Abstract

This article investigates issues surrounding the adoption of the ‘simple view’ of reading. While this theory of the reading process has recently been espoused as the official view of early reading instruction in England, a recent Irish study, discussed in this article, indicated that this viewpoint is also widespread among Irish teachers. This article argues that a less simple view of reading, recognising the importance of cognitive flexibility, metacognition and explicit comprehension strategy instruction in reading needs to be promoted among all educators. A lack of emphasis on such explicit reading comprehension instruction has been found to be a common thread in research conducted in the United States, in England and in Ireland and is often linked to reading underachievement. Hence, the authors conclude that the implementation of a more holistic and inclusive ‘balanced’ model of reading development is immediately imperative in reading classrooms, both in Ireland and internationally.

Keywords: reading instruction, reading theory, ‘the simple view’ of reading, reading comprehension, ‘balanced literacy’, Ireland

The ‘simple view’ as reading theory

It is of utmost importance that all teachers have a coherent and articulated theory of reading literacy as every action taken in the classroom related to language activity will be influenced by those theories and beliefs (Bruner, 1963; Smith and Elley, 1997). Recently, the ‘simple view of reading’ (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) has been promoted in England as the theoretical framework to be followed for reading development (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006). While some have described this theory as an answer to the ‘reading wars’ (Chall, 1967; Kirby and Savage, 2008), others have viewed it as a means of pushing a decoding agenda (Pressley et al., 2008). The simple view formula, which states that reading comprehension (RC) arises from the interaction between decoding (D) and linguistic comprehension (LC) (RC = D \times LC), appears to acknowledge both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ approaches to reading instruction. This is regarded by some as the first attempt at ‘balanced’ literacy instruction (Kirby and Savage, 2008; Pressley, 2002).

It appears that this ‘simple view’ may, in fact, be more of a skills-based ‘bottom-up’ approach to reading instruction than an interactive, balanced metacognitive approach, which children require to navigate our increasingly textual world to achieve both academic and personal success (Block et al., 2004). Having adopted the ‘simple view’ model in England, DfES (2006) stated that synthetic phonics should be the “prime approach used in the teaching of early reading” (p. 54). Hence, the novice reader is expected to acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills that sequentially build towards comprehension ability (Dole et al., 1998). Successful readers do not need to use context to read words (p. 61). If this is true, how does a reader read words such as ‘produce’ correctly without referring to context or syntax, or read a word with multiple meanings such as ‘run’ and comprehend the meaning of text?

It is widely accepted that the ability to decode a text is a prerequisite to comprehension. However, comprehension of text does not always occur naturally through hearing the words of the text read aloud or in one’s head (Pressley, 2000; Tovani, 2000). Gough’s simple view, currently adopted by the DfES, implies that linguistic comprehension can be equated with reading comprehension. This view does not take account of the differences in vocabulary and syntax, text structures and the use of cohesive devices, which make written text differ significantly from spoken language (Dombey, 2008). It fails to recognize the static nature of written text compared with the fleeting presence of the spoken word, which allows for deeper construction of meaning when dealing with print. While oral language instruction plays an important role in developing a child’s literacy skills, it will not, even when combined with phonics, create metacognitive readers. Indeed, according to Dombey (2008) “we need to do more than teach them synthetic phonics and careful listening”. This is because reading is a recursive, interactive process (Rummelhart, 1994), which requires a rich interplay between syntactical...
Recent research has shown that graphophonological-semantic flexibility is required to navigate texts efficiently (Cartwright, 2007). This cognitive flexibility allows the reader to consider various types of phonological and semantic information simultaneously, deliberately selecting the most appropriate strategy when necessary. According to Pressley et al. (2008), this kind of flexibility is not captured by the simple view of reading, as being proficient in both decoding and linguistic comprehension independently does not guarantee that the reader will possess graphophonological flexibility. As a result reading comprehension will be limited. This research supports the need to explicitly teach children how to use comprehension strategies in a metacognitive manner from a young age as being cognitively flexible has been found to be equally important for both beginning and more mature readers.

