

*Picture Books to Support the Teaching of Disciplinary Literacy in the
Primary School Classroom*

Lorraine Lawrance, Mary Immaculate College, Ireland

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the use of picture books in relation to the burgeoning area of disciplinary literacy in the Irish primary school context. At the centre of this research is the recognition that picture books play a central role in teaching and learning across the curriculum in primary schools; with this research deciphering whether picture books may aid disciplinary literacy learning as a child-friendly mode for exploring and teaching the language associated with the various disciplines. With the first mention of disciplinary literacy appearing in our recently published Primary Language Curriculum (2019) immediately followed by the interruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers are yet to discover how this ideology may transpire into every day planning and practice. This case study-led piece of research uses a professional learning community model to engage practitioners in discourse in relation to disciplinary literacy, the use of picture books and teacher planning and preparation for teaching. The Irish curricula is currently in a period of drastic reform, with the Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) laying the foundations of what is yet to come, this research considers the most up-to-date expectations from our National Council for Curriculum Design and Assessment at the cusp of the dissemination and transfer into practice of a completely new curricula. Seeing the teacher as ‘the curriculum maker’, this research thoroughly explores the position of disciplinary literacy in a series of primary settings by working with teachers to identify the ways in which educators can plan for disciplinary literacy in a meaningful and purposeful way.

Keywords: Disciplinary Literacy, Picture Books, Teacher Planning, Professional Learning Communities

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Introduction

Disciplinary literacy involves the development of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills specific to a given subject. In a recent review of literature relating to disciplinary literacy, Burke and Welsh (2018) reported that the disciplinary literacy approach requires literacy teaching to fulfil the needs of a particular discipline, complementing and enhancing the modes of thinking and communicating that are characteristic within that discipline (Moje 2007, 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008; Siebert et al. 2016). By using a literacy-based skillset, practitioners can, for example, assist pupils to add background knowledge to a scientific inquiry or provide authentic primary and secondary sources in an historical investigation. However, if disciplinary literacy is to take place within the primary classroom, it will need to be planned for carefully. The foundation for good teaching and learning is purposive teacher planning. This study seeks to investigate the development of teacher planning in relation the burgeoning area of disciplinary literacy. When the aims and objectives of current and new curricula are recognised and understood, the need for functional teacher planning documents will be an essential component for the effective delivery of a disciplinary approach. This is the gap which the researcher hopes to address.

Very few recent studies carried out in relation to disciplinary literacy recognise fully the role that picture books may play in teacher planning (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2014; Siebert et al, 2016, Spires et al, 2012). However, a study by Dawson et. al (2021) highlights the significant role that picture books can play in children's language. Some may argue that it may be more beneficial to invest in research that concentrates on the scope for using picture books within the primary language curriculum as it stands; however, having studied the curriculum document in-depth and in acknowledgment of the gap in curricular linkage, it seems well poised to locate this research within the current paradigm of overall curricular change. Furthermore, the researcher has a longstanding desire to explore the meaningful integration of literacy across the disciplines through the building blocks of good teaching and learning: planning. At the centre of this research will be an investigation into the development of teacher planning for disciplinary literacy using picture books, working with and alongside teachers in the process. To inform my own macro level understanding of the position, status and role of disciplinary literacy within the new and emerging primary framework, I will also connect with the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) and the National Council for Curriculum Design and Assessment (NCCA). These educational bodies will comprise a primary level of data collection: questionnaires/on-line interviews if possible.

From initial research, it seems that the presence of The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011- 2020) with its increase in the time allocation and centrality of these core subjects had led to a dilution of other curricular areas. With international best practice looking toward the emerging effect and implications that disciplinary literacy at primary level may offer, significant consideration must be given to the practical implementation of this endeavour. The knowledge and experiences of PDST facilitators and NCCA personnel will also be explored through questionnaire/interview which will be sent to all facilitators as well as a preliminary cover letter. The questionnaire will serve to provide a nuanced account of how the new curriculum is being presented to teachers as a pivot towards disciplinary learning emerges. While the literature on the effects of disciplinary literacy using picture books as central texts is limited, it is argued that in coming years, with the revision of other curricular areas and the full roll out of the primary language curriculum, the topic will be of popular consideration by schools and by researchers. However, is the quality of information provided by such groups translating into current

teacher planning and classroom practice? It seems that while our awareness of best practice in literacy has dramatically increased in recent years, our understanding of how to plan effectively for it has not developed simultaneously. Advisors for reformed primary language curriculum have advocated for the use of high quality picture books in schools in order to achieve a dialogic classroom (Courtney and Gleeson, 2009, Roche, 2014, Primary Language Curriculum Support Material for Teachers, 2018) This research study however will explore the reality of that rhetoric. It will consider the possibilities for placing high quality picture books at the centre of the move towards disciplinary literacy practices in Irish primary school settings.

