

## Report of a Survey Inspection



# Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development: Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Programme

2012-2015

## Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

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## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Department of Education (DE) funded the Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development (UDLD) programme to support the strategic objectives of the two key policies: the 'Every School a Good School' policy April 2009 to raise the quality of children's achievements and standards so that 'every child will leave compulsory education with appropriate standards of literacy and numeracy'; and the new literacy and numeracy strategy, 'Count Read: Succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy' (March 2011). The core aim of the UDLD programme is to enhance the skills of teachers in primary schools for the teaching of reading, writing and spelling. The desired outcome is to reduce the reliance on external support through the development of the teachers' capacity to identify and address factors that may cause children to underachieve and fail to attain appropriate literacy standards.

1.2 The DE has made £4.3m available for the programme over the period 2012-2015. The timing of the funding is opportune given the importance of improving standards in literacy across the education system as identified in the two key policies above. Indeed, the results of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), revealed that one in five of 15-year-olds has poorly developed literacy skills. In addition, the OECD data identified a widening gender gap: girls are reading better and more often than boys. Northern Ireland's performance is average in OECD terms and there remains a marked gap between the highest-achieving students in Northern Ireland and the long tail of underachievement in schools, particularly for those young people who experience social disadvantage. To improve this position, the most recent Chief Inspector's Report<sup>1</sup> recognises the need to develop the capacity of teachers and management in schools to meet the notable rise in the number of pupils [in mainstream education] who have special educational needs, and to provide high-quality professional development and support for staff to meet these needs.

## 2. Remit of the survey<sup>2</sup>

2.1 The DE's final business case stated that '*the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) would be commissioned to monitor the implementation of the project; this will be done by a team of ETI inspectors with skill in the teaching of reading, teaching children with special educational needs (SEN), and the interpretation and use of data in schools. The development of the course will be monitored, the content of the course will be scrutinised, samples of the lectures will be attended and opinions of teachers taking the continuing professional development (CPD) with regard to the course meeting their professional needs will be gathered*'.

2.2 To meet the remit, the ETI planned the survey with a focus on:

- how schools are using the programme to develop their provision to meet the literacy needs of pupils who require additional support;
- improving standards of literacy across the participating schools;
- the development of the professional expertise of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and staff; and
- how effective the project is in meeting its aims.

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<sup>1</sup> Chief Inspector's Report July 2012 – June 2014

<sup>2</sup> This survey refers to cohort 1,2 and 3 schools 2012-2015

2.3 In reaching its evaluations, the inspection team has taken account of the original difficulties of starting a new initiative of such enormity, the issues posed by the development and outworking of the programme, and its governance, management and accountability arrangements.

2.4 Despite the challenges, the funding has enabled 563 schools and representatives from eight education support services to register for the course and 5142 teachers to participate, at various levels, in the programme since its inception until the completion of this report in February 2015. This represents two-thirds of the primary schools in Northern Ireland. From the overall group of participants, some 1062 teachers attended a specialist master's course on dyslexic-type difficulties with 470 of this group completing successfully one master's level module and 285 (out of the 470) gaining two master's modules. From the group of teachers who achieved two master's modules, 263 also achieved Approved Teacher Status (ATS) from the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). Twenty-nine teachers elected to undertake further study and achieved the award of Associate Member of the British Dyslexia Association (AMBDA). Across the duration of the programme 1062 teachers attended the monthly specialist face-to-face seminars and 672 attended the summer schools in August 2013 and 2014.

### **3. Methodology**

3.1 Between November 2012 and February 2015, a team of six inspectors, supported by four associate assessors, evaluated the progress of the programme by visits to 55 schools, which included classroom observation, additional evidence from meetings and discussions with the programme manager and local co-ordinators, and from inspection or district visits over the period. Inspectors also observed cluster meetings and lectures, summer school activities and the online sessions covering the programme content. Interviews with the participating staff and principals were central to gathering evidence of the impact of the programme on school development planning and individual pupil case studies. Finally, telephone interviews were conducted with 20 schools across the five former education and library boards (ELBs).

3.2 The inspectors focused on the following key aspects to assist the evaluation of how well the programme has achieved its aims as stated in the business case. They assessed the impact of the programme on:

- the school's capacity to meet the literacy needs of its pupils;
- improving the standards of literacy in the school; and
- developing the expertise of the SENCO and staff of the school.

