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Note: the term 'Project' (initial capital) refers to the collaborative activity of the thematic network. The term 'project' (lower case) refers to the four national projects which are brought together by the network.

Abstract

Early Literacy in Context is the report of a two year Thematic Network connecting researchers into Early Literacy in the UK, Greece, Italy and Spain. Fully funded by the European Commission's DGXII, under the Targeted Socio-Economic Research initiative, the Network has operated through meetings, including shared observation of classrooms in action, and exchange of written texts, as well as telephone, fax, post and e-mail. The Network's prime concern has been to explore the context-dependent nature of practices in early teaching and learning.

Specifically the Network has brought together projects in the four countries, all concerned to develop innovatory practice in early teaching of literacy to children in the 4 - 6 age range. All the four projects share the same central informing ideas:

— Very young children (from four years or earlier), even those at the margins of their societies, are interested in written language and its use, and capable of developing powerful ideas about it (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979).

— The act of reading involves "simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing" (Rumelhart 1977) - that is reading involves the generation of expectations about the text in general and particular sections, sentences and phrases, and at the same time the recognition of letter shapes, letter strings and common words. Data at one level are used to generate hypotheses at other levels. So to learn effectively, children need to attend to what a text is saying and what its function is, as well as to the letters on the page and their relation to speech sounds.

— Following Vygotsky (1978), learning is seen as an essentially social and collaborative process, in which, aided by proficient practitioners and by their own peers, learners engage in tasks which would be beyond their individual independent capacity. Participation in this collaborative activity develops the capacity to perform such tasks independently.

However, the very different contexts - social, political and educational - in which the projects operate have resulted in these shared ideas being realised in very different ways. While the operation of the Project has enabled the participants to observe many important commonalities in addition to differences in terms of communicative style, genre and provenance of texts used, they have also observed many differences, for example in the balance between encouraging children to construct theories about the workings of the written word, and instructing children through making these processes explicit, and differences of emphasis on the form and function of written language.

Such differences have led the participants to conclude:

— At a time when a number of the EU's member states are moving towards highly centralised control of the curriculum, this project indicates the necessity of taking a contextualised view of the pedagogy of literacy teaching, while striving towards an agreed view of the goals of literacy education, and of the dynamics that shape its processes.

— In particular, it is evident from all projects that substantial innovation requires much more than administrative action or political pronouncement. For teachers to develop a well founded pedagogy that answers to the demands of their particular situations, a profound change of attitude is required, in relation to children, each other, researchers and ideas of what constitutes an active, productive literacy.

Section 1 Executive Summary

1a Aims and Objectives

The aims of this Network were to:

- contribute to the establishment in the EU of a _shared knowledge base_ on educational innovations in the area of early literacy teaching and learning, including a focus on children from marginalised groups;
- share and enlarge the perspectives, understandings and sense of what is possible in terms of early literacy teaching and learning, both of those involved in the research and also, of other researchers, of teachers, of teacher educators and of administrators in the various countries of the EC;
- enhance the quality of early primary education in literacy, particularly for children from marginalised groups.

The Network operated through the exchange of perceptions and understandings rather than quantified data. In concrete terms the objectives of the Network were to produce:

- observational and interpretative reports from a European perspective of four projects on early literacy teaching and learning in four member states of the European Union;
- video material on these projects, again from a European perspective;
- a publication on issues arising from the four projects and from the Network.

1b Context and methodology of the network

The Network linked the four existing projects which the four participants were currently operating. These projects all concerned the teaching and learning of literacy, and all operated through some sort of action research case study, reflecting institutional and other cultural influences in the countries concerned. The methodology adopted for the Network was observational and interpretative, achieving its validity through the processes of triangulation and the preservation of primary observational data in video form.

Perceptions and ideas were exchanged by means of:

- the exchange of key texts between the four partners;
- the exchange of videos, sound tapes, transcripts and other observational data, plus copies of children's writing and texts read by them;
- communication by telephone, E-mail and fax;
- twice yearly meetings, each of one week's duration, over a period of two years, for the purposes of visiting classrooms, talking with teachers and the collective examination and editing of video material, other observational data and texts read and written by children, plus discussion of informing ideas for a joint publication.

The four projects linked by the Network had a number of features in common, some of which only became fully apparent during the course of the Project (see 3g below). In particular, they shared a basis of collaborative action research in which the researchers worked with teachers to help them become more reflective practitioners, and to draw on their perspectives and perceptions.

1c Major findings

In the course of the Network activities, a high degree of commonality in the conceptions informing the various projects emerged. These include ideas stemming from a number of seminal figures in the area, whose key works date from some twenty years ago, but whose influence on official, national conceptions of the teaching and learning of reading and writing has been slow, despite productive innovation in particular areas. Those of most significance to the Network's participants have been:

— Very young children (from four years or earlier), even those at the margins of their societies, are interested in written language and its use, and capable of developing powerful ideas about it (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979).

— The act of reading involves "simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing" (Rumelhart 1977) - that is reading involves the generation of expectations about the text in general and particular sections, sentences and phrases, and at the same time the recognition of letter shapes, letter strings and common words. Data at one level are used to generate hypotheses at other levels. So to learn effectively, children need to attend to what a text is saying and what its function is, as well as to the letters on the page and their relation to speech sounds.

— Following Vygotsky (1978), learning is seen as an essentially social and collaborative process, in which, aided by proficient practitioners and by their own peers, learners engage in tasks which would be beyond their individual independent capacity. Participation in this collaborative activity develops the capacity to perform such tasks independently.

Where the participants have differed has been mainly in the particular contexts in which they work. These prompt differing emphases and points of entry to the written word. In the UK the complex nature of the orthographic system, the early age at which formal schooling starts and the intense national anxiety concerning early independence and fluency in reading and writing have meant that there is a particular interest to help children towards mastery of the code, albeit in a way that recognises that much more than this is involved in learning to read. By contrast in Italy the spelling system is more straightforward, the age of starting formal schooling is later and there appears to be less public anxiety about standards of fluency and independence in reading and writing in the early years. Consequently innovative practice in Italy places much greater emphasis on the construction (through dictation) of a range of texts than it does on developing mastery of the code.

Through visits to schools, close examination and analysis of video material and the exchange of perceptions and ideas, the meetings have enabled the participants to understand some of the reasons determining the particular forms the projects take in the different national sites. The participants now understand each other's contexts better, and therefore each other's projects. The meetings have also raised important questions such as:

— What counts as success - in the teachers' eyes, the eyes of the children and those of their parents?

— What determines if a purpose (for reading or writing) is seen as 'real' or 'authentic'?

— Does explicit attention to the code at an early age necessarily impede children's development as protagonists?

— What is the role of demonstration in the different projects?

They have given the participants the opportunity to explore these in ways that challenge some of the assumptions they bring to the process of researching in this area. These assumptions have also been challenged by the different national perspectives brought to bear on the practices of one project. For example the meeting in England foregrounded and called into question the way in which in England narrative is privileged among other text types. Similarly, the Italian meeting questioned the assumption that it is always counterproductive to embark on teaching children about the code until they have a wide experience of using different text types for a range of different purposes.

Another feature has been the enlargement of the participants' theoretical concerns. The meeting in the UK brought to the fore the work of Goswami and Bryant (1990) on the development of phonological awareness, and the role of

analogy in the child's learning of the code. This permits a view of 'code-breaking' as a learning process in which the child can operate with a higher degree of autonomy than traditional 'phonics' teaching permits. The work of the socio-linguist MAK Halliday has been shown to add another useful dimension, in permitting the analysis of linguistic interaction in general and pedagogic interaction in particular on an interpersonal dimension as well as the ideational dimension that deals with propositional knowledge.

1d Conclusions and Policy Implications

Through application of the analytical framework to data on the early literacy projects of the four different countries, the work of the Thematic Network has identified the key features, informing ideas and assumptions shaping each project, together with those features of the context that appear to influence the form taken. In particular, interrogation of practice seen through classroom visits and video of classroom interactions, has enabled the participants to develop greater awareness of the often unstated assumptions on which practice depends. Through this process the participants have enlarged and refined their ideas of what productive early literacy - active and interactive - teaching and learning can look like, and of the ideas on which various innovative practices rest.

The participants have been continually impressed by:

- the variety of written texts that pervade the lives of young children, even those living in difficult socio-economic circumstances;
- the lack of confidence many parents feel with respect to the written word and to their capacity to help children become familiar with it;
- parents' willingness to collaborate with schools to support and extend their children's literacy learning;
- the interest of young children in making sense of and constructing written text;
- their capacity to develop ideas both about the function of particular texts and about the relationship between written and spoken language;
- the value of group teaching and learning in creating a social dynamic that increases motivation and enables individuals to operate on a higher intellectual plane;
- the importance of providing children with the opportunity to make sense of and construct texts which deal with problems, issues and topics which are of real concern to them;
- the beneficial effects of ensuring that children learn about the workings of the orthographic code in the context of making use of meaningful text;
- the beneficial effects of ensuring that such learning gives children the opportunity to make and test their own hypotheses about how the system works;
- the capacity of teachers to observe and listen to children, to validate their acts of hypothesis construction and to provide them with the kind of feedback that promotes the development and refinement of understanding;
- the capacity of teachers to construct situations which promote an active, confident and purposeful attitude to learning about the workings of written language;
- the capacity of teachers to develop productive and respectful relationships with parents that promote a more coherent introduction to the written word for their children;
- the beneficial effects of in-service support which respects the autonomy of teachers while introducing them to new ways of conceptualising children, literacy and the written language;
- the beneficial effects of teachers working to improve literacy teaching and learning through collaboration with each other, with children and with parents;

— the beneficial effects of an action research approach which encourages teachers to develop a cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action, in researching work in their own classrooms.

