

# Literacy education through *Beginning Literacy*: Research and preliminary findings

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## *Abstract*

*Beginning Literacy (BL) as a model for literacy education in the first two years of primary schools has been an option for Icelandic schools for eight years now. The BL model is twofold: First of all it entails an approach to literacy teaching and learning and secondly it involves a professional development programme for teachers and schools to implement the teaching and learning approach. This paper reports an investigation into literacy education in Iceland with focus on both strands of the BL model: teaching and learning on the one hand and professional development on the other. Eight case studies (thereof two pilot cases) were conducted in BL schools and a questionnaire was sent to 75% of Icelandic primary schools. The paper gives a detailed account of the data gathering, and the theoretical underpinnings of data analysis. The paper also provides some preliminary findings. They indicate that the implementation of BL as a teaching and learning programme has been generally successful, and that the professional development programme has been effective. Despite this there are signs of difference in the depth of implementation and the level of use by participating teachers. A more robust evaluation of pupils' outcomes and attainment, and the outcomes of teachers' professional learning on part of the schools and consultants, is also suggested.*

*Keywords:* Literacy, literacy education, interactive/balanced approaches, professional development, case study research, levels of analysis

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## Introduction

A worldwide emphasis on literacy as a means of personal empowerment, social and human development, citizenship, lifelong learning and academic attainment draws attention to the demand for high quality literacy education for all students from their early years of schooling throughout their school career (Eurydice, 2011; OECD, 2002; UNESCO, n. d.). Literacy is described as a fundamental skill and a key outcome of education; a key to human empowerment and political, cultural, social and economic development, and as a prerequisite for academic success and informed and active participation in society (Perry, 2012; UNESCO, 2003). Definitions of literacy have also moved from a narrow perspective on reading and fluency to a broader view of reading, writing and social communication for personal fulfilment and practical purposes alike (Eurydice, 2011; OECD, 2002).

In Iceland literacy has been of particular concern in the wake of the results of recent PISA surveys where the general trend since 2000 has been a decline in the reading comprehension of 15 year old students. The PISA results for 2003 and 2006 showed a statistically significant drop in the reading comprehension of Icelandic 15-year-olds, and in this period the number of countries that significantly outperformed Icelandic students nearly doubled from seven countries in 2003 to fifteen countries in 2006. An improvement was seen in 2009 when scores recovered to their previous 2000 levels, but in 2012 they dropped again to the equivalent of the 2006 score, which is significantly below the OECD average. (Halldórsson, Ólafsson, & Björnsson, 2012).

Furthermore, a new National Curriculum for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) states literacy in its widest sense as one of six fundamental pillars of education. The other five are: sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. Some of those (e.g. democracy, equality and creativity) have at least an indirect connection with literacy. The curriculum is outcome-based and the outcomes of education are built around knowledge, skills and competences as core concepts, and several key competences – derived from the six fundamental pillars – are described. These are similar for both compulsory and upper secondary schools and relate to:

- Expression and communication of thoughts, feelings, opinions and knowledge, orally, in writing or otherwise
- Creative thinking, reasoning and ability to draw conclusions
- Working independently and in cooperation with others
- Responsible, creative and critical handling of knowledge and information
- Responsibility for own education and evaluation of own performance

As is evident from the above there is emphasis on literacy education and Iceland's new National Curriculum guide is the first to attempt to introduce literacy as a fundamental pillar of education and a key competence across the three levels of the school system. On the other hand, there is no implementation strategy present and there seems to be little agreement about literacy education in the country, and clear criteria to define literacy competence do not exist.

Research knowledge about literacy education in Icelandic Compulsory schools is also sparse, but the findings of a recent report, written for the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2009 (Leiknisdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, Björnsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Jónsson, 2009), indicated that schools have continued a long tradition of phonics teaching, where formal teaching of reading was confined mainly to the first years of primary school, and was aimed at teaching children to decode, building fluency in reading and reading comprehension.

## **Beginning Literacy**

Beginning Literacy (hereafter BL) was developed by Rósa Eggertsdóttir, a specialist at the Centre for School Development (CSD) at the University of Akureyri (UNAK), early in the first decade of this century. It was piloted as an experimental programme in a few primary schools in the school years 2004–2005 and 2005–2006, but from the autumn of 2006 it was offered to schools generally through a two-year contract with the CSD. The programme commenced with a small number of schools in the school year 2006–2007, and their first BL pupils completed their 8<sup>th</sup> year of compulsory school in the spring of 2014. Currently 68 primary schools – about 42% of all Icelandic primary schools – have adopted BL, and have either completed the two-year period of implementation or are on its first year.

