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*Improving literacy levels among
underprivileged boys in Belfast*

Author: Dr Anne Bailie

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WCMT Report: Improving literacy levels among underprivileged boys in Belfast

Aims:

To learn more from the good practice of countries where Literacy levels are significantly higher than our own.

Objectives:

- To visit educationalists in Canada and Finland and discover their good practice;
- To observe lessons;
- To explore links between teacher training and actual practice;
- To translate lessons learned back into my own situation in North Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Background:

I have been a teacher, in some form or other, throughout my entire career: I have taught at tertiary level in both Kenya and Northern Ireland, and at secondary level in France, Kenya and Northern Ireland. For the past decade, I have been an English Teacher in Belfast, Northern Ireland; for the past seven years, I have been Whole School Literacy Co-ordinator in Belfast High School and then St Malachy's College, with particular responsibility for encouraging good literacy practice throughout each whole school. I am fascinated by research from other countries, and I have been particularly curious to discover why countries like Finland and Canada have been doing so well in Literacy: they often attain top slots in the PISA Literacy tests, for example.¹ These countries seem, on the surface, to have many things in common with my own, so I wanted to travel to both to research why they are doing so well, and to see what conclusions, if any, I could draw to share with my own school and wider community.

There have been many fears about literacy – and falling literacy levels – here in Northern Ireland. In 2014, the GCSE English Language pass rate went up from 68.8% to 73%.² Such improvement is clearly to be welcomed, but it means that 27% of our 16 year olds did not pass the basic literacy requirement at the end of their compulsory education. That translates to over 20,000 of our pupils leaving school without the minimum qualification in literacy. Clearly, this needs to change. I teach in a deprived area of Belfast which has been deeply impacted both by the Troubles and their legacy.³ However, I believe

¹ PISA is an acronym for the Programme for International Student Assessment of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is currently the only educational survey administered to 15 year olds students across a range of countries; it tests their knowledge and skills in reading, numeracy and science, as well as their attitudes towards learning. For more information on the PISA test, please see: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisafaq> [last accessed 31.3.15].

For the full list of countries that have participated in the PISA test, please see: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisaparticipants.htm> [last accessed 31.3.15].

² For further details and analysis of NI results, please see www.rewardinglearning.co.uk [last accessed 31.3.15].

³ North Belfast is recognised as one of the most deprived areas within the UK. See: http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/archive/pr_dep.pdf [last accessed 31.3.15].

that education can make a positive and lasting difference here: as Kofi Annan put it, “Literacy is the bridge between misery and hope.”⁴

During my travels funded by the WCMT and Mercers’ Company grant, I was privileged to visit both Canada and Finland. I spent two weeks in Montreal, Canada, in June 2014, and then three weeks travelling throughout Finland in August 2014. I interviewed and observed teachers, students, lecturers and other educationalists in both countries. During my time in Canada, I remained in Montreal, and I was thus able to visit a number of different educational establishments within the same city. During my time in Finland, I travelled the length of the country, and visited fewer establishments, but for a longer period each time.

⁴ Kofi Annan, in his short speech to mark International Literacy Day on 8 September, 1997. For a full transcript of his speech, please see: <http://www.un.org/press/en/1997/19970904.SGSM6316.html> [last accessed 31.3.15].

CANADA

Montreal: 9th – 24th June 2014.

In Montreal, I was able to visit the following educational establishments:

- College Jean De Brebeuf
- Loyola High School
- McGill University
- The Centre for Literacy
- ATPAL
- Au Coup De Pouce
- Montreal Fluency Centre
- RECLAIM Literacy
- English Montreal School Board
- St George's School of Montreal
- Primary School, Ecole Primaire de Sainte Lucie

Brief Overview of Education System in Quebec:

The School System in Quebec is unique in North America as it is the only one which operates primarily in French. I selected Montreal as it contains schools in both French and English, and I wished to see how pupils were educated in both languages. There is no inspectorate in Canada, although there are education boards which provide continual training and standardisation of marking for teachers.

Education in Canada is decentralised: it remains within provincial jurisdiction, so I learned about Quebecois education during my time in Montreal. The curriculum is overseen by each province, so can vary widely from province to province. In order to graduate with a provincial high school diploma, there is no standardised test; instead, there are in-house exams. The Ministry Programme was overhauled some fifteen years ago: *The Reform*, as the overhaul became known, was modelled on a socio-constructivist pattern, with the student placed firmly at the centre of his or her learning. Students were coming in from primary schools with reading ages below grade level, and it has long been recognised that literacy needs to be actively encouraged, modelled, reviewed and improved. The Reform is due to be replaced next year by another new curriculum, and many teachers to whom I spoke expressed a faint anxiety about the kind of changes this new curriculum will herald. A strong social democracy over the past few decades has placed a strong emphasis upon funding education and healthcare, beginning at the earliest possible age. In Montreal, government funding and strict rules on how much private schools can charge pupils have led to a situation where almost as many pupils attend private schools as public ones. However, the population is declining and public schools are becoming more competitive, even when compared to private schools. Some private schools have

already closed: Weston Private School closed after ninety years and Elizabeth High School is closing; other private schools may have to merge in order to survive.⁵

Case Studies and Findings from Canada:

I. Francophone School: Collège Jean De Brebeuf



College Jean De Brebeuf is clearly an excellent private school; indeed, it which was ranked first in Quebec this year.⁶ The late Canadian President, Pierre Trudeau, was a pupil at this school. It has an illustrious history and clearly, also, an illustrious present. After spending much of its existence as a boys' school, Jean De Brebeuf has recently admitted girls, but they are schooled in a separate part of the school and taught separately, in alignment with the belief that boys learn better in single-sex settings. Boys and girls can meet in both the library and cafeterias and they also have some senior classes together. Although College Jean de Brebeuf was founded by the Jesuits, it adapted to the system of secularism which was brought in during the 1960s. Jean de Brebeuf offers its students exchange programmes to Australia, Spain and the USA, as well as excellent and wide-ranging drama, music and PE programmes. Its results are phenomenal: 175 pupils took the Ministry exams last year without a single fail. This is a school where both academic and extra-curricular excellence are important.

I was made very welcome during my time at Jean De Brebeuf, and I had the privilege of interviewing several members of the Senior Leadership Team: Monsieur April, le Directeur; Madame Brazeau, La Sous-Directrice, and Monsieur Lemaire, le Directeur of Upper School. I also interviewed Madame O'Reilly (whose husband has Irish ancestry), Madame White, who both teach English, and Madame Lamonico, who teaches French. When asked about the incredible success of pupils at Jean De Brebeuf, every teacher identified the following key elements for high achievement: consistently excellent teaching across all subjects; systematic and specific teaching of literacy skills; and pupils from a strong socio-economic background with at least one parent educated at tertiary level. At Jean De Brebeuf, all pupils are encouraged to extend their ability. Thus, every pupil has the opportunity to explore his or her talent outside the classroom with a wide range of options: sport, art, theatre, musicals, environmental groups, international relations groups, and an accurate recreation of a meeting of the United Nations. These opportunities reinforce classroom-based learning to provide an education that is challenging and holistic.

Although Jean de Brebeuf was founded as a Catholic (specifically, Jesuit) school, the current system is more secular; however, the Christian values from the time of the school's foundation still underpin it today and, its leaders believe, help to contribute to its success.

⁵ See <http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/news/montreal/story.html?id=2bc55e18-afd9-4ad1-ade1-aaa8a11571c8> [last accessed 31.3.15].

⁶ See <http://www.brebeuf.qc.ca> [last accessed 31.3.15].

Library: The library was very well resourced and extremely well attended. Even its central location in the school testifies to its significance. Indeed, the Librarian told me that pupils are queuing up to get in from 7:30 am, and would probably be there even earlier if they could. In addition to reading that occurs in the library, an incredible 4,000 books are borrowed every month. Shelves are well stocked with modern books and up-to-date magazines in both English and French. The library is quiet and largely free from modern technology. It is also the only place, apart from the cafeterias, where male and female pupils can mix freely. While this may explain some of its attraction for the pupils of Jean De Brebeuf, it does not explain it all. Clearly, reading regularly and widely is seen as “normal” at this College, in marked contrast to many schools in the UK and Ireland.

Teacher Timetables: Teachers here have timetables that are significantly lighter than many of ours in the UK, typically no more than 18 x 45 minute teaching periods per week. This is almost a half timetable in the UK. The remaining time is spent in school, grading and preparing for classes, or participating in extra-curricular activities.

Friday Afternoon Tests: Friday afternoons are reserved for tests across the school, with a timetable of topics and subjects tested. This ensures that pupils are continually learning relevant facts and skills and applying their knowledge under timed conditions (which is, of course, how they are tested in their final exams).

There are three different education tracks currently available at the school:

- International Baccalaureate: now just two years;
- Sports Track for competing athletes;
- Older, more traditional and academic *Langues et Civilisations Latins* track.