Yet in each context these features have been realised in different ways . It would seem that while the four projects share many underlying assumptions, the way in which these are interpreted and how they are seen to relate to each other differ markedly. Particular contexts orient practitioners towards particular emphases and interpretations, placing, for example greater emphasis on children's autonomy as independent readers and writers at an early age, or on children's autonomy as learners.

The following questions arise out of these considerations of difference.

- i Do different contexts require a different balance between the construction of theories by the child on the one hand and the explicitation of processes by the teacher on the other?
- ii Given that the construction by the child of successive theories about how written language works is a slow process, do children from different socio-cultural backgrounds have different needs in terms of early literacy learning, if all children are to achieve mastery over the written word ?
- iii Given that in tackling a text, successful literacy learners engage in a simultaneous multi-level process, ranging from the development of ideas about its social function and the construction of meaning, through the detection of linguistic and orthographic patterns to the identification of letters, should literacy pedagogy take a similarly multi-level form, or should teachers focus on particular levels at particular points in children's literacy learning?
- iv Do the different orthographic systems pose, at a certain point in literacy learning, different problems, demanding pedagogies which draw attention to different phonological levels: words, syllables, intra-syllabic units or phonemes?
- v Do the more complex and less regular orthographic systems demand a pedagogy which includes more direction and explicitation by the teacher?
- vi Early literacy learning is not the introduction of children to a neutral skill or technology, but each text is concerned with values, either implied or stated explicitly. Consequently, at the same time as working on mastery of the orthographic code and the construction of significant meaning, should we also be paying attention to these values?
- vii Does narrative have a central role to play in literacy teaching and learning?
- viii What sort of in-service education will encourage teachers to develop, not a mechanical conformity, but a spirit of productive collaboration, based on shared understandings?
- ix What are the most effective strategies for sensitising teachers to a more constructive and interactive approach to early literacy teaching and learning?
- x How can we develop home-school relations to bring about a real 'horizontal continuity' that respects both the written culture of the home and parents' potential to develop their conceptions of early literacy learning?
- xi How are parents' attitudes to their children's teachers in the crucial early years of literacy learning influenced by the fact that in different

countries they have different expectations of the early years of literacy learning? For example in the UK parents have been encouraged for many decades in the expectation that their children will learn to read and write at an early age, whereas there is not the same pattern of expectation in Italy or Greece.

xii How can schools prepare children to master the literacies of the future? That is how can schools recognise and integrate into early literacy learning the multiplicity of languages and modes of representation, such as advertising, television, CD Rom, multimedia, which constitute the rapidly developing communication systems of the world today?

Through consideration of these questions, two important conclusions have emerged:

— At a time when a number of the EU's member states are moving towards highly centralised control of the curriculum, this project indicates the necessity of taking a contextualised view of the pedagogy of literacy teaching, while striving towards an agreed view of the goals of literacy education, and of the dynamics that shape its processes.

— In particular, it is evident from all projects that substantial innovation requires much more than administrative action or political pronouncement. For teachers to develop a well founded pedagogy that answers to the demands of their particular situations, a profound change of attitude is required, in relation to children, each other, researchers and ideas of what constitutes an active, productive literacy.

1e Dissemination and/or Exploitation of Results
During the lifetime of the project, the dissemination strategy has been to present the project and its findings at a series of conferences for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, advisers and administrators, in different EU countries. Some of these have resulted or will result in published papers (see Annex 1). Now that the project is finished, further publications are planned in a range of national and international journals. The completed video is also an important means of diffusion.

Result	Partners Involved	Exploitation intention	
The context-dependent nature of innovative early literacy practices			H. Dombey
	C.G. Colmenares		
	M.P. Formisano		
	G.V. Skoura	Conference	
Video			
Autonomy in early literacy learning - different realisations in different contexts			H. Dombey
	M.P. Formisano	Presentation at EECERA Munich Conference and published article	
		In service Education for change in Early Literacy Learning	H. Dombey
	C.G. Colmenares	Presentation at EECERA Santiago Conference and published article	
		Children as collaborative protagonists	H. Dombey
	G.V. Skoura	Presentation at 1999 Bera Conference and published article	

As the list of publications and conference presentations in Annex 1 indicates, findings from the Project have been presented to conferences in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, extending the awareness of teachers, teacher educators, researchers and decision makers of the way in which context shapes the interpretation of shared theoretical ideas.

In each of the four countries concerned the impact of the national project has been noted.

_ In Italy the project has elicited much interest in those responsible for pre-school education in various parts of the country. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, responsible for Italy's primary schools, has invited Dott. Marina Pascucci Formisano to work with its officers to develop ways of extending these approaches into the years of formal schooling. This will involve both further research and in-service courses for teachers.

_ In the UK the pedagogic procedures developed in the project are now embedded in the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Brighton, which has a high reputation in this field, and consequent influence on other institutions. They have also become an integral part of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in the Local Education Authorities of East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, and are exciting interest in other parts of the UK. Research is continuing to extend and refine the analysis of classroom literacy interactions.

_ In Spain the pedagogy developed in the project now informs the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Valladolid. Furthermore, the four teachers' centres of the Palencia region are planning a collaboration with some 50 of the region's nursery teachers (nearly all those who participate in the teachers' centre activities) to bring to their classrooms a more innovative approach to their teaching of reading, along the lines developed in the project. This in-service work will take the form of action research, in which the teachers develop and extend the classroom practices of the project.

_ In Greece the project nursery has become a place for a pilot programme of teacher training in the project's approach to active literacy teaching and learning. The ideas developed in the project have also informed courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The in-service courses are planned to take the form of action research, so that the participating teachers will be encouraged to develop and extend the practices of the project.

Furthermore, the project is providing an excellent example of greater classroom interaction and increased involvement of children in the construction of their own learning, at a time when there is considerable ministerial interest in a change of didactic approach in such a direction.

Thus all these projects are proving productive in developing practice in their own countries, and engendering further research. The thematic network has permitted the exploration of underlying issues which have aroused and continue to arouse interest in the four participating countries and in other countries of Europe.

1f List of Agreed Deliverables

1 Observational and interpretive reports from a European perspective of the four projects on early literacy and teaching in four member states of the European Union (See Section 3 of this report);

2 Video material on these projects (See Annexe 1 of this report);

3 A publication on issues arising from the four projects and from the thematic network (See Annexe 1 of this report)

Section 2 Background and Objectives of the Project

This Network was set up to connect four action research projects into early literacy teaching and learning currently being carried out in England, Italy, Spain and Greece. Each of these projects was funded within the country concerned. The funding from DGXII was solely for the Network which brought them into communication with each other. Compared to the other projects funded under the TSER initiative, Early Literacy in Context was a very modest enterprise.

Throughout the European Union, literacy is seen as a pressing concern. Success and failure in literacy teaching carry implications for the economic and social well-being of the Union. The most important phase of literacy learning is arguably that which takes place during, or even before the first years of formal schooling. But the four Project partners did not approach this topic in a quantitative enquiry, nor did they seek to develop a homogenised European pedagogy. The Network was not intended:

- to establish quantified data on what is learnt and taught in the four countries concerned, useful though such an enterprise would be.
- to contribute towards establishing a best practice for Europe, a single pedagogic strategy that maximises the learning of children in all countries.

Although there exist internationally agreed measures of literacy learning such as those used by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in surveys of reading (Elley 1992), their use tends to provoke controversy among educators. In part at least this is because different countries think of success in different terms, placing emphasis on different aspects of reading, ranging from the identification of literal meaning to thinking extensively with the aid of the written word. Furthermore within each country there are competing views of the aims of literacy teaching and of the best means for achieving these. What counts as literacy and literacy learning are affected by the values of the society in which that learning takes place, by the nature and status of the written language in that society, and by the history of its educational institutions. So it is highly unlikely that what 'works' in one society is readily transportable to another.

Nevertheless research carried out in Europe and elsewhere over the last twenty years has established a foundation of shared understanding about the processes of literacy learning - shared between researchers, and also increasingly between teachers engaged in innovative practice. But the ways in which these shared understandings are interpreted differ, often quite dramatically, between different countries, not always in ways readily traceable to unalterable circumstances. So we still have much to learn much from one another.

Hence the chief aim of the Network was to contribute to the establishment in the EU of a 'shared knowledge base' on educational innovations in the area of early literacy teaching and learning, including a focus on children from marginalised groups through:

- interpretative 'European' accounts of the four projects, informed by the differing perspectives of the four participants, as well as by their shared understandings concerning the value of literacy, the process of reading and the process of learning to read;
- video material arising from these projects, edited and with commentaries from a European perspective.