The ‘simple view’ of reading: an enduring international and Irish understanding

Despite a wealth of research indicating the importance of explicit comprehension instruction (National Reading Panel, 2002; Pressley, 2002), pedagogy appears to remain static. Durkin’s (1978) study first revealed that comprehension was not being taught in classrooms in the United States. Twenty years later, Pressley et al. (1998) found that the assessment of reading comprehension through questioning still dominated reading lessons. Lunzer and Gardner (1979) revealed very similar findings in the United Kingdom, as did Morris (1986) in his study of Australian classrooms. More recently, reports from Ofsted in the UK criticise the excessive time being devoted to ‘hearing reading’ rather than to teaching comprehension strategies (Fisher and Lewis, 2002; Ofsted, 1996). The emphasis on comprehension in England’s policy documents (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 2000) remains largely unexplored by British researchers (Brooks, 2002) in contrast to the extensive research on phonics (Rose, 2007). Recent policy change promoting the ‘simple view’ of reading fails to emphasise the importance of the complex cognitive processes which contribute to linguistic comprehension (Barrs et al., 2008). This reductionist viewpoint also fails to take account of socio-cultural aspects of reading instruction (Purcell-Gates, 2002) which can be significant to meaningful engagement in the reading task, particularly in a classroom culture where excessive emphasis is placed on decoding and students ‘miss the point’ of reading (to construct meaning).

A recent study conducted in Ireland among a sample of Irish primary teachers (Concannon-Gibney, 2009) similarly revealed a hierarchical understanding of reading instruction (a ‘simple view’) characterised by an approach with a heavy emphasis on decoding skills and an assessment and/or affective approach to reading comprehension instruction rather than a balanced methodology (involving decoding, vocabulary and comprehension instruction within a motivating, engaging environment). The study revealed that Irish teachers tended to favour the ‘simple view’ of reading (although it is neither mandated nor recommended explicitly in policy documents) and appeared to possess minimal knowledge and understanding in relation to the importance of explicit strategy instruction in comprehension, metacognition (Flavell et al., 2002) or graphophonological-semantic flexibility.

Methodology

A comprehensive questionnaire was distributed to a representative sample of 400 Irish primary teachers working in 30 different primary schools across West Dublin and its surrounding hinterland. The sample included a variety of school types (e.g. co-educational/ single-sex, junior/senior and vertical, low socio-economic/middle class) and sizes (e.g. from very large with over 40 teachers to small with <12 teachers) and the teachers varied in age, experience (e.g. from younger or novice teachers through to older, vastly experienced teachers) and class level which they taught, as well as comprising a number of teachers in specialist learning support and resource roles. The response rate was 69.5 per cent (N = 278). This high response rate could be attributed to a particular interest in reading instruction among the surveyed teachers. An analysis of the returned questionnaires revealed a notable over-representation of ‘novice’ (younger and/or less experienced) teachers in the sample. This response pattern may be indicative of Huberman’s (1981, in Guskey, 1986) theory of teacher career stage where interest in professional learning declines in the latter stages of a teacher’s career. The questionnaire included sections which probed the teacher respondents’ understanding and practice with respect to the teaching of reading in general, and to comprehension instruction specifically, as well as a section on the teachers’ experience of and perceived needs in relation to professional development with respect to reading pedagogy.

In addition to the questionnaire survey, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 12 teachers who had previously completed the questionnaire and who had indicated an interest in being interviewed further on the topic of reading pedagogy. The interview schedule was based on the quantitative and qualitative findings of the questionnaire and was used to further probe and investigate particular key emerging themes.

