Better Numeracy and Literacy for Children and Young People: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

1. Introduction

The Irish Film Institute (IFI) recognises the DES’commitment to improving literacy and numeracy in schools through the Draft National Plan, Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People.

The Plan defines literacy and numeracy as skills in reading, writing and numeracy, skills which enable young people to ‘participate fully in education and in Irish life and society’. The report acknowledges that the definition of literacy has expanded to include capabilities in the use of new communications technologies. However, IFI would propose the specific addition of media literacy to the definition, as an essential skill for 21st century living.

What is Media literacy? As determined by the EU, media literacy is the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents, and to create communications in a variety of contexts. Media literacy relates to all forms of media, including television and film (incorporating moving image media, film literacy), radio and recorded music, print media, the internet and all other new digital communication technologies. The EU regards media literacy as a fundamental competence, and an important factor for active citizenship in today’s information society.

Within the above EU context, what is crucially absent from the DES draftplan are the aspects of access and understandand of the creation of media content. In terms of film and moving image, this would include the ability to access a wide range of film, to make critical and informed choices, to contribute to debate around film and moving image eg. film classification, and also to be able to create and produce one’s own media texts within a variety of contexts. IFI proposes an approach that would address each of these aspects, and place media literacy on an equal footing with more traditional forms. To this end, we offer a response to each point of the Draft Plan.

2. Improving teachers’ and ECCE practitioners’ professional practice

The Draft National Plan asserts the need to ensure that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses develop the teachers’ knowledge and understanding and their ability to apply theory and practice. In the area of knowledge, there is no specific attention given to media literacy in ITE outside of the individual enthusiasms and interests of certain colleges/lecturers. Given the experience of students entering ITE to many forms of media technologies and their personal competencies and literacies in the use of same, it is an ideal opportunity at ITE to capitalize on these existing skills and to formalize ways in which they can be harnessed for classroom application. In the likelihood that new teachers’ media literacies may exceed those of their more senior colleagues, there is also an opportunity for skills sharing, upskilling and mentoring or creating roles for experts within the school environment.

Of particular relevance to IFI is the regular and unmonitored use of film as a ‘treat’ in primary schools. Schools nationwide rely on the ‘Friday Film’ as a reward or even as a means of settling classes. However, even though the upgraded digital classroom will facilitate greater facilities for film viewing, issues of film content, classification and quality remain valid. Teachers often merely rely on the films their pupils bring from home or the school collection, with the result that young peoples’ access to a range of material may

---

1 Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, p.9
2 Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, p.9
3 http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/literacy/docs/media_literacy_leaflet_en.pdf
4 Early Childhood Care and Education
be limited. Opportunities for further engagement will also be determined by teachers’ own knowledge or enthusiasm.

IFI proposes the introduction of media literacy modules across all ITE programmes, along with the proposed mandatory units in literacy development and related assessment, with specific reference to the use of film and moving image as a means of promoting this literacy. While the FIS\(^5\) project has achieved much in the area of filmmaking by upskilling teachers who are in the classroom, it is at ITE level that this whole area of creating and understanding can be combined and developed.

**CPD**

In Continuing Professional Development (CPD), IFI proposes a programme of courses which will enable teachers to develop their own film and media literacy and their skills in maximizing the potential of film and moving image in all subject areas. The Draft Report outlines the teaching of the ‘basic building blocks of reading’\(^6\); CPD in media literacy would include film language as a ‘basic building block’ of reading film and understanding of how the elements of film – lighting, camera, sound etc. - contribute to meaning.

As a highly experienced provider of CPD through our own and other projects with the Second Level Support Service, IFI would undertake to provide CPD as above. IFI proposes that this Media Literacy programme would be accredited in accordance with the Teaching Council proposals for improved teacher education in the years ahead. Unlike many other subject specialisms, media literacy is a skill in which young people are already to some extent proficient from their own personal usage and experience. What is required is for teachers to harness this existing knowledge and facilitate learners in furthering their skills through the provision of wider access and opportunities for critical engagement.

