Communication and Language in Schools: New Emphases and New Opportunities for Teaching and Learning?

The relevance of communication and language knowledge and skills in children's learning and development has now become a central concern for all of those involved in the education of children and young people in Irish schools. At curricular level at least, there is the expectation that Communication and Language teaching and learning will be integral to school experience. The Primary Language Curriculum for children from junior infants to second class is in our Primary schools and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently developing this Curriculum to the next stage to include the senior classes. In a very welcome advance for education at second level, the Junior Cycle Programme for English now has an Oral Language Strand. With these developments, we can say that we now have a renewed emphasis on this area of learning and a context in which to address key issues about communication and language teaching and learning in school.

NEW EMPHASES IN THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

Developing Communicative Relationships

Communication and language are about making meaning, meaning for ourselves and meaning for and with others. The Primary Language Curriculum shows some significant advances in how we think about the children in our schools and how we value and develop their skills and their potential as communicators and meaning makers. One of the critical advances is the emphasis on developing communicative relationships. In the Curriculum, this element is recognised as fundamental to developing the other two elements, Understanding the Content and Structure of Language and Exploring and Using Language (p.32). This emphasis is recognition that communicative relationships are the context for entry into language. Further still, it allows that the concepts, skills and dispositions associated with this element, such as attention, engagement, mutuality, intentionality, and turn-taking along with enjoyment, motivation and choice, are pre-requisites for the building and exchange of meaning.

In privileging the development of communicative relationships within a curriculum, we are thinking about the spoken word but we are also taking a wider perspective

on communication and a broader and more inclusive view of how meaning can be constructed. With this advance, we can, with some legitimacy, claim to be thinking about all of our children and valuing all of their potentialities. We are acknowledging those children who will not acquire speech and will rely on a range of alternative means of communication and those children with very serious levels of intellectual disability for whom initiation into a communicative relationship and to the concepts, skills and dispositions required, will be the major focus for teaching and learning. We are also recognising that children whose first language is neither English nor Irish, will have been well initiated into communicative relationships in their home language and will use their existing understanding of the communicative function of language to interpret and understand communicative intentions and to build communicative relationships in the new language.

Striving for Inclusivity

The emphasis on communication signals another critical advance which is that this Curriculum strives to be inclusive and to go beyond rhetoric in claiming to provide for all of our children. The vision as set out in the Rationale and Aims is for a Curriculum that recognises the diversity of our population of school-going children and allows for the development of all children's potential across our range of primary schools including special primary schools. The Oral Language Progression Continuum is intended as a practical expression of this vision. It should serve to inform teachers about the trajectory of communication and language development and allow them to recognise their children in terms of present levels of development, planning for next steps in teaching and learning and assessment of progress.

The strength of the Continuum is that it is intended as an inclusive construct, one that maps out the general progression of children's communication and language acquisition and development during the school years, while allowing for the varying degrees of individual difference that will exist in children's language profiles, including the profiles of children whose developmental levels place them at very early points on the continuum. This is a major step forward in terms of vision into practice. However, we should not underestimate the size of the challenge involved in attempting to provide for a Progression Continuum which is inclusive of all children and points the direction towards their common goals <u>and</u> is also relevant and appropriate to their varied and sometimes complex developmental profiles. Already, the NCCA has seen it necessary to introduce an additional, earlier point on the Continuum in the form of an Early A milestone. Given the diversity and complexities of the population involved, it is entirely acceptable that adjustments might be needed. Indeed it is to be hoped that the

appropriateness of the Continuum and its interpretation in practice would be kept under review. However, it is unclear why this Early A adjustment would not have been made through further development of the existing Continuum rather than through add-on content. There is the danger of returning to former practices of claiming to consider all children while seeing some children as other and apart.

Emphasis on the Language of Schooling
In the statements of Learning Outcomes for The Primary Language Curriculum, we see a new emphasis on children constructing narrative and expository talk and on using topic specific language and the language of text. This emphasis is grounded in our developing understanding of the role of language in learning and of the levels of language competence children need to develop for school achievement. In the following sections these aspects of language teaching and learning are discussed and are considered in terms of variation in individual children's abilities and needs. The question of how to teach is addressed and a repertoire of evidence based teacher talk strategies is presented and discussed. These strategies can be differentiated to children's abilities and needs towards the achievement of common goals for communication and language, as appropriate, along a continuum of learning.