Key findings

In general, classroom practice emerged as traditional and instruction appeared significantly ‘un-balanced’ in
nature (Pressley, 2002). Key themes that surfaced included the dominance of word attack skills over comprehension instruction (particularly in the junior/learning support classroom) and an emphasis on reading for pleasure (most apparent in the senior classes) over explicit comprehension teaching, both of which indicate that Irish teachers may espouse and implement the ‘simple view’ of reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). This philosophy and understanding of reading instruction appears ingrained in teachers and may be responsible for enduring traditional classroom practices across all class levels including the persistent use of oral sequential reading, the continued reliance on workbooks and commercial reading schemes and an assessment-based approach to comprehension instruction. This is in spite of the introduction, over 10 years ago, of a revised Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) advocating a more balanced approach to reading. In this light the responses of novice and experienced teachers were compared and analysed, but did not reveal any significant differences in relation to beliefs or practices with regard to reading instruction. This is cause for concern as it highlights the static nature of reading pedagogy in Irish classrooms and a failure on behalf of research, a revised curriculum, pre-service and in-career development to induce any ‘paradigm shift’ (Pressley et al., 1998) in reading instruction.

A strong emphasis on decoding

When Irish teachers were asked to identify the most important elements of their reading instruction, 83 per cent of junior class teachers identified ‘word attack skills’ as ‘very important’ and just over 6 per cent of respondents defined reading purely in terms of decoding, with one respondent stating that reading was simply “learning to put sounds together” (Q2.1, r394). Indeed, when asked to describe a typical lesson, approximately 58 per cent mentioned teaching phonics and decoding, with one representative response describing a typical reading lesson as comprising “examining individual sounds and blending to form words” (2.3b, r380). Word attack skills were also regarded as a ‘very important’ element of a typical lesson in specialist literacy learning support as reported by approximately 76 per cent of respondents, with 65 per cent of such learning support teachers mentioning phonics and word attack skills as part of their normal lesson. This type of practice can be illustrated by the response of one such teacher who described a reading lesson as consisting of “concentrated specific word recognition starting with initial sound then breaking it down eventually by week’s end putting words into simple sentences to be read” (2.3b, r070). This is indicative of the very hierarchical, skills-based understanding of reading and reading pedagogy which emerged from a large number of the survey responses.

Comprehension as secondary

Comprehension of text appeared somewhat secondary to the teaching of phonics and decoding skills in Irish junior and learning support classes with only 33 per cent and 47 per cent of teachers, respectively, mentioning it as an element of a typical lesson. When asked to define reading, 54 per cent of respondents did not mention the construction of meaning as part of their definition. Indeed, only 45 per cent of learning support teachers and 47 per cent of junior class teachers agreed that children should always understand what they are reading (Q3.5, b). This correlates with findings of previous Irish research by Shiel and Hogan (1997) and again highlights the narrow viewpoint which many Irish teachers seem to share about early reading instruction. It appears that both learning support and junior class teachers may be neglecting to teach children about the ‘bigger picture’ of reading around the comprehension of text, despite current research which emphasises the importance of teaching comprehension from the outset of instruction (Pressley, 2002). Indeed, the lack of emphasis placed on the construction of meaning as the goal of reading may have a significant, possibly long-term effect on Irish pupils’ perception of the reading process. A classroom culture that values decoding, while neglecting comprehension development, may encourage pupils to perceive reading as a mechanical task rather than an interactive, meaning-based process (Rosenblatt, 1994). This type of classroom practice may in turn have a significant effect on Irish pupils’ engagement and achievement in reading (Guthrie, 2004; Ruddell and Unrau, 1994).

‘Bottom-up’ reading instruction

Irish teachers generally appear to characterise reading as “an ability to decode first, then to comprehend” (2.1, r248). This hierarchical understanding assumes that comprehension will occur automatically or naturally if the child can decode the text (Government of Ireland, 1971, p. 107). Across the data, reading was often characterised as a passive process, for example “looking at the written word and understanding it” (2.1, r229). Indeed, almost 40 per cent of respondents narrowly referred to ‘looking’ at the text as the process by which decoding turned into comprehension. This clearly corresponds to Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) previously discussed “simple view of reading”. Despite other significant research, which contradicts this simplistic assumption, particularly in the case of struggling readers whom it is deemed require more explicit instruction (e.g. Brown et al., 1996; Pressley, 2000; Pressley and Wharton McDonald, 2002), the simple view appears to remain deeply rooted among surveyed teachers.