### *Beginning Literacy as literacy education*

As an approach to literacy education BL has to be realised within the context of three distinct models or theories of the reading process that are commonly identified as the bottom-up model, the top-down model and the interactive model (Lipson & Wixson, 1991; Rumelhart, 1985). The bottom-up model emphasises the decoding part of the reading process. It is built on the assumption that learning to read progresses from learning the names of individual letters and decoding them into sounds to learning how the letters and sounds connect into words and the words into sentences to form meaningful entities. For students to become fluent readers and comprehend what they read their decoding must become automatic to take their effort from the decoding process to understanding and reflecting on the meaning or the text.

Behind the top-down model is the assumption that the reading process is rooted in children's experience and exposure to the language, their linguistic awareness and knowledge of the content of texts. The reading process is therefore characterised by word

recognition and the search for meaning rather than sounding out individual words (Lipson & Wixson, 1991).

BL is built on the third model; the interactive model. Approaches to literacy education built on this model assume that neither the bottom-up model nor the top-down model are, by themselves, sufficient to explain the reading process and inform literacy teaching (Lipson & Wixson, 1991; Rumelhart, 1985). Literacy teaching needs to address both surface structure systems and deep structure systems (Cornerstone literacy, 2014; Keene, 2008). The surface structure system comprises the knowledge of letter-sound relationships and decoding skills (grapho-phonetic system), vocabulary for reading (lexical system), and knowledge about the structure of the language (syntactic system). The deep structure systems of reading comprise students' engagement in reading to develop concepts and meaning (semantic system), their use of background knowledge (schema) to support new learning (schematic system), and social construction of knowledge to understand and extend what they read (Wolf & Barzillai, 2009). Here the reader needs to activate his former knowledge or schema. He takes in new information and applies it to existing knowledge, and may need to modify his former schema or create new schemas because older ones are no longer sufficient (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

In line with interactive approaches BL emphasises reading as an interaction between the written language and the understanding of meaning (Just & Carpenter, 1985). It also emphasises the development of writing skills and the integration of reading, writing, listening and speaking into a literacy curriculum where these aspects of literacy are balanced (Eggertsdóttir, 2009; Tomkins, 2006). BL also draws on theories of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1991) where the readers actively engage with the text and make meaning of it based on their experience and background knowledge.

In BL the interaction between bottom-up and top-down processes is achieved by moving students' learning through a sequence of three phases (Eggertsdóttir, 2009). In the first phase children are exposed to an authentic text that is meaningful for them; a story from published children's literature, a poem or an informational text. The teacher reads the text for a group of pupils in order to establish a common experience. He introduces and explains new vocabulary, and encourages discussion about the text where pupils predict and draw conclusions. In the second phase the pupils deal with the technical aspects of literacy that correspond to the surface structure systems of reading (Cornerstone literacy, 2014; Keene, 2008). In this phase pupils' tasks are always derived from the text introduced to them in the first phase. They address phonetic awareness, the structure of the language, the relationship between letters and sounds and decoding, word recognition and spelling. In the third phase the focus is on whole text again and the reconstruction of meaning where deep structure systems are applied. In this phase pupils work on building their own texts using the vocabulary and reading skills they have just learned in phases one and two. Pupils are encouraged to express their own ideas, compose their own texts, write stories, plays or

poems, draw a concept map or interpret a text by means of drawing. Pupils are taught and encouraged to use comprehension and organising tools such as concept mapping and reciprocal reading.

Furthermore, BL draws on a child-centred perspective of inclusive education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009), learning competences such as metacognition and creative thinking (McGregor, 2007), and classroom communities, and assumes that every child should learn within his or her class community by means of interdependent collaboration (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), scaffolding, active learning, and other means of adapting learning to the needs of children (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, & Hensen, 2003). It is acknowledged that pupils' literacy abilities vary and throughout the process they are given challenging tasks adapted to their abilities.

### *Beginning Literacy as professional development*

BL is implemented in schools through a two-year contract between each school and the Centre for School Development (CSD) at UNAK. Professional development is therefore an integral element in BL and cannot be separated from the BL literacy programme. The implementation of BL draws on definitions of professional development as an ongoing process of intentional activities that aim to develop teachers' skills, knowledge, expertise and teaching practice (Guskey, 2000, 2014; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Guskey (2000) further emphasises that such a process needs to be systemic in the sense that it "considers change over an expanded period of time and takes into account all levels of the organization," (p. 20) and is guided by a clear vision and planned goals that inform the selection of materials and procedures and establish the criteria for formal evaluation. The evaluation needs to take into account the impact on students' learning, which is the core criteria for the effectiveness of any professional development programme, organisational support, and the outcomes of teachers' learning and their level of use (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011). The implementation plan further draws on a scheme developed by Eggertsdóttir (1999), in an action research project with 19 teachers in five compulsory schools to implement the storyline method.

