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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*



Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Quality Assurance Inspection of the

**Northern Ireland Literacy Strategy
(Raising Achievement Programme 2003-2004)**

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

- More than 90% - almost/nearly all
- 75%-90% - most
- 50%-74% - a majority
- 30%-49% - a significant minority
- 10%-29% - a minority
- Less than 10% - very few/a small number.

GRADE		
1	Significant Strengths	good (ranging to outstanding)
2	Strengths outweigh weaknesses	fully satisfactory (ranging to good)
3	Weaknesses outweigh strengths	fair (ranging to fully satisfactory)
4	Significant weaknesses	poor

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) was to evaluate the efficacy of the procedures used by each of the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) in their support of participating schools in the Raising Achievement Programme (RAP) during 2003-2004 and the validity of the outcomes and recommendations contained in their self-evaluation reports.

1.2 The ELBs' evaluation of RAP was set against the backdrop of the Northern Ireland Literacy Strategy (NILS) of which it is part. The work of the literacy strategy reflects, in turn, a strong focus on improving literacy standards in both school-aged children and the adult population in the United Kingdom and across most European countries.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 In January 1995, the Department of Education (DE) launched the Raising School Standards Initiative (RSSI), as part of its on-going improvement agenda. RSSI involved all five ELBs and a total of approximately 100 schools. The essential aim of RSSI was to help selected post-primary and their feeder primary schools, to address significant underachievement and low achievement, to improve the performance of the pupils and ultimately their employability.

2.2 In February 1998, as part of the School Improvement Programme (SIP), DE launched the School Support Programme (SSP). The main purpose of SSP was to raise the standards of attainment of the pupils in the schools that participated in the programme, over and above their previous best. The focus on literacy and numeracy was central to the improvement agenda; it remains a challenging issue to all those involved in raising the standards of pupils' educational achievements.

2.3 The DE targets for English were as follows.

At Key Stage 1 (KS1), by 2002, all pupils, except those with severe special educational needs should be working at level 2 or above.

At Key Stage 2 (KS2) by 2002, 80% of pupils should be working at level 4 or above; the KS2 target was reduced to 77% for 2004 and 76% for 2006.

At Key Stage 3 (KS3), by 2002, 75% of pupils overall should be working at level 5 or above; DE revised down the KS3 target to 72% overall for 2004, and then raised it to 73% in 2006.

3. NORTHERN IRELAND LITERACY STRATEGY

3.1 The NILS emerged from the SIP, and the associated training programmes were made available to all schools in Northern Ireland (NI). The promotion of literacy and numeracy was a key element of the SIP. As part of the NILS, schools were offered a choice of three models of support ranging from an intensive structured model of whole-staff training over a period of three years, to a less intensive menu of support and training.

3.2 The Literacy Steering Group, which comprised representatives from each of the ELBs and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) initiated a review in November 2001. The areas for development highlighted in the Literacy Steering Group's Review, which was published in February 2002, included:

- the need for regional co-ordination;
- an agreed approach to monitoring and evaluation; and
- a greater emphasis on targets and outcomes.

3.3 One of the key recommendations of the Review was that the Steering Group should "consider the issues raised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report (February 2002)". The NIAO report 'Indicators of Educational Performance and Provision' quoted the Public Accounts Committee: "it is entirely unacceptable that 20% of pupils who leave school after twelve years of compulsory education should be unable to read and write to a standard that will equip them to deal with the demands of adult life."

3.4 In addition, the Review of the NILS quoted the International Adult Literacy Survey (2001) completed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which stated that, "21% of young people 16-25 year olds in NI were performing at the lowest levels of literacy, and that 5% of 15 year olds could not demonstrate proficiency at even the lowest level of reading literacy."

3.5 In response to the review of the NILS, the Literacy Steering Group agreed to initiate what was at first known as 'The Underachieving Schools Project', then 'The Literacy Enhancement Programme', and ultimately the RAP. The long-term goal of RAP was sustained improvement in the performance of pupils' achievements in English. Approximately 40% of the schools currently participating in the RAP have also participated in SSP and RSSI.

3.6 The overall aim of the RAP programme was to be realised through following the four-stage process of improvement as identified by the SIP, namely: review and assessment; target setting; action planning; review and evaluation. The purpose was to bring about measurable gains in children's learning and experiences by the end of the academic year.