The English term 'literacy' was capable of a range of definitions, and has no direct equivalent in the Network's other languages. But the participants shared a view of the kind of competences with written language they were working to promote. The literacy learning they were concerned with is something larger than what is conveyed by the Italian term 'alfabetizzazione' or its equivalents in Spanish and Greek. The participants see learning to read and write as more than mastering the code that connects spoken words to their written equivalents.

They make more use of the Greek the word 'protagonist'. In their view and that of many researchers and educators in Europe and elsewhere, even at the early stages of their literacy learning, children can and need to learn to do more with print than simply lift the words from the page, or answer questions posed by others on the propositional content of texts. They need to learn to take an active role in putting written texts to use for purposes that inform and enlarge their lives. In their various projects within their own countries the participants are concerned to help children gain an active command of an enquiring and critical literacy. The participants also share a particular concern with the literacy of children from marginalised groups.

Specifically the aims of this Network were to:

- contribute to the establishment in the EU of a _shared knowledge base_ on educational innovations in the area of early literacy teaching and learning, including a focus on children from marginalised groups;
- share and enlarge the perspectives, understandings and sense of what is possible in terms of early literacy teaching and learning, both of those involved in the research and also, of other researchers, of teachers, of teacher educators and of administrators in the various countries of the EC;
- enhance the quality of early primary education in literacy, particularly for children from marginalised groups.

The Network operated through the exchange of perceptions and understandings rather than quantified data. In concrete terms the objectives of the Network were to produce:

- observational and interpretative reports from a European perspective of four projects on early literacy teaching and learning in four member states of the European Union;
- video material on these projects, again from a European perspective;
- a publication on issues arising from the four projects and from the Network.

Section 3 Scientific Description of Project Results and Methodology

3a Context and methodology of the network

The Network linked the four existing projects which the four participants were currently operating. These projects all concerned the teaching and learning of literacy, and all operated through some sort of action research case study, reflecting institutional and other cultural influences in the countries concerned. The methodology adopted for the Network was observational and interpretative, achieving its validity through the processes of triangulation and the preservation of primary observational data in video form.

Perceptions and ideas were exchanged by means of:

- the exchange of key texts between the four partners;
- the exchange of videos, sound tapes, transcripts and other observational data, plus copies of children's writing and texts read by them;
- communication by telephone, E-mail and fax;
- twice yearly meetings, each of one week's duration, over a period of two years, for the purposes of visiting classrooms, talking with

teachers and the collective examination and editing of video material, other observational data and texts read and written by children, plus discussion of informing ideas for a joint publication.

The four projects linked by the Network had a number of features in common, some of which only became fully apparent during the course of the Project (see 3g below). In particular, they shared a basis of collaborative action research in which the researchers worked with teachers to help them become more reflective practitioners, and to draw on their perspectives and perceptions.

3b An analytical framework for comparing the four projects
In the course of the first two meetings, the framework for presentation and analysis of the four national projects was agreed as follows:

- i General description
- ii Context of the project
- iii Aims
- v Actions undertaken
- vi Sample of the project in action
- vii Impact
- viii Indicators of success
- ix Questions posed by the project
- x Key features

3c The Italian project

i General description

The project was fully funded by Universit_ La Sapienza, Roma and the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche. It involved 12 classes of children aged four to six years in the urban centres of Roma, Genova, Modena and Pesaro, in pre-schools where there is a significant population of children of immigrant parents. In Genova these non-indigenous children are mainly from African, Arab and Latin American backgrounds, in Rome they are mainly from African, Arab and Chinese backgrounds, in Modena from a variety of African backgrounds, whereas in Pesaro they are the children of Bosnian and Albanian refugees. The innovations introduced, through collaboration between the university team, teachers, parents and children involved the children in working collaboratively on joint activities. Thus the study of peer interaction played an important part. The focus of the study was on aspects of conceptualisation involved in early literacy learning, both children's conceptualisation of written language and teachers' conception of the teaching and learning processes involved in early literacy learning.

ii Context of the project

The particular context which shaped the form and content of this project includes:

- a relatively straightforward spelling system which principally operates through the representation of individual phonemes by individual letters;
- the fact that in Italy literacy teaching begins officially at six years old;
- the absence of any basis of psycho pedagogical or socio-pedagogical research in the teaching of literacy in formal schooling.

iii Aims

The principle aim was to promote the development of early literacy teaching in a broad conception of the term, to include an awareness of the various functions of written language and a competence in understanding and producing written language for the purposes of explanation and persuasion as well as narrative. Focus on the 'code' of written language, that is on word recognition and spelling was reserved until children had developed a thorough familiarity with the forms and functions of written language.

iv Theoretical Base

The project was based founded on a view of :

- literacy learning as concerned with initiation into the forms and functions of written language as well as a mastery of the orthographic code (Goodman 1968);
- learning as primarily achieved through the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978);
- young children as interested in written language and capable of developing powerful ideas about it (Ferreiro & Teberosky 1979, Formisano 1996).

v Actions undertaken

From this context and these aims and insights the project takes three practical implications:

- an early introduction (from four years on) to writing in a wide range of different genres;
- activities involving the co-construction of written language in small groups;
- the deep transformation of the attitude and role of the teacher who becomes attentive to the processes of learning and an active constructor of the curriculum.

Thus the project has chiefly taken the form of closely monitored in-service education, involving working with teachers in schools and out, to introduce them to :

- the theoretical basis set out above;
- close observation of children's operation in literacy acts;
- planning, organising and participating in group literacy activities to promote children's awareness of the forms and function of written language.

This project is based on the recognition that young children, even on entry into pre-school, have already developed ideas about the function, form and system of recording of written language. The project, therefore, is concerned to help teachers recognise the different understandings developed by different children and their varying 'cognitive dynamics' and to base their teaching on these. This involves listening to children's hypotheses concerning the function and operation of the written word and offering cognitive responses to these, tailored to each child's level of operation. It also involves preparing and carrying out group activities with the children in which they collectively compose written texts of different sorts, dictating these to their teacher, or collectively make sense of written or printed texts, for example identifying medical certificates or TV listings, and developing ideas about their function and form.

The emphasis is on literacy acts which spring from 'real' situations and carry 'real' consequences. Peer reading sessions where a child 'reads' a picture book to a small group of companions also have a role in this learning.

Video and audio recordings have been made of various phases of the work. These have been the object of discussion, analysis and reflection among the adults involved in carrying out the activities.

vi Sample of the project in action

In a pre-school class in Modena, a group of six five year olds are working on a card game which they know well and have often played without adult involvement. The aim of the activity is to determine the rules and procedures so that another adult, unfamiliar with the game, could master it and teach it to another group of children. The teacher present, in principle unfamiliar with the game, is acting as the children's scribe, but also reading aloud what she has written at key points in the process, and asking the children questions of clarification.

The children are all intent on the activity, participating actively, often interrupting each other to modify or extend the written text they are co-constructing. The net result is a coherent and highly explicit text which fulfils its purpose with remarkable effectiveness. The teacher, through the video recording of the session, is able to analyse and evaluate her role and the children's contributions in discussion with colleagues and the project's director, Dott. Marina Pascucci Formisano.

vii Impact

The project has elicited much interest in those responsible for pre-school education in various parts of Italy. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, responsible for Italy's primary schools, has invited Dott. Marina Pascucci Formisano to work with its officers to develop ways of extending these approaches into the years of formal schooling. This will involve both further research and in-service courses for teachers.

viii Indicators of success

Success is indicated by:

- the children's interest in constructing and making sense of written messages;
- the development of the children's hypotheses concerning the relation of spoken words to written text;
- the extent to which the children work collaboratively, taking account of each other's contributions to co-construct or co-interpret written text;
- the extent to which the teachers develop positive attitudes to and competence in this way of working.

ix Questions posed by the project

- What counts as success - in the teachers' eyes, the eyes of the children and those of their parents?
- What determines if a purpose (for reading or writing) is seen as 'real' or 'authentic'?
- Does explicit attention to the code at an early age necessarily impede children's development as protagonists?
- What is the role of demonstration in early literacy learning?

x Key features

- encouragement of the children to focus on function and overall form of written texts before sound/symbol relationships are investigated;
- the use of video to record actual teaching interactions and make them fully available for subsequent analysis;
- the active involvement of teachers in the analysis of the video and other data;
- the action research cycle of action, reflective analysis, leading to modified action.