Burke and Welsh (2016) note that teaching literacy from a disciplinary perspective would present a number of challenges for the Irish school context. If disciplinary literacy was to be a more prominent feature in the primary curriculum, the professional development needs of teachers would warrant careful consideration. Disciplinary literacy wields demands on practitioner pedagogical content knowledge (Carney and Indrisano 2013; Love 2009). Therefore, preparation for disciplinary literacy requires the establishment of deep and meaningful connections amongst the discipline and related literacy practices (Fang 2014). The use of narrative, fictional texts as reading material would also necessitate deliberation. Data from the 2014 National Assessment of English Reading and Mathematics (Kavanagh et al. 2015) reveal that teachers use informational texts considerably less frequently than narrative texts. This factor would require further consideration by the researcher through an in-depth picture book research review and interactions with professional curriculum and teacher bodies. The researcher recognises that a broad range of texts, in different formats and modalities, would be necessary for use across the curriculum.

Traditionally, cross curricular planning has a regular heading in teacher's planning documents. Teachers have always strived to connect curricular content whether it be thematically or loosely linked (Curriculum na Bunscoile, 1999, Planning documents). The transition towards disciplinary literacy across the curriculum would carry a number of potential advantages. Burke and Welsh (2013) note that disciplinary literacy, by its very nature requires intrinsic links between literacy and the different subject areas represented in the curriculum. Literacy, however must not become a mere 'add-on which can be universally applied to any content' (Piercy and Piercy 2011, 72). Planning and preparation for a disciplinary literacy approach to teaching should come first in order to ensure that the 'intrinsic links' are substantial, well-considered and worthwhile. A disciplinary approach with its focus on important critical thinking and literacy skills also fosters an inquiry-based classroom culture. It will interesting to see how this might be captured in planning documents and teacher discussions. Moje (2007) states that linking disciplinary knowledge and literacy empowers young people to read, write and think critically. Furthermore, the application of literacy in authentic contexts for authentic purposes has been shown to motivate learners. It could also be argued that an explicit focus on language in the disciplines would aid the growing number of English language learners in Irish schools (Fang et al. 2014).

Of course, the availability and provision of dedicated teacher planning time slots in schools is a factor in the creation and development of teacher planning. This will also be considered in this study. In the UK, teachers are provided weekly planning slots within their school day which is relieved by another member of staff. If such a system were employed here in Ireland, perhaps our disciplinary planning would be able to reach new heights. After all, the Looking at our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools states that excellence in teaching is the most powerful influence on pupil achievement. It acknowledges career-long

professional development as central to the teacher's work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart. The framework holds that improving the quality of pupils' learning should be the main driver of teacher learning. These statements require, at their heart, explicit teacher planning.

A further consideration in this study will be the provision of funding for books in Irish Schools. Burke (2019) detailed a grim discovery when conducting research into Irish libraries and a decrease in funding for both schools and libraries since 2008. Following the establishment of the Robert Dunbar Memorial Libraries in 2017, a book-gifting programme, it was immediately flooded with 300 applications from schools across the country. With this in mind, and having seen first-hand the will of librarians to foster effective partnerships with school communities, the researcher hopes to bring to the fore the different ways in which libraries may facilitate the development of disciplinary literacy planning in schools.

This study will be conducted in the context of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020). In this Draft Framework there is evidence pointing toward a disciplinary literacy outlook with the merging and reclassification of subjects. This points towards the timely nature of this research study and the need for collaborative, open-ended research study with teachers.

Methodology

The proposed research will focus on the experiences, desires and beliefs of teachers in their practice and therefore must be qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2009; Denscombe, 2007; Punch, 2009). It will take the form of a case study. Bell (2014) denotes that case studies may be carried out to follow up and to put flesh on the bones of a survey. Case studies may also precede a survey, setting the scene and can be used as a means of identifying key issues which merit further investigation. However, most case studies are carried out as free-standing exercises.

Yin, Merriam, and Stake are three foundational methodologists in case study research. Cronin (2014) says that defining case study research remains problematic because a case study can constitute both a design and a research method. The terms 'case study', 'case study method' and 'case method' seem to be used interchangeably in the literature (Hamel et al 1993, Yin 2009). However, it is clear that case study research focuses on specific situations, outlining a picture of individual or multiple cases. In using this design, the researcher can explore 'everything' in that situation, be it individuals, groups, activities or a specific singularity.