Pupils select at 12 years old which track to follow: all graduate with a diploma at the same level. In addition to these more academic streams of education, there is also an Apprenticeship Programme available at Trade High Schools. There is an expectation at schools like Jean De Brebeuf that all pupils will – and generally do – continue to tertiary level education.

Government Funding: Education is a provincial domain throughout Canada. Funding of education, even in private schools, is assisted by the government in Quebec and is deliberately kept relatively low: the Quebecois government gives a school \$5,000 per child and the school is not allowed to charge parents more than this:⁷ this keeps the cost of private education remarkably low compared to similar private educational establishments in England.⁸ I was astonished to learn, therefore, that attendance at Jean de Brebeuf costs only \$5000 Canadian per annum. One in two high school students in Montreal currently attends a private school; by contrast, in Ontario, for example, the percentage of students at private school drops from 50% to just 4%. Bursaries to enable poorer parents to send their children to the private school of their choice have become fewer due to recent economic hardship.⁹ Alumni often send their own children to the private schools they attended: they have often achieved a high socio-

⁷ That equates to £2,654, which is so much lower than I had expected for a private school of such quality.

⁸ Private education is extremely rare in Northern Ireland. One of the very few private schools in Northern Ireland is Campbell College, <http://www.campbellcollege.co.uk/> [last accessed 31.3.15]. The fees there are currently £4,068 for Junior Day tuition. Day tuition fees for private schools in England can be much higher: currently £34,434 per annum at Eton College, for example: <http://www.etoncollege.com> [last accessed 31.3.15].

⁹ One example of this is the Children First fund, which operated in Ontario and Alberta, and which closed in 2012: <http://www.childrenfirstgrants.ca> [last accessed 31:3:15].

economic status, with at least one parent having attended university. The academic success of parents here is seen as underpinning the success of their children. While there are mandatory programmes in place to diagnose and help pupils with learning difficulties, little money is available at private schools for this. At Jean De Brebeuf, for example, there are no Classroom Assistants.¹⁰

Finding Your Level: In Jean de Brebeuf, there are 4 different in-house English levels. Pupils take an English exam at the age of twelve, and they are then streamed accordingly. The school welcomes the widest possible range of students, from very beginners in English to those who come from Anglophone homes and Anglophone primary schools. The recommendation is to have 100 hours of English teaching per year per pupil in Grades 7 – 9; this is often enriched in Grades 10 and 11 to 150 hours per year. ESL exams, both regular and advanced, are ministry exams taken at the age of 17. In order to pass these, pupils have to write a feature article, read and reinvest what they read, and channel, shape and craft information. For ESL, samples are moderated at marking conventions, but teachers give the marks to their own pupils.

Footprints: The published annual collection of the Winners of the English Writing Contest, in collaboration with the Association des Parents. This is a beautifully curated and published collection of student writing in English. It contains the winning written pieces and also high-quality photographs of students and staff reading out their own writing: poems, essays and songs for the contest. Such careful presentation of the pupils' work emphasises how much literacy is valued at Jean De Brebeuf, in both French and in English.

II. Anglophone School: Loyola School



Loyola is an Anglophone Catholic school which forms part of the Quebec Association of Independent Schools.¹¹ School fees at Loyola are set at \$6,000 Canadian per pupil per annum; 1 in 7 pupils at Loyola receives a bursary to help defray expenses. Loyola runs on a nine day cycle timetable, with six periods per day, and about 31 of the 54 periods as teaching periods for teachers. There are approximately 25 pupils per class. As with Jean De Brebeuf, there is a Summer School at Loyola which is attended by pupils from Loyola and sister schools: this may be to help pupils catch up, or it may be to help some pupils get ahead. Teachers have training days for professional development built in to the school year: in mid-October, early January and June. There are very clear objectives which help to enhance success, and teachers have a set number of periods per week for preparation, marking and reflection. Each teacher produces his or her own learning plans, and is given time on staff days to review activities and plan for pupil differentiation.

I was given a tour of the school by the Head of Drama, Ms Adams, and I had the opportunity to speak to the Principal, Mr Meagher, and several other staff too. I was truly taken by so many aspects of it: it was, quite honestly, one of the warmest and most exquisitely decorated schools I have ever seen.

¹⁰ At my school, by marked contrast, there are thirty-five classroom assistants.

¹¹ See <http://www.loyola.ca> [last accessed 31.3.15].

The beautiful displays throughout the school were created with such care and flair that I wanted to stop to examine each one in detail. It made the whole school seem bright and focused upon celebration of all the wonderful sporting and theatrical and academic and service events.

The Christian ethos of the school was evident and made relevant through things like “rules of engagement” and “daily thoughts”. There is an undeniably strong focus on Jesuit school principles of loving, being open to growth, developing intellectual confidence and maintaining a spiritual life. As part of this, all pupils must complete a 25 hour Christian Service project which includes presentations and journaling as part of its reflection. One example of Christian service is the school trip to the Dominican Republic; others carry out their service in Montreal. Acts of service include fundraising in home rooms, the collection and delivery of Christmas baskets, and a spring walkathon. Parental involvement is a very strong factor throughout the school year, including the charity work. Parents are encouraged to be involved in different ways in different additional activities such as after-school sport, music, charity work and also the Drama Department outreach to local primary schools.

Public Speaking at Loyola: all five years participate in a Speech Course. This is believed to improve literacy levels and thinking skills, to encourage confidence and group work, to engage pupils in difficult subjects and to enable them to overcome fears and perform to the best of their ability.

Library and Active Literacy: Again, the Library plays a central role in the education of the school: it was beautifully stocked and decorated with several recent student-projects based on research and reading. The Literature chosen to study in class must adhere to the following criteria: it must be interesting, age-appropriate and in line with Jesuit qualities. Vocabulary and basics are vitally important in the teaching of literacy skills here: they start with the sentence and then move up to paragraph and chapter and whole text understanding. Pupil reading is individually assessed and pupils are put on an appropriate reading programme. Every five weeks, they read books on their level and then undergo a test, moving up as soon as they are fit to do so.

Going out and experiencing life is also deemed very important: as a culture, the school believes that Canadians need to develop better skills and not merely be content with grammatical errors and inconsistencies. Standards need to be raised; pupils need to be allowed to develop more robust absorption and retention rates.

Literacy and Technology: The Technical Co-ordinator at the school examines what technology will improve the power of pupil learning, not merely the fun of it. The focus is on using technology to promote deeper learning, never just for its own sake or vaguely supposed intrinsic value.¹²

Drama Department Outreach: Each year, the Head of Drama chooses an appropriate play for younger children, and pupils in the Drama department undertake to learn it and then perform it in local primary schools. This has proved to be a huge success. The primary schools look forward to it, it advertises the school in an unusual and highly positive light, and it encourages both creativity and altruism in the pupils who are performing. In my opinion, such creative links between primary and secondary schools

¹² The use of technology to enhance literacy has come more sharply into focus in my own school since my visit to Loyola High School, and I have been developing and trialling a range of materials using free apps which can be downloaded on the boys’ school iPads.

should be further encouraged in the UK.¹³ While UK schools can feel paralysed by league tables and continual assessments, it is important to make room for creativity and sharing throughout the year.

III. McGill University School of Education:



During my time at McGill, I was able to speak to a number of students and also interview Dr Teresa Strong-Wilson of the Department of Integrated Studies in Education. I learned so much more about the Canadian system during my time here.¹⁴ I have read about dissention and dissatisfaction within the teaching profession, at both secondary and tertiary level here: Canadian teachers have reported that, while they enjoy greater autonomy than in the States, they do not have as much autonomy as they would desire. There is an increasing culture of teacher bashing, and of blaming teachers if scores are not as high as they ought to be. Such pressures have led to militant teacher strikes in areas such as Ontario.¹⁵ University students want free tuition, and their desires led them, a couple of years ago, to campaign in the face of riot police. I wanted to learn more about the current education system for training teachers here in Montreal, and Dr Strong-Wilson kindly answered all my questions.

I discovered that the Canadian system is not one overall system. In fact, there is no overall department of Education, but rather a Council of Ministers who act in a consultative role. Moreover, there are thirteen separate systems of tertiary education within Canada.¹⁶ As in Finland, there is also no inspectorate; however, organisations like the Frazer Institute, based in Ottawa, play a significant role in discerning educational progress. The Frazer Institute is an independent think tank, associated with the Conference Board of Canada, which ranks schools according to performance.¹⁷

The McGill teacher training programme was first piloted a decade ago, following 1990s research into the idea of *literacies*, not just literacy. With this acceptance of pluralities came a back-to-basics approach, focusing on reading and writing scores. It is a longer-than-typical programme, university length, as opposed to the one-and-a-half year programmes typical in other provinces. It requires 120 credits for completion; most of the courses are prescribed, with only 6 for electives. There are 70

¹³ Here is an encouraging article about possibilities for maintaining creativity in the primary sector in England: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/26/creativity-schools> [last accessed: 31:3:15]. All too often, UK teachers feel, as this article points out, too constrained by “an oppressive data-police mentality and fear of the standards agenda”.