### **4. Summary of the key findings in February 2015**

4.1 The overall programme

The UDL programme is regarded by almost all participating schools as a coherent, comprehensive and challenging professional development course. It is highly researched, well-presented and structured appropriately to enable schools to adapt its contents and extend their provision for raising standards in literacy. A small number of schools, less than 10%, reported that elements of the course did not fulfil their expectations; for example, they were concerned about the imbalance of practical strategies and theoretical understanding, and the time required to complete the master's level course.

An important and innovative aspect of the programme relates to the flexibility and adaptability of the courses on offer. School communities and individual teachers can choose to commit to a level of study which suits their particular context and professional development needs as they seek to support children experiencing difficulties in literacy. The effective engagement of the most highly qualified teachers in support of the programme team was an important development in the overall provision.

As a whole-school programme, the UDL course has demonstrated its capacity to contribute to the participating schools' actions in supporting learners who require specialist help with aspects of their literacy. The schools are becoming more skilful in measuring accurately the impact of their interventions with individual children. It remains a challenge to measure in an equally accurate way, at a whole-school level or programme level, how far improvement can be conclusively or entirely attributed to the programme. For some schools, their previous training in, for example, 'Competence in Educational Testing'<sup>3</sup> provided a strong foundation for the more sophisticated assessment and analysis provided by the UDL programme. Nevertheless, positive developments can be identified through case study evidence, the impact of classroom practice on learning, increased teacher knowledge and confidence, and whole-school planning to improve standards based on participation in, and learning from, the programme. To determine how well the programme has realised its aims, the schools will have to demonstrate its impact over time; this work is taking place within increasingly sophisticated cycles of self-evaluation in which the effective use of data and enhanced confidence in teachers' professional judgement are key features.

The challenge ahead is for schools and other course providers to work collaboratively with the DE, and other government departments, to identify and address the full range of barriers<sup>4</sup> to learning and show evidence of raised standards. The most effective schools in identifying whole-school progress were those which based their judgements not only on the emerging data, but also on evidence gathered from first-hand observations of the children's learning and first-hand evaluations of the children's attainment in literacy. All of this effective work was informed further through close links with the parents and families of the children to gain detailed knowledge of individual needs, plot progress and celebrate achievement.

As a consequence of their discussions with principals and school staff, the inspectors recognised that, while the progress of individuals can be measured robustly, it is too early to assess the impact of this particular intervention at a whole-school level. The other interventions and initiatives going on at the same time, such as the Signature Project, also make it difficult to measure accurately the success of the UDL programme. However, this report does recognise key emerging strengths and areas for development which are recorded below.

## **5. Strengths**

### **5.1 School leadership and self-evaluation**

- There is clear evidence of the effective monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the programme through inclusion in the school development planning process and re-drafting of the special education and/or literacy action plans. In the best practice, dedicated time was set aside for the specialist/lead teacher to observe practice in other classrooms and support the development of other staff in meeting the needs of individual children experiencing difficulties with literacy development. Skilful pacing, and a staged introduction of the intervention, ensured school-wide and long-term commitment to the strategies that were being embedded.

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<sup>3</sup> Certificate of Competence in Educational Testing (CCET)

<sup>4</sup> An evaluation of Full Service Extended Schools and Full Service Community Network: ETI June 2013

- The targets in the performance review and staff development (PRSD) programme were reviewed and linked more closely to the priorities which emerged as result of the schools' participation in the programme. The revised priorities were agreed at whole-school level and the current school development plan (SDP) was amended to reflect these changes. As a result of this inclusive process, the programme has provided a clear focus for staff development and underpinned high quality professional development for both teachers and classroom assistants (CAs) leading, for example, to the more effective deployment of CAs to support the children's learning.
- Where there is a strong, well-embedded culture of self-evaluation leading to improvement, the schools are more confident to consider the practical application of the programme. These schools approach their staff development flexibly, choose the priorities which suit their own context and adapt strategies to meet the particular learning needs of their children.
- Schools reported that they felt that their developing skill and expertise helped to sharpen and clarify communication with parents and the relevant external agencies, particularly in identification of specific need and the proposed strategies to address that need.