A consultant from the CSD works with each school and visits the school twice in each school year and a development leader is appointed in each school to oversee the implementation in close collaboration with the CSD consultant and the principal. The development leaders are assigned an important role as mentors and advisers to the teachers; they run workshops for teachers and visit their classrooms to observe and give feedback on their teaching (Eggertsdóttir, 2013). During the implementation period, teachers and leaders attend courses and workshops, network with teachers from other participating schools. The teachers receive coaching from a consultant from the CSD or the development leader, and the leaders and the CSD consultants communicate regularly. Teachers and leaders are provided with various kinds of material (Eggertsdóttir, 2013).

The sequence and ingredients of the professional development programme are further described in Figure 1.

	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Leaders</b>
<b>Consultants and leaders in BL</b>	<p><i>Year one: in/or out of school (cluster of schools)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two days course before school starts in August</li> <li>- Five workshops over the school year (4 hrs)</li> <li>- Eight classroom observations, with follow up meetings</li> </ul> <p><i>Year two:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One day course before school starts in August</li> <li>- Five workshops (4 hours)</li> <li>- Six classroom observation, with follow-up meetings</li> </ul>	<p><i>Year one</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two-day course in June</li> <li>- Five whole-day courses over the school year</li> <li>- Attend all programs BL teachers go to</li> <li>- Eight classroom observations and reflection follow-up meetings</li> <li>- Eight phone or skype meetings with a CSD consultant from UNAK</li> </ul> <p><i>Year two</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One-day course in August</li> <li>- Four whole-day courses over the school year</li> <li>- Attend all programs BL teachers go to</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Teachers both years – in-school support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular year group &amp; key stage meetings</li> <li>- Access to Moodle (teaching plans, discussion board, etc.)</li> <li>- Materials on literacy</li> <li>- Practical handbook</li> <li>- DVD “Glimpses of good practice”</li> <li>- BL newsletter</li> <li>- Classroom visits</li> <li>- Visits between schools</li> </ul>	<p><b>Leaders</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get all material teachers get and materials used in workshops</li> <li>- Get material about leadership,</li> <li>- Run most workshops for teachers, supported by CSD consultants</li> </ul>
<p><b>CSD Consultants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Always conduct in-service days in June and August</li> <li>- Visit each school twice a year, visit classrooms, meet with teachers, leaders and principals.</li> <li>- Stay regularly in contact with leaders in each school</li> </ul> <p>Occasionally a leader may be employed elsewhere (LEA or next school). Those schools appoint a contact person who organizes BL related events.</p>		
<p><b>Principals</b></p> <p>No planned involvement so far. They organise the initial introduction to staff, which usually takes place at the end of the school year prior to the first year of implementation. They oversee the formal agreement with SDC at UNAK, meet with the CDS when they visit the schools and are expected to support the implementation process and BL teachers involved, and meet regularly with the the school’s development leader.</p>		

Figure 1. The structure of the BL professional development programme

## A study on Beginning Literacy

In 2011 a team of researchers and master’s students affiliated to the University of Akureyri School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the University of Iceland School of Education launched a study on literacy education under the banner of BL. The overall aim of the study was to investigate BL as an approach to literacy education and literacy education taking place in BL schools in light of international research knowledge, and shed light on how new approaches, such as BL, might be introduced, implemented and sustained. Furthermore, the aim was to analyse Icelandic literacy policy, build capacity for literacy research, contribute to knowledge on literacy education and advance its development in Icelandic primary schools.

Two specific aims are to 1) analyse the BL literacy programme and the literacy teaching and learning that takes place within it, in light of the existing body of international literacy research and knowledge of effective literacy teaching, and 2) analyse the professional and school development that operate within the BL schools to understand what makes these developments effective, and how new approaches to literacy education in Iceland, might be introduced, implemented and sustained in the future.

The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. What characterises Icelandic literacy policy and the BL approach and to what extent do they reflect the cognitive, social and cultural research on effective literacy learning and teaching evident in international research studies?
2. What are the learning experiences and learning outcomes of pupils' literacy education and how does this link to the teaching arrangement of teachers, e.g. the depth of implementation of a literacy programme such as the BL?
3. How do teachers adapt a change programme such as the BL to dovetail with their personal understandings and the policy and pedagogical context in which they work?
4. What are the staff development issues that arise for teachers who are required to implement change in their literacy teaching, such as the BL-programme?
5. What role do development leaders within schools play and what factors facilitate and impede their impact on the staff development processes for literacy for which they are responsible?
6. How, and to what extent do individual schools create internal conditions for the implementation of a literacy programme and how effectively do they sustain this after the external consultation is withdrawn?