Thorough planning and preparation are key to the presentation of case studies. Case study research seeks an in-depth understanding of an individual case (or series of cases) that is illustrative of an area/problem of interest. Rapley (2018) acknowledges that teacher practice can only be changed and enhanced if the underlying reasons for practices are enacted, and the influence of the place and people in a site, is understood. Only then can the advancement of teacher pedagogic practice take place. In relation to this study, it is hoped that through exploration and collaboration with practitioners and other educational personnel, teacher practice may indeed see some reform.

Sampling

This criterion is derived from the research question. This study's central research question asks; how can teacher planning be enhanced to work across the disciplines and is there a place for high quality picture books as a central basis for this planning. The sampling proposes will involve the researcher engaging with a set of practitioners through a series of teaching and planning meetings, discussing what does the translation of planning into practice look like?

Reflexivity

A crucial component of any qualitative research project is reflexivity. Maynard (2018) states that research is not about intervention, but rather it is about maintaining that ethical stance and taking care of people that you are researching with. In her SAGE research methods video excerpt, Maynard talks about the three R's; rapport, resilience and reflexivity. Rapport is about how you build a relationship in a research environment with people. Resilience is that pliability which comes from you as a researcher. Reflexivity questions, do you know how you are going to be able to respond and use those unique human stories that come to you in a way that really gives you some authentic learning? The three R's require careful consideration by the researcher and an allowance by the researcher to grow into that research role using a set of principles. This will form the backbone of the researcher's work.

Data Collection

The data will be collected in surroundings familiar to educators which should allow participants to act normally. Reflective diaries, observations, case studies, focus groups, questionnaires and interviews will comprise the data collection instruments used. These methodological tools reflect the values and characteristics of the study at hand. The researcher will ensure that the data is accessed, collected and managed in line with Mary Immaculate College's ethical guidelines and will have sought approval from the university's ethical committee prior to approaching any participants regarding their involvement in the proposed research.

Reflective diaries are an essential tool of the teacher researcher. The researcher has already begun using this reflective research tool in the formulation of this proposal. As a Reading Recovery teacher, the researcher holds a strong background in note taking, carefully observing the child at every turn of the lesson. This methodology has proven informative, functional and worthwhile and has shown to make a significant difference to both learner outcome and teacher practice. This tool will be employed throughout this research project. Furthermore, the researcher has some experience in educational research which may prove beneficial to this study. When the researcher conducted her M. Ed and research relating to Building Bridges of Understanding (2009) she conducted interviews and questionnaires as well as transcribing pupil responses using computer software. In this research, the researcher will observe and document the type, frequency and pattern of teacher responses to planning, the transfer of planning to practice and the identification of disciplinary links, supporting and guiding where necessary. Furthermore, Moje's (2015) heuristic for disciplinary literacy teaching may prove a helpful guide for considering what disciplinary literacy teaching must include and why (See Appendix 3).

Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis throughout this project will be iterative. Through repeated reading and consistent comparison methods of interpretive analysis, repeated phenomena will be identified (Burke, 2018). Qualitative research methods have been criticised for their apparent lack of validity and reliability in scientific terms (Strunk, 2020). However, the validity and reliability of qualitative studies do not rely solely on method and can only be confirmed if the experiences of participants are related accurately (Mertler, 2017). The validity and reliability of this research project will also be aided by the triangulation methods used throughout in relation to site and sample selection, data collection methods, and theoretical foundations.

It is envisaged that the proposed research project will span over a four-year period with year one being dedicated to research reading, skills development and project planning.

Conclusion

The quality of teaching and learning is central to confident teaching and in order to achieve this, effective and user friendly planning tools must be made available to practitioners. A disciplinary literacy approach requires that the literacy needs and methods of each subject be studied in unison. In this thesis, the researcher will examine the capacity for ‘tightening up’ the curriculum, in so far as this study will allow, in order to demonstrate that disciplinary literacy is the most effective way forward in terms of teacher planning. The Primary Curriculum Framework Document, which is due to be published in 2021, will serve to guide this research. We, as educators, must assist our colleagues to maintain high standards of teaching and learning in Irish classrooms. Through such example, educators play a vital role in the creation of a standard of teaching which continues to foster well-rounded pupils with a life-long love for learning. This research suggests a viable means of fusing current policy and practice in order to investigate the effectiveness of teacher planning documents that can be used for disciplinary planning. Such practical planning documents are essential for the effective delivery of high-quality teaching and learning. Research, upon which our future curricula is founded, has emphasised the need for teacher planning to be embedded across the disciplines. When disciplinary classroom environments are created and developed, learning experiences of all involved could be greatly enhanced. Disciplinary literacy is a relatively recent phenomenon. As a result, its application at the primary level is the focus of continuing research which the researcher hopes to contribute to.

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