¹⁴ <http://www.mcgill.ca/dise/about/academicstaff/strong/> [last accessed 31:3:15].

¹⁵ The teacher strikes in Ontario have been ongoing over the past few decades – and also wide-reaching in their impact. See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/28/world/teachers-strike-in-ontario-closing-thousands-of-schools.html> and <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ontario-teacher-strikes-5-frequently-asked-questions-1.1193828> [last accessed 31:3:15].

¹⁶ For a thorough exploration of the Canadian education system, see <http://www.schoolsinCanada.com/Canadian-Education-System.cfm> or, for a brief outsider overview, please see: <http://www.workinginCanada.com/education/education-and-schooling/overview> [last accessed 31:3:15].

¹⁷ <http://www.fraserinstitute.org> [last accessed 31:3:15].

hours of field experience, the bulk of these in the pivotal third year of the course. Those on the teacher training programme begin in mid-August, when schools begin, even though that means that they start weeks before the rest of the university students. There are sometimes two student teachers to one co-operating teacher, but the ratio is more often 1:1. Typically, there is a two week observation in the fall term, and a five to six week observation in the winter term.

First Nation Teachers: As a result of legislation like the 1973 Policy Document on Indian Education, First Nation people took back control of their education from the federal government. However, a disproportionate number of First Nation students still require IEPs¹⁸, and, while birth rates are fastest among First Nationers, they also have the lowest graduation rate of any groups within Canada. Grass roots programmes have proven much more effective and successful than anything introduced by the government. However, in Quebec, while private schools unexpectedly top the Frazer rankings, First Nation schools remain frequently at the bottom. There are relatively few First Nation teachers, but that problem is being addressed: for example, the UBC now also offers a thriving teacher programme for First Nation teachers. In 2008, the PM made an apology to residential school survivors for what they went through in the name of “education”.¹⁹

IV The Centre for Literacy:



The Beginnings . . .

I had a wonderful, lengthy interview with the inspirational director of this Centre, Linda Shohet. The visionary project, *Literacy Across the Curriculum*, was a faculty development project at Dawson College. Its aim was to enhance literacy skills for *all* teachers, and grew beyond the parameters of Dawson. In 1988, a Literacy Resource Centre was established in each of the then twelve states: its remit was to integrate into a literacy resource centre which would support practice, and inform evidence-based practice in provinces. The Centre for Literacy was initially founded as the QAAL: Quebec Association for Adult Learning, at Dawson College in 1991.²⁰ Since the 90s, the very concept of literacy has undergone a shift in policy discourse, from a dichotomous condition (either you could read and write or you could not) to a more context-related continuum of understanding.

There appear to be fewer inequalities than in the US: the public system makes a gallant effort to compensate deprived areas, but, in most cases, such areas do not achieve the same level of outcomes as less deprived areas. However, in deprived areas with strong leadership and vision, outcomes can definitely rise. Despite clear evidence of the power and success of such interventions, literacy programmes are being strongly adversely affected by cuts in budgets across Canada. This has impacted

¹⁸ IEPs are Individual Education Programmes which are drawn up for students who have special or additional educational needs.

¹⁹ See <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649> for a full transcript of the apology, made by PM Stephen Harper [last accessed 31:3:15].

²⁰ For a brief summative history of The Centre for Literacy, please see: <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/about/history> [last accessed 31:3:15].

the most vulnerable groups in society, including the Literacy in Prisons programmes, programmes for those who speak minority languages, immigrants and native Aboriginal peoples. The Canadian Government had funded *Upskill*, a project to help those with basic literacy levels to gain more.²¹ The measures of success for this project were both quantitative and qualitative; indeed, an extremely broad framework of success was established. Quantitative data included an increase in productivity or application for a promotion following participation in the programme. Qualitative data included: reported increased confidence; increased trust between employer and employee; wider social network; greater engagement with family; deeper community engagement; increased morale. Such interventionist programmes have been viewed with great interest by EU countries too, but it is difficult to find funding for such programmes, despite the proven and widespread benefits, at a time of economic hardship.

The Middle . . .

Bill 101 has had a powerful impact upon language and education throughout Quebec.²² The implementation of the Bill extends up to the end of secondary school. In addition, all immigrants (of school age and older) must acquire Francophone skills. Adult Literacy, according to Shohet, is strongly provided for here in Montreal, despite government officials withdrawing funding.²³ It is popular: both immigrant and Canadian-born adults with below-par skills have a strong desire to improve their literacy skills here. Finding ways to help them is particularly important in light of recent world literacy statistics, such as Canada's ranking in PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies).²⁴ While it is understood that PISA offers a profile of what fifteen year olds who have been – and currently are – in education can do, and PIACC is for 16-65 year olds, and therefore an entirely different population, there is concern that Canada is now slipping down the ranks in both tests. Interestingly, countries appear to be together, more in bubbles than in ranks in such tests, so Canada and Australia appear together: such patterning would merit further, more specific research. Countries that are “bubbled” together appear to have similar concerns, including, for Canada and Australia, a marked discrepancy between school achievements and workplace requirements.

Hopefully, not The End . . .

Those teaching French, in schools and through charities such as this one, have maintained a strong determination to teach basic blocks of language. There is a special focus on qualitative learning, on personalised homework and on listening for learning, on using conversation and directed questions to help pupils improve their literacy in general – and their grammar in particular. Charities such as *Reclaim Literacy* and *Au Coup De Pouce* are there to empower people to have better lives as a direct result of improved literacy, and organisations, such as the Centre for Literacy, do a fantastic job of proving the improvements that stronger literacy can make to adult life and livelihoods.

²¹ See <http://www.upskill.ca/about> [last accessed 31:3:15].

²² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_of_the_French_Language [last accessed 31:3:15].

²³ See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/adult-literacy-programs-in-trouble-warns-advocacy-group-1.2644836> [last accessed 31:3:15].

²⁴ For the work of PIAAC, please see: <http://www.piaac.ca> [last accessed 31:3:15].

For an overview of 2001 PIAAC results for Canada, please see <http://cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/315/Canadian-PIAAC-Report.EN.pdf> [last accessed 31:3:15]; for important reasons to pay attention to the PIAAC results, see http://www.rcinet.ca/console.php?id=6858295&image=http://img.src.ca/2013/10/15/635x357/131015_dz0pt_rci-computer-gropu_sn635.jpg&locale=en&appCode=medianet [last accessed 31:3:15].

However, there are serious funding issues as a result of political change which have imperilled all of these current literacy programmes. Firstly, there is no single Minister for Education in Canada, and no overriding single policy, so these can shift according to which party or parties are currently in power. The current, more right-wing government holds a very narrow view of literacy (based on the old binary literacy/illiteracy model). This narrow view, combined with the need to make serious budget cuts, have had a negative impact in Quebec. Funding has been dramatically cut following a year of flux, and the future for many literacy charities and other groups is uncertain. Such news is obviously very worrying, and could have a massive negative impact on all who work for – and benefit from – the strong literacy charity sector here.

V. ATPAL:



ATPAL is a centre to help adults learn new languages quickly and easily, including English, Spanish and French (and especially in Montreal) French. They are open and friendly and offer regular courses (many of them online), at affordable rates for those needing to learn French, or improve their spoken or written French.

VI. Au Coup De Pouce



This offers a range of literacy support in French, including programmes – such as The First Thousand Days – which encourage parents to develop the habit of reading to their babies.

VII. Montreal Fluency Centre:



This is a very impressive, not-for-profit, multilingual organisation which helps children with speech difficulties to develop their language skills and language confidence.

VIII. RECLAIM Literacy:

REading

Council

for

Literacy

Advance

In

Montreal

Reclaim Literacy offers confidential – and free – literacy support to English-speaking adults in Montreal. It runs an impressive number of programmes and has a wonderful tag line: “Making low literacy something the next generation will only READ about.” It is currently developing its online support also, which I believe will allow it to reach even more people.

IX. English Montreal School Board:



At the EMSB, I had a detailed interview with Dr Kettner. The English Montreal School Board is the board for Anglophone schools in Montreal. Its Mission Statement, on its website, indicates clearly its supportive role:

The mission of the English Montreal School Board is to support its schools and centres in their efforts to educate students within a caring, safe and inclusive learning community.

- Recognize and value the diversity of its community;
- Provide all students with the opportunity to develop their talents and achieve their personal best;
- Recognize the skills and competencies of its employees and support their continuous professional development;
- Encourage collaboration among the various educational partners;

- Use resources effectively and innovatively to help schools and centres focus on the mission of instruction, socialization, and qualification;
- Encourage lifelong learning and critical thinking.

