A Response

from

The Association of Teacher Education Centres of Ireland (ATECI)

to the

Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

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Executive Summary

The National Plan sets out ambitious targets and a range of initiatives to improve national standards in literacy and numeracy. In order to realize these targets without there is an urgent need to adopt a cohesive and coherent *systemic* approach to numeracy and literacy at a national level.

This document, as the ATECI response, highlights a number of key issues which the Education Centre Network considers essential to the development, implementation, sustainability and overall success of the proposed national initiative.

There is a need:

- to bring together those, both national and international, with extensive knowledge and expertise in these areas
- to identify, assess and disseminate good practice that now exists in a number of schools and communities across the sectors
- to focus on the **key implementation issues** of School Leadership Quality, Teacher Education and Parental/Community Involvement
- to re-examine the national school leadership development policy and to prioritise the up-skilling of current and aspiring school leaders on whole-school literacy and numeracy improvement strategies and classroom methodologies prior to the roll-out of a national literacy and numeracy curriculum framework in schools
- to enable **consistent, integrated school–centred** approaches which empower the principal and school community to take ownership of the improvement agenda
- to examine the possibility of a more unified approach to teacher education and in the teaching and learning curriculum across the 5-16 age group
- to focus on **the transition** from primary to post-primary and the need to bridge the gap between the two systems so as to: a) sustain the learning achieved in primary school and b) provide **continuity** for children’s learning and learning outcomes in post-primary.
- to introduce compulsory up-skilling of all serving teachers to ensure standardisation and quality of provision.
- to establish agreed age-relevant targets and standards across the sectors with appropriate teacher professional accountability.
- to appoint an in-school literacy and numeracy coordinator / leader to oversee the integration and implementation of the literacy and numeracy plans.
- to review the Infant curriculum to bring it in line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear Framework Action 4.3(page 27).
- to further expand the Aistear programme to include the briefing of parents and the general community
- to upskill teacher methodologies to integrate the literacy and numeracy across all subjects within the primary curriculum.
Introduction

While most OECD countries doubled and even tripled their spending on education in real terms in recent decades, student outcomes in a large number of systems have either stagnated or regressed. As we see in the recent Irish Pisa results, standards and student outcomes in literacy and numeracy continue to decline in Irish schools. We believe that this lack of sustained progress demonstrates the need to adopt a different systemic approach to numeracy and literacy at a national level. If the system continues to do what it has always done, we will continue to get what we have always got and as recent surveys have shown that is not what our students need or deserve.

There is a real need to research, develop, implement and sustain a National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and curriculum framework across the Irish Education System. The formulation of same requires a bringing together of those with extensive knowledge and expertise in these areas and with a commitment to child literacy and numeracy in the fields of research, in professional development, in curriculum, in school management, in classroom practice and in child advocacy.

The Education Centre Network welcomes the publication of the national draft Plan and in particular the opportunity it affords for dialogue and debate in relation to improving learning outcomes for students across the education system. We also welcome the Report’s broad definitions of Literacy and Numeracy. We have studied the Plan with interest.

This response highlights current system challenges and offers suggestions with regard to possible policy changes and positive actions. It is divided into two sections:

1. A literacy framework for schools which explores teacher education and issues pertaining to the school sectors

2. Policy and actions essential to the implementation and sustainability of improved literacy and numeracy standards and learning outcomes for schools.

Section 1 – A Literacy Framework for Schools

1.1 Literacy in the Early Years

The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector (ECCE) and the provision of one year free pre-school education has been developed in response to reports signaling the value of Early Childhood Education. The importance of early learning was acknowledged in policy documents including the White Paper on Early Childhood Education ‘Ready to Learn’ (1999). The intention to review the Infant curriculum to bring it into line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear Framework for Action 4.3 as outlined in the Plan (p.27) is to be welcomed. This report and others have confirmed the necessity to introduce structured learning environments for children as young as three years of age. The development of the Siolta
quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework offer opportunities to focus on Literacy and Numeracy at the pre-school stage and both have brought opportunities for developing literacy and numeracy learning in the early years. It is encouraging to read in the Plan (p. 13) that teachers’ and pre-school practitioners’ professional development will be necessary to support the integration of Literacy and Numeracy across the education sector.

1.2 Bridging the Disconnect between Pre-school and Primary.

A common systemic approach between the early childhood learning centres and the primary school sector will effectively support learning in the early years. Currently, the link between the pre-school and the primary sector is informal and no specific structures for collaboration and sharing of critical information including programme content, methodologies, assessment and pupil records exist. The dissemination of the Aistear programme to include an emphasis on Literacy and Numeracy is well placed to develop this link which would offer a coherent transition between pre-school and the primary sector.