**3. Building the capacity of school leadership**

The report asserts that school principals will be required to oversee the school-wide implementation of literacy and numeracy policies. It is essential, therefore, that principals are also give the chance to upskill themselves in these areas with a view to implementing self-evaluation. IFI would provide input to leadership development programmes in the areas of media literacy and its teaching and assessment. This would include tackling head on the casual and widespread use of film in school and promoting a more informed and critical whole-school approach to this practice.

**4. Giving priority to language skills, literacy and numeracy in early childhood, primary and post-primary education**

The draft report prioritises the acquisition of ‘critical core skills’\(^7\) over such additional ‘concerns’ as ‘arts and music education’\(^8\) which, it is suggested, can be delayed.IFI asserts the essential nature of arts and music education for all young people. In Finland, where the highest standards in international assessment\(^9\) are achieved, compulsory basic education includes ‘music, art, crafts’.\(^10\)The media education policies also acknowledge the contribution of media literacy to ‘participation and wellbeing’, the ‘bedrock of Finnish education’\(^11\), right through from early childhood education.

---

\(^5\)Film in Schools Project [www.fis.ie](http://www.fis.ie)

\(^6\)p.17

\(^7\)p.25

\(^8\)p.25

\(^9\)p.10

\(^10\)http://www.oph.fi/english/education/basic_education/curriculum

\(^11\)http://www.oph.fi/english/education/basic_education/curriculum
In Ireland, legislative framework for the arts and education can be found in The Education Act (1998) which makes specific reference to promoting the development of ‘the arts and other cultural matters’ as a particular function within the wider list of functions for schools set out in that Act.

The Arts Act (2003) sets out eight general functions of the Arts Council / An ChomhairleEalaion, the first two of which are to: (i) stimulate public interest in the arts and, (ii) promote knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts.

Further legislative underpinning can be found in the National Children’s Strategy (2000), which makes specific reference to cultural activities as part of the six ‘Basic Range of Needs’. International reference points includes Article 31 of the UN Rights of the Child, ratified by the Irish government in 1992. Together these all point to the essential nature of arts education which cannot be viewed as simply a ‘concern’ to be replaced by extra reading classes.

In order to ensure that ‘full participation in all aspects of Irish life’, learners require literacy in all its forms as well as in the arts. Media literacy will facilitate access to the arts and in so doing, access to cultural capital which in turn will facilitate participation. Turning to the Finnish model again, media education starts at ECEC stage where it is based on events, experiences and learning as a form of playing. This could include watching short animations and talking about them, learning to recognize basic film codes such as colour and sounds but also following basic stories. IFI proposes the production of a manual for ECEC personnel, which would outline basic approaches to media literacy including film and moving image recommendations and related themes, complementing those themes outlined in Aistear such as communication or well-being. Aistear’s emphasis on early literacy development will include early media literacy such as following simple film stories or articulating simple responses to what has been seen.

**Literacy skills at Primary**
At primary school, any actions to improve literacy and numeracy skills must also include media literacy skills. These would range from basic recognition of visual codes eg. costume, character and setting to more sophisticated skills such as story comprehension, further engagement and oral/written response. Stimulus from media texts will also complement the development of language skills.

In the course of our current research project, Film Focus, where teachers and educators have developed and delivered film or moving image projects with their groups, and during the evaluation of a previous Transition Year Moving Image Module, teachers consistently expressed the efficacy of film as a resource with which students of all levels could engage. The language of film and moving image is acquired at increasingly young ages and enables young people to follow narratives, recognize characters and identify visual and audio codes in moving image media.