The EMSB mission fosters the development of educated and responsible persons who will assume their position as active members of a democratic society.

It was founded in 1998 and is the largest English public school board in Quebec. Prior to the EMSB, the English Speaking Schools used to be combined under what was called the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal: divisions of language, religion and ethnicity are ones which are all too easily understood from my own teaching context. Now, however, the old lines drawn Catholic and Protestant have been redefined simply along language lines: Francophone or Anglophone. To put it in other words, “While initial struggles in Canada were around religious differences, in more recent years language has shown greater salience.”²⁵

Montreal is the most cosmopolitan area of Quebec - and the most truly bilingual, with signs in both English and French. Many other parts of Quebec are deliberately, politically monolingual. Two decades ago, concerned about the falling birth-rate among the French-speaking population, the Parti Quebecois introduced Bill 101, which made it law for all immigrant children to be schooled in Quebec in French. Indeed, the only children legally able to attend English-speaking schools are the children of Quebecois Anglophones. Ironically, many of the Anglophones I spoke to have chosen to send their children to Francophone schools instead, to ensure that they are completely bilingual. Thus, many younger Anglophones tend to be bilingual or even trilingual, and find it easier to move outside Quebec for work than young Francophones.

There is no National Curriculum: each Province and two territories have their own curriculum; each Province sets its own standards, albeit influenced by other provinces and also other countries. Literacy has long been at the top of the political agenda. Most schools have Mission Statements which incorporate some notion or ideal about the significance of good literacy. In the present times, a conservative national government has had a marked effect on literacy. Influenced by the United States, and particularly the *No Child Left Behind* policy, they have consequently been moving steadily towards more standardised forms of assessment. Thus, in the last five years, Quebec and Ontario have both increased standardised testing at younger and younger ages. In addition, there was a management agreement which each school is supposed to sign, in which certain key areas are identified, and scores in these areas had to improve by an agreed amount: this tie between performance and funding led to real pressure upon schools.

Constructivism has been the main pedagogical method in recent times; indeed, constructivism has remained the predominant philosophy – with learning centres and the extremely popular “Daily Five” literacy classroom management strategy, particularly for primary schools: pupils learn to do five different literacy tasks per day as part of the routine of the school day: these could include reading to themselves; reading to someone else using materials selected from the classroom book boxes; word work; writing; Listening Centre. Reading methods currently involve balancing a mix of a whole language methods and phonics, rather than the reliance on only one particular method.

While English is well taught in schools throughout Montreal, some schools in Quebec city and smaller Quebecois towns do not have such strong English; indeed, as I observed throughout my time in

²⁵ Please see <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46580959.pdf>, p.3 [last accessed 31.3.15].

Montreal, there is a strong political element to the teaching of English. The globalisation of English as a *lingua franca* of the world has helped some in Quebec to rethink English as merely for Anglophone Canadians; however, as some teachers told me, the very act of becoming an English teacher may still be viewed as a political act.

English schools can be bilingual: students may learn one day in English, the following day in French. They might have the same teacher, or there might be collaboration between two teachers. A bilingual programme was brought in to increase employability, although English teachers can still typically find it difficult to get placements if they do not speak French. The Bill 101 has had the impact of slowly reducing Anglophone schools and this, in turn, has led to an exodus of young, English-speaking teachers and a gradual process of attrition.

The following are some of the top pedagogical procedures currently advocated to support and enhance Literacy:

- Guided Reading
- The Advanced 5, moving on from the Daily Five
- Evidence-based learning.

X. St George's School of Montreal:



ST. GEORGE'S SCHOOL
OF MONTREAL

St George's School of Montreal is a co-educational, non-denominational school which is committed to providing excellent individualised, personalised learning in a pupil-centred environment. This school is significantly more expensive for parents than its French counterparts: it costs up to \$20,000 Canadian dollars per pupil per annum here.

Its core values are as follows:

- The discovery of oneself
- The encouragement of curiosity
- The acquisition of a "Life Tool Kit".

St George's Method: The "St George's Method" is clearly outlined on the school website and other documentation: they challenge students to challenge themselves in order to grow emotionally, socially and cognitively. The following quotation from their website summarises their practice of their theories very well:

Best practice research indicates that Teaching, Learning and Curriculum are the basis for the development of effective pedagogy. These three key components are interdependent and are constantly in motion. Our primary focus at St. George's is on Learning, equally supported by the science and art of Teaching and the development and delivery of enriched Curriculum.

St George's shows understanding by designing a curriculum with clear concepts at different grade levels. These concepts require topical knowledge and language skills which are developed to acquire knowledge in other areas too. The school invests time to ensure the realisation of its strong vision: it has, I discovered, a nine-year long term plan including specific professional development for its staff; with that in mind, it carves out 7-8 professional training days per annum for teachers to review their teaching and to learn or enhance teaching skills. There are targeted goals for each teacher per annum, and the staff is divided into professional learning community groups within the school, according to their specific goals.

The school offers French immersion in kindergarten: 50% in French; 50% in English. K1 – K3 have French teachers; K4 – K6 offer remedial support for newly-arrived pupils. Vocabulary tool boxes are used for each language, and the clear focus in early kindergarten is on basic sentence structure. The children in this school play and live in both languages: they have two homeroom teachers, one French, one English, who teach them on different days and swap over. The Elementary School also has teaching assistants, and there is a strong focus on developing both a shared general pedagogy and subject-specific pedagogy, which extend throughout the school. Exams happen at the end of May and are often thematically linked: for example, an oral exam relating to pre-set, studied topics could take the form of a debate in small groups (of no more than four pupils); this could then lead on to a three hour reading exam, with a DVD providing multi-modal information in addition to more traditional reading material on the same topic. Then, there might be a further, two-hour seated written exam comprising an essay or a letter with a twist on the same topic. There is less literature and poetry in literacy development nowadays, and more practical, multi-modal information, in keeping with modern society. There are ministry exams at the end of High School, and French as a second language is obligatory in order to graduate from an Anglophone school in Quebec. There is a base programme and the school also offers one of enrichment, focusing on comprehension, oral and written skills. The school takes account of the variety of its pupils: those who are bilingual; those who have a definite and developing second language; those who do not have a strong second language. Even for the bilingual students, the teachers work hard to refine the subtleties of their written and oral expression.

Senior Staff at St George's believe that the secret to educational success is *not* in providing more bodies, but in teaching teachers to be *more resilient* in all processes. Thus, in order to foster Literacy, specialists in the Arts meet the whole school to discuss specifics of promoting literacy within each discipline. The targets are: visible learning, formative assessment, pushing students to reach and reflect and to become independent thinkers. The school plan for next year includes collaborative analysis of student work.

Centre for Learning Enrichment: This is an area where the most advanced students can have time out of regular class in order to engage at higher levels and push their learning further and higher. We have a Literacy Support Centre in my school, but we do not have a centre for the Gifted and Talented.

XI. Primary School – Ecole Primaire de Sainte Lucie:



One of the teachers from Jean De Brebeuf kindly introduced me to a friend of hers teaching in a very different kind of school: a truly multicultural primary school in a much lower socio-economic area. Many of the pupils here do not speak French when they arrive; many also have no opportunity to speak French at home. In that school, this teacher is the only English teacher, and works to support those whose English is stronger than their French, as well as those whose English is very limited. In Junior Primary, they play games in English and learn to sing songs.

There are also French classes available for parents who might need them. The school has a strong sense of its place and importance within the local community.

A Review Of The Main Lessons Learned About Ways In Which Good Literacy Practice Is Integrated In Canada

The teachers whom I met in Montreal feel valued and validated. They are accountable to their colleagues and their students more than to some external body. The focus is on training the trainers, and allowing them time to disseminate that information in schools. A multi-pronged approach to teaching teachers is believed to be the most effective: developing and using solid tools; revealing student thinking and considering work from a student perspective; establishing challenging, real-life situations which are worthy of the pupils' thinking time. Within each subject area, teachers overtly seek to establish the connections between theory and authentic, meaningful performance. Interestingly, these are no longer simply project based, as projects have increasingly been viewed as lacking depth of learning and focus. Assessment evidence comes from evaluation of a variety of situations, and formative assessment requires visible thinking. Depth of knowledge is reviewed on teacher assessment of various essential levels of student thinking, including tasks which allow students to display extended thinking, critiquing and formulating new solutions. Peer assessment is also deemed important for student development, and emotional investment and social competence are also seen as validating cognitive growth.