The study addresses the two main strands of BL described above: teaching and learning and professional and school development in the implementation process (Figure 2). In the teaching and learning strand of the study the focus is on three facets of literacy education: 1) Aspects of literacy, 2) pedagogical practices, and 3) learning outcomes. The professional development strand focuses on schools' internal learning and development conditions, such as leadership, roles and responsibilities, professional development and school culture evaluation, and how successfully these conditions have been transformed to support successful implementation and sustain positive outcomes.

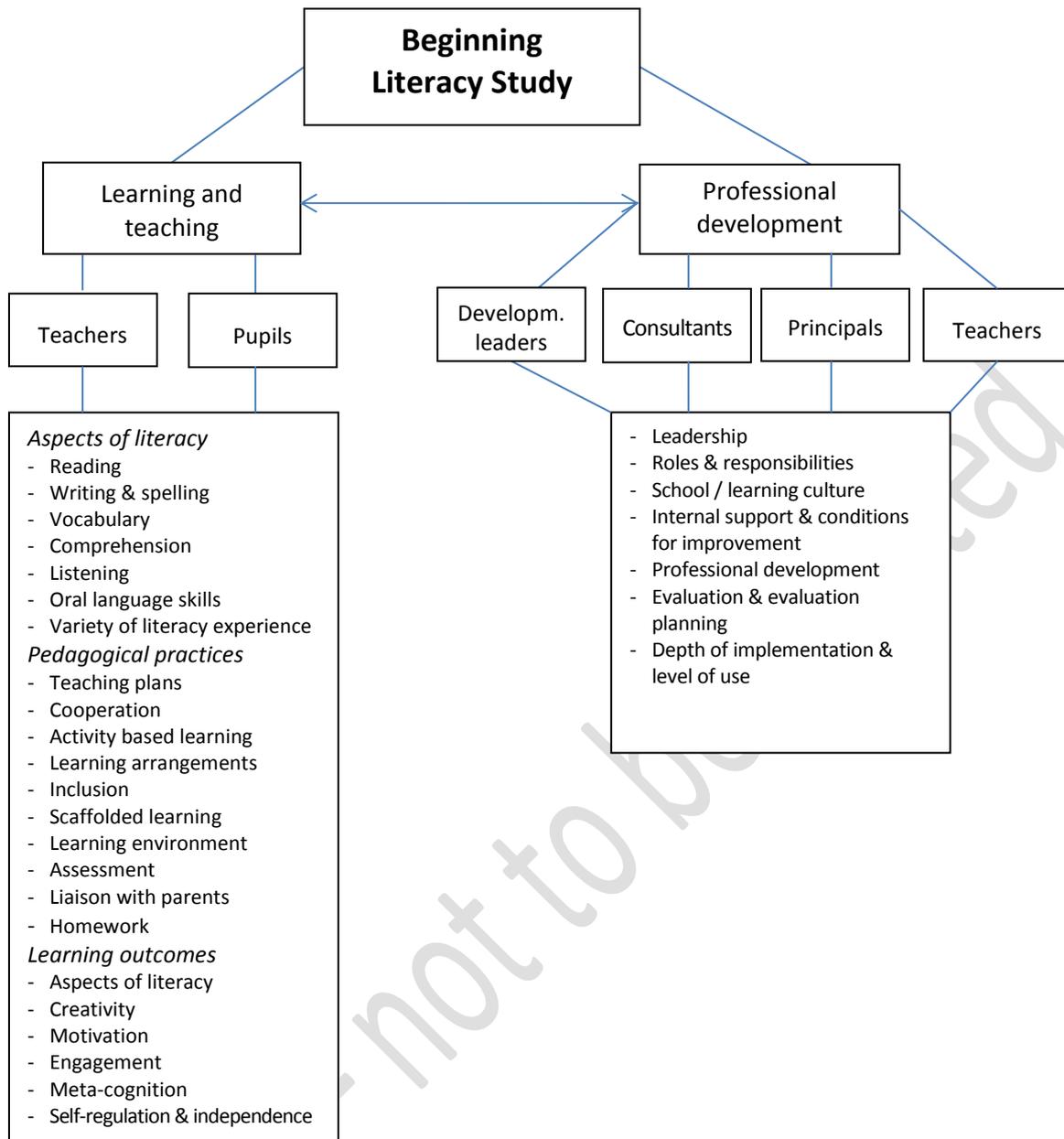


Figure 2. The beginning literacy study: A conceptual framework

In the study the following four sets of data have been collected:

- 1) Existing data from teachers' and leaders' evaluation of workshops and consultation from the CSD.
- 2) Available results from regular screening tests conducted six times in each school over the two implementation years.
- 3) Case study data from eight BL schools (thereof two pilot schools) on both strands of the study: learning and teaching and professional development. The data comprise: A) Field notes from semi-structured observations of teaching, examinations of teaching plans and other written materials. B) Individual interviews with the observed teachers, and purposefully selected pupils and parents; these interviews address the literacy aspects, pedagogical practices and learning outcomes of literacy education. C)

Individual interviews with the BL leader and principal of each school, and a focus group interview with BL teachers in the school to address professional and school development issues. Furthermore, the CSD consultant of each school is interviewed.

