers to participate in CPD in order to renew their registration in the future, though this has yet to be implemented in practice.

The Teaching Council highlights effective CPD as 'constructivist in nature involving both formal and informal ways of learning where emphasis is placed on reflection, joint problem solving, networking and systematic sharing of expertise and experience' (TC, 2011 p.21).

Types of CPD

Teachers in Ireland have access to a broad range of CPD experiences. In the case of reading literacy, these include:

- Conferences, including those organized by subject organisations (e.g., Literacy Association of Ireland, the Association of Teachers of English)
- Seminars and courses organised by Education Centres and by Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)
- Courses leading to qualifications provided by universities (for example, Diploma in Learning Support, Masters of Education).
- School-based activities that include literacy such as Whole School Evaluation and school planning activities.

Regarding learning support (formerly remedial teaching), "both primary and post-primary teachers in Ireland can ... take a part-time one-year course that leads to a diploma in learning support. This course includes a strong reading literacy component and is intended for teachers wishing to undertake learning support roles in their schools" (Eurydice, 2011, S. 108). According to the same report, Denmark, England and Norway are the only countries where fully qualified teachers can obtain an additional qualification to become a specialist in teaching reading. Teachers in Ireland who teach in schools designated as disadvantaged (DEIS) can also receive training in implementing the Reading Recovery programme.

Time frame and quality standards of CPD

CPD courses vary in relation to the theme, purpose and outcomes of the provision. Courses also vary in duration from short 2/3 hour workshops to one-day, three-day or one week. As noted above, the first week of July and last weeks of August are designated specially for teachers attending CPD courses for which primary teachers may be allowed three days compensatory leave during the following school year. Courses can be provided face-to-face, in blended form or entirely online. Summer courses are wide-ranging and include professional development opportunities for teachers on topics related to each curriculum area, special education, teaching approaches and methodologies, and many aspects of school organisation, management and leadership.

Certified courses are offered by Colleges of Education and Universities on a continuum from Certificate to Diploma to Masters allowing teachers to develop a specialty. Teachers may also engage in research and development activities with clusters of schools in their vicinity, with a strong CPD element (Eurypedia Reports on CPD).

The Teaching Council is currently seeking to develop criteria and procedures for the accreditation of CPD courses which should provide for:

- active/interactive participation
- participant involvement in the design and evaluation of the learning activity
- opportunities for purposeful collaboration by all
- use of ICT
- opportunities for individual and collective reflection on practice and on learning
- promotion of action research and inquiry

- continuity, allowing for follow-up support and progressive and sustained learning over time
- impact on teachers' learning, confidence and practice
- advancement of professional learning communities (The Teaching Council, 2015)

Participation in CPD in Ireland

Time spent on professional development related to literacy

In PIRLS 2011 teachers were asked how much time they had spent on professional development in reading in the past two years. The following are the outcomes for Ireland (EU-24 averages in brackets):

- Percent of students whose teachers attended 16 hours or more of professional development related to reading: 10.5% (EU-24: 2.3%).
- Percent whose teachers attended some professional development, but less than 16 hours: 52.0% (EU-24 average = 52.9%),
- Percent whose teachers attended no professional development: 37.5% (EU-24 average = 29.3%).

The development of a national framework for teacher professional development is currently a major focus of the Teaching Council of Ireland. In 2017, Section 39 of the Teaching Council Act will give statutory power to the Teaching Council to review and accredit 'programmes relating to the continuing education and training of teachers'. Key national priority areas highlighted in the recent policy document (Cosán, The Teaching Council, 2015) include: supporting teachers' learning; leading learning; inclusion; well-being; ICT; and literacy and numeracy. The policy highlights effective CPD as 'constructivist in nature involving both formal and informal ways of learning where emphasis is placed on reflection, joint problem solving, networking and systematic sharing of expertise and experience' (p.21). When the relevant section of the Act is commenced, the Council will be required to conduct research into "the continuing education and professional development of teachers" and promote awareness among the public and the teaching profession of the benefits of continuing education and training.

