

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 11

Improving Early Literacy for EU Countries

Context of the Research

Throughout the European Union, literacy is seen as a pressing concern. Success and failure in literacy teaching carry implications for the economic and social well being of the Union. The most important phase of literacy learning is arguably that which takes place during, or even before the first years of formal schooling.

Based upon existing research primarily in England, Italy, Spain and Greece a thematic network was established to create a 'Shared Knowledge Base' on innovative developments in early literacy teaching and learning. Particular emphasis was placed on the development of literacy for children from marginalized groups. It aimed to develop innovative teaching practices to increase literacy levels for children aged 4-6 years old.

Key Conclusions

Two particularly important conclusions were reached:

1. At a time when a number of the EU's member states are moving towards highly centralised control of the curriculum, there is a need to take a contextualised view of the pedagogy of literacy teaching, whilst striving towards an agreed view of the goals of literacy education, and of the dynamics that shape its processes.
2. Substantial innovation requires much more than administrative action or political pronouncement. For teachers to develop a well-founded pedagogy that answers to the demands of their particular situations, a profound change of attitude is required, in relation to children, each other, researchers and ideas of what constitutes an active, productive literacy.

The different contexts in which the participants from the four countries work has shown that each country places differing emphases on language development and points of entry to the written word.

3. In England, in the context of a highly complex orthographic system, there has been a polarised debate between those who place the major emphasis on helping children towards mastering the code at an early age and those who give greater emphasis to the construction of meaning. Currently attempts are being made to reconcile these two views. Formal schooling can start at 4 years old.

4. In Spain and Italy the spelling systems are more straightforward, yet Spanish teaching traditionally focuses on learning the code in the early years of formal schooling. However, the educational reforms of 1990 in Spain have introduced a 'socio-cognitive' approach with an emphasis on the construction of meaning. In Italy innovative approaches have principally been limited to pre-school settings. The age for starting formal schooling in Italy and Spain is 6 years old.
5. In Greece the traditional focus is again placed on the learning of the orthographic code in preparation for formal schooling. However, teachers are currently being encouraged to take a more interpretive approach to the curriculum and more careful account of children's responses to literacy activities. The age for starting formal schooling in Greece is 6 years old.
6. Social, political and educational differences have affected the teaching of early literacy in a dramatic way. England's national anxiety about the standard of literacy has led to increasing pressure on teachers, with the demands of the curriculum effectively allowing less time to work with individuals, and less time to develop particular areas of interest. However in Greece and Italy there is less public anxiety and less expectation for children to read and write at an early age.

Other conclusions reached:

7. There are a wide variety of written texts available to all young children, including those from marginalized groups.
8. Many parents are keen to collaborate with schools to help with their children's literacy development, but feel they are not confident about their own abilities. Teachers have developed productive relationships with parents in order to symbiotically promote an introduction to written language.
9. Young children are interested in understanding the meaning of the text and in writing their own texts. They are especially interested in texts that they can relate to and they are keen to explore both the meaning of the text and its relationship to spoken language.
10. Children benefit from learning about the orthographic code with meaningful text that they are able to form ideas about. The opportunity to speculate in a group about the meaning of the text has promoted a greater understanding of purpose of language.
11. Teachers can construct situations that promote positive attitudes towards literacy learning. Through observing, listening, validating and extending children's ideas about written language, they are able to provide positive feedback that promotes development and understanding. Group teaching and learning has been shown to increase motivation and enable individuals to progress beyond their independent capabilities.

12. Teachers can benefit from collaboration with each other, with children and with parents, they can also benefit from in-service support that offers them new concepts for teaching children literacy and written language, without infringing their autonomy.
13. There are beneficial effects of an action research approach, which encourages teachers to develop a cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action, in researching work in their own classrooms.
14. Modern teaching techniques need to evolve by supplementing traditional text with advertising, television, CD Rom and multimedia.

Key Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations relevant to a number of the European Union's member states: -

1. When deciding on agreed goals for literacy education, it is vital to consider the various contextual differences between the countries, their language and their teaching practices.
2. A change in attitude is needed to implement real change and innovation, in relation to all involved.

Further Information

The full title of the project is "Early literacy teaching and learning: innovative practice in four different national contexts, a thematic network" (1998)

The full title of the final report is: "Early Literacy in Context"

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

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