3.7 Since 1995, all five ELBs have been encouraged to quality assure their improvement work and to learn from past initiatives. As part of the QAI of the RAP, the ELBs provided an evidence base that reflected the procedures and support strategies that they had used, and included a record of the programme of support that was provided to the schools.

4. SELECTION OF SCHOOLS AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Within each ELB, the key stage (KS) results over a three-year period were used primarily to identify primary schools that might benefit from involvement in the RAP. The schools were those whose results fell below the DE target levels for KS1 and KS2. A minority of the schools in the RAP had previously been in one or both support programmes, for example, RSSI and SSP.

4.2 In the post-primary schools, the selection criteria focused on the number of pupils achieving levels 3 and 4 at Key Stage 3, and the percentage achieving grades A*-G and A*-C in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), compared with the NI averages for similar schools. The numbers of schools that participated in RAP, however, varied across each ELB and those selected did not reflect the total number of schools in the particular ELB that needed support.

4.3 All ELBs agreed to adopt a common approach to determine a baseline and a process which would involve the whole staff. The existing NILS stages of review and assessment, target-setting, action planning and review continued to be used to help schools to carry out in-depth analyses of the learners' standards of achievement. The Inspectorate findings indicate that the achievement of consistency in the approach was hindered by:

- the lack of skills in a majority of schools to determine a baseline position;
- the different starting points and the variation in the confidence of staff and in the capacity of the schools to bring about improvement;
- the level of support and commitment from senior staff in a minority of the schools; and
- the ELBs' capacity to bring about improvement in these schools.

4.4 The SIP materials, which had been prepared for all schools in 1998, included a strategy for the promotion of literacy and numeracy in primary and post-primary schools in NI, together with guidance on school development planning, target setting, school self-evaluation and the promotion and sustaining of good behaviour. The Literacy Steering Group had been encouraged by the Inspectorate to monitor continually the effectiveness of their support in terms of the achievements and attainments of the learners by building on the experience of previous initiatives; they were encouraged in particular, to take account of the recommendations included in the Inspectorate's QAI report on SSP, and the factors which had been found to hinder school improvement in the two previous support programmes.

4.5 In some ELBs, the Curriculum, Advisory and Support Service (CASS) officers provided the schools with a range of proformae to enable them to record and maintain details of pupils' achievement and predicted attainment. In addition, the CASS officers kept records of meetings with teachers held in school and at out-centres. The quality of the evaluative reports prepared by the participative schools varied. A small number of reports focused on the learning that had taken place and identified clearly the next steps necessary to promote ongoing reflection, evaluation and improvement. In addition, in a minority of schools, the staff worked collaboratively to evaluate the effectiveness of particular lessons in achieving the identified learning outcomes for the pupils and the appropriateness of the teaching approaches used.

4.6 Even though CASS had been involved in the in-service training offered as part of the NILS, it was appropriate that, where particular professional needs of officers were highlighted, these were addressed. The professional development for the CASS officers contributed to their becoming more effective in promoting improvement in schools.

4.7 In arriving at their evaluations, the members of the Inspectorate:

- held discussions with the ELB school link officers, and with the senior officers in each ELB who had responsibility for RAP;
- held discussions with principals, co-ordinators and teachers in the sample of schools visited;
- met with the Chairperson of the NELS Steering Committee to evaluate how the agreed rationale, principles and support strategies were managed across the five ELBs;
- analysed the substantial information provided by the ELBs and schools, including individual school files, and the evaluations prepared by each ELB.

5. EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME'S OUTCOMES

The composite QAI Report of the RAP indicated that the effectiveness of the initiative could be identified in nine key areas.

5.1 Measurable gains in children's learning

Performance information presented to the Inspectorate indicates that "in some ELBs there is evidence from standardised testing of measurable gains in children's learning" and "in all ELBs there is evidence of achievement of targets in individual school action plans".

The Inspectorate's findings indicate that, while the limited duration of each school's involvement in RAP was, for the most part, insufficient to indicate significant, sustained improvement in pupils' performance, the extent of the improvement varied from school to school and across the ELBs. In all ELBs there is some evidence of improved achievement, as measured by comparative standardised tests results and as outlined in the targets set in individual literacy action plans.

Given the baseline position of many of the schools in RAP and the timescale for the support programme, the schools found that their initial target proved to be too difficult to achieve and measure, particularly by the end of the first year. There was an over-emphasis placed on quantitative measurable gains at the expense of a wider range of qualitative indicators against which to evaluate progress. The teachers had difficulty assessing what the learners can do and what they find difficult as users of language.