Challenge: It is a matter of concern that 38% of students in Ireland are taught by teachers who report that they had attended no professional development related to reading in the two years prior to PIRLS 2011. *T National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* includes a commitment to supporting teachers' professional practice and building capacity in school leadership (DES, 2011) and there is a recommendation that teachers should engage in CPD in literacy/numeracy for at least 20 hours every five years in order to renew registration with the Teaching Council. This has yet to be implemented.

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

Digital literacy part of initial teacher education

The Department of Education and Skills (2015), in its new Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, emphasises the importance of teacher education, including CPD, for the future use of digital literacy skills by both teachers and students in schools. A key objective in the strategy, to be achieved by 2020, is:

- To embed ICT in Initial Teacher Education programmes... through cooperating with initial teacher education providers to ensure that pre-service teachers acquire the skills, knowledge and confidence to use digital technologies to support teaching and learning

There are related objectives for the embedding ICT in induction programmes and in CPD courses and activities.

The objective is intended to build in existing work on ICTs in colleges and universities, where ICT is already part of the programme for prospective teachers.

5.2.6 Improving the quality of literacy teaching for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

As described in earlier sections, a number of initiatives have put in place to ensure the quality of literacy teaching for children and adolescents. These include:

- TULSA, the agency of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, has a comprehensive quality assurance framework in place to ensure overall quality in early care settings, including an Early Years Inspection Service (see http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/standard-operating-procedures-for-early-years-services) and a complaints service. Changes have also been made in the qualifications required of care staff.
- Implementation of the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009) in all early care settings that deal with pre-school children is an important next step, in that Aistear includes several key objects related to emergent literacy.
- The Department of Education and Skills has recently recruited a group of inspectors to inspect educational provision in Early Childhood care settings, and their work can be expected to embrace emergent literacy.
- The development and implementation of new curricula for English and Irish for the junior primary classes, and for English at Junior Cycle in post-primary schools, along with changes in assessment practices, can be expected to impact in a positive way on children's literacy development.
- The ongoing implementation of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020 can be expected to lead to further improvements in both print- and digital literacy of students in primary and post-primary schools.

5.3 Increasing participation, inclusion and equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distributions of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

The **socio-economic gap** in literacy refers to the fact that children and adolescents from disadvantaged families have lower mean performance in reading than students from more advantaged families. However, the degree to which family background relates to the reading literacy performance varies from one country to another, even in Europe. Family background, measured as parents' educational level and/or occupation, or measured as economic, social and cultural status, is one of the most important predictors of reading literacy performance. Family background also explains some of the performance differences between schools.

The **migrant gap** refers to the unequal distribution of learning outcomes between the native students and immigrant students who in most countries have lower levels of performance in reading than the native students. In many countries, the migrant gap is associated with the socio-economic gap but this explains only a part of it, because the migrant gap is also associated with home language differing from the language of instruction at school which increases the risk of low performance in reading. It is noteworthy that even language minorities with high status in the society (and above-average socioeconomic background) show below average performance if the language of school is not supported at home. This signals the importance of a good command of the language used at school.

Another alarming gap in reading literacy in many countries is the **gender difference,** which is more vital for adolescents than for children. In all PISA studies, 15-year-old girls outperformed boys in reading in all the European countries, and boys are frequently overrepresented among the low performers. PISA 2009 results showed that these differences are associated with differences in student attitudes and behaviours that are related to gender, i.e. with reading engagement, and not gender as such. Therefore, the gender gap is also related to growing up in a family or in a school environment that values reading and learning and considers reading as a meaningful activity.

To achieve fairer and more inclusive participation in literacy learning we need to close these gaps, which already start in early childhood, by supporting children, adolescents and adults who are "at risk". The groups of students "at risk" must have access to language screening and flexible language learning opportunities in school, tailored to individual needs. Furthermore, early support for children and adolescents with special needs is necessary.

In the section below we address the following issues:

- Compensating for socio-economic and cultural background factors
- Support for children with special needs
- Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children
- Provisions for preschool children with language difficulties
- Support for children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school
- Preventing early school leaving
- Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

This section refers to children and adolescents who for different reasons can be considered as being "at risk" (from disadvantaged homes, those whose home language is not the language of school, or

those with "special needs"). The focus is on preventing literacy difficulties among members of these groups. There is a certain overlap with the topic "Identification of and support for struggling literacy learners", dealt with in the section "Improving the quality of teaching", which is concerned with those who have already developed literacy difficulties.