Major Literacy Lessons Learned in Canada:

- The success of bilingual teaching: English is truly the second, minority language here.
- There can be unexpected consequences of language laws: due to the outworkings of Bill 101, many Anglophones choose to send their children to French-speaking schools to ensure that they are raised completely bilingually; Francophones do not have the possibility of making the same educational choices for their children.
- The Anglophone community is small and getting smaller. It is easier, for example, for Anglophones to move for work to the rest of English-speaking North America, so they are more likely to move than their Francophone counterparts.
- The importance of a shared, communicated and developing whole-school vision cannot be understated.
- The “pupil-centeredness” of pedagogical approaches.
- Teaching teachers – and pupils - to develop resilience.
- Visible learning, including independent thinking.
- Fostering literacy in a variety of ways, which are appropriate to the situation of each school.
- A Centre for Learning Enrichment for Gifted and Talented pupils.
- The significance of the Library in promoting strong literacy skills and a physical focal point for good literacy.
- The need for teachers to have sufficient time to plan lessons, mark papers and collaborate with colleagues.

- The acknowledgement – and promotion - of the power of educated parents to promote education for their children. Strong parental involvement allows additional extra-curricular activities to flourish.
- The desire to teach traditional grammar and spelling regularly.
- The view of literacy as wider than traditional formula.
- A very strong and varied extra-curricular programme available to all students.
- Boys and girls sometimes educated in separate classes, though they can socialise in the library, canteen and extra-curricular groups.
- Private school here is not as expensive for parents because the government contributes – and places a cap on fees.
- Extra-curricular subjects like Debating and Drama can have a huge, positive impact on children’s literacy confidence and ability.
- The importance of display boards in promoting and celebrating literacy should not be overlooked.
- Small organisations, often operating on a shoestring budget – and reliant on volunteers – can make a real, lasting and positive difference to literacy levels: they complement mainstream education – and one another.
- Functional literacy for adults can have a massive positive impact and provide strong and lasting quantitative and qualitative benefits.
- The McGill programme is longer than the typical university-length Teacher Training Programme; indeed, it is double the length. The extra time allows student teachers to have a much greater breadth and depth of teaching experience before they graduate.
- Creativity – and the celebration of creativity – are extremely important factors in promoting good literacy and should not be overlooked.
- Passionate people, with clear vision, can effect *real change* in their chosen areas of concern.

Difficulties in Education in Montreal:

- Politics has an increasing impact upon education, including tertiary level education, in Montreal – and, indeed, across Canada: funding is increasingly linked to results, and teachers and students in different parts of the country are feeling demotivated and angry about high fees and reduced funding.
- Teacher education programmes are currently the subject of serious debate, and pedagogical methods are under review.
- Funding, even for proven, established and successful Literacy charities, cannot be guaranteed in the current climate of economic hardship and narrow political view of literacy.

- There has been some improvement in the education of First Nation pupils – and in the training of First Nation teachers – but there needs to be more.

Interesting Aspects that merit further research:

French Language: I was surprised by how much French was spoken, everywhere I went, and how some (particular older) people did not speak English fluently, or even at all. French acts as a true unifying factor in schools of such mixed background: the fact that French is enforced as the language of the school gives everyone a common goal and helps everyone to integrate more easily into school and wider society. Moreover, offering French and English classes to parents has a strong, positive effect in helping parents and children learn these languages together and integrate more fully into society here.

PISA and PIAAC Discrepancies: I was interested in the links – and discrepancies - between PISA and PIAAC results for Canada. I have been intrigued that the Canadian PIAAC results are significantly lower than the PISA ones. This imbalance may be due in part to the following: good literacy is more current in schools now than it had been before, so those who are older (the PIAAC results test those from 16 – 65, which is a huge age range) may not have enjoyed the same education as current 16 year olds, while those who emigrated here as adults may not have had the opportunity to achieve high levels of written literacy in French. Certainly, the need to support adult literacy here is clearly reflected in the vast number of Literacy Charities and other support available for adults.

Personalised Literacy Support: Throughout society now, there are programmes in place to diagnose and deal with learning difficulties. This has now become mandatory: the government forces schools to refer identified students to a resource person, and each school has a quota. However, there is not always money at private schools for Classroom Assistants (CAs), so different ways of personalised literacy support are introduced.

Programmes: Programmes like Guided Reading and The Advanced Five merit further investigation.

FINLAND

Case Studies from Finland: 10th – 31st August 2014.

I travelled to Finland in August 2014 for three weeks. I flew to Helsinki, then travelled to Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle, where I began my educational research. Over the next few weeks, I made my way down Finland, stopping at Jyvaskyla to speak to educationalists there before arriving in Helsinki for my final week of interviews and school visits. I thoroughly enjoyed my travels in Finland. It was a much more expansive trip, and felt very different compared to Canada: although it is European, and indeed, part of the Eurozone, Finland seems very different due to its landscape, language and food. This trip was geographically much more spread out compared to my Canadian trip. In Canada, I stayed in the one city and was able to visit many educational establishments; in Finland, I was able to travel the length of the country. I visited fewer educational establishments, but stayed for a longer period at each one. I believe that both methods of travel and research were thoroughly useful in my quest to explore good literacy practice.

Travels in Finland:

- University Schools, Rovaniemi
- University of Rovaniemi
- University of Jyvaskyla
- Finnish Language Society
- University of Helsinki
- Viikin Normaalikoulu

Finnish Education in brief:

Following a major political discussion in the '70s, the present comprehensive system was unveiled. It provides a comprehensive system, up to Grade 9, for all students, and it replaces the earlier vocational-track selection system, which had a proven correlation to socio-economic background and was therefore deemed unfair in a society which prides itself on its equality. The newer system keeps all possibilities open for all students, and the average level remains high: variation between students is smaller than many other countries, although the comparative homogeneity of the population is also believed to play a key factor in results. Studies in Finland are completely free, and education is extremely well supported by the government. Special Education teachers have been available in the classroom working alongside other teachers since the 1970s, and co-teaching is quite common.

University Schools

The idea of University Schools is new to me: throughout Finland, from Lapland down to Helsinki, there are Primary and Secondary schools affiliated to universities which have Education and Teacher Training Departments. Student teachers go to these schools during their training, both to observe and to teach, and there are teachers in each school who help to train the student teachers. A great deal of practical research is carried out in these schools, and the relationship between the schools and university education departments is mutually beneficial.

I Teacher-Training School of the University of Lapland:



Lessons Observed and Teachers Interviewed . . .

Dr Turunen, of the University of Lapland, very kindly put me in touch with the Teacher-Training School. The School Principal, Dr Eija Valanne, met me, introduced me to the school and created an excellent programme which allowed me to observe many classes and interview a number of teachers at different levels.

There are two years of nursery before free preschool up to the age of six. Children are given more time to play; they learn by playing and develop social behaviour in preschool. Their preschool teachers typically have a Masters level education: teacher training in Finland takes five years to complete. In the UK, it is crammed into nine months. Previously, in Finland, an inspector would come out to see a teacher after they had been teaching for two years. If they passed this inspection, they were licensed. There have been no inspections in the past twenty-five years. Since 1981, the MA programme has been the path for all teachers.

At National level, there is a school level programme, but individual schools have the freedom to choose how to deliver it. In 2016, the new curriculum will be unveiled. The way people think about children here impacts educational decisions: children are not considered to be small adults; they are allowed nap time during the day and given time to develop. There is even time included between classes for pupils and teachers to have a short break, grab a snack or drink, get ready for their next class. Apart from break time and lunchtime, teachers and pupils in the UK are expected to teach and learn continuously; no break time is built in to UK timetables. Throughout my time in Finland, I recognised that Finnish culture has a great deal to do with the significance of literacy.

Specific Lesson Examples:

Class 2C: Teacher: Ms Hanna-Maija Maatta

The class comprised a teacher, IT Teacher, Teacher Assistant and twenty nine-year-old pupils in the class. Everyone sat round the teacher at the beginning of class and the day began with oral work: conversation and discussion. This was followed by a reading and iPad session: Literacy is personalised on the iPad. Some pupils, who were not using iPads, read their library books instead. After completing each book, they will complete a questionnaire on the book in the library. The web-based literacy programme was a trial programme developed in conjunction with the nearby Education Department in the University. The programme was personalised, allowing each pupil to move forward at his or her own pace and offering a range of activities: multiple choice questions; filling in the blanks; matching sounds and words; listening and typing the correct spelling of the word they hear. Matching, selecting, listening, and repeating: the children concentrate very hard during this Literacy session, so Ms Maatta always ensures that they are given a break afterwards.

Sixth Grade Lesson Observed:

Ms. Heidi Hämäläinen was the class teacher here, collaborating with Ms. Tiina Jokela; again, there were only twenty pupils in the room. Words to describe different types of literature were placed on the board. Following a discussion, pupils were invited to volunteer to come up and divide them into factual and fictional types of writing. They then went round the room looking at various books from the school library which had been laid out for them to explore, and they identified which book could be placed under which title. In this manner, they were learning how to work in pairs and small groups, how to categorise, construct and explain simple mind maps. The teacher took a small pile of books which had not been categorised and read extracts from them before pupils guessed which category they might belong to. All the pupils automatically listened very quietly to the reading aloud; it was obvious that this was something which happened frequently and something which they really enjoyed. A final, whole-class plenary discussion ended the class. On the following day, pupils would be visiting the library to select books to read, including the ones they had been examining in this class.