- 4) An on-line questionnaire survey was sent to class-teachers in years 1–4 (N = 571), development leaders (N = 68) and to principals in all BL schools (N = 68). For comparison the questionnaire was also sent to teachers in the same years (N = 345) and principals (N = 53) in schools that have not taken on BL. All in all the survey was sent to 75% of Icelandic primary schools. The questionnaire comprised following themes (apart from questions about the respondents' background):
- a. Participation and roles in improvement projects (teachers, development leaders and principals).
  - b. Professional development issues (teachers, development leaders and principals).
  - c. The organisation of learning and teaching (teachers).
  - d. Inclusion and differentiated learning (teachers).
  - e. Evaluation of outcomes for pupils and teachers (teachers, development leaders and principals).
  - f. Classroom management (teachers).
  - g. Collaboration with parents (teachers, development leaders and principals).

## **Analysis and preliminary findings**

### *Learning and teaching*

The analysis of data from the teaching and learning strand of the BL study seeks to answer sub-questions that are specific to the teaching and learning strand of the study and derive from the main questions of pupils' learning experiences and outcomes and teachers' teaching arrangements and depth of implementation (questions 2 and 3). The specific questions address the aspects of learning and teaching listed in the conceptual model in figure 2. These questions address

- teachers' conceptions of literacy teaching and how they adapt the BL programme to their personal understanding and pedagogical priorities,
- teachers' pedagogical practices and arrangements for pupils' learning,
- pupils' learning tasks, learning opportunities and learning outcomes (pupils' attained curriculum) (van den Akker, 2003) in the main aspects of literacy,
- pupils' learning opportunities and learning outcomes (pupils' attained curriculum) in other areas such as creativity, motivation, meta-cognition, self-regulation and independence.

It should be noted here that the last set of outcomes can be regarded both as outcomes of learning and as prerequisites of further learning.

The analysis is further informed by the following theoretical aspects:

- Definitions of literacy as a socially orientated and culturally responsive phenomenon, (Perry, 2012), and social constructivism as a main theory of learning (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Bodrova, et al., 2003; Tracey & Morrow, 2012).
- Theories of literacy and literacy teaching built on an interactive approach that seeks to balance an emphasis on phonics and decoding and whole-language processes of social construction and independent search for meaning.
- Furthermore, a balance between the various aspects of literacy; reading, vocabulary and comprehension, writing, and social communication (Lipson & Wixson, 1991; Rumelhart, 1985).
- The interaction of bottom-up and top-down processes through the three teaching phases where children 1) are exposed to an authentic text; 2) deal with the technical aspects of literacy through elements of the text, to exercise phonetic awareness and decoding skills; 3) work on building their own texts using the vocabulary and reading skills they have just learned in phases one and two (Eggertsdóttir, 2009).
- Teachers' level of use (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011) of BL, and research on characteristics of effective literacy teaching (K. Hall, 2003; Tomkins, 2006) in terms of teachers curricular, organisational and pedagogical practices, such as
  - teachers' understanding of pupils' learning,
  - pupils' amount of reading and writing and constructive reading and writing about what matters to them,
  - pupils' constructive use of the phonological (sound), syntactic (structural), semantic (meaning) and pragmatic (social / cultural) aspects of literacy,
  - explicit teaching of word recognition, vocabulary, spelling, comprehension and writing,
  - organisation of classrooms as inclusive communities of learning where a variety of learning experiences are offered, such as "partner reading, shared reading, independent reading, book choosing, ... writing for a variety of purposes [and] collaborative writing" (K. Hall, 2003, p. 321),
  - classroom management and literacy-rich learning environment that supports pupils' independence,
  - emphasis on cognitively demanding and literacy-relevant tasks,
  - extensive scaffolding of learning and giving the right level of support, and adapting tasks according to pupils' needs,
  - connecting of teaching and assessment,
  - partnership with parents,
  - pupils' self-regulation, autonomy and choice, motivation and engagement,

- integration and balance of reading (a variety of texts, for a variety of purposes), writing (various texts for multiple purposes), and other aspects of literacy, and integration of content areas,
- lesson planning, including multiple goals for a single lesson.