5.3.1 Compensating socio-economic and cultural background factors

The child's **socioeconomic and cultural background** has a strong impact on literacy. Material poverty and educational level, particularly of the mother, are well-recognised main factors influencing literacy (World Bank, 2005, Naudeau et al. 2011). Socio-economic background also influences biological risks to children, by determining early exposure to risk factors and increased susceptibility (Jednoróg et al. 2012). The primary language spoken at home also influences literacy development (Sylva et al. ,2004).

In order to describe the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence emergent literacy, several indicators were used which stem from international surveys, thus providing comparability across Europe (for more information concerning the concepts and indicators s. Appendix A).

Gini index

The Gini index is the most commonly used measure of inequality, and represents the income distribution of a nation's residents with values between 0 (maximum equality) and 100 (maximum inequality). In the European countries participating in ELINET the range is from 22.6% in Norway to 35% in Spain (for an overview of European countries see table A1 in Appendix B). With 29.9%, Ireland is close to the European average.

Child poverty

An indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in a household in which disposable income, when adjusted for family size and composition, is less than 50% of the national median income (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2012). At 8.4%, Ireland is close to the average of all European countries participating in ELINET. The range is from 4.7% in Iceland to 25.5% in Romania (for an overview of European countries see table A2 in Appendix B).

Low birth weight and severe prematurity

According to PERISTAT (2010, Figure 7.11, p.149), the percentage of live births with a birth weight under 2500 grams in Ireland was 4.2%. The range is from 3.0% in Iceland to 8.8% in Cyprus (for an overview of European countries see table E1 in Appendix B). According to the same source (PERISTAT 2010, Figure 7.14, p.155), the percentage of live births with a gestational age <32 weeks was 1.0% in Ireland (with a range from 0.7% in Iceland to 1.4% in Hungary). The percentage of live births with a gestational age between 32 and 36 weeks was 4.7% (with a range from 4.5% in Lithuania to 7.5% in Hungary (for an overview of European countries see table E2 in Appendix B).

Mother's education level

The PIRLS 2011 database offers information about mother`s level of education referring to ISCED levels. The figures for Ireland are presented below and point to a relatively low proportion of mothers with lower secondary education or below, compared with the average figures for the European countries participating in PIRLS (shown in parentheses) (for an overview of European countries see table A3 in Appendix B). In addition, the percentages with upper secondary education are about half

that of the EU average while the percentages with tertiary with occupation orientation are much higher than the EU average. Hence, in general, Irish mothers have relatively high levels of education, compared with their counterparts on average across EU countries.

No schooling: 0.3% (0.6%)
ISCED 1: primary education: 5.2% (5.3%)
ISCED 2: Lower secondary education: 12.2% (16.7 %)
ISCED 3: Upper secondary education: 19.2% (36.1%)
ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education: 13.7% (7.1 %)
ISCED 5B: Tertiary education (first stage) with occupation orientation: 24.9% (9.5%)
ISCED 5A: Tertiary education (first stage) with academic orientation 15.6% (13.9%)
BEYOND: 8.6% (10.1%)
Not applicable: 0.4% (0.9%).

Single parents

According to Eurostat (2012, Figure A 7), in Ireland the percentage of children living mainly with a single parent is 13.8%. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from 1.4% in Croatia to 30% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table A5 in Appendix B).

Migrant parents

No data are available for Ireland. For an overview in relation to European countries see Table A6 in Appendix B). Source: PIRLS 2006 (Mullis et al. 2007, Exhibit 3.12 – Students' Parents Born in Country).

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

Children for whom English is an additional language now make up 12% of the primary population presenting with up to 200 varied languages in 60% of Irish schools (DES, 2011). According to PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, exhibit 4.3 - Students Spoke the Language of the Test Before Starting School, p. 118), the proportion of children speaking a different language at home from the one used at school is significant in Ireland, at 6.6% (for an overview of European countries s.ee table A7 in Appendix B). The range across EU countries in ELINET is 0% in Croatia to 13% in Spain, and one outlier, 55% in Malta. Not unexpectedly, there is a quite significant performance gap in reading competence at grade 4 in Ireland between children who spoke the language of the test before starting school (mean reading score 558) and those who did not speak the language (mean reading score 519).