## 5.2 Continuing professional development

- The programme provided an excellent development opportunity for SENCOs, building their capacity to act as a leader/champion and reference point for the whole school in understanding, identifying and addressing the specific learning needs of children who experience difficulties with reading, writing and spelling. Evidence of this was often described within the context of whole-staff commitment to becoming a dyslexia-friendly school.
- The rolling out of strategies for a range of multi-sensory approaches ensured that teachers' understanding was being deepened and challenged within the context of their school. This process of reflection has given teachers the confidence to be pro-active, and has reduced the need to be reactive, in their response to the children's learning needs.
- Teachers reported being better prepared and more confident in making professional judgements on the strategies best suited to overcome the barriers to learning that a specific child is experiencing. Through participation in the programme, teachers and school leaders spoke of a developing confidence to challenge the theoretical basis for 'single' solution interventions and a movement towards selecting the most appropriate interventions from a variety of programmes to improve reading, writing and spelling. This was particularly evident in those schools where they were building on expertise previously gained in such effective initiatives as Reading Recovery.
- Schools reported that, through participation in the programme there was strengthened and more effective co-operation between their literacy co-ordinators and SENCOs, providing consistent school-wide interventions in support of the children experiencing difficulties with literacy. In practical terms, this action often led to a fundamental review of, for example, the criteria for accessing support in school and whole-school reading schemes, and to the re-drafting of key policies, such as those relating to literacy, handwriting, spelling and marking.

- Schools reported that their participation in the programme affirmed the good practice already existing in their schools. The clear focus for whole-staff development gave schools the opportunity to embed the strategies in the classrooms, although transferring the one-to-one work to larger groups remains a challenge.
- School leaders and SENCOs report they have gained a better understanding of reports from educational psychologists. As a result, they are able to interrogate the reports more effectively and plan their response more sharply to meet the child's specific need.
- The professional development of those teachers awarded accredited status has afforded them the opportunity to share good practice with, and develop the understanding of, other colleagues through geographical clusters that appear to be growing organically.
- Those teachers who have availed of this professional development opportunity are increasingly committed to sharing their expertise with other teachers in the interests of supporting all children, not just those within their school.

### 5.3 The effective use of quantitative and qualitative data

- Schools reported that their participation in the programme helped them to refine their tracking of children's progress to identify more effectively emerging trends over time.
- Analysis of the data suggests (for those children receiving one-to-one support) that standards of handwriting, reading and spelling are being raised; evidence of raised standards across the school will require further gathering of data year-on-year to identify trends in performance.
- The SENCOs reported they felt more confident in tracking the progress of those children showing dyslexia-type tendencies. The assessment data demonstrates clear improvement for individuals benefiting from one-to-one sessions.
- In addition to improvements identified through quantitative data, schools reported qualitative evidence of children's raised self-esteem, confidence and engagement with literacy, especially in relation to reading, with the children responding very positively to the effective implementation of the strategies.
- Good use is being made of diagnostic testing, particularly when the school had already accessed the training for CCET. This developing expertise has helped schools analyse data more effectively, set targets and plot progress.
- Some evidence is emerging of more effective differentiation at class level as a result of whole-school participation in the online sessions. However, showing consistent improvement within and across classes will remain a challenge.

## 5.4 Resources

- Schools reported more effective use of a range of resources due to a deeper understanding of the difficulties facing children who are experiencing delay in the development of their literacy skills. These resources include, for example, the DE “Resource File to support children with Special Educational Needs”.
- Schools stated that participation in the course put them in a position to make best use of any transfer of special needs resources to their schools, for example in the area of speech and language support.

## 6. Areas for Development (NB: these areas for development were not necessarily targets for the project)

6.1 The higher education institutions and the schools with which they engage, working in closer collaboration, need to:

- demonstrate more clearly the benefits of teachers from different schools learning from one another and sharing their practices in the interests of all learners;
- plan for the extensive time needed to discuss, share and reflect on literacy provision within and across schools, in order to develop practical strategies and resources for classroom use; and
- extend and enhance the opportunities for classroom assistants, parents and pupils, as well as teachers, to be actively involved in literacy improvement programmes with the potential to embed change and celebrate achievement through sustained intervention.

## 7. Recommendations

**(NB: These are generic recommendations to be considered and they refer to possible future trends in continuing professional development for teachers and those working in support of schools.)**

7.1 Teachers and school leaders should:

- (a) engage in joint inter-disciplinary professional development to share methodologies which support the most effective interventions for those children experiencing difficulties with literacy;
- (b) avail of further professional development opportunities on adapting the one-to-one strategies for whole-class implementation; and
- (c) sustain a long-term, whole-school approach to literacy support which is child-centred, evidence based and evaluated robustly;

7.2 All course providers should:

- (a) work more clearly with schools to establish the professional development needs of teachers through, for example, robust self-evaluation and analysis of data by the schools and clear channels of communication, including discussion within cluster groups. As a result, teachers should have the opportunity to select from a more flexible menu of modules within courses in order to meet the needs of their children most effectively. This, in turn, should enable schools to develop and implement the most effective approaches for their particular context and support families in educating their children; and
- (b) create professional development opportunities, across the university colleges, university schools and departments, for teachers to engage in study related to improving outcomes for children.