This apparent preference for a skills-based approach to reading instruction may be influenced by or more likely align coincidentally to the current emphasis on phonics instruction in the United Kingdom (DfEE,
An affective approach to reading instruction (top-down)

While the emphasis in junior and learning support classrooms appeared to be on the development of word attack skills, senior class teachers appeared to favour ‘reading for pleasure’ above phonics and comprehension instruction, with 72 per cent regarding it as a ‘very important’ element of their reading instruction, while only 58 per cent of teachers regarded explicit comprehension instruction as ‘very important’. Indeed, only 62 per cent of senior class teachers indicated they specifically taught reading comprehension in their lessons. These data corroborate findings from the 1991 IEA study which found that Irish teachers rated the aim of “developing a lasting interest in reading” above the mean for most countries and above that of reading comprehension (Martin and Morgan, 1994). This finding may indicate that in the intervening 15 years, Irish teachers’ understandings and practices in relation to the pedagogy of reading development have not significantly changed.

This element of a ‘top-down’ approach (Smith, 1994) may be cause for some concern, as although research has pointed to motivation and enjoyment as important components of successful reading instruction (Guthrie, 2004), there is an understanding that engagement should be coupled with explicit strategy instruction in comprehension (Guthrie et al., 1998). This is evidently not happening in practice as is exemplified by one teacher’s comment that “we only do comprehension work on a quarter of what we read, in the hope that interest will override any view of this work being real work” (3.4, r177). The aim of promoting a lasting interest in reading is one that is recommended by the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). However, enjoyment and motivation are only part of the reading ‘puzzle’, and successful comprehension of a text is necessary to develop a student’s love of reading. Indeed, if a student struggles to comprehend, they are unlikely to read for pleasure as highlighted in a recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report for Ireland (Cosgrove et al., 2005). It outlined concerns regarding a low level of reading engagement and difficulties in relation to higher order reading tasks among Irish students. Such an enduring approach to reading instruction could have serious repercussions for students’ reading achievement, particularly those who will not learn to comprehend through ‘osmosis’, while also failing to challenge better able readers to interact more deeply with text (Pressley and Wharton McDonald, 2002).

Despite an emphasis on reading for enjoyment, student motivation and engagement in reading appeared to be a persistent challenge faced by Irish teachers across the data. One-fifth of respondents reported difficulties in relation to this aspect of their reading instruction. Teachers described a lack of attention to reading by the current “Nintendo/65 channel/mobile phone generation” (3.3, r025) who desired a “quick fix cartoon type reading” (3.3, r373) experience. Indeed, this affective approach to reading instruction at senior class level may have contributed to the identified stagnation of reading achievement among Irish students over the past 20 years (Cosgrove et al., 2000; Eivers et al., 2005), as students may not have been equipped with the higher order thinking skills required for engaging with complex texts (Cosgrove et al., 2005; Department of Education and Science (DES), 2005b) and therefore may choose to ‘opt out’ of participating in challenging reading tasks.

Therefore, the lack of importance which teachers appear to attribute to explicit comprehension instruction may go some way towards explaining the difficulties experienced by Irish pupils in national and international assessments of reading (Cosgrove et al., 2000, 2005; Eivers et al., 2005; Shiel et al., 2001), where students struggled with higher order comprehension tasks. This pattern of practice further highlights the inadequacy of and may call the apparent rigid adherence by Irish teachers to the ‘simple view’ of reading instruction into question.

Assessment of vs instruction in comprehension

The ‘simple view’ of reading implies and assumes that comprehension will occur once the text is efficiently
decoded. Therefore, contrary to current research (Duke and Pearson, 2002; Pressley and Afferbach, 1995; Pressley and Wharton McDonald, 2002), it contends that comprehension, rather than being explicitly taught, needs to be assessed. This understanding of the reading process among Irish teachers was evident from the data. Indeed, over 80 per cent of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that questioning would be their main method of developing comprehension abilities, mentioning use of ‘continuous questioning’ (2.8, r170) and ‘constant questioning’ (2.8, r258).