LANGUAGE, LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOL

Language is of fundamental importance in children's learning and development in school because it is the meaning system through which children come to know the world and come to know and understand themselves and others in relation to the world. From the fields of socio-linguistics and psycholinguistics, we have long known that, with entry into language, children have access to a meaning system, a resource through which experience can be interpreted, represented and reflected upon, and can become knowledge (Halliday, 1993; Bruner, 1996). From the wider perspectives of cultural and anthropological research, language is defined as a system which allows for participation in a society, participation which begins and is played out in social interactions. In these interactions, children not only acquire the language system but through language, in communicative relationships, they come to know the values and practices of their cultures and come to find a voice within these values and practices (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002). These ways of defining language, as a means of knowing and as enabling participation and voice, are interdependent. They recognise the role of language in developing children's potential as thinking and knowing beings and in enabling their participation as members of a community and a society. These definitions can provide a strong

conceptual basis for the content of what we teach and they are compatible with the ways in which language is defined in the Primary Language Curriculum.

LEVELS OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

To define language learning as a way into knowledge is to highlight the need for conscious and deliberate teaching of the particular features of language that contribute to children's development and achievement within the school system. Continued acquisition and knowledge of the language system, of the nuts and bolts of words and sentences and of the functions for which language is used, is a critical objective throughout the school years. However, the issue for schooling is that language is not just a system to be acquired, it is a resource to be used in constructing knowledge and the nature and quality of children's acquisition of the system will influence their learning across the curriculum and the outcomes they will achieve.

In his seminal contribution to our understanding of the relationship between language and learning, Bruner (1996) identified three levels of language competence which children need for successful access to learning across the curriculum. These levels of competence are Communicative competence, Linguistic competence and Analytic competence. Bruner's analysis is compatible with Halliday's also seminal work which identifies language as the basis for learning and has alerted us to what we now describe as the language of schooling. New forms of language provide for new forms of knowledge and children need explicit and structured teaching in the forms of language which carry knowledge across the curriculum (Halliday, 1993).

These ways of defining the relationship between language and learning are extremely useful in the school context. Bruner's analysis signals the fundamental importance of children being able to engage in communicative relationships, it focuses on the need to develop children's competence in vocabulary, sentence structure and language use and it identifies the need for children to bring this knowledge of the language system to the levels of higher order understanding and use required for the language of schooling.

Bruner describes children's development of these competences as progression along a continuum of learning through increasingly complex modes of meaning with communicative relationships being the critical, foundational stage. This view has been influential both in structuring the elements in the Primary Language Curriculum: Developing Communicative Relationships; Understanding the

Content and Structure of Language and Exploring and Using Language, and in framing the Progression Continuum.

COMPETENCE IN ACADEMIC LANGUAGE OR THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLING

The work of Bruner and Halliday on the more abstract and specialised forms of language required for educational knowledge has been developed further in the literature on language and school achievement. From this literature, we know that children need explicit instruction in the language of discourse or academic language (Schleppegrell, 2004; Cummins & Man, 2007, Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Snow, 2014; Uccelli, Phillips Galloway, Barr, Meneses & Dobbs, 2015). The language of discourse is a literate language requiring different forms of expression to those of everyday conversation. Snow (2014) identifies specific features as including: displaying subject knowledge, using subject specific vocabulary and the ability to talk about complex ideas, hypotheses and abstractions. The language forms required include sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical elements such as the use of the embedded clause and passive voice.

These kinds of oral skills are closely aligned with the language of written texts and we know that comprehension difficulties in older struggling readers and in children acquiring a second language are associated with lack of competence in these levels of language knowledge and styles of language use (August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller & Kelly, 2010; Nagey & Townsend, 2012). Research is now clearly connecting oral proficiency in discourse skills with comprehension of the written texts children encounter at the upper end of primary and in second level schooling (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Bailey, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow 2014).

Narratives and Explanations
In classroom contexts, the language of discourse requires structured teaching for narrative and expository talk across a range of genre. Such talk must include explanation, evidence of reflection, and the capacity to go beyond the given information to form hypotheses about other possible meanings relating to a given topic. Equally, these forms of narrative and expository talk must be carried by the literate language discussed above (Uccelli et al., 2015). While the topic for teaching and learning may be based on and supported by actual experiences and / or materials, discourse skills require a level of propositional talk which is, in the main, context free. The participants, as both listeners and speakers are relying for

meaning on the symbolic function of language and are having to call up their words and sentences to comprehend, reflect upon and construct new meaning on a given topic, in discourse with others. The goal here is towards developing the child's individual and autonomous voice, a voice of collaboration in the construction of knowledge and of participation in the culture of the school.