7.3 The Education Authority working in close collaboration with the higher education institutions and/or other associated school support agencies should:

- (a) provide further development in the teachers' effective use of assessment tools, in particular for those schools which had not participated in the CCET initiative, and create an opportunity for the one-third of primary schools which could not avail of the opportunity to take part in the UDLD programme at this time;
- (b) create a continuing professional development programme to support SENCOs and literacy co-ordinators, based on the model provided by this programme;
- (c) showcase best practice through a range of media, for example, ESaGS TV or Fronter. Schools value highly the online course materials and express strongly the view that these materials should remain available (through, for example, Fronter), in order to provide schools with practical guidance on the most effective use of the strategies with a whole class;
- (d) support and develop further the cluster meetings to share their most effective practice on how to embed this important work in mainstream classrooms; and
- (e) develop the digital technologies used here to support the development of communities of expertise and exploit opportunities for collaborative professional development across Northern Ireland.

## **8. Conclusion**

8.1 The UDLD programme has had a significant impact on promoting quality in literacy provision in the schools visited and has initiated extensive interest, debate and action within, and across, the participating schools. The progress achieved to date has the potential to act as a lever for change and improvement in how schools address children's literacy difficulties and provide effective and timely intervention. The knowledge, understanding and skills gained by the participating teachers and schools should help them to improve their planning, teaching and pupil achievements. In this way, the benefits of participation in this course should be evident.

8.2 Principals, SENCOs and literacy co-ordinators, applying the learning accrued to whole-school priorities, are central to the successful implementation of the programme. The provision of high-quality professional opportunities, which motivate and enable teachers to address the gaps in children's literacy achievement in schools, should remain a key priority for teacher continuing professional development.

8.3 While it is clear at this stage that positive outcomes are evident across the participating schools, it is too early to measure how far the aims and objectives as stated in the business case have been met; and to speculate as to the future impact on primary schools across the province.

8.4 In order to address the increasing diversity of need, the recently established Education Authority needs to give consideration as to how the continuing professional development of staff through this programme, and others designed to raise literacy standards in schools, could be most effectively delivered to benefit those children experiencing literacy difficulties.

**Schools visited**

Ballymagee Primary School, Bangor  
 Blackmountain Primary School, Belfast  
 Bridge Integrated Primary School, Banbridge  
 Bunscoil Naomh Bríd, Tirkane, Maghera  
 Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain  
 Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh  
 Cumran Primary School, Clough, Co Down  
 Dromintee Primary School, Newry  
 Dromore Central Primary School, Dromore, Co Down  
 Drumahoe, Primary School  
 Drumlins Integrated Primary School, Crossgar  
 Elmgrove Primary School, Belfast  
 Enniskillen Integrated Primary School  
 Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh, Strabane  
 Groggan Primary School, Randalstown  
 Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown  
 Kilrea Primary School  
 Lisnagelvin Primary School, Londonderry  
 Lurgan Model Primary School  
 McClintock Primary School, Seskinore  
 Millennium Integrated Primary School, Saintfield  
 Newcastle Primary School  
 Newmills Primary School  
 Newtownstewart Model Primary School  
 Oakwood Integrated Primary School, Belfast  
 Our Lady's Girls' Primary School, Belfast  
 Pond Park Primary School, Lisburn  
 Portadown Integrated Primary School  
 Primate Dixon Primary School  
 Rowandale Integrated Primary School  
 Spa Primary School, Ballynahinch  
 Springfield Primary School, Belfast  
 St Anne's Primary School, Londonderry  
 St Bernard's Primary School, Belfast  
 St Brigid's Primary School, Derry  
 St Brigid's Primary School, Downpatrick  
 St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg  
 St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor  
 St Joseph's Primary School, Crossgar  
 St Joseph's Primary School, Tyrella  
 St Malachy's Primary School, Belfast  
 St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge  
 St Mary's Primary School, Claudy  
 St Mary's Primary School, Killyleagh  
 St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle  
 St Mary's Primary School, Rathfriland  
 St Mary's Star of the Sea Primary School, Belfast

St Patrick's Primary School, Ballynahinch  
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon  
St Patrick's Primary School, Eskra  
St Patrick's Primary School, Mullinahoe  
St Patrick's Primary School, Saul  
St Paul's Primary School, Irvinestown  
St Ronan's Primary School, Lisnaskea  
Tattygar Primary School, Lisbellaw

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