

Agenda Item	<b>5</b>
Report No	<b>ECAS 61/16</b>

## Emerging Literacy

### Report by Director of Care and Learning

#### Summary

This paper supports a presentation, and describes work done by a range of services, including teachers and Allied Health Professionals to provide resources that enable teachers in P1 onwards to adapt literacy teaching to the developmental status of their pupils. It covers the rollout of the approach to Emerging Literacy, early evaluation data and the extension of the work to the Northern Alliance local authorities.

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 In May 2013, a paper was presented to Committee describing work being done to improve early language and literacy, and setting this into a research-based context. Since that time a wide range of partners, from midwives to librarians, have been working to promote literacy in a coherent way through from the womb into early primary school. This briefing focusses on current developments to support personalised and effective teaching and learning of literacy in Primary 1. Early literacy is a controversial area, with many experts and strong views. **Appendix 1** therefore provides a rationale for the developments in Highland both for scrutiny and to facilitate informed and evidence-based discussion.
- 1.2 Individual differences in academic attainment, and other life outcomes, are to a large extent predictable from inequalities in key skills at school entry. These early inequalities underlie the well-known “attainment gaps” related to deprivation and gender. But children also vary naturally in how quickly they develop. Thus there is a risk that differences due either to nature or nurture can be magnified over the school years unless teaching and learning in P1 onwards is developmentally sensitive.
- 1.3 With respect to literacy, there are four clusters of skills that underlie learning, and determine the degree to which children can benefit from whatever literacy programme is used in P1. *Fine motor skills* underlie handwriting as well as the integration needed to coordinate the complex processes of reading and writing. *Language skills*, including vocabulary and listening, determine the kinds of texts that children can access or create. *Concepts of print* – a whole range of skills and knowledge about text as well as the purposes of literacy – help children understand what they are doing and why. And, finally, *phonological awareness* – explicit knowledge about the sounds in our spoken language – is the foundation for learning the connections between those sounds and letters.
- 1.4 In January 2016, the Committee saw data from the Developmental Overviews that showed not only the range of developmental skills at school entry in Highland, but also that we can easily measure this at population and individual level. The work described in this report is aimed to help teachers leverage this kind of knowledge into effective teaching and learning. The ethos of the developmental approach is to enable practitioners to reflect on the needs of their learners and respond accordingly, rather than to mandate a rigid programme.

## 2. Resource Development

- 2.1 In order to match literacy instruction to the developmental status of the children in their classes, P1 teachers need to be able easily to assess that status, and have to hand practicable strategies that can address identified needs. Simply ploughing on with “one size fits all” approaches is likely to leave some children unnecessarily behind. However individualising learning is not always easy depending on the range of skills present in a class.
- 2.2 In a unique partnership, class teachers in Highland have been working with Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) and other specialists to provide assessment and teaching materials that can enable teachers to respond to the literacy needs of each learner in their classes. Teachers have “developmental continuums” that give a map of the key skills and allow rapid assessment of the pattern of needs in the class. Linked to each skill are activities and strategies that incorporate the specialist knowledge of AHPs and others, but which have been tried and tested in real classrooms. The full range of resources can be found at [www.highlandliteracy.com/emergingliteracy](http://www.highlandliteracy.com/emergingliteracy), which has direct links from assessment to teaching practices. A summary “what to do” guide is presented in **Appendix 2**, and an example of a developmental continuum, that for phonological awareness, is presented in **Appendix 3**.
- 2.3 Parental involvement in early learning is essential, and the working group also developed and tested materials that schools can use to explain the developmental approach to parents and involve them in supporting their children’s literacy learning. This can be supplemented by existing resources such as the *Improving Literacy with Parental Involvement* pack developed by Psychological Services.

## 3. Testing and Roll-out

- 3.1 Any new approach needs to be carefully tested and introduced gradually so as not to disrupt existing good practice. A staged roll out of materials is therefore under way, allowing for adjustment and flexibility as we learn from teachers what works for them.
- 3.2 During May and June 2015, a series of awareness raising workshops were held around Highland to introduce the evidence and rationale for thinking about emerging literacy and to roll out the developmental continuums to help teachers plan for their incoming P1 pupils. There was attendance from 115 schools (65%), resulting in 83% of the pupils in Primary 1 having access to a practitioner who had received awareness raising and was familiar with the supporting materials.
- 3.3 In the session 2015/2016, a working group consisting of teachers and AHPs used feedback from teachers who had attended the awareness-raising to develop and test classroom materials and strategies. There was particular attention paid to sustainable ways of providing appropriate differentiation within a real class context – to improve effectiveness without disproportionate increases in teacher workload. Resources include materials suitable for Gaelic medium.
- 3.4 By summer 2016, the approach was therefore complete enough to allow a more sustained roll out. Comments from teachers indicated a strong welcome for the materials and methods, but that more support was needed to make best use of them. In response, 7 local practitioner networks have been set up all around Highland, supported by the Literary Officer, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and the early years educational psychologist. These help teachers to support each other in assessing and responding to the individual needs

in their classes. The learning from these sessions will allow more general guidance to be produced. Currently, as at October 2016, we have covered 2 rounds of networks, which include P1 teachers from 50 schools, reaching well over half of the P1 children in Highland. The networks have been very well received, with teachers now confidently and appropriately assessing and planning using concepts that used to be the preserve of AHPs and specialists.

