Response to: **Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools**

Submitted by: **The Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI)**

February 2011.

While this Draft Plan from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is to be welcomed in so far as it places a committed focus on the need to improve literacy and numeracy standards in our primary schools, the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative (MLPSI) believes that it also has stimulated a much needed and timely discussion on the place and role of language learning at primary level. This broader discussion relates directly to the need to address the falling standards of literacy and numeracy in our primary classrooms and presents the DES with an opportunity to effect the real and meaningful curriculum change needed to reflect the “rapidly changing world”\(^1\) and to ensure that our children are well placed to adequately face “the challenges that they will face as Irish, European and global citizens of the future”\(^2\).

Any discussion concerning literacy and numeracy cannot be conducted with a monolingual focus as we do not live in a monolingual world. Indeed the many references to Europe and an increasingly global world in the draft plan are at odds with its overwhelming monolingual emphasis. While the draft plan’s broad definition of literacy which includes all media, both technological and traditional communications, and all the language skills, is to be welcomed, its monolingual focus is not in keeping with Irish or international best practice or indeed recent key developments in the context of language and broader education policy, all of which firmly promote a plurilingual focus.

The Language Policy Division in the Council of Europe is now placing greater emphasis on languages of schooling and their role in the teaching of subjects so as to establish a balance more in keeping with the idea of plurilingual and intercultural education. The overarching theme for the Council of Europe’s Language Policy Division’s current programme of work is “Languages in/for Education” and similarly the European Commission’s new European Languages and Education policy, “Languages 2010 and beyond” reflects the critical need to improve foreign language learning as it is deemed a core skill to be nurtured and developed from an early age. A recent Intergovernmental Policy Forum on “The right of learners to quality and equity in education – the role of language and intercultural skills”\(^3\), held in

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\(^1\) Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young people, A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools, Department of Education and Skills, November 2010, p.5.

\(^2\) Ibid, p.10.

\(^3\) [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/conference_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/conference_EN.asp)
Geneva, focused on the role played by languages, in particular the language(s) of schooling, in pupils’ success or failure at school. It brought together those responsible for the overall language policy of education systems, not only those in charge of foreign languages or of the national language taught as a subject in itself, but also those responsible for other subjects, as languages are the vehicle of all teaching and learning. One of the main themes of the Forum was the language dimension in the learning/teaching of all subjects and so it is heartening that the Irish system is also now reflecting on such critical issues.

These language and education policy developments reflect the aspirations of the Lisbon Strategy which detailed a commitment to improving foreign language learning as one of its specific objectives, with a special emphasis placed on early language learning. The reasons for this policy focus have been widely researched and documented. Bringing young children into contact with foreign languages can result in faster language learning, improved mother tongue skills, and better performance in other areas. This strategy was further endorsed by EU Education Ministers when they formally supported the teaching and learning of at least two foreign languages from a very early age through the Barcelona Agreement (2002). As well as laying the foundations for later learning, early language learning influences attitudes towards other languages and cultures, reason enough for various EU Commission initiatives to promote it and support further research. Ireland is currently the only country in Europe where modern foreign language learning is neither a core nor compulsory element of its primary school curriculum. There are many references in the draft plan to the need to learn from other European countries and so as will be further elaborated upon later in this response, the reflection on our children’s failing literacy and numeracy standards creates an opportunity to broaden the considerations to include how there is now an opportunity to agree on new priorities for our primary school curriculum, to get it right and to bring educational opportunities for Irish children back into line with European guidelines and existing practice in other countries. In short, modern language learning could have a very positive impact on our children’s literacy and numeracy. To quote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “He who does not know foreign languages does not know anything about his own…”

The draft plan contains, obiter, many references to the need to ensure that our children are afforded every opportunity to attain employment in ‘satisfying jobs and careers’. It is, therefore, of note that the Forfás Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) identified the need to offer foreign languages to all primary school children - “The embedding of foreign language provision in the primary curriculum is a hugely important foundational component of Ireland’s language infrastructure…...and [the EGFSN] recommends that the pilot programme should be integrated into the mainstream curriculum and made available to all primary schools.”