5.3.2 Support for children with special needs

Not only are children from culturally disadvantaged families "at risk" in their literacy development but also those with very low birth weight and severe prematurity, factors that are associated with developmental disabilities, including reading and writing disabilities. Also cognitive and sensory disabilities must be considered.

Cognitive or sensory disabilities: In February 2015, a new Inclusion Support Service was established within the National Council for Special Education to assist schools in supporting children with special educational needs. This service includes the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and the Visiting Teacher Service for children who are deaf/hard of hearing and for children who are blind/visually impaired

According to Eurypedia[38], in Ireland children with special needs may spread their current allocation of one-year of free pre-school to two years.

Speech and language services are provided by the Health Service Executive for qualifying pre-school children. These include places in crèche and pre-school settings funded by the HSE.

The Department of Education and Skills funds dedicated pre-school education for children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, which is available in early intervention classes in mainstream primary schools or, where such classes are not available, through a home tuition grant to the child's family. The Department of Education and Skills also funds the Early Start Programme. This programme is a one-year preventative intervention scheme offered in selected schools in designated disadvantaged areas. The programme caters for, to some extent, but is not focused on, pre-school children with special educational needs. The Department also provides funding for pre-school education for children from the Travelling Community.

5.3.3 Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children

The benefits of attending preschool institutions have been proven in many studies. The duration of attendance is associated with greater academic improvement (Mullis et al. 2012b). In 2009 the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme was introduced which provided, from 2010, a free preschool year for all children aged from three years and two months. From September 2016, all children can avail of up to two years of free preschool. Also in 2009, the NCCA launched *Aistear* (an Irish word meaning journey), an early years framework designed for use in a range of settings including children's own homes, child-minding and day-care settings, as well as infant classes in primary school (see above). Through four interconnected themes – Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking – the critical role of play, interactions, relationships and language for young children's learning are highlighted in *Aistear*. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-20 has highlighted the need for high-quality educators in ECCE settings and has set targets for provision for high-quality ECCE programmes for all educators in government funded preschools.

Number of children attending day care and preschool institutions

According to European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014, Figure C1 p.62), the enrolment rate at age 4 is 96.1%. Ireland reaches the European benchmark for at least 95% of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education participating in ECEC (for an overview of European countries see table C1 in Appendix B).

The OECD Family Database (2014) offers more differentiated figures of participation rates at age 3, 4 and 5. According to 2010 statistical data, the participation rate is 100% for 5-year-olds, 76.8% for 4-year-olds, and 35.2% for 3-year-olds (OECD 2014) (for an overview of European countries see table C2 in Appendix B).

[38] See: EURYDICE, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Separate_Special_Education_Needs_Provision_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education, 22.08.2014.

Average duration of preschool attendance

PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.7, p. 128) provides information about the relationship between the length of preschool education attendance and average reading score in grade 4. These are the figures for Ireland:

3 years and more: 7% (average reading score 544)
Between 1 and 3 years: 57% (average reading score 562)
1 year or less: 25% (average reading score 554)
Did not attend: 12% (average reading score 534)
(For an overview of European countries s. table C3 in Appendix B).

In Ireland, children who had attended pre-school outperformed those who had not attended pre-school by 10 scores points or more at Grade 4, depending on pre-school duration However, differences may be related to factors other than attendance at pre-school (for example, socioeconomic status). Since 2010, all three-year olds are entitled to a year of preschool, and, from 2016, two years. This entitlement was not available to students in the PIRLS 2011 sample in Ireland when they were three years old.

Is preschool education free?

Pre-primary education is free only for the last preschool year (4-5 years of age)[39], though from September 2016 this will be extended to two years. Ireland does not belong to the half of the European countries where the entire period of ECEC is free. Moreover, the free component lasts for three hours per day.