Lessons were clearly planned, and pedagogically underpinned with clear research and desired results for pupils. Literacy was absolutely central. Pupils displayed high levels of both concentration and enjoyment throughout the lessons I observed.

II Interviews at University of Lapland:



UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND
LAPIN YLIOPISTO

I had the privilege of interviewing Dr Tuija Turunen and Dr Kyösti Kurtakko, both of whom teach in the School of Education here.

Religious history: From the beginning of my travels through Finland, I was deeply impressed by the significance the Lutheran faith to the development of literacy. Historically, throughout all the small towns and villages of Finland, the teacher, priest and head of police ranked among the most important citizens. In the nineteenth century, the Lutheran church, the main church in Finland, insisted that one could not become a full member of the church, and consequently not marry, until one could read from the Bible and Martin Luther's catechism. In a society where literacy facilitated the path to adulthood, it is small wonder that it has been viewed as important.

The significance of literacy, and those who teach others to be literate, continues to be seen in the way in which teachers are trained and perceived by society. In Lapland, only 6.3% of those who applied to study education at Rovaniemi University this year were admitted on to the programme. The programme is free, but extensive: teachers are trained to Masters level, and a research-based Masters level at that. Every teacher is highly qualified, and therefore considered suitably equipped to carry out his or her job without external interference. In the UK, on the other hand, we appear to be treading down an opposing path of less training and more, constant interference from outside sources. On 6 November, 2014, a report came out in which the Northern Ireland Inspectorate (ETI) lambasted schools. Even though NI schools "annually outstrip" other regions throughout the UK in both GCSE

and A Level results, this report belies the comforting notion that NI therefore enjoys a “world class education system.” On the contrary, as the Belfast Telegraph reported it, the ETI report is “a litany of shame which shows that the popular image of our schools is grossly skewed by the results of a few.” The figures cited in the report are indeed sobering: 5,000 of our children annually leave primary school with poor literacy and numeracy skills; approximately 21,000 of our pupils attend schools that urgently need improvement; 33% of our schools cannot, following inspection, be classified as “good”, and some 40% of our 16 year olds do not achieve five GCSEs (A*-C) including English Language and Mathematics. The Telegraph reflection on this report concluded that “Those involved in education, from the minister down to the classroom, must accept that change is needed and needed urgently.” The wording of this phrase, “from the minister down to the classroom” betrays the pervading – and, I believe, detrimental - attitude here: the work in the classroom is looked down upon; it is distrusted and feared.²⁶ Time and time again in Finland, I was told that the system is not a “top down” one: rather, the focus in the classroom is always upon the pupils who are there. Teachers in Finland know what they are doing – and *why* they are doing it. In Finland, University schools and Departments of Education in universities work in tandem, both in the training of new teachers and the research and development of new teaching strategies. I think such symbiosis should be considered in the UK.

Place-based Education: Literacy, a sense of the environment and national pride are all taught through place-based education here.

The Finnish value system also plays its part: equality is one of the key principles and this is maintained strongly in different ways. Thus, there is no academic streaming of pupils and no 11+ examinations, such as the AQE and GL exams which run concurrently in Northern Ireland as entrance examinations for Primary 7 pupils who wish to attend grammar schools at secondary level. Furthermore, Finnish pupils usually attend the nearest school, and there is little competition for schools outside of Helsinki. Inclusion is an equally high priority in the past decade, although there are not always sufficient numbers of Special Education teachers. All teachers expressed amazement and even confusion when I explained how many assessments and public examinations our pupils must undergo.

III Interviews at Jyväskylä University



I enjoyed a fascinating series of meetings here, kindly organised for me by Professor Jouni Välijärvi and Professor Miina-Riita Lukka; below is a collective survey of my findings.

²⁶ For further, updated opinion pieces on education in Northern Ireland, see www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk [last accessed 31.3.15].

National Framework Curriculum: There is a National Framework Curriculum and teachers then write their own curriculum from it. At the end of Senior High school, those who have remained in this track of education (typically 50%- 60% of young people) may take National Exams. Apart from these final year exams, there is NO national testing – and even these are teacher choice exams, and not compulsory.

Excellent English: Good at Languages: I was amazed at how many people spoke excellent English, throughout Finland, and across societal and age barriers. I do not speak Finnish, unfortunately, so was dependent upon people speaking English. I was thoroughly impressed throughout my trip. When I asked teachers why they thought that English was spoken so well, they suggested a number of reasons:

1. Firstly, English-speaking films and other programmes shown on Finnish television are not dubbed but rather subtitled; this important difference encourages bilingual literacy skills. Even children to read more quickly as they scan the subtitles in Finnish, and they also hear, identify and learn the cadences of English.
2. Secondly, the internet is deemed helpful for English acquisition as many forums and social media sites are conducted primarily in English.
3. Thirdly, literacy skills in general, in English and in Finnish, are greatly enhanced by the library system, both in schools and beyond. Indeed, the public library system is excellent, and almost every adult possesses – and regularly uses – their free library card. Every teacher, lecturer and researcher I interviewed spoke with pride about the library system and their love of it. Libraries and schools work very closely together, and children form the habit of going regularly (often, weekly) to the library from kindergarten onwards.

Finnish children generally begin learning English in school in third grade (when they are about nine or ten years old) and typically have three lessons per week in English in third and fourth grade. In fifth and sixth grade, they have two English lessons per week and English continues on into High School. Russian, French, German and, in Lapland, Sami, are also available for pupils to learn in primary school. From seventh grade, everyone learns Swedish; in the new plans for educational reform which are due to come in in 2016, Swedish will also be available in Primary School. Such planned focus on language learning is impressive and undoubtedly effective.

Architecture: In the schools and universities I visited, libraries were central and had pride of place. In addition, I was truly impressed by the layout of rooms – large and bright, with plenty of alternative seating, play and working areas in each one – and chairs that were beautifully designed and incredibly comfortable.

The system of selection is different here; indeed, there is no system of selection in the sense that we know it. While pupils may choose different tracks to follow, schools are comprehensive, so no exams are required in order to move from primary to secondary level. Indeed, such is the Finnish sense of equality that pupils generally just transition from primary school to the nearest secondary. Also, all pupils eat lunch together in the school canteen: this promotes equality, good nutrition and time for good communication. I enjoyed several of these lunches during my school visits – and they were wonderful, proper and nutritious lunches.

Finnish culture is strikingly important. Certainly, in every school and educational establishment I visited, I was made strongly aware of the pride with which people view their Finnish existence.

A Century of Change: It is difficult to believe that so much has happened in such a relatively short time in Finland. The comprehensive school system began relatively late in Finland, in 1863. At that time, Finland was part of Russia. Literature was certainly valued, particularly in the church. In the nineteenth century, a small elite created schools, with cohesive ideas of valuing and uniting national, historical and traditional themes. By the 1970s, teacher training at university emphasised the technical and instrumental aspects of schools: this helped to characterise teachers as professionals. Prior to this professionalism, however, teachers had also been viewed in a positive light: one professor told me that they were seen as the “candle of the people”, and their job was to light the fire inside young people and to motivate them.

Since 1979, Elementary School Teachers in Finland must have a Masters degree in education: Finland was the first country in the whole world to carry out this ground-breaking change. Although a number of other countries have followed suit, the UK has not – at least, not yet. Primary teachers in Finland must have a Masters degree in education; Secondary teachers were not encouraged to have one until 1990. I interviewed a teacher with thirty-five years teaching experience who said that pedagogy had changed during his time in education: the learning *process* is currently considered to be the most important thing in Finnish education today, and research is conducted into the learning process along with research into psychological aspects. The need to teach the new generations how to have critical opinions and an aptitude for all kinds of communication, from oral to cyber, means that teaching has had to change to remain relevant.

Tertiary education is comparatively young in Finland: to survive, it must have specific, high-quality specialities. In 2010, new legislation increased the competition between universities, and the government increasingly gives money from outcomes, and the UK system of continual assessment and evaluation is now becoming stronger here too. Many older lecturers and teachers lament these changes: the government previously gave money to cover costs, but each establishment enjoyed much greater autonomy than is currently the case.

Reading has had an extremely important role, especially for girls, both in and outside school. In Finland, the correlation between motivation and outcomes is higher than in most countries, and the qualitative enjoyment of reading remains a strong motivational factor for pupils and the general public. One teacher told me that everyone she knows has a public library card – and uses it regularly. However, despite the culturally-embedded love of reading, results have gone down, suggesting that motivation has also declined. The big challenge facing Finnish secondary education is the same one facing other countries: how to integrate the new challenges of technology, changing pedagogy and educational reforms in ways that allow literacy to thrive.