Although Ireland is lagging behind our European counterparts in terms of language in education policy, thankfully we are not starting from a blank canvas. Strategically and with due regard to best international practice, the MLPSI has offered a solid support system to teachers and schools who have chosen to offer their children additional language learning opportunities. It is heartening that many of the key recommendations of the Draft National Plan reflect elements of good practice that have been pillars of the MLPSI’s support service for many years. These include:

- a focus on the need to **integrate language learning** into all aspects of the primary school curriculum – the MLPSI encourages schools to adopt a whole school approach to their language learning and to ensure that language learning is a key feature of class, school and wider school community programmes and events. A strong focus on modern teaching approaches, the

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5 Languages and Enterprise - The Demand & Supply of Foreign Language Skills Enterprise Sector (2005), [http://www.forfas.ie/media/egfsn050608_foreign_languages_skills.pdf](http://www.forfas.ie/media/egfsn050608_foreign_languages_skills.pdf)
integration of ICT and use of active learning methodologies have helped ensure that a third language can be very beneficial and relevant in terms of enhancing children’s language development, confidence and proficiency in other curricular areas. Feedback from Principals and teachers in MLPSI has confirmed that modern language learning lends itself particularly well to integration with a broad range of curricular areas and that approaches and methodologies advocated by the MLPSI have impacted positively on the teaching of other curricular areas.6

- a renewed emphasis on the importance of a cross-curricular approach in the context of language teaching – the integration of language learning with all other curriculum areas has been comprehensively addressed in our modular CPD programme.

- a renewed focus on the important place of Language Awareness in the teaching of all languages – teachers attending MLPSI training and support events have received training on the Language Awareness strand of the curriculum and the potential of Language Awareness to benefit children’s understanding of other languages has been explicitly included in our support materials.

- a prioritization of the role of assessment, particularly assessment for learning, in the context of the primary classroom but also its role in the child’s transfer from primary to post-primary school. The MLPSI has developed its own model of the European Language Portfolio (ELP). Entitled “My ELP”, this portfolio was accredited by the Council of Europe and can be used very effectively as both a planning and an assessment tool. Not only are learning outcomes in the language clearly defined (and as it is a completely bi-lingual resource, it can be used for English, Gaeilge or another modern language), lending itself exceptionally well to aid teachers as they plan their classes and pro grammes of work. The ELP also promotes and encourages pupils to engage in self-assessment, peer assessment, goal setting and autonomous learning. As all aspects of their language learning are clearly documented, including cross-curricular work and reflection on the intercultural awareness aspects of their work and classes, it is an excellent mechanism by which to help ensure that children and teachers can benefit from a seamless transition from one level of the education system to the next.

- in instances where the language of instruction is neither English nor Gaeilge, the reminder of the need for teachers to have due regard for the child’s mother tongue is to be welcomed. This is an approach that the MLPSI has promoted and supported being mindful not only of the benefits for the newcomer child, but also of the contribution such discussions can bring to the intercultural dimension of a class.

- the need for schools to have a whole school approach to their plans for literacy and numeracy development very much echoes the MLPSI’s approach of encouraging schools to ensure that all class, school and wider community programmes and events include a language dimension and that all the languages of the school, including pupils’ mother tongues when not English or Gaeilge, are acknowledged and celebrated. As well as enhancing children’s literacy skills in their L1, this awareness of other languages and cultures can contribute much to children’s knowledge of the world and ultimately lead to improved social and cultural cohesion within a school and community context.

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• the commitment to prioritize teachers’ professional development at all stages in their career is also to be welcomed. The formal evaluation of the MLPSI’s CPD and school-based support programmes for teachers and schools has consistently reflected very high levels of satisfaction. Furthermore, the proposed extension of the B.Ed. programmes to four years provides an ideal opportunity to introduce a modern language to initial teacher training at primary level. Students entering the Colleges of Education are very well placed to embrace this change as all of them have achieved high grades in a modern language at Leaving Certificate level. The MLPSI presents on its work to student teachers in the Colleges of Education and there is significant interest among this cohort of future teachers in modern language teaching. We believe that given adequate and appropriate training and support, all primary teachers can deliver a modern language programme that would dramatically enhance literacy attainment levels in their classes and facilitate an integrated, cross-curricular approach which in addition to delivering competency in another European language, would actively promote increased language awareness and intercultural awareness in their schools.

While welcoming many of the key proposals for reform as outlined above, there are a number of issues raised in the Draft Plan which are a cause of concern.

• The monolingual dimension of the report does not do justice to an education system that currently accommodates students who are representative of a linguistic landscape of almost 200 different languages. Neither does the report do justice to the unique and critical place of Irish in our education system. The MLPSI has demonstrated that modern language learning can contribute much to the learning of both English and Irish, and as outlined earlier, also enhance literacy levels. The approach advocated by the MLPSI also promotes regard for other home languages in the classroom, as discussed previously. This plurilingual approach is in line with established international best practice.