1.3 Aistear Training

We welcome the intention, as outlined in the Report, to review the Infant curriculum to bring it in line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear Framework Action 4.3(page 27). A recent significant development is that The Network of Education Centres is currently involved in a collaborative project with the NCCA which has resulted in the training of fifty five tutors nationwide and the design of eight individual workshops which are been made available to pre and primary school teachers in all Education Centres throughout the country in 2011.

These workshops are meeting a number of the recommendations as outlined in the Plan, for example:

- Significant professional development for infant teachers (page 16)
- Ensuring that school principals have the information and support they need to lead improvement in literacy and numeracy (page 13)
- Expanding the knowledge of parents in the techniques they can use to support the oral language of children aged 0-6, (page 48)
- Introducing teachers to an early assessment system to allow the assessment of children’s oral language competences and pre literacy and numeracy development (page 28)

A number of Education Centres are also working in conjunction with the County Childcare Committees in their counties and are providing training for the preschool providers on the implementation of Aistear. However, we believe that to have a significant and sustainable impact on the literacy and numeracy levels in the early years in the system this programme need to be resourced and delivered at a national level. We recommend a further expansion of this
programme to include the briefing of parents and the general community through the Education Centre Network. Schools and parents should be invited nominate representatives for training.

1.4 Literacy and Numeracy in the Primary School Curriculum

The Report (p.28) refers to the need to spend more time on the teaching of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum. We highlight a concern regarding the actual cost of time to other subjects which may become marginalized? Perhaps the issue is not so much a question of specific allocated time for addressing literacy and numeracy but rather the need for teacher skills and methodologies to integrate the literacy and numeracy across all subjects within the primary curriculum. There is a need for further discussion both within schools and at systems level on how this could be achieved. Reference is made in the Report (P.29) that a proportion of English and Mathematics lessons in primary schools were not of a satisfactory nature. We believe a considerable amount of work needs to be done in up-skilling all teachers in relation to the strategies and methodologies to be used to improve and reach targeted learning outcomes in their classrooms.

1.5 Bridging the Disconnect between the Primary and Post-primary Sector

Research evidence (Naughton, P.,1998, Reay and Lucey, 2001) indicates a need to focus on the transition from primary to post-primary and the need to bridge the gap between the two systems so as to: a) sustain the learning achieved in primary school and b) provide continuity for children’s learning and learning outcomes in post-primary. The current disconnect between the sectors in the Irish Education System in terms of structures, learning culture, teaching methodologies and student focus etc. is such that as research evidence indicates most students show regression in their learning in their first year attending post-primary school. More importantly, this disconnect has a particularly negative impact on students with learning / literacy difficulties, some of whom, due to the significant social, emotional, physical and academic adjustment required, cannot cope and drop out of school.

Post-primary teaching, particularly up to Junior Certificate, needs to be a follow–on from the primary school and to mirror its teaching and learning modes and methodologies. In the short term, this will require a professional development initiative to support junior cycle post-primary teachers in understanding the primary system and in adopting new classroom approaches to teaching and learning particularly in relation to integrating literacy and numeracy across all subject areas. In the longer term there is a need to examine the possibility of a more unified approach in the teaching and learning curriculum across the 5-16 age group, as happened in Finland in the early 1970s (Hautamaki et al. 2008). This proposed radical shift has significant implications at systems level both for initial teacher education, primary and post-primary and for teacher continuing professional development.
1.6 Literacy and Numeracy in the Post-Primary School Curriculum

A whole school approach to literacy development is more difficult to negotiate in post-primary schools. Integration of numeracy or literacy within the post primary sector is informal by nature, and lacks a clear structure. In general, no arrangements are in place within post primary schools that allow for a formal integration of literacy or numeracy. Furthermore, the school timetable determines the running of the school day and does not allow for creativity regarding integration as it operates within an overcrowded curriculum. Also a focus on subject specialisms together with a multiplicity of teachers and teaching methodologies further complicates this approach.

In reality, Literacy and Numeracy at post-primary level have traditionally been the remit of teachers of English and teachers of Mathematics. However, all subject departments within post primary schools now engage in formal subject planning but as yet the concepts of numeracy and literacy do not form part of the learning conversation and discussion for any of the subjects departments, other that Mathematics and English. In more recent times additional supports re numeracy and literacy have been provided at post-primary level as part of a learning support/special needs provision. However, this provision is often delivered by teachers who are not specifically trained in teaching literacy or numeracy skills.

A significant point in relation to all attempts to improve literacy and numeracy levels across the system is that all those involved must be ‘expert’ and experienced in their field in order to deliver a credible and sustainable improvement of standards across the sectors. Therefore, while welcoming the mention in the Report of 20 extra Literacy DEIS advisers, we believe that a systems literacy curriculum framework initiative across all sectors needs to be targeted at all schools (70% of disadvantaged students do not attend DEIS Schools!) and be led by recognized experts.

A further key component necessary for the successful implementation of a literacy strategy in schools is the role of a literacy and numeracy coordinator / leader to oversee the integration and implementation of the literacy and numeracy plans.