**Literacy skills at Post-Primary**
At post-primary, the draft document acknowledges the deficit of attention to ‘social and cultural applications of literacy skills’ at Junior Cycle English. The gap that exists between primary and secondary education both in terms of content, teaching and learning demands that any revision of Junior Cycle, such as that proposed by NCCA, must address this gap and also the social and cultural applications of media literacy skills. Young people between 12-15 enter a completely new band of moving image content in terms of film classification. Finland identifies a ‘protective and critical’ focus for their media education which can include understanding of classification processes which directly impact what young people can view or access in a public capacity. In keeping with the Irish classification process, through IFCO, media literacy will be about awareness raising and understanding the process of classification and why it exists. Critical media engagement will enable young people to make critical judgements based on understanding. The media literacy classroom can offer opportunities for debate and furthering of oral language skills.

---

12 An action research project to develop a national strategy for film education and young people, see www.ifi.ie/education
Looking internationally again, the revised Australian curriculum across all ages includes Media Arts through which individuals and groups participate in, experiment with and interpret the rich culture and communications practices that surround them. Huge attention is given to indigenous Australian film as a means of promoting understanding and awareness of all aspects of Australian life. In this way, moving image is used to promote active citizenship, a way for learners to acquire capital within their own cultural experience. This has obvious direct relevance for Ireland where access to our own filmed stories in both English and Irish language can promote broader cultural engagement.

The draft document prioritises the revision of the Junior Certificate English to include ‘greater range of non-fiction and graphical sources; a greater emphasis on skills such as…functional writing’. Again, film and moving image provide instant and engaging stimuli to serve as prompts for writing that can be functional, creative or discursive.

**CSPE & media literacy**

CSPE as a compulsory subject at Junior Cycle is also a significant place for media literacy. Engaging with concepts such as development, government, democracies and citizenship can be a challenge for the teacher and students. Film, however, can provide ideal source material for all of these areas, and its comprehension will draw on media literacy skills acquired across the syllabus as a whole. IFI propose a screening programme that would support elements of a CSPE curriculum along with online support materials for teachers and students. The digital classroom will be an obvious option but engaging locally with arts venues or cinemas will promote students’ understanding and experience of their local environment as well as their capacity to access cultural experience.

**The Leaving Certificate, Film and Key Competencies**

At Leaving Certificate level, film is already an element of the English curriculum and examined as a text. This has proven to be a very popular option for teachers and students and certainly addresses aspects of media literacy. However, appearing as it does only in Senior Cycle, when curricula are already overloaded, film is frequently regarded within the confines of ‘text’ rather than a medium operating within its own language. But a revised curriculum which has a focus on media literacy right through from ECCE will allow students to develop their understanding of media texts over the years. Media Literacy addresses all Key Competencies, which have been identified by NCCA as central to teaching and learning across Senior Cycle. In each of these: Information Processing, Working with Others, Communication, Being personally effective, Critical and Creative Thinking, Media Literacy has a function as well as the capacity to provide content which will facilitate learners’ development of these skills.

IFI propose a furthering of Media Literacy at Senior Cycle through its continuation in English, but also across all subjects as material for subject support and promoting Key Competencies.

**5. Targeting available additional resources on learners at risk of failure to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy in schools**

As we have learnt through our research projects, film and moving image have proven to be highly accessible media by which to engage students who may be at risk of failing to achieve. In situations of limited literacy in traditional reading or writing, young people can respond to visual texts and communicate using a range of media technologies.

For DEIS schools at primary level, the initiatives of Reading Recovery and First Steps can be augmented to include reading of moving image media as well as whole school approaches to the inclusion of media literacy. IFI proposes the development of a comprehensive module comprising CPD, guidelines for whole school media literacy as well as lesson plans for maximizing the potential of media in these learning situations.

**After school/Homework Clubs**
IFI also propose the introduction of film clubs (see UK model, www.filmclub.org) which would provide schools with content and support materials for afterschool and homework initiatives around film. Films would be selected and recommended for schools, taking into account learning needs, environment and topics or themes that may be relevant to the particular school. CPD would also be integrated into the setting up of a club, to enable teachers/facilitators to take on the role of film educator.