• The proposals to reduce the time allocated to other “academic” subjects during initial teacher education and subsequently reduce the class time allocated to subjects such as music, visual arts and drama is also of much concern. If, as stated in the Minister’s introduction to the report, we need to equip our children with the core skills needed to allow them “to contribute to and participate fully in all aspects of our culture and society” 8, then surely there is a need to maintain a strong humanist element in our curriculum. Indeed, Forfás’s EGFSN claimed that “One of the most highly regarded aspects of the Irish educational system, … has been its broad-based curriculum. Notwithstanding the requirement to align curricula with the changing needs of the enterprise sector, this key feature should be retained as a cornerstone of the educational philosophy”. 9 While ever cognisant of the need to focus on measures to improve literacy and numeracy, particularly at primary level, a far more preferable option would be a meaningful review of the Primary School Curriculum. This would ensure a prioritisation of literacy and numeracy as the keystone element of all areas of learning, while concomitantly allowing for the retention of the present suite of subjects. This representation of the curriculum subjects, albeit perhaps in a more integrated manner, inherently supports the introduction of modern languages under the languages “umbrella” of the curriculum.

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7 Ibid, p. 5, 7.
8 Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young people, A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools, Department of Education and Skills, November 2010, p.5.
• Building on the last point, there is scope to broaden without diluting the Draft Plan’s proposal to dedicate all discretionary time to literacy and numeracy. Rather than examining literacy and numeracy in the overwhelming and unhelpful monolingual context of the Draft Plan, we propose that discretionary time be used for language development and that schools are given scope to implement their own plans and priorities in allocating this time. As Principals and teachers involved in the MLPSI have testified, including those teaching in DEIS designated schools, learning a third language has enhanced language learning throughout the school and indeed it often results in an increased appreciation of Irish, in particular, and a realization that it is a “language” which can be used to communicate. As mentioned earlier in the response, modern language learning allows for very effective cross-curricular work and the integration of language into all areas of the curriculum, including mathematics. We believe, therefore, that teachers and schools would welcome a progressive decision to allow discretionary time to be dedicated to modern and other language development and that this would certainly enhance literacy and numeracy standards.

In conclusion, we welcome the proposals expressed many times within the “Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools” to learn from our European neighbours, to implement best practice and to ensure that our children have the requisite core skills to enable them to take their rightful place on the future global stage. Literacy and Numeracy are core skills, but they cannot be viewed from a monolingual perspective and neither should they be viewed as pertaining solely to a language agenda. In order to improve literacy and numeracy standards, a comprehensive review of the Primary School Curriculum needs to take place as the world has changed considerably since its introduction in 1999. Irish children should continue to benefit from and enjoy a broad-based curriculum that promotes literacy, numeracy and language development in all areas of learning and which is further enriched by the presence of three languages, English, Irish and a modern European language. This is what is happening in other countries; other countries have three or more languages in their primary schools from a very young age and it is unjust and undemocratic that the same learning opportunities are not afforded to Irish children. The need to involve parents in this discussion is referred to in many instances in the Draft Plan and it is of note that the National Parents’ Council has been calling for the introduction of modern languages to the primary curriculum for over thirty years. The “Your Education System” (2004) public consultation also showed that the non-teaching of modern languages at primary level was the greatest source of dissatisfaction amongst the public\(^\text{10}\). The formal independent evaluation of the MLPSI\(^\text{11}\) has also shown that Principals, teachers and parents all advocate the extension of the programme and note the positive effects it has had on their pupils and children linguistically, academically, socially and in terms of assisting preparation for second level.

We therefore hope that these considerations will be taken on board and that this response gives an indication of what the MLPSI can contribute to a new vision for Irish Education.

Tanya Flanagan, National Coordinator & the MLPSI team,
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\(^{10}\) [http://217.35.77.12/stats/republic/education/pdfs/yes_survey_report.pdf](http://217.35.77.12/stats/republic/education/pdfs/yes_survey_report.pdf)

\(^{11}\)\(^\text{“A Third Language at Primary Level in Ireland: An Independent Evaluation of the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative”, John Harris and Denise O’Leary, Early Learning of Modern Foreign Languages, Edited by Marianne Nikolov, SLA, 2009, p. 5, 7, 12.}\)