University Schools: These are located at universities, and provide an excellent interface between research and primary and secondary educational reality. Although they are “normal” schools, university schools tend to be populated by children whose parents have tertiary level education, so this offers a slightly false impression. Mentors in these schools are extremely qualified and experienced to help trainee teachers. However, there have been recent suggestions that it would be good to spread teacher training to city schools and beyond, rather than keeping it simply in university schools.

In countries like Finland, the level of education rose quite quickly several decades ago. The reality today, however, is that Upper Secondary Education no longer guarantees a good job. Moreover, the dropout rates in vocational education especially are increasing and are currently far from the targets. That being said, the reality is that 80% of young people have upper secondary education, with some

taking qualifications later on. The conundrum is the same throughout the world: while education is no guarantee of employment, it is nevertheless increasingly important. However, since some students are losing the meaning of education, perceiving the current education system as old-fashioned, the question now is how to integrate modern technology into education and make it relevant. Indeed, all educationalists to whom I spoke agreed that the major challenge now is to use technology appropriately in the classroom situation. Online learning environments are developing quickly, for example, with many privatised companies investing a great deal in these, and educationalists are exploring their value and possibilities compared to more traditional teaching methods. The ministry is changing legislation and the curriculum, in a bid to better support pupils through the labyrinths of our modern, fast-changing world.

Developing the Finnish language co-exists here alongside a sense of national identity, and both are deemed very important in education. Respect for other cultures and languages includes respect and rights for the small Swedish-speaking minority which exists in pocket areas throughout Finland. However, many are wondering about the continuation of the Finnish language in the future. English is the lingua franca of the world, including the online world, and even academic articles are now often published only in English, irrespective of the author's mother tongue. Some in Finland are now suggesting that all university teaching should be carried out in English, but there is obvious and widespread resistance to this idea. However, the very existence of such dialogue could impact young people's view of the Finnish Language, and some educationalists admitted feeling slightly anxious about the future of Finnish.

Unlike in Canada, there is a high correlation in Finland between PISA and PIAAC results: several suggested possible reasons for the Finnish success are the relative homogeneity of the population, and the widespread and continued love of reading throughout the population. Problem-solving in a technology-rich environment has not truly impacted the writing or taking of the PISA tests here yet, though, again, it might in the future.

Proposed New Curriculum Changes: The proposed new curriculum will bring the Swedish minority closer than before: the Board of Education emphasises and encourages the development of similarities between the two languages.

IV The Finnish Literature Society



FINNISH LITERATURE SOCIETY

I was incredibly moved by the reverence with which the Finnish Literature Society is treating all the texts which they have collected across the whole country, and how they are actively researching those texts and seeking to bring them to light and provide historical contexts for them. I was also incredibly fortunate that Dr Anna Kuismin of the University of Helsinki kindly allowed me to audit the International Conference she had co-ordinated to bring together all scholars involved in her multi-national and multi-year project, "Reading and Writing from Below: Exploring the Margins of Modernity." I had the opportunity to meet many eminent scholars, including Illka Makinen, Margaret Ezell, Tuija Laine and Olli Viitaniemi.

Architecture: everything about the building speaks of Finnish pride in Finnish artistic and literary achievements. The Protestant emphasis on reading the Bible in church, and on personal Bible reading for both men and women, led to a quiet revolution for ordinary lay folk, a movement where the centre of piety shifted from the pew to the prayer closet. Literacy became equated with adulthood, and formed an important part of the journey to adulthood and membership of the church community. There is not the same sense of “literature division” that there has been in English: all of the literature was painstakingly collected, and it is now being painstakingly researched and reported upon. There is a genuine sense of excitement about the whole project, about reclaiming voices from the past which have been silent for too long – and for allowing them to speak into present society and help with future steps.

Contemporary pedagogy in the digital age can take comfort in the thought that a previous golden age, the Renaissance, was bringing in incredible new technology: printers, booksellers and the quick and easy dissemination of ideas overtook the love labours of the scriptoria. Perhaps we do not need to fear the new technology, but rather harness its power for literacy good.

Libraries are incredibly important throughout Finland. In the UK, we are cutting and closing libraries, turning them into noisy centres for ICT and clubs. While these things are not, of course, wrong in themselves, there is a great deal to be said for quietude. Illka Makinen, one of the foremost scholars on library use in Nordic countries, summarised the simplicity and deep complexity of library use beautifully thus: “A large part of the belief system that lies behind the success of the Nordic public libraries can be stated as follows: reading is good for you, and you are free to choose what you read. This ethos of popular education is, of course, a result of centuries of development.”

Reading and Writing From Below: this fascinating Nordic multi-disciplinary research project is now coming to an end. I was able to audit the meetings and lectures and to have unparalleled opportunities to speak to these researchers. They have been focused on the forgotten readers and writers, the “ignorant”, the ignored. The recent interest in these kinds of readers originally grew from a desire to preserve and privilege Finnish: once considered a language fit only for peasants, then a language permitted by other rulers, but only for the past hundred years a language of freedom and great pride.

Children as Readers: Tuija Laine, whose research is primarily focused upon children as readers in centuries gone by, explained how some would learn the catechism off by heart so that they would appear to be reading to the priest during their reading test. Their mothers would teach them, and it was a source of great maternal pride when they could pass the catechism exam at a young age. Priests began asking young pupils to read unusual passages to ensure that they could really read and had not simply memorised the passages in front of them.

Religion as a motivation for Literacy: You could not marry or receive the Eucharist unless you could read. In the 18th century, Christianity focused on children in Finland, with catechisms by Rambach, Graberg and Moller (who wrote three different versions for three different levels of reader; even two centuries ago, there was differentiation in Finnish for different levels of reader!). The importance of reading and deciphering for oneself was established early in children’s minds. Reading was considered to be a good hobby for children, and owning a book seemed to be important, a source of power, even for illiterate children. Books were thus highly valued, carried with them and kept under their pillows. This power in books – and the key they held to fully adult participation in the Lutheran Church and the local community – provided a strong basis for the esteem in which books are still held in Finland today.

Readers in Religious Terms: Olli Viitaniemi explained how, in 18th and 19th century Swedish, and following the Moravian Awakening, a “Reader” was someone who read the Bible, a religious man or woman. While such a word does not exist in Finnish, a similar thought concept is there. Devotional literature, particularly Bible and Spiritual stories, were *de jour*, while Finnish writing describing ordinary Finnish life was an extremely popular genre as each reader could find him or herself, through their imagination and engagement with the writing, actually *in the book*.

All of these discussions emphasised the importance of Finnish history and culture in shaping modern views of reading and readership. History and culture also need to be addressed more openly in the UK as educationalists plan to help meet anticipated literacy needs of the present and future.

V University of Helsinki



One of my final interviews was with Professor Andrew Newby, an Irish historian who has integrated fully into Finnish society: he is married to a Finn, teaches in Finnish at a Finnish university. It was fascinating to get his perspective – and to have him confirm something that I had been considering since my arrival in Finland: the undeniable links, historically and otherwise, between Finland and Ireland. The Centre for Nordic studies is engaging in further comparative studies between Finland and Ireland, exploring issues such as history, language and cultural identity, and I do think that all of these should prove fascinating as we review literacy throughout Ireland, including Northern Ireland.

VI Viikin Normaalikoulu



I had a wonderful time at this school.²⁷ I met many teachers and pupils, and was shown round by one of the VPs. Again, the library was central in the building – and to the whole-school approach to literacy and learning. Again, I observed the sense of pride of “place” in the displays round the school, including a large display cabinet entirely dedicated to Finland’s indigenous species.

²⁷ For the school website, please see: <http://www.vink.helsinki.fi/> [last accessed 31:3:15].

First Grade Lesson: A mother-tongue lesson, with only eight children who, together with their teacher, were writing a collaborative story on a whiteboard about their previous day's class fishing trip. Flexibility allows some pupils to begin the school day later than others – and others to finish earlier, so these eight (out of a class totalling 16) had close educational experience. Each child was given the opportunity to contribute one sentence to the story; each child's response was written in a different colour. The classroom was beautiful and bright: letters of the alphabet and numbers decorated the length of the whiteboard and there were many books on display. The children were helping each other to spell difficult words, which were broken down into syllables for them. Once the story was completed, teacher and pupils read it aloud together and agreed that it sounded good. As the pupils were moving to individual reading time, another teacher came in to test one boy for whom Finnish is not mother-tongue. Such pupils are then given individualised and small-group support to ensure that they are flourishing. During the reading time, where personalised differentiation meant that non-readers had picture books to read, everyone read in absolute silence. Their chairs were the most comfortable-looking chairs I have ever seen in a school: with special arm and footrests cleverly included. Indeed, everything was designed to make learning as personal and enjoyable as possible.