5.3.4 Provisions for preschool children with language problems

Literacy competence strongly builds on oral language proficiency, word knowledge, and syntactic knowledge. Measures must be taken by governments and institutions to ensure that children with poor language development (second-language speaking children and those from a low socio-cultural background, as well as others who experience difficulty in learning language) acquire adequate levels of oral language in kindergarten, preschool institutions and in school.

There is no systematic assessment of children in order to identify language development problems in Ireland[40]. However, children with apparent difficulties can be referred by their school or general practitioner (doctor) to the Health Service Executive for comprehensive assessment by a speech and language therapist, with support available for those who need it. Private assessments and tuition is also available. An outcome of an assessment may be that a pre-school child will work with a speech and language therapist to address identified problems.

Language enhancement is one of the priorities of the "Early Start Programme" which is provided to children at risk of educational disadvantage[41]. Early Start pre-schools are located in the most disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland.

[39] See: EURYDICE, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care, 21.08.2014.
[40] See: EURYDICE, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Assessment_in_Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care, 22.08.2014.
[41] See: EURYDICE, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Support_Measures_for_Learners_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education. 22.08.2014.

There is provision for support from educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and other specialized professionals (EURYDICE et al., 2014, p. 109). There has been some criticism concerning the availability of speech and language therapists to implement assessments and work with pre-school and school-age children. For example, a survey commissioned by advocate group Inclusion Ireland (Conroy & Noone, 2014) found that almost 3,000 children (including pre-schoolers) had been waiting more than 12 months for speech and language therapy and that a further 1,940 children were waiting for assessments for more than 12 months.

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

5.3.5 Support for students whose home language is not the language of school

Children who speak a language that is different to the language of the school and are deemed to be in need of support, can access additional language teaching for up to two years. This support is generally provided by learning support/resource teachers. Where 20% of a school's enrolment comprises pupils who require EAL (English as an Additional Language) support, the school may be granted an additional teaching position (DES, 2014, Circular 0007/2014).

Under certain governmental frameworks and programmes, the number of language support teachers has been increased at both primary and post-primary level, with the aim of promoting successful integration in schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2011). In addition, the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2006) has published guidelines for schools to help them implement intercultural education. For those newly-arrived pupils, who do not speak English (or Irish), it is stated that an encouraging and supportive atmosphere towards different languages is a key factor in integrating immigrant pupils to a class. Support is planned in co-operation with subject teachers, language support teacher and parents. Teachers ought to create and utilise the context for the information being taught, by, for example, adding visual aids. Other pupils can also be encouraged to help the newly-arrived pupil to adjust and understand the language. Teachers and schools are also to recognise the importance of pupils' own mother tongues and encourage them to carry on developing their skills in those languages (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006).

Also, the "Language Support for Migrants" document recommends that schools acknowledge and affirm pupils' home languages and cultures, and ensure that their pupils enjoy an inclusive learning environment, where the needs of all pupils are equally addressed (Department for Education and Skills, 2011a).

Adolescents whose home language is not the language of school are taught alongside native speakers. The guidelines for intercultural education in post-primary schools state that it is crucial that newly-arrived pupils are placed with students of their own age once they arrive at school. Pupils are motivated to learn a language, when they want and need to do so in order to communicate. Pupils can be supported in learning by using a language that will allow for them to access the curriculum – and learn content and language at the same time (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006).

The English Language Support Programme at Trinity College has developed a set of assessment profiles that allow teachers to gauge the proficiency of new-comer students at primary and post-primary levels (ILLT 2003a, 2003b).

5.3.6 Preventing early school leaving

One important, but certainly not sufficient, precondition for raising performance levels in literacy for adolescents is literacy provision during secondary schooling, as functional literacy is mainly acquired in school-based learning. Thus, the provision of secondary education for all adolescents and the prevention of early school leaving may serve as indicators for the opportunities of adolescents to improve their literacy performance especially related to basic functional literacy.

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

The duration of compulsory education in Ireland is 10 years. Children start school at the age of 6; compulsory schooling ends at 16 years (Compulsory Education in Europe 2013/14, Eurydice report).