These levels of achievement in communication and language, in terms of informed, autonomous voice, are reasonable objectives for teaching and learning within the language curriculum. Further, there is ample evidence now that this emphasis on discourse skills needs to be present as early as preschool and the early primary school years (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2012; Scheele et al., 2012) This is a critical message for early years teaching and learning in our schools and it is important that this message is not lost or diluted in the roll out of the current language curriculum.

VARIATION IN INDIVIDUAL VOICE AND PARTICIPATION

We know that most children will have been well initiated into communicative relationships by the time they come to school (Hoff, 2006; Clarke, 2014). In these relationships, they will have acquired words and sentences and will have had experience of using language for a range of purposes (Halliday, 1993; Owens, 2012; Clarke, 2014). By this time also, children with typical development will have been initiated into the use of decontextualized language (Halliday, 1993) to relate news and recall and describe events which are unknown to their listeners. Already, by school entry age, these children will have begun to acquire their participatory voice. They can harness the potential of language to assert themselves as having knowledge and as being able to communicate it. With this level of communicative and linguistic competence in place, they are on the way to using propositional language in discourse and to entry into domains of knowledge which are abstract in nature and require what we are describing as academic language or the language of schooling. The challenge for schools is to identify and build upon these competences where they are already in place and to plan for teaching and learning to develop the skills in those children who will be dependent on early schooling to initiate them into these styles of language use.

While the majority of children will come to school with this already well developed knowledge of communication and language, we know too to expect varying degrees of individual difference in children's language profiles. The research which has most informed our understanding of individual difference in children's

language competence is based in the emergentist view of language acquisition and development (Hollich, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2000; MacWhinney, 2004; Tomasello, 2009; MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2015). In this view, language develops in tandem with, and is influenced by, physiological, cognitive and social development. The child is an active learner who brings varying capacities to what is a complex task. Language emerges in the interaction between the predisposition the individual child brings- the individual biological, social and cognitive profile- and his/her social linguistic environment (Shatz, 2009). This view is compatible with and is situated within a social-interactionist theory of language acquisition and development which sees language as socially constructed through adult-child interaction (Tomasello, 2009; MacWhinney, 2004; MacWhinney & O'Grady, 2015).

In thinking about individual child differences in communication and language teaching and learning, we need a closer understanding of what is described in the intervention literature as the interaction between genetic endowment, neurological development and the moderating and mediating effects of environment (Warren & Abbeduto, 2007). This view from the intervention literature again brings us to the notion of a continuum of development and has been influential also in providing the rationale for the Progression Continuum in the Primary Language Curriculum. The strong view in this literature is of the child as an active learner and potential communicative partner, having a particular developmental profile and bringing individual characteristics, both strengths and needs, to the teaching and learning context (Warren & Abbeduto, 2007; Abbeduto, Brady & Kover, 2007; McDuffie & Abbeduto, 2009). This view is a good fit with the intention of the Continuum as an inclusive framework for communication and language development which holds goals in common for all children and allows for differentiation according to the developmental profile of the individual child.

Recognising Individual Strengths and Needs
Delayed or disordered communication and language development are intrinsic to a definition of developmental disability and autism and are key indicators in the identification of learning disabilities and behavioural disorders (Warren & Abbeduto, 2007). Given the heterogeneity of the population of children described as having learning disabilities, there is wide variation in the communication and language skills of this group with severity of delay linked to such factors as the aetiology and severity of the disability, the nature and quality of environmental input and the presence or absence of effective early intervention (Brady & Warren, 2003).

Identification of, and understanding about, the presence or absence of syndrome specific features of communication and language are critical to effective intervention and to informing a language curriculum. However, along with stressing the need for syndrome specific knowledge, the intervention literature stresses the need to take account of the child's developmental level. This view is based on the evidence that within a given diagnosis such as Autism or Down syndrome, children of the same age often vary greatly in terms of their cognitive, social and communicative development (Brady & Warren, 2003; Abbeduto, Brady & Kover, 2007). The intervention literature also highlights a link between language acquisition and development and syndrome related patterns of strengths and weaknesses in social and cognitive development. These patterns can vary according to the genetic syndrome and so the association between language and cognition can differ in character and outcome for differing kinds and levels of developmental disability (McDuffie & Abbeduto, 2009).