- 3.5 We have further strengthened our partnerships this session across the Northern Alliance authorities, funded by the Education Scotland Innovation Fund. The Emerging Literacy development team are working with practitioners across Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Moray, Orkney, and Shetland to support sustainable practice in Emerging Literacy across the Northern Alliance partnership, with key cross-authority links between education, allied health professionals and educational psychologists. Funding from the Northern Alliance partnership has also enabled the sustained education input into the work in Highland during the 2016/2017 school session described here.
- 3.6 The local networks, along with work with the Northern Alliance, also allow systematic gathering of evidence of effectiveness that can be reported in future.

#### **4. Evidence for effectiveness**

- 4.1 Fully robust evidence for effectiveness of any educational intervention is difficult to gather. The gold standard of randomised control trials is expensive, and also results in delay in implementation. However, we do have indicative evidence that shows that a developmentally sensitive approach is both implementable and effective.
- 4.2 The working group gathered evidence from teachers through the 2015/16 session. Teachers reported that using the continuums provided structure and focus for their work, and that children who in the past might have struggled with reading or writing were making progress in the skills. For example, one P1 teacher reported that “I feel that my pupils are more confident and more motivated as they seem to all have made significant progress and a more solid foundation of basic skills.” Another remarked that this was the first time in many years of P1 teaching that all children had made progress.
- 4.3 Numerical data is also promising. Hilton Primary School tracked the development of children’s skills through P1 and also assessed reading and writing attainment at the end of the school session. They found that both P1 classes, despite a wide range of skills at school entry, were on average reading and spelling at age-appropriate levels by the end of the year. This is a remarkable result in a school with a relatively deprived catchment area. In addition, the initial “gap” in skills had been closed, such that children who were further behind at the start of session had mostly caught up.

#### **5. Future Plans**

- 5.1 This is an innovative development with potentially far reaching consequences for improving attainment for pupils, not just in P1 but through the course of their education, as successive learning is built on firm foundations in early skills. To embed the changes in practice, and ensure the potential reaches all P1 children in Highland requires a sustained process of support and dialogue, and will require focussed and dedicated input for at least another whole school session, including 2017/18.

## 5.2 Current priorities for development include:

- Using the learning from networks to compile Guidance for teachers and other practitioners
- Agreeing models for practice so that the developmental continuums can be used in Early Learning and Childcare Settings without risk of introducing inappropriately formal methods
- Providing consistent support to embed Emerging Literacy across the Authority
- Continued work with teachers, supported by Speech and Language Therapists to develop “key messages” for classroom practice
- Continuing to support the current networks and developing further ones through the session of 2017/18 to spread good practice and include more children and their teachers. This should become a self-sustaining process once there are enough confident teachers to support each other and those new to P1.

## 4. Implications

4.1 **Resources:** The Literacy Officer’s post is funded by the Northern Alliance and this may need review from February 2017. AHP input is provided from existing posts as part of the Ready to Act agenda.

4.2 **Gaelic:** Phonological awareness materials, including a screener, have been developed in Gaelic and are being tested in several schools in Highland and across the Northern Alliance

4.3 **Rural:** The materials are just as suitable for use in smaller rural schools with composite classes. Local practitioner networks cover all areas of Highland.

4.4 **Equalities:** The essence of the approach is to reduce the long term educational, financial and health impacts of inequalities at school entry, including those based on gender and deprivation, and this is assessed throughout.

4.5 There are no **legal, climate change/carbon clever** or **risk** implications.

## 5. Recommendation

5.1 Committee is invited to:

- Note the work done to support developmentally appropriate teaching and learning in literacy in the early level
- Note the unique partnership of education, health and other professionals in improving literacy outcomes for young children
- Note the developments across the Northern alliance and the lead role played by Highland staff in this
- Agree to endorse the direction of travel and agree to receive further reports on progress and effectiveness of the approach to emerging literacy.