As concerns students (ISCED 1-6) aged 15-24 years, we find that in Ireland, 62.2% of 15-24 year olds were in some form of education in 2011, an indicator which is on an increasing trend: by 2012 it stood at 65.0%.

The percentage of 18-year olds in education was 94.9% in 2011, which situated Ireland well above the EU-27 average (80.7%). By 2012, this indicator increased to 97.9%, which is the highest value for this indicator in the EU.

(See also section on Policies To Prevent Early School Leaving below).

5.3.7 Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 aims to improve the literacy of all pupils. The strategy states that it is crucial for the curriculum to reflect interests of all pupils, including boys, and allow them to have an access to a better balance of text types. According to the strategy, syllabi should also provide for the development of literacy in a range of texts (literary and non-literary) and a range of media including digital media, and ensure that the reading tastes of boys are catered for (Department for Education and Skills, 2011). Designated literacy link teachers are responsible for ensuring that teachers integrate literacy into content subjects in post-primary schools (see http://pdst.ie/literacylinkteacher). There are currently no specific national programmes designed to raise the literacy achievement of boys.

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

5.3.8 Increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

Compensating for socio-economic and cultural background factors

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) aims to effectively address the needs of children from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school to second-level education (3-18 years). Core elements of DEIS comprise:

- a standardised system for identifying, and regularly reviewing, levels of disadvantage
- an integrated School Support Programme (SSP) which will bring together, and build upon, existing interventions for schools and school clusters/communities with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. The differences between urban and rural disadvantage are taken into account in targeting actions under the programme.

Children attending schools in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme for disadvantaged schools can avail of a breakfast programme via programmes such as the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme, though provision is not universal. Other schools not designated as disadvantaged may also provide programmes[42].

The School Books Grant Scheme is available to State primary and post-primary schools to help with the cost of school books. Funding for this scheme comes from the Department of Education and Skills and the scheme is administered in each school by the school principal. The scheme is mainly aimed at pupils from low-income families and families experiencing financial hardship. It can be used to set up a book rental scheme within the school or help individual students buy books. The Department of Education prefers schools to use it to set up book rental schemes as this helps more students from low income families[43].

Family literacy programmes

Schools in DEIS contexts have a designated home school community liaison teacher (a regular primary school teacher) whose role is to build strong home school links and to run programmes for parents during school time. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy set targets for provision for information and on-line resources for parents in general by 2014 about activities that they could use to support their child's oral language development, literacy and numeracy from birth and some work in this context has been done by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)[44].

Family learning programmes are supported by the Education and Training Boards to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context and encourage adults to learn for their own personal development and for the benefit of their children. Family learning involves partnership between the Adult Literacy Service, schools and local communities and services.

A number of local family literacy programmes exist. The Clare Family Learning Project seeks to encourage parents to get involved in their children's education, particularly through supporting their children's literacy and numeracy development. The programme teaches parents about the Irish

[42] For additional information on DEIS, see: https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/.
[43] See: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/educational_supports/school_books_scheme.html.
[44] See NALA's Help My Kid Learn website at http://www.helpmykidlearn.ie/.

educational system, shows them how to help with their children's school work, and gives them confidence they need to communicate with school staff. This is a "win-win" process: by getting more involved in their children's education, parents improve their own basic skills and develop the confidence and knowledge they need to take up further learning. Many participants come from the following groups: single-parent families, teenage/young parents, refugees and asylum seekers, migrant workers, Roma and Travellers, and carers and foster parents. The programme collaborates with schools, social services, libraries and community groups to connect with parents who would benefit from family learning. A learning champion helps the programme to engage with families from the Roma and Traveller communities.

Children function as the programme's 'hook' for drawing parents in and introducing them to further education. Once engaged in family learning, many parents become aware of their own potential for learning, and are exposed to new educational opportunities. For many parents, family learning thus serves as an essential stepping stone to adult education. Clare Family Learning offers a broad range of classes, and the majority of parents who complete a class continue onto other learning opportunities[45].

Programmes for teenage mothers or for single mothers or fathers

The Department of Health in Ireland produced a report on young parents in education as part of its support of the Teen Parents Support Programme[46]. This report details the programmes available to support parents who want to continue their own education or training including the Back to Education Allowance.