A Review Of The Main Lessons Learned About Ways In Which Good Literacy Practice Is Integrated In Finland

Lessons Learned:

- Finnish education has developed rapidly, including at tertiary level, over the past century. Finns believe that an understanding of cultural and social history is extremely important when making plans to improve the future.
- National pride in Finland is strongly linked to education. In countries where education is strongly valued, people are prepared to invest strongly in it.
- The historical significance of the Lutheran faith upon literacy – the importance of a deep appreciation of literacy within a society. Ordinary people value teachers, education and reading.
- Education is free, up to and including tertiary level.
- There is no inspectorate – and hasn't been for 25 years!
- There is genuine investment in teacher training at all levels here: teacher training is a free 5 year Masters programme here, and is always over-subscribed. The quality of teacher training to Masters Degree level has a profound impact on the quality of the subsequent teaching. Teachers are exceptionally well qualified and equipped with the most recent research. They have also, through their extensive university training, been given the tools and means to develop their own work, to carry out their own action research and to help their pupils with confidence. Thus, highly trained professionals have more control within the Finnish autonomy model of framework for accountability.
- Research methodology is clearly maintained beyond teacher training, and there are strong symbiotic links between university departments and university schools here. One current example is that they work together to produce suitable literacy materials for pupils of different ages and abilities to use on iPad.
- Teachers retain enormous freedom to choose materials and teaching methods. Great possibilities for development exist within and beyond the level of the intended curriculum.
- Teachers exhibit a quiet confidence in their own “teacherhood”. Every single one to whom I spoke had a clear sense of the theoretical research underpinning their choice of lesson practice for the day.

- Literacy is considered important in all subjects, and from pre-school onwards, Reading and Writing are considered core skills and maintained as such. Students and teachers alike acknowledge the importance of good literacy.
- Interestingly, there is no prescribed or agreed canon of Finnish literature that is used in all schools – instead, there is freedom to choose texts considered most appropriate for each cohort of students.
- Lessons may be co-taught here: teachers often spoke of working together with colleagues, of co-teaching or co-planning lessons. Much planning goes into lessons – and thoughtful links are established between the classroom and the school library, for example: pupils are encouraged to find books that suit them.
- Deliberately smaller classes allow the teacher time to focus in on individual pupils to a much greater and more effective extent than typical classes of 30+ pupils at home.
- Individualised learning is prioritised here from a very early age: pupils concentrated very hard on their individual tasks and are clearly confident and highly self-motivated.
- Pupils were clearly used to being heard and to speaking up to offer opinions, comment on others or ask for clarification. Pro-active methods – such as splitting class times and building in ten-minute breaks for everyone between classes – allowed much more focused learning to occur.
- Books – and dissemination of learning through writing in all its forms – deserve to be valued, and provide strong evidence about education in times past. Pupils love reading; throughout my classroom observations across Finland, at moments of public (teacher- or pupil-led) or private (individual) reading, pupils from first grade to final grade instantly quietened down to concentrate.
- Place-based education is important and used frequently here; it is a remarkably effective way to encourage literacy.
- Space, both physical space and space/time between lessons, are deemed beneficial for staff and pupils alike.
- There is one test in the mother tongue: this is voluntary and sample-based, designed to develop the school system not the rank of the school in league tables.
- No one is left to be a struggling reader – SEN is well-developed, and pupils for whom Finnish is not mother tongue also receive regular additional language support.
- Many Finns speak excellent English due to many reasons, including a number of practical factors, such as television. Many English-speaking programmes are shown in Finland with subtitles, rather than dubbing, and many educationalists believe that this helps young people to develop both their reading of Finnish and their English. However, some are concerned that

English might take over from Finnish as the language of tertiary-level education here, and there is strong pride in the teaching of mother-tongue here.

- Historically, there are many comparisons between Finland and Ireland. Many of these are currently under investigation, and perhaps further findings might help to enhance literacy here too.

Interesting Aspects that merit Further Research:

1. Language elements: I think that we in Northern Ireland have much to learn from Finnish approaches to languages. Mother-tongue (i.e. Finnish) is very highly regarded, and there is a great deal of thought put into maintaining language standards. However, other languages, including those which may be mother-tongue for minority groups, are also actively encouraged.
2. Reading and History: The comparisons and contrasts between Finland and Ireland definitely merit further exploration in terms of literacy history and current literacy development.
3. Homogeneity and Changes Ahead: Finland has been a largely homogenous society, and this may be one of the factors explaining why its results at PIAC and PIAFF are more homogenous than in Canada. However, Finnish society is now changing and it would definitely be interesting – and informative – to maintain a strong interest in how the changes are met.

Conclusions:

Sadly, there is no “magic pill” to enable literacy improvement. However, my time in Canada and Finland was inspirational, and I have already been able to implement some of the lessons I have learned, both in my own school and beyond. Both Canada and Finland are anticipating a new curriculum to come out soon, and it will be interesting to see what changes lie in store for both countries in the years ahead.

In the meantime, here are the three main lessons I have taken away from my Fellowship travels:

1. **Mastery:** I was thoroughly impressed by the *depth* of pedagogical knowledge which I found everywhere I went. The investment in initial and continuing teacher education is impressive, both in Canada and in Finland. Moreover, everyone involved in education – from university researchers to literacy charity co-ordinators – seemed informed about latest research developments, and confident about the value (or not) of each development within their own classroom situation. In the UK, if we wish to raise levels of literacy, we need to ensure that all educators have high levels of literacy themselves, and that they have both time and opportunity to develop and maintain a clear awareness of the current pedagogical issues surrounding literacy teaching for their subject. Every teacher owes it to him/herself and to his/her pupils to ensure that their own knowledge of literacy in their subject is of the highest possible standard. Every government owes it to their young people to ensure that their teachers are as highly educated as possible – and that such quality education continues throughout their career. Even if there is a lack of government funding for further training in the UK, it is possible to learn in many different ways. Such ways need to be explored because, undoubtedly, my travel research has confirmed that mastery of subject and pedagogy enhances all aspects of teaching.
2. **Autonomy:** Again, I was repeatedly struck by the relative autonomy which Finnish and Canadian teachers enjoy compared to teachers within the UK. The lack of Inspectorate, the comparative lack of government interference and the lack of assessments allows for much greater and effective personalised learning and teaching in both Canada and Finland. In the UK, teaching unions have been arguing for greater teacher autonomy for many years. Having researched teaching in both Canada and Finland, I am convinced that we need greater autonomy in the UK. Indeed, the greater our autonomy, the greater our contentment in our profession, and the greater the benefits to our pupils. I have been challenged – and have been challenging others – to establish a stronger sense of autonomy within schools, departments and individual classrooms: the kind of autonomy I witnessed in Canada and Finland encourages personalised learning and pupil growth, and it also deepens teacher resilience.
3. **Purpose:** Teacher mastery and autonomy exist within the parameters of a clear sense of shared purpose in every educational establishment I visited. Such shared purpose provides unity: as teachers in the UK, we need to reclaim our sense of primary purpose, and develop clear, shared purpose for each school. We also need to strengthen our shared purpose beyond individual schools, area learning communities and the wider community. Teacher confidence – and resultant pupil confidence – are enhanced through a strong and maintained sense of personal and collective purpose, to the mutual benefit of all involved in education.

Brief overview of ways in which my Fellowship has already had a positive impact . . .

I gave a Literacy talk at our school training day in January, emphasising the importance of mastery of literacy within one's own subject, regaining autonomy as far as possible by planning ahead, and maintaining a strong, shared sense of purpose. As a result of sharing my findings, several departments have requested further literacy training together on a topic of mutual interest: this training will begin in August and will continue throughout the coming academic year.

I have been interviewed by a local Belfast newspaper and our school website and our school magazine about my research and findings, and the work of the WCMT and Mercers' Company.

I have also spoken at several local and one national WCMT events.

I have given a Literacy Lecture to all the PGCE students training in the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast, encouraging each of them, at the outset of their career, to privilege subject-appropriate literacy, and to take any steps necessary to be able to impart literacy knowledge with precision and confidence.

It has given me greater confidence to focus and recalibrate, both within my department and beyond, upon the important things: supporting teachers and trainee teachers to gain confidence in their own literacy skills so that they can teach relevant literacy skills within their subject; arguing successfully for fewer annual assessments; promoting both greater teacher autonomy and collaboration; and seizing every opportunity to encourage and celebrate improved literacy skills across my own school and others. I know that the opportunities I have been given through the WCMT and Mercers' Company will continue to impact and inform my teaching and thinking in the years ahead, and I am deeply grateful for that.

Acknowledgements

I can no other answer make, but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks . . .

Shakespeare.

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