The findings of this study are not fully developed but preliminary findings indicate that the adoption of BL has indeed changed the beginning literacy education of participating schools from a narrow emphasis on decoding, fluency and reading comprehension to a more holistic literacy curriculum where reading, writing and oral expression are integrated. 80% of teachers in BL schools who answered the questionnaire (N = 332) and 96% of the development leaders (N = 58) said that their school's participation in BL had yielded a highly positive impact on the literacy education of children in years one and two. 65% and 90% of the same respondent groups respectively thought that the participation in BL had also impacted positively on literacy education in years three and four.

Teachers who had experience in literacy teaching before their participation in BL maintained that they

- had found that implementing BL had been a demanding but learning-rich experience,
- put more emphasis than before on detailed lesson plans with explicit goals,
- are more conscious than before of pupils' different learning needs, e.g. in terms of gender and ability,
- put more emphasis than before on pupils using content-rich and authentic texts in their literacy learning,
- put more emphasis than before on writing,
- are more conscious than before of balancing the various aspects of literacy, such as oral expression, listening, reading and writing,
- use less seatwork with simplified texts and workbooks.

The same teachers also reported that they use more varied teaching methods and learning tasks and that this has

- increased pupils' motivation and contentment,
- enhanced pupils' engagement in learning,
- increased pupils' autonomy, self-regulation, meta-cognition and cooperative skills.

Despite this, the findings indicate a varied depth of implementation and level of use amongst teachers. All the teachers we have observed seem to have reached the level of routine application (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011) where they follow the cycle of BL, and there are examples of higher levels of refinement, integration and renewal (ibid.). Some of the teachers seem to struggle with formative assessment and the recording of pupils' progress and use of assessment data to address the needs of children within the classroom. A related issue is that some teachers do not seem confident with scaffolding, e.g. by assigning tasks to

heterogeneous cooperative learning groups or pairs. A lot of the pair and group work takes place in homogenous groups which lack the interdependence of cooperative learning.

A further indication of this comes from an analysis of screening tests that are applied six times during the two-year implementation period. When these tests are analysed it turns out that there is little stability in results within schools. This means that while the performance of the same student cohorts on the six tests in years one and two is highly correlated, there is very low correlation in the performance of different student cohorts in the same years. In other words: A student group that does well (or less well) on the tests in year one is highly likely to do so also in year two. Taken together this means that there is a high correlation between all the tests by the same group of pupils in years one and two, but very little correlation between the same age groups in different years. It has to be noted here that the questionnaire data reveal that at least 75% of teachers follow their classes for the first three or even four years of the primary school. In most cases, therefore, there is a new teacher every year in year one.

### *Professional development*

The specific aims of the professional development aspect of the BL study are to build a picture of the school improvement and professional development that has taken place within the implementation of BL; more specifically to investigate the

- role of consultants, principals, development leaders and teachers in the improvement efforts,
- organisation and outcomes of the professional development programme that guides the implementation of BL and the internal conditions that schools have created to support and sustain teachers' learning.

These aims derive from questions 4–6 (pp. 6–7) of the main research questions for the study. The specific questions address the aspects of professional development and improvement listed in the conceptual model in figure 2. These questions address the

- initiation, implementation and sustenance of the BL programme, and the creation of internal improvement conditions in schools,
- conceptions of teachers, development leaders, principals and consultants of their roles and responsibilities,
- leadership roles and the development of leadership skills of teachers, leaders and principals,
- teachers' professional development needs that derive from their participation in BL and how these have been met to enable them to get to grips with the methods of BL,
- evaluation of the outcomes of BL, both as an impact on pupils' learning and attained curriculum and on the outcomes of teachers' learning and resulting change in practice,
- impact of the BL methods on literacy education in the middle and lower secondary stages of the participating schools.

The analysis of the findings is informed by theories and research on school improvement and professional learning, more specifically by the following aspects:

- Change as transformation of school culture in order to create and sustain professional learning communities (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011; Hargreaves, 2003).
- Definitions and process of professional development as an “ongoing, job embedded process” (Guskey, 2000) supported by various interventions such as
  - creating and communicating a shared vision of the change,
  - planning and providing resources,
  - monitoring progress,
  - coupling of continuous assessment of needs and assistance to meet those needs,
  - creating internal conditions supportive of change (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011).
- Definitions and development of leadership and leadership capacity (Lambert, 2003a, 2003b), in particular the importance of leadership for student learning (Lambert, 2009; Louis, Wahlstrom, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010), distributed and collective leadership where the leadership of teachers and the development leaders plays a vital role (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003, 2005; Muijs & Harris, 2003).
- Role of consultants as external facilitators of change and the importance of collaboration between schools, university and local educational authorities in improvement efforts (Fullan, 2010; Sigþórsson, 2013; H. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; H. S. Timperley, Parr, & Hulsbosch, 2008).
- Evaluation and evaluation planning (Gaytan & McEwen, 2010; Guskey, 2000, 2014) that addresses the outcomes of the professional development for pupils and teachers alike. Here we pay particular attention to the criteria for the depth of implementation of the BL methods by teachers, such as the notion of level of use (G. E. Hall & Hord, 2011).