The financial support offered through the social welfare system can play a major role in a young parent's decision to return to or continue education or training. The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is administered by the Department of Social Protection as part of the Back to Education Programme. It allows people to return to full-time or part-time education while continuing to get income support.

Policies to prevent early school leaving

In order to reduce early school-leaving and facilitate the transition from school to work by developing quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models, the Youthreach programme provides two years of integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age (Eurydice, 2014b).

Intervention measures to reduce early school leaving often involve cooperation among various professionals. Pastoral Care/Student Support Teams operate in many post-primary schools. These teams involve a range of school personnel (Principal, HSCL, Guidance Counsellor, Learning Support Teacher) and at times external agents such as the Public Health Nurse and Youth Worker. The care team meets frequently and ensures a coordinated approach to support identified children at risk (European Commission, 2013, p. 39).

[45] The Clare Family Learning Project website can be found at http://www.clarefamilylearning.org/. The programme has been included as a case study in UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning's Effective Literacy Programmes database: http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=15&country=IE&programme=204.

[46] See: http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/publications/The_Invisible_Student_-_Young_Parents_in_Education.pdf.

There are also specifically targeted programmes to cut early school leaving: In 2005 Ireland implemented an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)' involving a process for identification of schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. Under the terms of DEIS, high priority is given to early intervention; specific measures and support to improve literacy and numeracy; increased emphasis on the involvement of parents and families in children's education; planning, target-setting and measurement of progress and outcomes. In addition, the Home School Community Liaison and School Completion Programme are two major interventions associated with DEIS (European Commission, 2013, p. 39).

The development of creative environments conducive to learning is a key target in Ireland: the 'whole school approach' builds on collective engagement and individual reflection from all school staff (not only principals and teachers) to continuously improve the school and its learning environment. Depending on the specific situation of a school, measures for improvement can address different issues. Measures usually take into account all aspects of school life (e.g. curriculum, physical environment, organisation of the school day, provision of services). Schools collaborate also with partners in the community, based on the understanding that schools are part of an educational continuum. They are critical players in children's development, but only one among others. The whole school approach is embedded in all practices and legislation, especially since the passing of the Education Act 1998 (European Commission, 2013, p. 41).

Interventions to reduce early school leaving also rely on measures at family and community level: the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) is a preventative strategy and a major component of DEIS, the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. The scheme is targeted at pupils identified as at-risk of not reaching their potential in the educational system due to background characteristics which tend to adversely affect pupil attainment and school retention. HSCL targets the causes of educational underachievement by focusing on the parents and relevant adults whose attitudes and behaviours impinge upon the educational lives of children. The primary role of the HSCL co-ordinator, who is a teacher released from all teaching duties, is to engage in full-time liaison work between the home, the school, and the community. He or she seeks to enable parents to act as a key resource in their children's learning and supports the development of the pupil-parent-teacher relationship, so that school becomes a place where all young people can reach their potential. The HSCL scheme places significant emphasis on collaboration with the local community, seeks to develop and promote partnership with parents and encourages a whole-school approach to improving attendance, participation and retention in education (European Commission, 2013, p. 42)[47].

As concerns compensation measures, in Ireland, the 150 Youthreach centres aim to provide early school leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and to progress to further education, training and employment. Youthreach targets young people (aged 15 – 20) with poor qualifications and who are unemployed. Youthreach centres are out-of-school units that intend to be small, dynamic studio or laboratory-style settings with an inbuilt adaptability and capacity to respond to the needs of young people. While Youthreach is a national programme, centres are locally managed and programmes reflect the particular social, economic and cultural environment in which they operate. Besides offering flexible learning opportunities, they also provide guidance, mentoring and counselling (European Commission, 2013, p. 45).

[47] More detailed information on the HSCL can be found in https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Home-School-Community-Liaison-HSCL-Scheme/Information-Booklet-for-DEIS-schools-participating-in-the-Home-School-Community-Liaison-Scheme.pdf.

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

Responsibility for the HSCL and the School Completion Programme currently fall to TULSA, the Child and Family Agency's Integrated Education and Welfare Service, under the broad umbrella of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

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