**English as an Additional Language (EAL)**

In EAL situations, media literacy has much to offer in the field of language acquisition. Learners already bring experience of the international language of film to the classroom. They are able, through early experience, to follow narrative, to recognize visual codes and to articulate response – albeit perhaps in their own first language. The opportunity for the EAL teacher is to harness that existing skill and use it to promote L1 language development. Engaging with moving image can also promote social skills, raise cultural awareness and also provide opportunities for family integration through local public events. During our research, we have worked with teachers who have a high number of EAL students and their experience with film education has been extremely positive. IFI propose the development of a media literacy module for the EAL classroom which outlines basic skills and identifies links between media literacy and L1 language and social skills acquisition and cultural awareness.

**Youthreach**

IFI proposes the film club model for Youthreach centres, drawing on our experience from the IFI Teen Film Club which offers opportunities for critical engagement with a broad range of film. Taking a whole-centre approach to media literacy through film watching and filmmaking, promoting communication and information technology skills, film is ideal source for individual study or project work are all possibilities for this area.

6. *Fostering Continuous Improvement in Literacy and Numeracy in Schools*

The *Schools Like Ours* initiative outlined in the draft document proposes the generation of evidence of achievement at primary level through standardized assessment tests. It is suggested that in the long term this would be continued into post-primary. The problems with standardized assessment are already well documented and while the *like ours* approach offers a context for schools, at the same time the nature of testing itself and the usefulness of such evidence is all contentious. CPD implications notwithstanding, there is undoubtedly potential for schools to self-evaluate based on their own criteria which could be informed by national and international models. Working in local clusters to share methodologies and expertise could also serve to motivate and broaden experience.

Media Literacy is recognized by the EU as a competency required by every citizen. Much research has taken place as to how this should be measured and clearly any developments in school assessment should be taken within this context. Within our current economic climate it is essential that just as our traditional literacies have been measured so too must our nation’s competence in media literacy be internationally indexed. IFI proposes a direct input into the assessment debate, informed by our research, our experience and our ability to contribute to international media literacy debate.

7. *Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development*

As cited above, film clubs and public events in film and moving image will provide excellent opportunity for parents and communities to support children’s media literacy development. Recognising young peoples’ competence in their own private and social networking spheres, it is important that this be validated within the school setting and that parents see opportunities for reinforcing their childrens’ skills at home. Issues of

---

13 [http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/literacy/docs/studies/eavi_study_assess_crit_media_lit_levels_europe_fi nrep.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/literacy/docs/studies/eavi_study_assess_crit_media_lit_levels_europe_fi nrep.pdf)
film classification and internet safety all have relevance in the private sphere and can be focal points for parents supporting their childrens’ media literacy development. IFI proposes online tools for parents, families and communities in these areas, drawing on the NCTE (www.NCTE.ie) and IFCO (www.ifco.ie) guidelines.

8. A consistent national focus on the prioritization of literacy and numeracy in the educational system and beyond

As the national body with responsibility for film education, IFI is ideally placed to contribute to the prioritization of media literacy in the educational system and beyond. Our extensive network of schools, teachers, arts and cinema venues enable us to facilitate film events to underpin media literacy education. Our experience in film education and teacher professional development around the country has given us an insight into needs but also into ways of exploiting film for classroom use. Through Film Focus, our research project which will be reported in autumn, we have engaged directly with teachers, educators and facilitators who are working in this area and together have evaluated their ways of working, to provide models of practice which can be made widely available to support media literacy development plans.

Through the proposals outlined in this response, IFI is committed to contributing to the development of a strategy that promotes better literacy, numeracy and media literacy. The ability to communicate verbally, in writing and digitally has never been more crucial as we try to negotiate our way out of economic decline. The ability to critically engage, to create and innovate are essential skills which arts education promotes. As our young people seek employment further afield and the world becomes smaller through migration and media technologies, our negotiating of a viable space hinges on our ability to understand other cultures and to contribute to international developments. Literacy in the international language of media is at the heart of contemporary living and is an essential skill for all. Media literacy will facilitate citizens’ full participation and ability to contribute to the renewal of our society.

Alicia McGivern
Head of Education
Irish Film Institute
February 28th, 2011