There was little evidence that would suggest that Irish teachers widely understood and/or implemented a metacognitive style of teaching comprehension which would develop students’ graphophonological-semantic flexibility (Cartwright, 2007). This can be gleaned as over a third of teachers stated that they did not specifically teach comprehension strategies in their reading lessons (see Figure 1). Among those who did teach such strategies there was also considerable evidence that explicitly labelling, explaining and cognitively modelling the strategies to a metacognitive level (Duke and Pearson, 2002), was not widely practised by teachers at any class level. For example, 27 per cent of respondents ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ explained how a strategy worked (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.851$) and only 4 per cent described the use of cognitive modelling when asked how comprehension would best be developed.

It may be tentatively concluded that the lack of knowledge, understanding and reflection in relation to how comprehension may be taught or the cognitive processes involved in comprehension may lead to teachers continuing to use traditional assessment of comprehension practices, particularly questioning. This contention is supported by one teacher who outlined: “I had to think about whether I do or not [teach comprehension] ...” (T8, tr7, p. 3). Such a perspective would seem to be indicative of a pedagogy of reading practice, which functions from a ‘simple view’ of reading where explicit teaching of comprehension does not occur.

**Further evidence of teacher understandings begetting practice**

The overall findings of this study to date reveal a ‘simple view’ understanding of and approach to reading instruction by Irish teachers. This is further illustrated by the revealed widespread use of oral sequential reading in conjunction with traditional reading pedagogy support resources such as commercial reading schemes and workbooks by the surveyed teachers.

The use of oral sequential reading has been a consistent although frequently criticised feature of classroom reading instruction in Ireland and internationally (Eivers et al., 2005; Government of Ireland, 1990; Martin and Morgan, 1994; Ofsted, 1996); yet it continues to endure. Across the data, oral reading consistently outranked silent reading across all class levels. At junior level it emerged as being more frequently used than discussion on text as a teaching method, despite the centrality of oral language proposed by the English language curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). Teachers described and categorised this practice in a variety of ways, from ‘round robin’ (2.3b, r392), to “hearing of individual reading” (2.3b, r256). The idea of “listening to children’s individual reading” (2.3b, r148) would seem to characterise classroom reading development as comprising merely oral sequential reading (often termed ‘word calling’) rather than an activity designed to improve reading fluency or comprehension. One may tentatively conclude that this affinity to such traditional practice may be linked to an enduring implicit acceptance of ‘the simple view’ of reading where decoding is valued over comprehension instruction, resulting in oral reading becoming the main focus of instruction.

**Why do Irish teachers appear to adopt the ‘simple view’ of reading?**

Although the ‘simple view’ of reading is neither mandated to Irish schools nor specifically mentioned anywhere in Irish policy documents on reading, it appears to inform and strongly influence classroom instruction. This reality of an ingrained traditional classroom reading pedagogy could be partly explained by elements of the history of the development of reading instruction in Irish primary schools over the past 150 years. The development of accurate oral decoding has traditionally been expected of Irish teachers. Many commentators trace this back to the enduring influence of the ‘payment by results’ system of the later 19th century when teachers were awarded additional sums of money if their students were able to
decode selected passages flawlessly (Moloney, 1998). Although this scheme was abolished by the turn of the 20th century, the endurance of its legacy was aided by an extended 60-year period of curriculum inertia where, following achievement of political independence, the focus of the Irish primary school system was on the agenda of ‘nation building’ through the attempted restoration of the Irish language as the vernacular. As recently as the precursor to the current curriculum of 1999, the 1971 Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1971) emphasised reading for pleasure and enjoyment and national reading policy appeared to implicitly validate the ‘simple view’ of reading when it stated that by decoding text, students should be able to ‘absorb’ what they read (p. 107).

Research conducted following the introduction and implementation of this curriculum revealed a continuing focus on decoding skills mainly practised through oral sequential reading (Shiel and Hogan, 1997; Martin and Morgan, 1994). This emphasis may have been accentuated by a concurrent lack of emphasis on the explicit development of comprehension in the 1971 curriculum. Pre-service teacher education continues to appear to have a limited impact on changing such beliefs and practices among teachers regarding reading. Only 8 per cent of survey respondents felt that their pre-service training had prepared them ‘very well’ to teach reading comprehension and almost half of the respondents felt ‘unprepared’ to teach comprehension strategies with a near uniformity of responses between novice and experienced teachers. This finding would be reflective of a recent report (DES, 2005b), which criticised newly qualified teachers’ knowledge and application of higher order thinking skills in relation to developing reading comprehension.