3d The UK project

i General description

The UK project was fully funded by the University of Brighton, with the participation of East Sussex Education Authority and concerned children aged four to six years. The study involved teachers and children in four urban infant schools, many from families living in poverty and including a significant proportion from minority cultures, in particular from Bangladesh. The project took the form of action research case study, and focused on developing and evaluating small group and whole class activities designed to promote early literacy learning. The precise nature of these activities was the product of collaboration between researchers, teachers and children.

ii Context

The particular context which shaped the form and content of this project includes:

- a spelling system with highly complex sound/symbol relations, operating more between groups of phonemes and groups of letters than through single phonemes and single letters;
- an awareness by teachers and researchers of the 'long tail of underachievement' in reading among English children of primary school age (Gorman 1992, Brooks et al. 1996);
- a tradition in English schools of using one-to-one interactions between child and teacher as the chief medium of teaching reading in the primary years;
- the introduction in 1990 and subsequent modification of a National Curriculum (Department for Education 1995), that places heavy demands on teachers, both in the range of subjects taught, from even the earliest years of formal schooling and also in the assessment and recording required, resulting in a loss of time for teachers to work with individuals, and a significant reduction in teachers' autonomy within the classroom;
- a polarised debate between on the one hand a 'progressive' pedagogy which takes a socio-cognitive view of learning and places emphasis on the construction of meaning while giving little explicit attention to establishing grapho-phonemic relations, and on the other a 'traditional' pedagogy which generally takes a behaviorist view of learning and places emphasis on accurate word recognition, with explicit teaching of grapho-phonemic relations.

iii Aims

Based on an informed understanding of the nature of reading, what and how children learn in the early stages of learning to read, and the kinds of interactive styles that foster active participation, the chief aim of the project was to help teachers develop interaction styles with small and large groups of children, that would encourage the children to take an active participatory role in identifying the words on the page and constructing larger patterns of meaning that take account of the verbal text, the pictures and the children's own first and second hand experience.

iv Theoretical base

The project was founded on a view of:

- reading as "simultaneous, interactive, multi-level processing" which owes much to the work of Rumelhart (1977);
- early reading which accords the construction of meaning prime place (Goodman 1968), but which also recognises the importance of the development of phonological awareness for children learning to read in an alphabetic writing system (Bradley and Bryant 1983) if children are to move from a logographic to an analytic and subsequently orthographic approach to word recognition;
- the learning of regularities such as sound symbol relationships, as operating most fruitfully through children's capacity to perceive and construct analogies rather than to learn items by rote, or to learn and apply explicitly formulated rules (Goswami and Bryant 1990).
- Learning in general as proceeding most fruitfully through social interaction rather than the individual child's encounter with learning materials (Vygotsky 1978).

v Actions undertaken

The project took the approach of action research, incorporating iterative use of a cycle of innovative activity, reflective analysis and modification of the original innovation. It involved setting up a small 'Focus Group' of teachers of children in the 4 to 6 years age range with a proven high level of competence in teaching young children to read in a way that focused both on the construction of meaning and the development of systematic means for identifying the words on the page, and an expressed interest in an interactive approach to teaching and learning. Videos of such interactive teaching were made by the

researchers involved, and permitted analysis in terms both of a three dimensional conception of the semantic content of linguistic interaction and of the perceptions and intentions of the participating teachers.

The practice to receive most thorough examination was the use of 'Big Books' (Large format texts) with whole class groups. In collaboration with the researchers, the participating teachers watched videos of the work of one member of the group, analysed it discussed this in relation to the aspects of reading they were aiming to promote, and modified their future practice in the light of this analysis and discussion. The emphasis was on the quality of interaction and the extent to which children were being encouraged to operate autonomously with texts, making effective use of their grapho-phonemic knowledge as well as the information about language, the subject matter and how texts are used, to construct significant meaning. The work of Halliday (1973) was used to inform a two dimensional analytic framework, permitting the simultaneous analysis of ideational and interpersonal content - that is of the interpersonal relations negotiated as well as the logico-experiential content - of the interactions concerned.

vi Sample of the project in action

At one particular meeting of the Focus Group the benefits for the children of the work with 'big books' were characterised by the participating teachers as follows:

- Attitudes
- Enthusiasm,
- Enjoyment - sense that reading is enjoyable and worthwhile,
- Wanting to read,
- The sense that they can succeed at it, without feeling put on the spot,
- Wanting to show adults how to do it,
- Independence,
- 'Have a go' attitude,
- It raises children's expectations of themselves as slower children aspire to what more capable children are doing,
- It raises the status of reading - makes it an exciting joint activity.

Learning strategies

- Children value the active involvement: it is more interactive than storytime;
- Big Book work is much more likely to produce a range of ideas than one to one reading;
- It makes it explicit that they are learners and succeeding at it;
- It often makes it explicit that there are ways of solving problems about how you learn to read;
- Children learn from each other - someone notices something and everyone can share it, e.g. a child sees the word 'the' in 'there' and the whole class can talk about this;
- The children are in control, in that inside the framework of the reading, they can make any comment they like, leading to more productive routines;
- It makes children aware of the processes of learning;
- It gives children the opportunity to engage in the complexity of reading.

'Lifting the words off the page'

Children are developing control over:

- Directionality,
- Recognition of common words,
- Independent word attack,
- Ideas from illustrations,
- Punctuation,

- _ Knowledge and use of letter/sound relations with emphasis on onset and rime,
- _ Orchestration of all this information to produce a rhythmic reading.

Making sense of text

- _ Making personal meaning of the story,
- _ Relating events in the story to their own experience,
- _ Development of prediction skills.

Other benefits

- _ The sense that they can work together as a group with a common purpose,
- _ The children pull together, helping those who find it hard.

vii Impact

Interest in the project among local teachers continues to be extensive, leading to the formation of an 'Extension Group' of some 30 local teachers, who have attended regular meetings with the project researchers and the teachers from the initial 'Focus Group'. At these meetings members of the Extension Group have watched video material from the project, considered the project view of the key features of this way of working and discussed ways of adopting such approaches in their own classrooms. They have also reported back on their results, leading to refinements of some of the procedures which they and the members of the Focus Group have been working. Some are currently in the process of making their own video material.

The pedagogic procedures developed in the project are now embedded in the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Brighton, which has a high reputation in this field, and consequent influence on other institutions. They have also become an integral part of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in the Local Education Authorities of East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, and are exciting interest in other parts of the UK. Research is continuing to extend and refine the analysis of classroom literacy interactions. In the future the intention is that the Focus Group and Extension Group should work together to produce a package of audio, video and print material which would permit wider dissemination of the project practices.

viii Indicators of success

These are of three types:

- _ indicators of children's sustained interest in reading;
- _ indicators of increase in children's performance in reading, in terms both of meaning construction and strategies of word identification;
- _ indicators of increase in teachers' enthusiasm for teaching reading.

In the current context in the UK the last type of indicator has a particular importance, as teachers are acutely aware of the general dissatisfaction in the political world with the standards of reading in the UK, and of the accompanying pressure for tighter specification and control over their activities. Those who feel oppressed by the increasingly tight control of England's National Curriculum (DFE 1995) are finding the project's cycle of action, observation, analysis, discussion leading on to modified action, a rewarding way to develop their competence, rekindle their enthusiasm and deepen their understanding of literacy learning and how it can most richly be developed.

ix Questions posed by the project

- _ Does explicit attention to the code in the early stages of learning to read inhibit the development of a sense of purpose in reading?
- _ Is it legitimate to talk of children taking the initiative in a context where the field of activity is determined by the teacher?
- _ To what extent could non-literary text permit a wide range of ideational focus - from phoneme-grapheme correspondence to issues of morality?

– Do complex orthographies such as English demand a different approach in the early stages, with more explicit attention to the code?

– To what extent can a similarly 'social' experience of reading be achieved with non-literary material?

x Key features of the project

– the use of video to record actual teaching interactions and make them fully available for subsequent analysis;

– the use of a Hallidayan model of analysis that deals with three dimensions of semantic content: the ideational (or propositional), the interpersonal and the textual;

– the active involvement of teachers in the analysis of the video and other data;

– the action research cycle of action, reflective analysis, leading to modified action;

– the adoption of a policy of inviting members of the Extension Group to use the Focus Group's way of working as a basis for adaptation to their own particular circumstances rather than a set of prescriptive protocols for them to follow in every detail.

xi Factors influencing pedagogy

Pedagogy in literacy teaching in England is very varied, the product of a number of forces. For many years there has been a high level of public anxiety about the levels of literacy in their children. This has made some teachers more adventurous - keen to try new approaches to tackle a very high profile problem - while others have been made more conservative, urged on by the erroneous belief that literacy levels were higher at some unspecified time in the past, when teaching was more straightforward and texts were more controlled.

Those who see present problems as a challenge, tend to draw on the work of those theorists whose work has shaped the English ELIC project - Vygotsky, Ferreiro and Teberosky, Goodman and Meek. Stimulated and supported by subject associations, Local Education Authority Advisers, the highly influential specialist teachers' centre in London, the Centre for Language in Primary Education, and institutions of higher education throughout the country, such teachers have developed some very interesting and varied practice in pockets throughout England, whose success is evidenced both in the children's scores on formal tests of literacy and in their eagerness to engage in a range of literacy acts in and out of school. In such classrooms there has in recent years been a move away from the individualised 1:1 instruction in reading that has been the conventional practice in British primary schools for decades. The move has been towards group and whole class approaches, particularly in recognition of the value of collaborative learning.

The English ELIC project was initiated and developed in order to help teachers make their class and group sessions more productive, by drawing their attention to the complex dynamics of such sessions, and their potential for encouraging or stifling the development of autonomy, collaboration, intellectual curiosity and more complex ideas about the working of the orthographic code and the relation of texts to life experience.