The professional development programme that supports the implementation of BL is built on international research on professional development, leadership and the creation of professional learning communities. In the interviews, teachers, development leaders and principals alike praised the professional development programme and maintained its effectiveness in improving literacy education in their schools.

The vast majority of teachers who answered the questionnaire (N = 332) and 96% of the development leaders (N = 58) maintained that the courses, workshops and materials had been useful to them, and 70% of the same respondents said that their participation in BL had considerably increased their theoretical knowledge about literacy and their pedagogical skills of literacy teaching. 57% of the teachers, 87% of the development leaders, and 74% of principals (N = 58) were also content with the collaboration with the external consultants.

Our data indicates that development leaders generally function well during the BL implementation period and that their leadership is highly regarded among teachers and principals alike. However, there are indications that the function of the development leaders

is more varied from school to school after the implementation period and that they need to be given more time and flexibility for classroom visits and consultation.

The data indicates that the implementation of BL is a radical transformation of literacy education in years one and two. In the interviews, some teachers, development leaders and consultants commented that the principals were too disengaged from the improvement process, not least after the two-year implementation period, and delegated the leadership roles to the development leaders without the necessary flexibility in their working arrangements, backup and authority. There are also indications from the interviews that teachers' involvement in the initiation stage of BL and that they have a say in the decision to embark on the project is among important conditions for successful implementation.

The BL model has a clear focus on pupils' learning and is also quite clear on what practices teachers need to implement and what knowledge and skills they need to acquire. Unfortunately, however, the BL schools do not seem to apply any systematic assessment of pupils' attainment, nor does the study entail testing of pupils' attainment apart from the analysis of the screening texts mentioned above. The tests are helpful as far as they go, but they do not address all aspects of literacy and there are not many indications of teachers keeping records or gathering data of pupils' outcomes of learning where the tests fall short. The same applies for the evaluation of teachers' learning and practices. An online questionnaire conducted by the CSDs at the end of each of the implementation years yields valuable information about teachers' preparation and lesson planning, and some aspects of classroom practice and liaison with parents, but the results are not systematically compared with criteria of teachers' proficiency, such as the level of use mentioned earlier in this paper.

### *Two levels of analysis*

The analysis of the findings is divided into two levels. The first level comprises reports from each of the case studies and an analysis of the questionnaire results. The case study addresses the two strands of the BL study: learning and teaching and professional development. They draw on the interview and observation data, and the document analysis. A preliminary report is presented to each school and feedback invited. The analysis of the questionnaire data is primarily descriptive to show the distribution of answers, and there is also cross-tabulation to compare the answers of various groups of respondents – teachers, development leaders, and principals – within the BL schools and between BL and non-BL schools. In-depth analysis of aspects of learning and teaching and professional development within the cases and the questionnaire is also possible.

In the second level of analysis the main themes in the study are analysed across the case studies and the questionnaire to build a more holistic picture of various aspects of literacy education in Iceland.