A revised curriculum was introduced in 1999 (Government of Ireland, 1999) with the general aim of providing ‘balanced instruction’ in reading. However, certain militating factors have possibly led teachers to continue traditional reading practices akin to the ‘simple view’. An ingrained culture of non-provision for and non-participation in-career development in reading by Irish teachers has not helped (Eivers et al., 2005; Gilleece et al., 2009; OECD, 1991), in conjunction with the reality that support for the implementation of the new reading programme was wholly inadequate in terms of trying to impact fundamental change in teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices about reading. Over two-thirds of surveyed teachers who participated in that in-service felt that it had not changed their practice. Indeed, one teacher responded that the in-service provided actually vindicated her traditional practice, stating that ‘I think maybe what it taught me was not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Some of what I thought were antique may not have been as antique as I would have thought’ (T1, tr.1, p. 10). It is interesting to further note that although the curriculum states that comprehension is the ‘ultimate goal’ of reading, the in-service sessions organised for teachers around the new programme highlighted phonemic awareness and phonics instruction almost to the exclusion of reference to the changes in emphasis in understanding and practices of comprehension development (http://www.ppps.ie/pcsparchive/en_semin.php). The message communicated to teachers at these sessions was loud and clear; in spite of the curriculum changes phonics and comprehension are not equal and should not receive equal attention or priority. This understanding flies in the face of the all the recent calls from the research community of the need to teach comprehension and comprehension strategies explicitly from “kindergarten to twelfth grade” (Pressley and Wharton-McDonald, 2002, p. 30) and may support the enduring traditional pedagogy of reading development.

Discussion: the need for a less ‘simple view’ of reading

The findings of Concannon-Gibney’s (2009) study discussed throughout this article appear to indicate that Irish teachers adopt a ‘simple view’ of reading as conceptualised by Gough and Tunmer (1986). The focus of instruction in the junior classes is very much on developing decoding skills, while in the middle and senior classes comprehension is implicitly developed through assessment practice, incidental exposure and ultimately ‘osmosis’. Such practice is far removed from what Michael Pressley and others (see e.g. Adams, 1994; Cunningham, 1999; Snow et al., 1998) and the Government of Ireland (1999) envisage as ‘balanced literacy’, where the explicit and integrated development of decoding, comprehension and vocabulary within a rich and engaging context is central from the outset of instruction. The decidedly unbalanced pedagogy of reading development which appears to pervade Irish classrooms may be contributing to the established reality that reading standards among Irish school students have not changed significantly since 1984 (Eivers et al., 2005; INTO, 2001). Indeed, a recent analysis of PISA results has indicated that although Ireland continues to perform well, a slight decline in both reading achievement and engagement among Irish adolescents was evident (Coggrove et al., 2005). Many studies have attributed the lack of growth in reading achievement in Ireland to the absence of explicit comprehension strategy instruction from the earliest stages of a child’s reading development (DES, 2005a; Martin and Morgan, 1994; Shiel and Hogan, 1997). Further support for this contention can be found from classroom research in the United Kingdom (see, e.g. Fisher and Lewis, 2002; Lunzer and Gardner, 1979; Ofsted, 1996). It has also been proposed that the ‘simple view’ of reading does not take adequate account of socio-cultural aspects of reading instruction (Purcell-Gates, 2002) which can be pivotal to the active
construction of meaning required of the reader during the reading task.