The teachers who participated centrally in this project have shown themselves to be highly successful in stimulating and supporting such development. Others in the 'extension group' were excited by the videos of their practice and by the analyses of these, to try more adventurous and open approaches in their own classrooms. The project encouraged both groups to reflect analytically on their practice and develop it in ways that encouraged children to take more confident control of the reading process. One perpetual feature of the project has been the increased enjoyment experienced both by teachers and children that comes from working in a way that allows children to take initiatives on a number of different levels.

xii Lines of development for the future

In England there has recently been a further sharpening of the national anxiety about levels of literacy. While international comparisons (Elley 1992, Brooks et al. 1996) indicate that England's middle and high achieving nine year olds stand comparison with their counterparts in similarly developed countries, it is clear that England has an unusually 'long tail of underachievement' - a higher proportion of children scoring well below the mean.

However, public concern is not directed solely at these underachievers. A national strategy has been developed and is currently being implemented, aimed at raising significantly the reading the writing scores of all eleven year olds. This involves urging all schools to adopt a highly detailed and prescriptive approach to literacy teaching throughout the primary school, from the entry to formal schooling - that is from September of the year in which children will celebrate their fifth birthdays.

This approach is presented in a document entitled The Literacy Framework (Standards and Effectiveness Unit 1998). In three lists, each up to 27 items long, the programme for each term is set out, in three strands entitled word level, sentence level and text level. The implication of the selection and ordering of this highly detailed content is that literacy learning is primarily a matter of mastering knowledge of form - letter-sound relationships, syntactic structures and discourse patterns - through a process of explicit didactic instruction, with little room for concern with the function of texts, with their personal significance for the young learner or with children's active use of processes of theory construction and analogy building. Indeed children's autonomy as learners is not considered in this document.

Much of this thinking therefore runs counter to the thinking that has informed and developed from the project that represents the English contribution to the ELIC thematic Network. However, paradoxically, the strictures of the Literacy Framework also enjoin teachers to make extensive use of whole class and group teaching contexts, which form the substance of the English ELIC project, which has explored the patterns of interaction between teachers, children and text that appear to yield productive learning.

Teachers faced with the prospect of having to comply with the demands of the National Literacy Strategy are eager to explore ways of adapting it to make it more dynamic: to take account of what they have learnt in recent decades of the primacy of the search for meaning (Goodman 1968), the importance of significant texts (Meek 1986), the need to respect and encourage children's development as autonomous learners (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979) and the power of collaborative learning (Vygotsky 1978).

Thus while ostensibly the work of the project seems to conflict with the National Literacy Strategy, participants are much in demand (and have even been employed as consultants) by those who wish to implement the strategy as richly as possible, in ways that take account of what we have learned in the last few decades of the dynamics of literacy teaching.

The project is now entering its dissemination phase. Within East Sussex the project videos form the core of in-service sessions in which teachers will examine their own practice in relation to group and whole class literacy work, and extend this in ways designed to encourage the active participation of children in the processes of meaning making and word identification, encouraging the building of hypotheses and the use of analogy.

Through published articles and presentations at conferences the work is now becoming more widely known in other parts of the country and has already

elicited much interest from teachers and advisers keen to develop children as active learners within the government's Literacy Framework.

xiii Questions which remain

— Should narrative continue to be privileged in texts for beginning readers, or should more attention be given to texts of different genres, embedded in different kinds of social interactions?

— How can one best establish the interpersonal relationships that underpin effective 'open' group and class work?

— What are the key characteristics of texts that promote the richest literacy learning in these settings?

— How can an open approach to children's verbal contributions in whole class sessions best be reconciled with the need to engage all children, not only the most vocal?

3e The Spanish project

i General description

The Spanish project was fully funded by the University of Valladolid, involved four classes in urban schools in Palencia and eight classes in rural schools in the surrounding countryside. The children in the urban context were aged from one to three years old, and those in the rural context from 3 to six years old. In general the children's families belonged to a lower socio-economic level.

Extensive use is being made of audio and video recordings and these will contribute to the development of an international archive.

ii Context

The particular context which shaped the form and content of this project includes:

— a straightforward orthographic system, governed by largely regular phoneme-grapheme correspondences, very different, for example, from the complex English system. This, in the view of the project participants, makes the teaching of early literacy less complicated;

— a tradition in which the teaching of reading begins at six years, at the start of formal schooling, with an emphasis on the mastery of the orthographic code;

— a conception of the pre-school years as a preparation for 'real school', that is, for primary school. In terms of literacy teaching, this leads to a focus on instructing children in phoneme-grapheme correspondences, in a decontextualised way that does not draw attention to sense or understanding, through activities and exercises termed 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing';

— a changing situation since the educational reform of 1990, in that teachers are now expected to use something closer to a 'socio-cognitive' approach in their early literacy teaching, with an emphasis on the construction of meaning (Curto et al. 1994);

— the current debate between two lines of research: one which criticises the explicit and immediate teaching of phoneme-grapheme correspondences, and the other, an eclectic approach, which begins with an emphasis on reading for meaning, but which considers it necessary that children should be aware of these correspondences.

iii Aims

The main aim of the project was for pre-school teachers to develop a repertoire of strategies for helping children to approach written language in a way that is meaningful, enjoyable and creative, while respecting the evolutionary stages of literacy development. In order to make the beginnings of literacy learning a natural and rewarding experience for the children, the teachers constructed different situations involving the use of written language in day to day activity (letters, newspapers, noticeboards, etc). In this way the children could get to know the uses of the written word in particular contexts (writing

an invitation to a birthday party, writing to the Town Hall asking for better play areas, writing letters to members of the family, reading news about the weather and events in the village, reading stories, writing riddles, rhymes etc.)

iv Theoretical base

The project is founded on a view of:

- reading as a contextualised activity concerned with meaning-making (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979; Bruner 1986);
- teaching children to read as a process which involves taking account of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978);
- learning to read in the nursery school as a means of combating school failure for children from disadvantaged backgrounds ;
- teachers as researchers and decision-makers concerning their own actions (Elliott 1980; Bellack and Bellack 1981);
- The involvement of the family as essential to the process of developing the acquisition and construction of written language (Anderson & Teale 1989; Dombey and Meek Spencer 1994).

v Actions undertaken

For reasons of consistency with the theoretical base set out above, the project employed an action research approach. For this reason the project co-ordinator has discussed with the participating teachers the particular situation in each classroom, their differences as well as the features they held in common, the problems and dilemmas that emerged and possible solutions. Meetings were held to discuss what happened in each class, and to identify the chief problems.

Each nursery teacher took into her class the strategies she considered could help her children to read, at the same time as developing other strategies for understanding all the explicit and implicit elements involved in the act of reading (the process of decoding and encoding, the prosodic aspect of language, intonation, different accents, metalinguistic aspects, interrogation of the text etc.). Classroom observation of each participating teacher, undertaken by student teachers, other teachers and the project director, allowed analysis and reflection on what was happening in each particular situation. Use was made of video material, written narrative of incidents and analytic grids.

vi Sample of the project in action

The investigators have found that children in both the rural and urban environments had a much more enthusiastic approach towards reading; they pestered adults (teachers and parents) to read with them. At the end of the two year course they were also more independent and capable of finding the meaning of signs, books, letters, newspaper articles etc. The different 'reading moments' were more participatory; the children asked each other questions, but also helped each other through co-operative learning, aiding independence in the move towards knowledge. Written text was used to find out what was happening in the world, to learn about things and people, and also for enjoyment.

As to the linguistic code, the children developed control over aspects such as a vocabulary of words recognised on sight, familiarity with sound/symbol relationships, familiarity with punctuation marks and accents, the capacity to read with understanding first their own names, then the names of others, classroom notices, newspaper titles and later on little newspaper stories on different subjects of interest to them (animals, space, cars etc). The strategies they learned enabled the children to make meaning from these texts.

vii Impact

The teachers involved brought their different experiences to the CPRs, the teachers' centres where in-service activities were based, and to other teachers' meetings .such as the day conference held at the Escuela Universitaria de Educaci_n de Palencia on June 5th 1997, during the meeting of the ELIC thematic network. This meeting brought together teachers from nursery schools and

classes, inspectors, decision-makers and researchers from the departments of Psychology, Didactics and Languages of the University of Valladolid.

The pedagogy developed in the project now informs the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Valladolid. Furthermore, the four teachers' centres of the Palencia region are planning a collaboration with some 50 of the region's nursery teachers (nearly all those who participate in the teachers' centre activities) to bring to their classrooms a more innovative approach to their teaching of reading, along the lines developed in the project. Meetings have already held with the region's four co-ordinators to plan this initiative. This in-service work will take the form of action research, in which the teachers develop and extend the classroom practices of the project.

viii Indicators of success

In terms of the children's development as readers, the investigators found that they enjoyed reading, that they understood the sense of written language, and above all, that their competence in reading allowed them access to texts in history, maths etc., which have real importance for their academic development.

The teachers were greatly encouraged by the approach and keen to continue with it, because they believed in what they were doing. They were also more independent and assertive, because they had developed a way of working which involved reflecting on their classroom work before initiating new activities. The project's monthly meetings indicated that there had been a marked and positive change in their attitudes towards their work.

The children's families were working in partnership with the teachers. At home they read stories and other texts with their children. The 'travelling book' made by the parents, had a particular role in bringing home and school closer together. Parents and teachers both made entries in this concerning the children's activities and understandings as readers and writers. Parents now insist on working in partnership with teachers.

ix Questions posed by the project

— How should we resolve the dilemma between teaching the orthographic code and teaching children to make sense of text?