In addressing the challenge to teaching, research on children's responses to communication and language interventions reiterates the need for a developmental approach and stresses the need to match language teaching strategies to the characteristics of the child as learner (Hancock & Kaiser, 2006). It is suggested that a continuum of appropriate communication and language teaching strategies would apply to children across diagnostic categories (Brady & Warren, 2003).

HOW DO WE TEACH?

When we come to consider the challenge of teaching for communication and language, there are now a number of important lessons from research to inform the direction we must take. We know to expect wide variation in rate and quality of children's communication and language development including for children with typical development. Equally, we know to consider language acquisition and development as a continuum of learning with that learning influenced by individual child characteristics and mediated by quality of adult input. This brings us to the need for a continuum of teaching strategies which can be differentiated and tailored to individual need.

TEACHER TALK

When we talk about strategies for communication and language teaching and learning, we mean the ways in which teachers can employ a repertoire of *talk*

strategies which are differentiated as relevant and appropriate to the children's strengths and needs along a continuum of learning. Along a continuum however, the common goal is that *teacher talk* will facilitate children's engagement in communicative relationships and will support children's vocabulary and command of sentences to discourse levels. A range of studies has focused on the nature of *teacher talk* in communication and language development and has identified the kinds of talk strategies that support language development in children at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage (Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Henry & Pianta, 2011) and in children with developmental disabilities (Rogers, 2006; Camarata & Nelson, 2006; vanKleeck, Vander Woude & Hammett, 2006; Kaiser & Trent, 2007).

A Facilitative Style and Fine Tuning Strategies
One of the fundamental characteristics of supportive teacher talk is that it is *facilitative* in style. A *facilitative* style is one in which the teacher structures the talk in contexts which are highly engaging and motivating for the child or group of children. In these contexts, she/he *scaffolds* the learning by monitoring comprehension and striving for an appropriate match between the new levels of challenge and the child's current levels of understanding and communicative and linguistic competence. This aspect of a *facilitative* style can be described as *fine tuning* both the context and the talk to create a maximally responsive environment (Warren, Yoder & Leew, 2002) and to enable the child/children to engage in a listener-speaker or, attending-communicating role, relative to the abilities of the child or children.

The finer grained interactions between child/children and teacher include teacher talk strategies such as following the child's lead, mapping language to the focus of attention, cueing/prompting or inviting comments, relating the topic to existing knowledge and extending the topic with additional comments and reflections. These strategies are directly focused on developing communicative competence by enabling children to engage as listeners/attenders and speakers/communicators, to take turns in contributing appropriately and to extend the topic. The strategies can be adapted and differentiated, in an age appropriate way, to suit the characteristics of the learners. For example, for a child with Autism, a major challenge may be to enable the child to achieve joint attention on a topic and to engage in the reciprocal exchange required for the listener-speaker relationship. A child acquiring a second language will need to have both the context and the teacher's talk finely tuned to his/her existing comprehension level.

Modelling and Discourse Enabling Strategies

The talk strategies which develop children's vocabulary, sentence structures and understanding and use of complex grammatical structures can be categorised as *Modelling* strategies. These include teachers using prompts, repetitions, recasts and expansions of children's utterances and the provision of multiple models of vocabulary use and of complex verb forms in use. Research on the role of these strategies in supporting language development includes findings for typically developing children (Chouinard & Clarke, 2003; Vasilyeva, Huttenlocher & Waterfall, 2006; Clarke, 2014) and for children with language delay and impairment (Hancock & Kaiser, 2006; Camarata & Nelson, 2006; Rogers, 2006, McGough, 2008).

Modelling strategies are proposed as the evidence based strategies which support the development of children's vocabulary including the use of nouns, verbs, adjective, pronouns and conjunctions, sentence structure and sentence combinations including specific elements of grammar such as verb tense and tense markers and the use of these components of language to name, describe, explain, reflect on the elements of experience and to engage in and contribute to topics in dialogue. The strategies can be differentiated to prompt and to recast and to expand early one/two word utterances from children with language delay and impairment (Warren, 2000; Smith, Warren, Yoder & Feurer, 2004; Hancock & Kaiser, 2006) and are identified as the teacher talk strategies which support vocabulary and grammar in second language acquisition (Tabors, 2008).