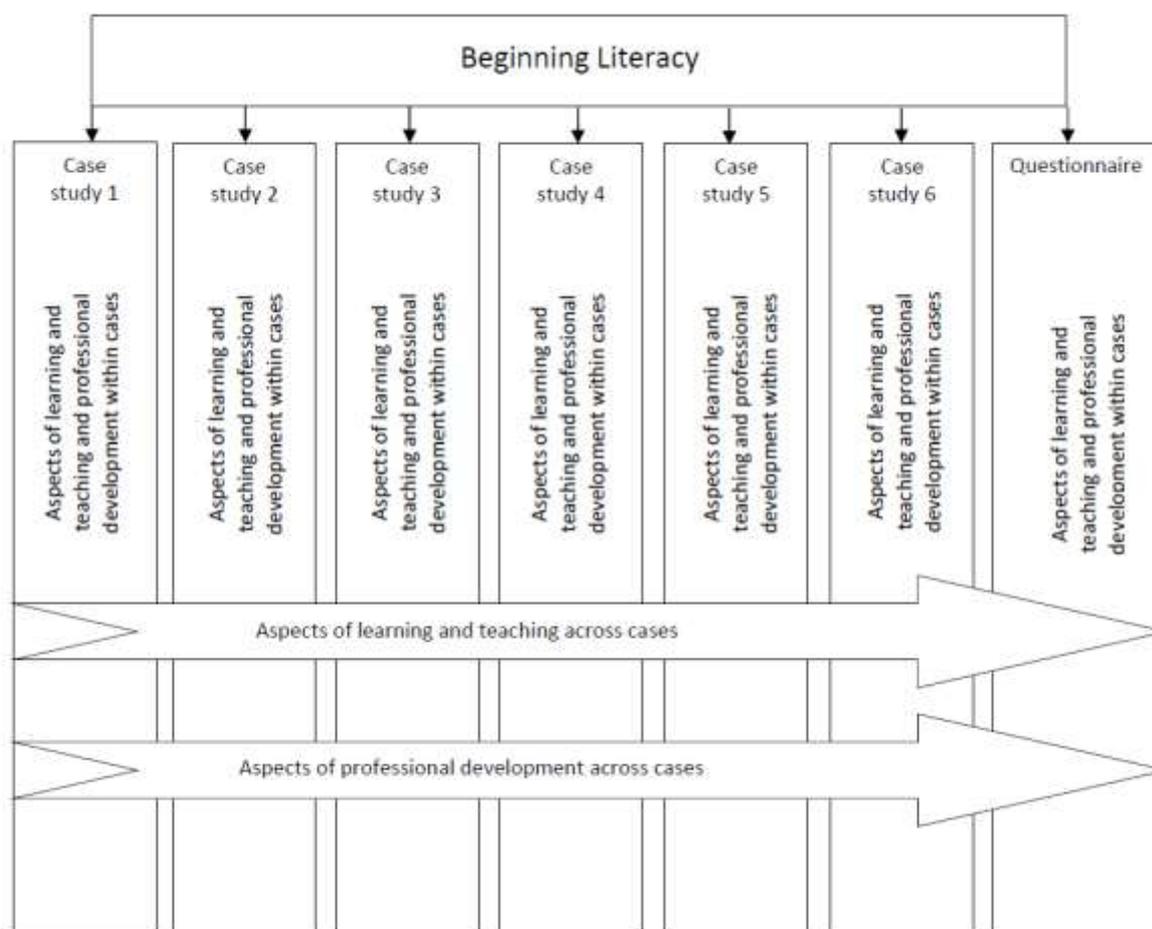


Figure 3. The second level of analysis of findings from the BL study

## Conclusion

The BL study has ambitious aims, and we are more than aware of its broad scope compared with the available resources. We think, however, that this is justified in light of the paucity of research into literacy education in Iceland. The study will also build capacity for literacy research in Iceland and form a database on literacy education to contribute to the body of knowledge of literacy education and its development in Icelandic compulsory schools. It is our intention that the database from the study will be available to other researchers and, not least, to master's students.

The in-depth case studies give a much needed deep insight into how individual schools help their students to achieve literacy and fare on their journey towards improved literacy education, what obstacles they meet and how they are overcome. We are fully aware, however, that neither the case studies nor our cross-case analysis warrant generalisations. The questionnaire data offers a much more comprehensive picture and taken together this mixed set of data has the potential to contribute to the knowledge of practice and development of literacy education in Iceland that is of international relevance.

We know from the questionnaire data that BL, as an approach to literacy education, and its impact on students' learning and the professional learning of teachers, is highly rated by teachers and development leaders and principals. We also know from interviews with teachers and development leaders that those who are able to compare BL with their former way of teaching almost unanimously maintain that BL has created more flexibility and variety in teaching methods, materials and pupils' work. They also maintain that pupils are generally more motivated and positive towards their learning. It is also evident from the BL model that it is not entirely preoccupied with teaching, but addresses literacy education from a child-centred perspective of inclusive education, children's learning experiences, children's right to have a choice in their learning, and learning competences such as metacognition, collaboration and creative thinking. There are, however, indications of differences in the depth of implementation and different levels of use, although it must be emphasised that this is not entirely a teacher issue as it might also indicate that schools have not built the infrastructure to sustain stability in their pupils' reading performance over time.

Our data suggests that BL's literacy programme is radically different from previous practice in the participating schools, and that its development programme is consistent with the literature of professional development. The programme is highly rated by teachers, leaders and principals and there are a number of indications to support its effectiveness. Nevertheless, there are indications that the implementation time of two years is not enough for schools to fully implement the required changes in classroom practice and build a sufficiently robust infrastructure of improvement conditions to sustain future development. There are also critical points to be made about the leadership issues, regarding both principals and development leaders.

What we lack, however, is more hard evidence about the impact of the BL programme on pupils' proficiency in reading or other literacy related competences and the outcomes of the professional development programme in terms of teachers' level of use. A more consistent, ongoing evaluation within the BL schools of the effectiveness of BL, both as regards pupils' outcomes and the outcomes of teachers' professional learning and their changes in classroom practice, is likely to strengthen the programme as a whole.

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