— How can we develop this teaching approach to give children from a background where there is little concern for written language more independence and autonomy?

— What are the most productive strategies for developing an effective partnership between home and school in contexts of social and economic deprivation?

— Is it legitimate to impose a common methodology on teachers who are working in very different contexts (urban, rural, children with different levels of motivation, different ideas about the written word etc. etc.)?

x Key features of the project

— a methodology which allows analysis and reflection of one's own classroom activity in the classroom and the modification of this activity through discussion with other teachers, external observation in the classroom or analysis of video material;

— the possibility of intervention with a key group of nursery teachers;

— the collaborative strategies developed between teachers and parents which have created a more enthusiastic relationship between home and school.

xi Factors influencing pedagogy

The economic, social and cultural development that has taken place in Spain, together with new approaches in subjects such as neurology, psychology, and

pedagogy have prompted an awareness of the importance of early learning in areas such as literacy, learning foreign languages, information technology etc. Families, even from lower socio-economic groups, insist on a pre-school education for their children very different from that of a few years ago. All this has meant that teachers have started to question their own work in the classroom, looking at their young pupils with new eyes. They have abandoned the idea that children arrive at pre-school knowing nothing, recognising that even the youngest bring important knowledge and understanding, and that the role of the pre-school is to respect the different developmental stages of their various pupils.

At the current time, a great proportion of pre-school teachers have begun to ask why written language should not be introduced into the curriculum, since the children have already become aware of the written language that surrounds them (in magazines, on cake boxes, on clothes, in advertisements, posters etc.). The question is rather "why is there no written language in the pre-school?". This question also raises others, which have a bearing on the methodology used to introduce literacy; that of 'meaningful teaching' (Ausubel 1977) and its contextualisation (Vygotsky 1978). This theoretical orientation implies that particular schools and teachers should be influenced by the characteristics of the particular contexts in which they operate.

The teachers who have participated in the Palencia project, including teachers from both rural and urban schools, have shared a continual awareness of the need for a pedagogy which supports children from deprived backgrounds. This means that the methodologies chosen have to be shown to be of positive benefit to children who arrive at school without a rich experience of written language.

The teachers who have participated in the project have reflected on these questions, and are in the process of developing a specific pedagogy that answers to the needs of each particular context, as determined by the families and the environment. The teachers aim to construct situations which make reading and writing functional, through the use of a range of texts such as newspapers, letters, stories and poems. They also aim to find strategies for collaborating with families. The children take home story books such as 'The Travelling Book' where all the parents have collaborated to produce a joint story, illustrated by the children. The teachers also share the belief that in introducing written language into the pre-school we should not forget that it is concerned with values, since an important role of the school is cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In teaching how written language operates, (encoding and decoding, development of metalinguistic understanding, autonomy in the act of reading) we should also encourage the development of critical thought and collaborative activity from the earliest stages.

xii Lines of development for the future

Those involved in the project have recognised the necessity of providing the participating teachers with the methodical tools that allow them to analyse and reflect on their own practice in order to modify it through discussion with other teachers, researchers and decision-makers. The work has to be undertaken in the spirit of 'research in the school' rather than 'research on the school'. The teachers need to reclaim possession of their own ground, their own territory, which has been usurped by such pseudo-teachers as psychologists, pedagogues and decision-makers. In Spain the Centre for Teachers and Resources (Centros de Profesorado y Recursos) in each area can constitute a privileged site for introducing and implementing changes and innovations concerning the introduction of written language into the pre-school, a site where the teachers can take on the role of protagonist and principal actor. At this time the project group is working on an ongoing seminar, made up of some 20 educators, who are very pre-occupied with issues relating to written language. There is an intention to publish the group's findings in the form of case studies for other

teachers in Spain, and also to produce some didactic materials that have been developed by the group over the last few years.

The group is also concerned to develop and implement strategies which encourage parents to collaborate in the process of initiating their children into a command of the written word, and strategies which take account of the changing nature of the written word, brought about by computerisation and the mass media, through investigating these mediating tools and their relation with different socio-cognitive processes (Vygotsky 1978). The group is considering initiating some collaborative work with libraries (influenced by the Greek project), and is investigating possibilities for developing the continuity between home and school: that is to say there is a need to create bridges and meeting points between the contexts of home and school.

In another direction, the group has developed contacts with other researchers and with different universities in Spain, to develop reflection on the topic of the teacher and the learning of written language in the pre-school.

xiii Questions which remain

— How do social changes influence the introduction of written language into the pre-school?

— What is the most appropriate methodological orientation for classes where children come from deprived backgrounds?

— How can a balance be found between direct instruction in reading (teaching the code) and the development of autonomy in young children?

— What are the best strategies for drawing parents into the school environment and facilitating the continuity between home and school in terms of literacy learning?

3f The Greek project

i General description

The Greek project, fully funded by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, involved classes in schools in both Thessaloniki and Thebes, and the participation of a chain of libraries for children in remote areas. The children involved ranged from four to six years old, and those in the rural context from three to six years old. In general the children belonged to a lower socio-economic level.

Extensive use was made of audio and video recordings.

ii Context

The context which shaped the form and content of this project includes:

— a tradition in which the teaching of reading and writing begins at six years, at the start of formal schooling, with an emphasis on the mastering of the orthographic code, in classrooms where a transmissional pedagogy prevails and is reflected in formally arranged seating and the absence of a variety of texts;

— a highly centralised educational system, with a curriculum transmitted through centrally produced text books for teachers and children, extended some five years ago to include texts for nursery classes;

— a conception of education in the pre-school years as a preparation for 'real school', that is for primary school, which in terms of literacy teaching, means a decontextualised focus on the motor skills related to writing, with no recognition of the experience of written language that even the youngest children bring to the nursery class;

— a changing situation, in which teachers are encouraged to take a more active, interpretive role in relation to the curriculum, and in particular to take more careful account of children's responses to the literacy activities they propose, with greater recognition of the importance of children's intentions and understandings;

— the possibility of significant changes in the didactic approach at all levels of schooling, moving towards greater interaction and increased involvement on the part of the children in the construction of their own learning;

— an orthographic code based on largely consistent relations between phonemes and graphemes, but including subtleties and complexities arising from the highly inflected nature of the Greek language.

iii Aims

The main aim of the project was to introduce children to the domain of written language in a way that placed emphasis on their involvement and activity, and to offer them enjoyable and meaningful experiences of the nature of written language and the uses to which they could put it in their everyday lives.

iv Theoretical base

The project was founded on a view of:

— the introduction to written language - that is both reading and writing activities - as a multi-faceted process of making meaning in significant contexts (Y Goodman 1980; Bruner 1986);

— the concept of the 'proximal zone of development' (Vygotsky 1986) that is that where children are assisted by those more proficient than themselves, they can learn through engaging in complex acts, justifying the introduction of children to written language in this broad sense, from the earliest years of nursery school;

— the central contribution that such an early introduction to written language can make to the avoidance of school failure, especially for children from backgrounds of social disadvantage;

— the involvement of families as essential to the creation of 'horizontal continuity', that is continuity between children's experience in and out of school (Dombey and Meek Spencer 1994);

— the necessity of teachers taking an active role in the development of strategies to ensure the effectiveness of the processes of teaching and learning.

v Actions undertaken

The project was developed in the context of in-service education offered to teachers by the pre-school department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Special emphasis was given to young children's conceptualisation of the system of written language, following the findings and the perspective of the constructivist approach, outlined above.

To this end seminars were organised for pre-school as well as primary school teachers. In this context teachers had the opportunity to meet some of the main authors of the constructivist approach such as E.Ferreiro, A.Teberosky, M.Pascucci-Formisano. In these seminars ideas and experiences were exchanged through discussion and analysis of different educational situations by means of slides, video films and exhibitions of children's work.

Against this background and using the framework of action research, more reflective practices and actions were developed. Thus despite the constraints of the national curriculum, a number of nursery school teachers decided, with the support of the university team, to implement a broader more active approach to written language teaching and learning.

A deliberate part of this strategy was to place an emphasis on the rituals of written language surrounding book borrowing in order to establish a solid connection with libraries in the world outside school. The project teachers were encouraged to work where possible with the 22 children's libraries which form a well established network dating from the early eighties. These libraries operate with a similarly open and constructive approach in introducing children to a wide range of texts through imaginative and varied activities.

In the near future, when the project approach is more widely diffused, this connection between schools and libraries will provide an essential dynamic for further development.

vi Sample of the project in action

Observations made by the network members during the week spent in Greece showed the project in action. The class visited had some 19 pupils aged between 5 and 6 years old, and was part of a nursery complex attached to a primary school in a small town, Thiva, with a population of some 40,000.

The organisation of the classroom gave a clear indication of the teacher's conception of written language and how children should be introduced to it. Written language covered the walls, serving both to introduce and organise activities, and also as a source of reference for the children who came frequently to compare, through close inspection, words and names they had written themselves with those written by the teacher.

Their own writing also featured prominently: for example the wall of the book corner was covered by a grid with the days of the week along one axis and the names of the children along another. Each time a child borrowed a book to take home s/he wrote its title on a piece of yellow sticky paper and placed it on the appropriate square of the grid.