Conclusions

The issue with the current 'simple view' lies in its interpretation and corresponding classroom practice internationally, which holds that the teaching of decoding should supersede the explicit teaching of comprehension, based on the belief that reading comprehension is a process which will just happen through accurate oral decoding. Surely a reading pedagogy which functions from this view has furnished and will continue to furnish cohorts of students who are 'word-callers'; students who can read but do not necessarily comprehend or as in Tovani’s (2000) book, students who “read it but don’t get it”. Are these the types of ‘unbalanced’ readers we wish to develop in our classrooms? It is important to recognise the danger in adhering to such a minimalistic model of understanding reading and organising reading pedagogy especially when according to Adams (1994), “relative to the overall literacy challenge, learning to recognise words is really a very small component” (p. 859). The ability to decode is extremely necessary in order to begin interacting with a text; however, a balanced approach to literacy incorporating explicit comprehension instruction is essential so that the reader has the ability to construct understanding in a recursive, metacognitive and cognitively flexible manner.

Therefore, this paper proposes that a ‘less simple view’ (Kirby and Savage, 2008) be advocated and promoted as a reformed framework for the teaching of reading in Ireland and internationally, especially in light of an acceptance that reading is a complex process and requires a ‘multi-componential response’ (Pressley, 2000, p. 557). This response and the ‘less simple’ approach envisaged can be represented by the ‘reading puzzle’ as indicated in Figure 2 above. This figure indicates the four core integrated factors (comprehension, decoding, vocabulary and engagement), which are essential at each and every stage of a child’s reading development in the primary school and which are embedded in the socio-cultural context of the child’s learning. The call is for reading pedagogy at all levels in all classrooms to adequately recognise and holistically implement each of the four pieces of the reading puzzle, with special attention required to the explicit development of comprehension, which as revealed from the survey data discussed through this article does not form a central part of many Irish teachers’ current reading development practice. In the case of Ireland this may entail reform of the current 1999 reading curriculum to adequately reflect the envisaged ‘balanced’ instruction. What is required in conjunction with and irrespective of any such curriculum reform is a programme of sustained system-wide and school-based in-career development in reading pedagogy for all Irish teachers, reflective of best international practice. Such school-based professional development would attempt to address the ‘culture of individualism’ (Lortie, 1975; OECD, 1991) that pervades schools in Ireland and internationally. Instead, teachers would be encouraged to collaborate, and become “creators, not just receivers of the curriculum” (Au et al., 2008, p. 170) focusing on the needs of their students and the context of their school within the larger context of a National Curriculum. This professional development would be ongoing and developmental in nature (Taylor et al., 2002), encouraging teachers to adopt an enquiry stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001) that is critical and transformative and which encourages teachers to question current practice and seek change.

It would seem that the starting point for achieving alternative more balanced approaches to reading development in Irish and international classrooms will be to help teachers to reconstruct their own understandings of reading and reading pedagogy through such professional development programmes which would allow for reflection, discussion and deepening understanding of the reading process and appropriate reading pedagogy. In Ireland this would mark a first and vitally important step in rebalancing reading pedagogy in classrooms to reflect a more holistic and contemporary understanding of how students learn to read effectively. This development may, in turn, draw from but also inform and affect classroom reading practice across the anglophone world and internationally, where the ‘simple view’ of reading still pervades and negatively impacts on the implementation of a more holistic reading pedagogy.
Notes

1. Explanation of respondent codes used throughout the paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of code</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q.2.3b</td>
<td>Refers to the question number in the questionnaire, question number 2.3b.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r331</td>
<td>Refers to a response to an open question in the questionnaire, respondent number 331 (of 400).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T7, tr6, p. 4</td>
<td>Refers to interview data, Teacher 7 (of 12), transcript 6, page 4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. ‘Junior class’ refers to children between 4 and 8 years of age approximately (junior infants to second class). ‘Senior class’ refers to children between 9 and 12 years of age approximately (3rd–6th class). Learning support teachers work with small groups of children experiencing difficulties with reading and/or mathematics.

3. Cronbach alpha’s test of reliability was used when appropriate. When this test was not used, findings were corroborated with another data source, e.g. quantitative data from closed questions were compared with qualitative data found in open question responses and/or through interview data.

References


DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE (DES) (2005b) Beginning to Teach: Newly Qualified Teachers in Irish Primary Schools. Dublin: Stationery Office.