Discourse Enabling

Together with the repertoire of strategies outlined so far, teachers need to use particular talk strategies and styles to enable the development of children's oral discourse skills or academic language. Styles of teacher talk which facilitate children's construction of narratives and expository talk have been described as topic extending and topic elaborating (Peterson & McCabe, 1992). Teachers contribute to children's construction of narratives and explanations by supplying words, word meanings and descriptions which develop the topic, by prompting the children and requesting information but also by contributing their ideas on the topic (Beals, 2001; Snow, Tabors & Dickinson, 2001). Critically, teachers demonstrate a style of reflection on, and of projection beyond, the given information, demonstrating the possibility of using language to connect ideas, events and actions and to construct new meaning from these connections (McKeown & Beck, 2006).

These modes of discourse happen in dialogue and rely upon an interactive style

of teaching and learning which goes beyond the traditional 'question and answer' format. They rely upon the teacher fine tuning the context and the talk to ensure comprehension and appropriate levels of challenge. The process has been described as collaborative participation (Beals & Snow, 1994) or co-construction (Peterson, Jesso & McCabe, 1999) and is based in the social-interactionist approach to language teaching and learning.

We now have an established body of literature which identifies these kinds of teacher talk strategies as supporting the development of discourse skills in the early years of schooling (Snow, Tabors & Dickinson, 2001; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Henry & Pianta, 2011). In a study in the Irish context (McGough, 2008), a range of Fine tuning, Modelling and Discourse Enabling strategies was used, in naturalistic play settings, to develop children's communicative competences and their command of vocabulary and structure through the development of fictional narratives and expository talk. Evidence from the study shows the effectiveness of the strategies in enabling children's use of discourse skills in their talk about these narratives and expository topics. Discourse skills are evident in the children's use of verbal reasoning to reflect on experiences, to explain events and to present new propositions and possible scenarios relating to their stories and classroom activities and are evident also in the children's use of sophisticated vocabulary and complex sentence structures.

A significant finding in the study is how the strategies could be differentiated to meet the needs of two of the children who had serious levels of language delay. For these children the strategies were used, in one to one play contexts, to map language to the children's play activities, to affirm the children's utterances and recast and extend them and to model words and phrases and prompt and support the children in their use. These children were enabled to construct narratives in these intensive one-to one contexts and were then supported by further use of fine tuning and modelling strategies to engage in discourse about these narratives, with their class peers. The children were recognised by their peers, as having their stories to tell and were included, and responded to, as participating members of the group.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCERNS

Communication and language teaching and learning is a challenging but critically important area of the school curriculum. With the new emphases in first and second level curricula, there is the hope of a greater appreciation of its importance in children's development and of the acceptance by schools, of the responsibility

to give appropriate and relevant focus to this core area of learning. The Primary Language Curriculum offers the potential for a radical reimagining of how we think about our children, their communication and language teaching and learning, and the levels of competence we should enable them to achieve. However, the very aspects of it which hold out most prospect for change may present the greatest challenges to practice.

Teachers and classroom support personnel will need on-going professional development if they are to feel comfortable in their understanding and application of the vision and values and the intended practice. The inclusive principles, the Progression Continuum and recognition of the need to develop children's competence in academic language, along with other advances which have not been discussed here such as the integrated nature of the Strands within and across the two languages, all move us towards the provision of a comprehensive and inclusive language curriculum. However, teachers and Special Needs Assistants will need support in seeing their children in this Curriculum, and in understanding its relevance and appropriateness and its application to the particular children in their care.

Beyond curriculum content, the critical consideration for practice is about language pedagogy; how do we teach? An inclusive curriculum requires an inclusive pedagogy. Teachers need to know how to behave as teachers of communication and language along the continuum of children's development. They need to know how to structure appropriate teaching and learning contexts and, critically, how to adopt appropriate talk strategies and communicative behaviours and how to fine tune and differentiate these as relevant for the learners. Past research in our primary schools has alerted us to problems with teacher confidence in language teaching and learning (NCCA, 2005; Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004) and without an adequate focus on pedagogy in the role out of the current Language Curriculum, it is likely that these problems will remain.