The activities in which the children were involved were essentially ludic. In these the written word plays a functional role, indicating, for example, the colour a child should use to complete a drawing, or the prices of the various vegetables the teacher was 'selling' to the children. Thus the children experienced written language in a purposeful context, initially with a holistic approach but one which invited children to make increasingly analytic observations.

The reading of stories was central, with children participating actively in the teacher's reading, joining in with key phrases. They were also eager to read themselves, each one reading aloud to the others a small story from start to finish. Despite some hesitation the children read these familiar texts with meaningful intonation and evident understanding and pleasure. They also frequently choose to read books to themselves

The library visited, in a small village with a population of some 4,000 close to Thiva, showed a similarly participatory introduction to written texts. Attendance is entirely voluntary: children come and go as they please. Like the other 26 in this network of rural children's libraries, this one is very well stocked, from the network's administrative centre in Athens, not only with books published in Greece, but also with books from other countries, many of them including a translation pasted in at the Athens centre. The design of the rooms, the lighting and the furniture all combine to create an atmosphere of intimacy.

On the day of the visit by the Network participants, some 30 children came to the library, most of them participating in the activity presented by one of the librarians, which made use of pictures of trees and animals to inform children about the changes autumn brings to the natural world. Some of the children whose parents came to collect them were extremely reluctant to leave the library.

vii Impact

The project has had an impact on the local community in several ways. Parents have responded enthusiastically to the sustained interest developed in their children for reading and writing activities, as well as to their literacy competencies. The response has had an impact on parents' interest in the

project and currently there is an unprecedented demand for a place in the project nursery.

The primary school to which the project nursery is attached has also responded in a positive way, recognising that the children entering primary school from the project nursery encountered no problems when faced with the high demands imposed by the Greek system in terms of reading and writing during the first school year. As a result, the teachers of the primary school actively sought in-service support to extend the approach developed at pre-school level throughout the primary school. This request was responded to by the university, and the dynamic created in the nursery school is increasingly having an impact in the larger community of the town, where other agencies such as the museum personnel, are involved in creating situations where children can take meaningful actions involving written language.

The project nursery has become a place for a pilot programme of teacher training in the project's approach to active literacy teaching and learning. The ideas developed in the project have also informed courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The in-service courses are planned to take the form of action research, so that the participating teachers will be encouraged to develop and extend the practices of the project.

Furthermore, the project is providing an excellent example of greater classroom interaction and increased involvement of children in the construction of their own learning, at a time when there is considerable ministerial interest in a change of didactic approach in such a direction.

viii Indicators of success

The children involved in both school and library projects showed a clear desire to read and write, and an evident pleasure in making sense of the texts which surrounded them. Those involved in the experimental school classes also showed a confidence in their own learning powers and an independence of approach in spelling unfamiliar words and in making careful comparison of their efforts with the conventional spellings of key words.

Parents of children in the experimental classes were very appreciative of this approach, evident in their eagerness to sign their children up for these classes and their active collaboration in reading the books their children brought home.

The primary school teachers who inherited the children from the experimental nursery classes attested to their familiarity with the uses of written language and their mastery of the orthographic code.

ix Questions posed by the project

— Given that the teachers in the school project are self-selected, and have profited from many years of interaction with the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and associated researchers, how can the style of teaching they have developed be spread to other teachers who will not have these initial advantages?

— What strategies can be developed to achieve a closer collaboration between the children's libraries and the project classes?

— How can teachers who have always worked within prescribed structures develop the necessary sensibility towards new cognitive models of children's control over written language and new conceptions of their needs?

x Key features

— the adoption by the teacher of the role of observer and questioner, encouraging the children to make and test their own hypotheses about the working of written language;

- encouragement to both teachers and children to engage in reflective processes, at both the individual and collective levels;
- the use of sophisticated picture books, rich in meaning, rather than texts constructed to teach the code of written language;
- the creation of situations- both practical and imaginative (e.g. book borrowing and _vegetable buying_) in which writing and reading play a key functional role.

3g Commonality and difference

In the course of the Network activities, a high degree of commonality in the conceptions informing the various projects has emerged. These include ideas stemming from a number of seminal figures in the area, whose key works date from some twenty years ago, but whose influence on official, national conceptions of the teaching and learning of reading and writing has been slow, despite productive innovation in particular areas. Those of most significance to the Network's participants have been:

- Very young children (from four years or earlier), even those at the margins of their societies, are interested in written language and its use, and capable of developing powerful ideas about it (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979).

- The act of reading involves "simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing" (Rumelhart 1977) - that is reading involves the generation of expectations about the text in general and particular sections, sentences and phrases, and at the same time the recognition of letter shapes, letter strings and common words. Data at one level are used to generate hypotheses at other levels. So to learn effectively, children need to attend to what a text is saying and what its function is, as well as to the letters on the page and their relation to speech sounds.

- Following Vygotsky (1978), learning is seen as an essentially social and collaborative process, in which, aided by proficient practitioners and by their own peers, learners engage in tasks which would be beyond their individual independent capacity. Participation in this collaborative activity develops the capacity to perform such tasks independently.

Where the participants have differed has been mainly in the particular contexts in which they are working. These prompt differing emphases and points of entry to the written word. In the UK the complex nature of the orthographic system, the early age at which formal schooling starts and the intense national anxiety concerning early independence and fluency in reading and writing have meant that there is a particular interest to help children towards mastery of the code, albeit in a way that recognises that much more than this is involved in learning to read. By contrast in Italy the spelling system is more straightforward, the age of starting formal schooling is later and there appears to be less public anxiety about standards of fluency and independence in reading and writing in the early years. Consequently innovative practice in Italy places much greater emphasis on the construction (through dictation) of a range of texts than it does on developing mastery of the code.

Through visits to schools, close examination and analysis of video material and the exchange of perceptions and ideas, the meetings have enabled the participants to understand some of the reasons determining the particular forms the projects take in the different national sites. They now understand each other's contexts better, and therefore each other's projects. The meetings have also raised important questions such as:

- What counts as success - in the teachers' eyes, the eyes of the children and those of their parents?
- What determines if a purpose (for reading or writing) is seen as 'real' or 'authentic'?

— Does explicit attention to the code at an early age necessarily impede children's development as protagonists?

— What is the role of demonstration in the different projects?

They have given the participants the opportunity to explore these in ways that challenge some of the assumptions they bring to the process of researching in this area. These assumptions have also been challenged by the different national perspectives brought to bear on the practices of one project. For example the meeting in England foregrounded and called into question the way in which in England narrative is privileged among other text types. Similarly, the Italian meeting questioned the assumption that it is always counterproductive to embark on teaching children about the code until they have a wide experience of using different text types for a range of different purposes.

Another feature has been the enlargement of the participants' theoretical concerns. The meeting in the UK brought to the fore the work of Goswami and Bryant (1990) on the development of phonological awareness, and the role of analogy in the child's learning of the code. This permits a view of 'code-breaking' as a learning process in which the child can operate with a higher degree of autonomy than traditional 'phonics' teaching permits. The work of the socio-linguist MAK Halliday has been shown to add another useful dimension, in permitting the analysis of linguistic interaction in general and pedagogic interaction in particular on an interpersonal dimension as well as the ideational dimension that deals with propositional knowledge.

Section 4 Conclusions and Policy Implications

Through application of the analytical framework to data on the early literacy projects of the four different countries, the work of the Thematic Network has identified the key features, informing ideas and assumptions shaping each project, together with those features of the context that appear to influence the form taken. In particular, interrogation of the practice seen through classroom visits and video of classroom interactions, has enabled the participants to develop greater awareness of the often unstated assumptions on which practice depends. Through this process they have enlarged and refined their ideas of what productive early literacy - active and interactive - teaching and learning can look like, and of the ideas on which various innovative practices rest.

The participants have been continually impressed by:

— the variety of written texts that pervade the lives of young children, even those living in difficult socio-economic circumstances;

— the lack of confidence many parents feel with respect to the written word and to their capacity to help children become familiar with it;

— parents' willingness to collaborate with schools to support and extend their children's literacy learning;

— the interest of young children in making sense of and constructing written text;

— their capacity to develop ideas both about the function of particular texts and about the relationship between written and spoken language;

— the value of group teaching and learning in creating a social dynamic that increases motivation and enables individuals to operate on a higher intellectual plane;

— the importance of providing children with the opportunity to make sense of and construct texts which deal with problems, issues and topics which are of real concern to them;

— the beneficial effects of ensuring that children learn about the workings of the orthographic code in the context of making use of meaningful text;

– the beneficial effects of ensuring that such learning gives children the opportunity to make and test their own hypotheses about how the system works;

– the capacity of teachers to observe and listen to children, to validate their acts of hypothesis construction and to provide them with the kind of feedback that promotes the development and refinement of understanding;

– the capacity of teachers to construct situations which promote an active, confident and purposeful attitude to learning about the workings of written language;

– the capacity of teachers to develop productive and respectful relationships with parents that promote a more coherent introduction to the written word for their children;

– the beneficial effects of in-service support which respects the autonomy of teachers while introducing them to new ways of conceptualising children, literacy and the written language;

– the beneficial effects of teachers working to improve literacy teaching and learning through collaboration with each other, with children and with parents;

– the beneficial effects of an action research approach which encourages teachers to develop a cycle of observation, reflection, planning and action, in researching work in their own classrooms.