5.2 Baseline data secured

The ELB officers reported that the majority of teachers are becoming more secure and skilled in the analysis of data.

Although over the last five years the teachers have been gathering a range of data on pupils' attainments in English, including the results of standardised tests, end of KS results and diagnostic test outcomes, many of the teachers in RAP did not use this data effectively to

inform their own planning for learning and teaching, agree realistic targets for improvement and set appropriate and improved expectations for their learners to achieve.

The majority of the schools in RAP had previously participated in the NELS cohort training and had some experience already of school development planning. There is, however, little evidence that even these schools had, initially, the necessary skills to analyse key assessment data to determine an accurate baseline from which to plan for improvement.

5.3 Appropriate monitoring and evaluation strategies

The overall RAP report prepared by the ELBs states that schools are developing strategies for the monitoring of pupils' work and the evaluation of their learning. In addition, evidence from the information and records provided by the ELBs, indicates that the majority of schools have been developing, to some degree, strategies for sharing good practice, monitoring pupils' work and evaluating their learning. Most schools are now better at gathering and maintaining relevant evidence to help them monitor and evaluate their provision and the outcomes for the pupils.

The evidence from school visits made by the Inspectorate indicates that the schools, over time, have improved their capacity to gather and maintain appropriate evidence for monitoring and evaluation purposes. The findings from the visits made by the Inspectorate also indicate that while, in many schools, standards have not improved significantly, some improvement has taken place in the evaluation of pupils' learning. Teachers have begun, as a result of the support provided, to focus more sharply on the effectiveness of their teaching and the improvement in the pupils' learning; they have also explored, implemented and developed a wider range of teaching styles. In most of the classes observed by the Inspectorate, the pupils showed enthusiasm and interest in their work and there was a greater diversity in teaching approaches and enrichment of the learning environment and experiences. There remains, however, in many schools, an insufficient focus on developing the quality of the teachers' assessments of the pupils' progress and achievement and the use of these assessments to plan for the specific improvement in the achievements of those whose literacy skills are weakest.

5.4 Promotion of school self-evaluation

During the first year of RAP, the CASS officers interviewed reported that there was little evidence to suggest that schools were becoming involved readily in the process of self-evaluation to promote improvement.

In all of the schools in RAP, the principals and staff were aware of the need for improvement when they first entered the programme; however, their self-assessment was not sufficiently based on a thorough analysis of the current achievements of their pupils and a clear understanding of how to bring about improvement.

5.5 Entry and exit interviews

Since the beginning of RAP, no school has exited the programme. In some ELBs, no new schools were invited to join the programme at the end of the first year. By the end of the second year, however, some ELBs indicated that the existing schools in RAP needed to

remain for another year.

It is important that the ELBs now devise an agreed and identified strategy to identify when a school has made sufficient progress, is able to take responsibility for sustaining its improvement and is, therefore, ready to exit the programme.

5.6 Identification of improved practice

In a minority of the schools visited, the staff who were supported as part of the RAP, reported that they had disseminated and shared new strategies and resources to and with other colleagues.

The Inspectorate confirms the link officers' views across the ELBs that, even though many of the schools in RAP had been involved in improvement initiatives previously, there was, initially, limited expertise available within the teaching staff; in a majority of the schools, improvement strategies were poorly developed. These gaps placed considerable demands on the ELBs' school link officers and limited the progress made by many of the schools, within the period covered by this report. Effective use was made of teacher substitution days.

5.7 Evidence of improvement in school planning

All of the participating schools set targets.

The targets set by the schools were not always aligned sharply to the respective current baseline position of the school, and there was insufficient indication of how improvement might be promoted and measured. Where targets for raising attainment were sharply focused, measurement of improvement was often more evident. Where target-setting within the school was imprecise, teachers found it difficult to discuss, or indicate precisely, whether or not improvement had taken place. In one ELB, the schools were encouraged to assess and compare their initial competence and their competence after a year in, for example, auditing, baselining, target-setting and action planning. This effective practice should have been shared and adopted consistently across all of the ELBs.

5.8 School portfolio of evidence

The ELBs managed the project well; they monitored the procedures they put in place, kept a careful record of the visits to schools and ensured that roles were clearly defined.

The Inspectorate, however, found that there was inconsistency in the rigour with which the effectiveness of the procedures was assessed; there was also minimal sharing of good practice and disseminating of key learning experiences.