NEW RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

One of the continuing concerns associated with communication and language teaching and learning is our lack of knowledge about practice across the range of settings, from pre-school to second level, in which our children continue to acquire and develop their communication and language skills. There is a dearth of research into classroom practice and a critical need to develop awareness about this and to frame research strategies to address the problem. Equally though, there

is a dearth of discussion and comment from parents and professionals about the importance of communication and language and how poorly served our children have been, in this regard, in our schools. It is to be hoped that the current curriculum developments at primary and second level will help in raising awareness and in creating a climate for greater engagement by parents and professionals with issues relating to communication and language teaching and learning.

In this special edition of *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland,* we are taking the opportunity to discuss and comment upon Communication and Language teaching and learning, to report inspiring practice and to present new research on the topic from the Irish context. We hope that the work presented here will inspire further discussions and will prompt further research.

Dervan and Egan present a study which is concerned with developing pragmatic language skills in children with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) and the children's use of those skills in play contexts, in a mainstream primary classroom, in a band 1 DEIS school. The intervention includes small group intensive teaching of the children concerned and whole class support in collaboration with the class teacher. This study affords valuable insights into the practice of communication teaching and learning for a particular group of children but also into the practices of collaboration and inclusion and how these are made possible at school level.

Another example of collaboration to improve children's and young peoples' communicative abilities is outlined in the article by Dolly and Noble. Here the collaboration is between speech and language therapists and classroom personnel, in a special school. The school caters for children and young people with physical and multiple disabilities from pre-school age to second level schooling. The concern here was to increase students' use of Lámh signs for spontaneous communication. A whole school approach was adopted towards developing knowledge of Lámh signs in the students and in the classroom personnel who are their communicative partners.

Developing communicative relationships through Augmentative and Alternative means is a central theme also in Gunning's inspiring account of how a small rural primary school created an inclusive culture within which to cater for the needs of a young girl with bilateral conductive hearing loss and complex medical needs. This article has a great deal to teach us about the possibilities for creativity and innovation in schools but also about how leadership and individual and whole staff professional commitment can achieve extraordinary change and development within a school community.

In this special issue also, two articles address the topic of second language learning. These articles are timely in the context of The Primary Language Curriculum. The Curriculum is a first language and second language curriculum for both languages, English and Irish and in terms of second language acquisition, the curriculum is informed by the research which promotes bilingualism as supportive of children's learning and development (Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012). The integrated nature of the curriculum is stressed with the same structure and strands in place for both languages. Teachers are encouraged to use this structure to integrate children's learning across both languages exploiting the potential for the transfer of concepts and skills which can occur in second language learning. For children acquiring Irish as a second language, the curriculum stresses the importance of the language in broadening children's linguistic experience and deepening their cultural awareness.

Tynan's article is concerned with the fact that children with learning disabilities are unlikely to have the opportunity to learn Irish as a second language and are most likely to be offered an exemption from Irish on the assumption that this is a support to them as learners. She focuses in particular on children with Williams syndrome who, despite high levels of motivation and an aptitude for language learning, usually have the exemption mechanism applied. Tynan questions this practice in terms of the inclusion debate. She highlights the fact that there appears to be little discussion or awareness of the issue and she calls for an opening of debate on exemption practices.

La Morgia's article will indeed contribute to such a debate. In a very informative review of current research on bilingualism for children with developmental language delays, she argues against what she sees as a pervasive view among teachers and health professionals that bilingualism is a barrier to learning for children with special educational needs. From her review of the literature, she cautions that what is usually the standard advice to parents of children with communication and language difficulties to choose monolingualism over bilingualism lacks any basis in scientific evidence. In her article also, she discusses problems, in the Irish context, with appropriate assessment and early identification of language difficulties in bilingual children and she highlights the challenges and complexities arising for both teachers and speech and language therapists.

Reynor's article is drawn from her study investigating the reading and cognitive profiles of children with dyslexia. This study once again highlights the need for recognition of the importance of oral language competence in supporting children's reading development at the upper end of primary school. She reports

that the children in her study, nearing the end of primary school, had poorly developed vocabularies and poor command of grammar and these problems were significantly related to the children's comprehension difficulties.

This study again reminds us of the critical importance of language competence in children's learning, development and school achievement. It is to be hoped that the emphasis in the Primary Language Curriculum on developing the academic language of schooling will find expression in classroom practice. Equally, it is to be hoped, that communicative competence, at all of the levels required for meaningful engagement in society and for academic learning, will become a central concern for teaching and learning for all of our children and young people in all of our schools.

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