Yet in each context these features have been realised in different ways . It would seem that while the four projects share many underlying assumptions, the way in which these are interpreted and how they are seen to relate to each other differ markedly. Particular contexts orient practitioners towards particular emphases and interpretations, placing, for example greater emphasis on children's autonomy as independent readers and writers at an early age, or on children's autonomy as learners.

The following questions arise out of these considerations of difference.

i Do different contexts require a different balance between the construction of theories by the child on the one hand and the explicitation of processes by the teacher on the other?

ii Given that the construction by the child of successive theories about how written language works is a slow process, do children from different socio-cultural backgrounds have different needs in terms of early literacy learning, if all children are to achieve mastery over the written word ?

iii Given that in tackling a text, successful literacy learners engage in a simultaneous multi-level process, ranging from the development of ideas about its social function and the construction of meaning, through the detection of linguistic and orthographic patterns to the identification of letters, should literacy pedagogy take a similarly multi-level form, or should teachers focus on particular levels at particular points in children's literacy learning?

iv Do the different orthographic systems pose, at a certain point in literacy learning, different problems, demanding pedagogies which draw attention to different phonological levels: words, syllables, intra-syllabic units or phonemes?

v Do the more complex and less regular orthographic systems demand a pedagogy which includes more direction and explicitation by the teacher?

vi Early literacy learning is not the introduction of children to a neutral skill or technology, but each text is concerned with values, either implied or stated explicitly. Consequently, at the same time as working on mastery of the orthographic code and the construction of significant meaning, should we also be paying attention to these values?

vii Does narrative have a central role to play in literacy teaching and learning?

viii What sort of in-service education will encourage teachers to develop, not a mechanical conformity, but a spirit of productive collaboration, based on shared understandings?

ix What are the most effective strategies for sensitising teachers to a more constructive and interactive approach to early literacy teaching and learning?

x How can we develop home-school relations to bring about a real 'horizontal continuity' that respects both the written culture of the home and parents' potential to develop their conceptions of early literacy learning?

xi How are parents' attitudes to their children's teachers in the crucial early years of literacy learning influenced by the fact that in different countries they have different expectations of the early years of literacy learning? For example in the UK parents have been encouraged for many decades in the expectation that their children will learn to read and write at an early age, whereas there is not the same pattern of expectation in Italy or Greece.

xii How can schools prepare children to master the literacies of the future? That is how can schools recognise and integrate into early literacy learning the multiplicity of languages and modes of representation, such as advertising, television, CD Rom, multimedia, which constitute the rapidly developing communication systems of the world today?

Through consideration of these questions, two important conclusions have emerged:

— At a time when a number of the EU's member states are moving towards highly centralised control of the curriculum, this project indicates the necessity of taking a contextualised view of the pedagogy of literacy teaching, while striving towards an agreed view of the goals of literacy education, and of the dynamics that shape its processes.

— In particular, it is evident from all projects that substantial innovation requires much more than administrative action or political pronouncement. For teachers to develop a well founded pedagogy that answers to the demands of their particular situations, a profound change of attitude is required, in relation to children, each other, researchers and ideas of what constitutes an active, productive literacy.

Section 5 Dissemination and/or Exploitation of Results

During the lifetime of the project, the dissemination strategy has been to present the project and its findings at a series of conferences for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, advisers and administrators, in different EU countries. Some of these have resulted or will result in published papers (see Annex 1). Now that the project is finished, further publications are planned in a range of national and international journals. The completed video is also an important means of diffusion.

Result Partners Involved Exploitation intention
The context-dependent nature of innovative early literacy practices H.
Dombey

C.G. Colmenares

M.P. Formisano

G.V. Skoura Conference

Video

Autonomy in early literacy learning - different realisations in different contexts H. Dombey

M.P. Formisano Presentation at EECERA Munich Conference and published article In service Education for change in Early Literacy Learning H. Dombey

C.G. Colmenares Presentation at EECERA Santiago Conference and published article Children as collaborative protagonists H. Dombey

G.V. Skoura Presentation at 1999 Bera Conference and published article

As the list of publications and conference presentations in Annex 1 indicates, findings from the Project have been presented to conferences in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, extending the awareness of teachers, teacher educators, researchers and decision makers of the way in which context shapes the interpretation of shared theoretical ideas.

In each of the four countries concerned the impact of the national project has been noted.

_ In Italy the project has elicited much interest in those responsible for pre-school education in various parts of the country. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, responsible for Italy's primary schools, has invited Dott. Marina Pascucci Formisano to work with its officers to develop ways of extending these approaches into the years of formal schooling. This will involve both further research and in-service courses for teachers.

_ In the UK the pedagogic procedures developed in the project are now embedded in the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Brighton, which has a high reputation in this field, and consequent influence on other institutions. They have also become an integral part of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in the Local Education Authorities of East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, and are exciting interest in other parts of the UK. Research is continuing to extend and refine the analysis of classroom literacy interactions.

_ In Spain the pedagogy developed in the project now informs the courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the University of Valladolid. Furthermore, the four teachers' centres of the Palencia region are planning a collaboration with some 50 of the region's nursery teachers (nearly all those who participate in the teachers' centre activities) to bring to their classrooms a more innovative approach to their teaching of reading, along the lines developed in the project. This in-service work will take the form of action research, in which the teachers develop and extend the classroom practices of the project.

_ In Greece the project nursery has become a place for a pilot programme of teacher training in the project's approach to active literacy teaching and learning. The ideas developed in the project have also informed courses of initial and continuing teacher education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The in-service courses are planned to take the form of action research, so that the participating teachers will be encouraged to develop and extend the practices of the project.

Furthermore, the project is providing an excellent example of greater classroom interaction and increased involvement of children in the construction of their own learning, at a time when there is considerable ministerial interest in a change of didactic approach in such a direction.

Thus all these projects are proving productive in developing practice in their own countries, and engendering further research. The thematic network has permitted the exploration of underlying issues which have aroused and continue to arouse interest in the four participating countries and in other countries of Europe.

Section 6 Acknowledgements and References

6a Acknowledgements

The participants would like to acknowledge the support of their universities in giving time, space and hospitality for the meetings of the Network, and the teachers and children of the schools involved for receiving the participants so generously.

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Annexe 1 List of Publications and Conference Presentations

A Conference Presentations

1 June 1996

Presentation on the work of the Thematic Network by the four participants at a conference on Innovations in Early Literacy Teaching in Genova's 'Scuole d'Infanzia_' held at the Palazzo Ducale, Genova.

2 October 1996

Presentation on the work of the Thematic Network by the four participants at a conference in London on Literacy and Bilingualism in the Early Years: European perspectives, organised by IEDPE, UK (l'Institut pour le D_veloppement des Potentialit_s de tous les Enfants, UK branch) and NAPE (National Association for Primary Education) and held at the Centre for Language in Primary Education, London SE1.

3 October 1996

Presentation on the work of the Thematic Network by the Project Co-ordinator at the TSER Area II Progress Seminar held in Brussels.

4 June 1997

Presentation on the work of the Thematic Network by the four participants at a conference in Palencia, Spain on La Lectura en la Escuela Infantil: Contextos educativos y familiar organised by, and held at, the Escuela Universitaria de Educaci_n de Palencia.

5 June 1997

Presentation by Prof. H Dombey and Dra. C G Colmenares on aspects of the work of the Thematic Network, ' Collaboration _cole-famille pour l'entree dans l'_crit' at a colloquium in Paris entitled Innovateurs et D_cideurs dans l'Action pour la R_ussite de Tous organised by IEDPE and the Mairie de Paris, with the support of DGXXII, held at the Mairie of the 13_me arrondissement.

6 September 1997

Presentation by Prof. H Dombey and Dott. MP Formisano on aspects of the work of the Thematic Network, in a paper entitled: '_Autonomy in early literacy learning: different meanings in different national contexts', at the fifth international conference of EECERA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) entitled Childhood in a Changing Society held in Munich, Germany.

7 Forthcoming - September 1998

Presentation by Prof. H Dombey and Dra. Dra C G Colmenares on aspects of the work of the Thematic Network, in a paper entitled: 'In-Service Education for Change - with a focus on new approaches to literacy teaching and learning in the early years', at the sixth international conference of EECERA (European Early Childhood Education Research Association) entitled: New Challenges, New Teachers to be held in Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

B Publications

1 'Dombey, H and Formisano, MP 'Autonomy in early literacy learning: different meanings in different national contexts' to appear in the International Journal of Early Years Education.

2 Video entitled 'Early Literacy in Context: Innovative approaches in four different European countries' to be published by Universit_ la Sapienza, Rome and the University of Brighton.

Annexe 2 List of Agreed Deliverables

1 Observational and interpretive reports from a European perspective of the four projects on early literacy and teaching in four member states of the European Union (See Section 3 of this report);

2 Video material on these projects (See Annexe 1 of this report);

3 A publication on issues arising from the four projects and from the thematic network (See Annexe 1 of this report)