6. THE SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION REPORTS

6.1 The quality of the end-of-year evaluation reports which the schools prepared for their respective ELBs varied. However, the Inspectorate noted that, over time, there was a growing, and appropriate, emphasis placed on an evaluation of the progress made rather than on description of what had been done. There was also increasing evidence to indicate that schools were improving their ability to identify shortcomings and to track improvement in

individual pupils' attainment and progress. Nonetheless, a significant minority of schools reported that they had difficulty in actually measuring and demonstrating how the support had contributed to improvement in learning and teaching. A key finding of this inspection is that teachers need more help to make qualitative judgements about what pupils can do and what they find difficult as users of language; the teachers need to identify and agree better indicators of progress in learning and achievement.

6.2 Where principals took an active role in promoting and supporting RAP within a climate of whole school improvement, the teachers and CASS officers found the process to be positive and effective. The impact of RAP on improvement in a minority of schools was limited by the extent of support and commitment from their respective principals and senior staff.

7. EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD SUPPORT

7.1 The ELBs assisted and encouraged all schools to make further use of data on pupil performance to identify and confirm where underachievement existed. In-service support for all post-primary schools was beneficial in developing an increasing awareness of cognitive ability testing and how the subsequent data could be used to inform strategies for support, and to raise the expectations of the learners.

7.2 In post-primary schools, the influence of RAP was mainly on individual subject departments rather than on the promotion of improvement across the school. There was, however, limited discussion and sharing of learning and teaching approaches across departments; in the few instances where this happened, it was facilitated by the school principal or senior managers.

7.3 One of the major challenges for teachers in the post-primary schools is the over-emphasis on raising end of KS results through focusing narrowly on the practising of examination techniques. Where this happens it is inevitably at the expense of teaching to develop the pupils' versatility and confidence in their use of language to extend their learning across the curriculum. In a small number of post-primary schools in the sample visited, the participation in RAP was set within the identified whole-school improvement programme, and was consequently more effective.

7.4 The appointment of designated ELB school link officers provided valuable opportunities for some teachers to work closely with CASS officers. The school link officers have helped schools to reflect on their current practice, to plan more effectively by identifying learning outcomes and to explore further a wider range of teaching strategies, including, particularly in primary schools, modelled and shared approaches to promoting literacy. Evidence from the teachers' planning and the reports of the ELB school link officers support this approach as an effective way of working. A few schools, however, reported limited changes in teaching styles and minimal improvement in attainment. In some cases, where the improvement was minimal, the school had participated in the programme for a short time only. CASS officers also provided some helpful support for beginning teachers, teachers in their early professional development and support for classroom assistants.

7.5 The schools appreciated the development of their good working relationships with the ELBs, which helped them to analyse more effectively their current provision and the

standards and attainments of the pupils in order to plan for improvement. The schools also valued opportunities to cluster together in centre-based training. They welcomed advice and support in using information-gathering tools, including questionnaires for principals, teachers, pupils and classroom assistants, such as Self-Evaluation Through Attitudinal Questionnaires (SETAQ). Schools that participated in particular projects, such as the Linguistic Phonics Pilot and the Communication and Education Together (COMET) project reported that they valued the independent evaluation of the improvement in the children's experiences and attainments.

7.6 The evidence from school and class visits by inspectors indicates that, in the best practice, the experiences of the pupils were enriched by:

- greater interaction and participation in class;
- the use of a wider range of learning and teaching resources, including ICT;
- more positive attitudes to learning;
- higher levels of engagement with learning tasks; and
- a more holistic approach to literacy development.

8. THE VALIDITY OF THE OVERALL REPORT ON RAP

8.1 Although there was clear and informed direction provided by the Chair of the Literacy Steering Group, and objectives were identified and agreed for the RAP, the subsequent planning by the ELBs and the management of RAP did not always reflect what had been agreed originally. Each ELB prepared a quality assurance report on its own work and the Literacy Steering Group prepared an overall quality assurance report of the programme.

8.2 The overall report did not reflect sufficiently the differences that existed among the ELBs. The five ELBs' individual reports should have represented more coherently their findings, common issues and recommendations. The quality of the analysis of the recommendations varied and ranged from that which suggested that the programme should merely continue, to that which identified the need to promote literacy in a cross-curricular context, to address the professional development needs of the teachers, and to ensure a more realistic pace to promote change. The overall recommendation of the ELBs' Quality Assurance Report is that "the RAP should continue as an element of the strategy to raise educational attainment for all young people in the area of literacy." It is the view of the Inspectorate that this recommendation is too imprecise; it includes insufficient guidance on how the RAP could be developed further and no specific expectations for learners.

9. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

9.1 The findings of the Inspectorate conclude that there is a need:

- to have a much clearer understanding of the qualitative differences to be expected in the pupils' use of language, and the time that it takes to bring about real improvement and raise attainment;
- to identify existing, effective practice and to disseminate it more effectively within and across the participating schools, the ELBs and initial teacher education; and
- for this programme to be seen, not only as a means of bringing about improvement in the end of KS results, but also as a way of extending learning through the enhancement of the pupils' language.

10. **SUMMARY**

10.1 **Positive aspects of RAP include:**

Schools

- the effective strategy of the ELB link officers and other teaching colleagues working together to discuss, share and evaluate aspects of planning and classroom practice;
- the improvement of the teachers' skills in analysing performance data to inform future planning;
- the increasing evidence, in teachers' planning, of identified learning outcomes rather than the content to be covered or the activities to be completed; and
- the improvement in achievement at individual school level, as measured, for example, by comparative standardised test results and as outlined in the targets set out in school action plans.

The Education and Library Boards

- the value of a support agreement between schools and CASS, and the appointment of designated school link officers, in ensuring consistency in the improvement strategies deployed;
- the differentiated specific support provided for each school;
- the modelling of approaches to promoting literacy;

- the good use made of information gathering tools, including questionnaires for principals, teachers, pupils and classroom assistants, for example, through SETAQ;
- the helpful guidance provided for schools to assist them in the analysis and interpretation of school performance information;

The Literacy Steering Group

- the effective direction and co-ordination strategies employed by the Chairperson of the Inter Board Steering Group;
- the comprehensive, common themes and priorities identified by some ELBs;
- the four stages identified by the Literacy Steering Group to promote improvement, that is, review and assessment, action planning, review and evaluation.

10.2 Areas for improvement

Schools need to:

- ensure that all teachers prioritise and plan for the development of language in the pupils' learning across the curriculum;
- set appropriately high expectations of what the pupils can achieve, based on the pupils' prior achievements, and on a diagnosis of what they find difficult;
- analyse and use more effectively, accurate assessment information on the pupils' attainments;
- ensure that the staff have ongoing professional support to acquire and apply skills to support school improvement;
- ensure that the action plans, identify clearly the intended learning outcomes as precisely as possible, with measurable and discernable outcomes highlighted;
- use ICT more effectively to support the development of literacy across the curriculum.

The Education and Library Boards need to ensure:

- that schools evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their current provision, can identify readily where underachievement exists, and implement plans for improvement;
- that the staff in schools, and in the support service, have developed the necessary

- professional competence to bring about the required improvement;
- that school management and leadership have the capacity to promote and support the improvement initiative;
 - that an effective exit plan is in place to help the school sustain their improvement; and
 - that there is coherence in the initiatives that provide support for literacy within the context of school improvement.

The Literacy Steering Group needs to ensure:

- that the CASS officers in each of the five ELBs work together more effectively, to determine achievable success criteria and to identify and disseminate effective support strategies;
- that there is a shared understanding of how improvement will be promoted, monitored and measured across all ELBs;
- that common and agreed approaches to planning, managing and evaluating the RAP are implemented consistently; and
- that the recommendations recorded in each of the ELB's quality assurance reports are reviewed and, where similar issues are identified, they are addressed in a corporate way.

11. CONCLUSION

The RAP displays features that helped to identify and support pupils in individual schools whose attainment needs to be improved. While it focused on a relatively small number of schools in each ELB, and many of the strategies employed within individual ELBs were successful, the best features of the programme need to become embedded in the day-to-day working of all schools across all five ELBs.

The findings from the quality assurance reports prepared by each ELB, together with the QAI findings, need to inform and contribute to a more coherent and agreed programme of support which influences a greater number of schools and learners. Teachers need to be able to make sound, qualitative judgments about what their learners can do and what they find difficult. All teachers in schools need to be more aware of the role of language in learning and how it supports and promotes the learning in all other subject areas. They need to acquire and develop a range of strategies for bringing about improvement and to enable learners to be aware of the standards by which their language is being judged. Teachers of English need to have a much clearer understanding of the progression to be expected of the learners as language users across the years of compulsory schooling.

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