Designation: Director of Care and Learning

Date: 10 October 2016

## Rationale for Emerging Literacy Approaches

There is increasing awareness nationally and in Highland of “gaps” in school attainment due to deprivation and, to a lesser extent, gender. While the gender gap tends to rapidly equalise or even reverse in terms of income and life chances, inequalities due to deprivation and poverty persist across generations with effects across nearly every area of life. Effective approaches to closing these gaps require early and sustained intervention. Some times of life are particularly critical for this, including early adolescence and the transition to young adulthood. However there is an extensive research consensus that the first few years of life, from pre-birth into middle primary school, offer the best hope for preventing, or reducing, inequalities in attainment based on life experiences.

Effective intervention also depends on an understanding of what the gap consists of. Abundant research shows that life outcomes are to some extent predictable from individual differences in key skills and developmental environments from at least school entry, and perhaps even by 18 months of age. The predictor skills include motor and language development, as well as cognitive aspects such as working memory and attention control. Individual differences in these skills at school entry to a large extent determine whether children can benefit from the teaching and learning in P1 onwards. For example, children who have lower awareness of the sounds in their language, and less skill in manipulating them, are likely to derive less benefit from a phonics programme, and children with relatively less secure fine motor skills might struggle to form letters fluently.

These differences are partly due to individual developmental experiences, and partly a result of biology. There is natural variation in the development of these skills, even in optimal environments. There is no sense in which children “should” – or are all likely to – arrive in P1 with emerging literacy skills all equally developed to a particular level. In fact, children at Primary 1 entry naturally vary in these underlying skills – some, especially boys, are less likely to have the full range of motor skills for handwriting, and many will happily recite nursery rhymes without explicit awareness of what a rhyme is. Thus prescriptive programmes (e.g., “learn 3 sounds a week”) risk to leaving some children behind, and unnecessarily restricting others, unless there is developmentally informed adaptation.

Reflecting on the processes involved in literacy shows why individual differences in these skills at school entry can lead to inequalities in attainment many years later. Writing involves a cluster of complex motor skills, including hand-eye co-ordination and a strong pincer grip. Writing words requires an understanding of language, both of vocabulary and structure. Spelling – finding the right letter to represent a sound – cannot happen without awareness of the sounds in a language and how to split up words into sounds. And writing comprehensibly depends on simple knowledge such as word spaces, as well as complex skills such as keeping the reader in mind.

Common sense, and international evidence, thus suggests that matching teaching and learning to the developmental status of the children in a given class is likely to lead to most progress in the medium and long term. For example, Shapiro and colleagues (2008) found that supplementing an evidence-based phonic programme in the first year of school with work to develop children’s oral phonological skills resulted in a near elimination of preventable literacy difficulties three years later.

This document has been created to support practitioners who aim to take a developmental approach to Literacy. Click on the images below and the hyperlinks to access the support resources available on the [Highland Literacy Blog](#).

### Developmental Overviews



Nursery 4 children in Highland have a [4 year old Developmental Overview](#) completed before they transition into school.

At the beginning of Primary 1, Highland recommends that Class Teachers use the information from the Developmental Overviews to plug any yellow (still developing) or blank (not yet developed) gaps.

The [bumps to bairns](#) site can be used to support practitioners in plugging gaps.

Use the [Expressive Language](#) and [Understanding of Language](#) continuums to track children's Oral Language development.

Oral Language



The [Words Up Key Messages](#) can be used to support Oral Language development of children working within the Early Level. Access the '[Building Vocabulary for Better Literacy](#)' for vocabulary teaching resources.

Use the [Pre-Handwriting continuum](#) to assess children's fine motor, scissor and pre-writing skills prior to formal handwriting instruction.

Pre-Handwriting Skills



Click on the [Pre-Handwriting Skills blog page](#) for practical classroom and home activities. The [Fine Motor Skills handout](#) provides practical starting points.

The [Concepts of Print](#) continuum can be used to assess learners' skills in book handling; picture and story comprehension; looking and recognising; and writing and story reading behaviours.

Concepts of Print



Each section of the continuum provides practical support strategies.

To assess learners use the [Phonological Awareness Screen](#) and [Picture Book](#).

Phonological Awareness



Once you have identified the gaps within the [Phonological Awareness continuum](#), click on the area the child is to develop on the [Phonological Awareness blog page](#) to access classroom activities.



To support schools in sharing the [Emerging Literacy](#) approaches and materials with families, a [family learning resource](#) has been created. This could be used with families during the Nursery – Primary 1 transition meeting or during a Family Literacy event. Each slide comes with comprehensive notes for the facilitator and links to suggested resources on the [Highland Literacy Blog](#).

## Phonological Awareness Developmental Continuum

Phonological Awareness refers to sounds **not** letters, it is spoken **not** written

**Be careful:** The developmental order below is **not completely** linear as children continue to refine earlier skills whilst learning later skills. Remember to take a holistic view of each child and be flexible to skip or review stages as required.