1.7 The DEIS Initiative.

Currently most of the early and support interventions are targeted at the DEIS schools. We welcome this necessary approach. However, research has shown that a large proportion of disadvantaged children attend Non Deis schools. These children are at a double disadvantage as the early interventions in Literacy are not available to them. A national literacy and numeracy curriculum framework is needed to address the needs of all children.

A consequence of the DEIS initiative is the range of considerable good practices (see Appendix I) that now exists in a number of schools and communities across the sectors. It is essential that these are identified, assessed and then disseminated across the system.

Furthermore, teachers working in disadvantage areas may not have a sufficient skills base in classroom management and or have access to positive behaviour support strategies. This is especially relevant and needs to be addressed in tandem with literacy supports as poor literacy levels and behaviour issues can be connected.
Section 2 – Key Framework ‘Implementation’ Supports

The formulation of a national literacy and numeracy curriculum and agreed standards and targets across the sectors is essential but is not sufficient for the successful introduction and implementation of a National Literacy Strategy. Critical to its sustainability and continued success in schools are the key implementation issues of School Leadership Quality, Teacher Education and Parental/Community Involvement (How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better, McKinsey Report, 2010).

2.1 School Leadership

Research evidence indicates that school leadership plays an important role in teacher quality (Leithwood et al., 2007) and has a direct link with student outcomes (McKinsey, 2008). Consequently the continuing professional development and support of serving and aspiring school leaders in the development of local in-school strategies for literacy and numeracy and also in the analysis of issues re same, is critical to the success of any national literacy initiative.

Piecemeal approaches to school improvement and teacher up-skilling, which are dependent on external support personnel, are not as successful as consistent, integrated school–centred approaches which empower the principal and school community to take ownership of the improvement agenda. Central to this successful in-school approach is the need for an open and collaborative learning culture among the teaching staff and the expansion of the notion of distributive leadership in our schools. The recent decision to prevent the re-appointment of middle leadership positions in schools is inimical to the distributive leadership agenda and currently limits the scope of school principals to delegate tasks within the school. Furthermore, it impacts negatively on leadership sustainability and the necessary leadership succession building required in schools to ensure the embedding and continuation of a sustainable learning culture. There is therefore a need to re-examine the national school leadership development policy and to prioritise the up-skilling of current and aspiring school leaders on whole-school literacy and numeracy improvement strategies and classroom methodologies prior to the roll-out of a national literacy and numeracy curriculum framework in schools.

2.2 Teacher Education for Literacy and Numeracy across the Continuum

While this Plan recognises Teacher Education as a Continuum and promotes a variety of actions to address these issues at different stages of that Continuum it can be argued that it does not address the matter of System coherence in any significant way. ITE, Induction and In-Service (CPD) currently remain as “stand-alone” entities in Irish Teacher Education. It is clearly necessary to provide for, and to deepen understanding of, the over-arching conceptual links and relationships between different sectors and system components if this Plan is to succeed.

Better Literacy and Numeracy levels and learning outcomes for students must be supported by quality training for teachers. There is a need for coherent, progressive building blocks in literacy and numeracy teaching strategies and methodologies across the teacher education
continuum. This should include a component on teaching literacy in disadvantage areas. It will require a radical root and branch review of the current disconnected curriculum and practices between pre-school, primary and post-primary teacher education and would provide a unique opportunity to build bridges between the primary and post-primary sectors and to identify strategies to minimise problems associated with transition experienced by students.

The draft policy on the teacher education continuum recently published by the Teaching Council will provide a review of teacher education curriculum and a roadmap for the integration and development of initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development. The themes of literacy and numeracy must now be identified as key threads in the broad tapestry of the teacher education continuum, linking initial training through to in-career teacher development.

Initial Teacher Education should examine its current provision of support for literacy and numeracy. Teachers need to be up-skilled in literacy and numeracy pedagogy and methodologies in order to inform their teaching and to ensure targeted learning outcomes for students at specific levels in the all sectors. There is a need for a stronger focus on skills based education in initial teacher education. While the DES recommends the First Steps resource as the preferred approach to the teaching of literacy in DEIS schools, it is not actually taught by the Colleges of Education. Consequently, newly qualified teachers working in DEIS schools are not equipped to deliver the programme to the students in their care.

It is to be welcomed that the induction programme for newly qualified teachers at primary level has designed a module on ‘reading’. Opportunities exist to develop modules exclusively for literacy and numeracy as an integral part of the induction programme. The introduction of literacy and numeracy module is also needed in the post-primary induction programme.

To provide all currently practicing teachers with the appropriate literacy and numeracy skills, intensive professional development delivered by experts must be provided across the system. It must be acknowledged that to support the immediacy and importance of this issue, day-time courses should be provided in addition to evening workshops. Compulsory up-skilling of all serving teachers would ensure standardisation and quality of provision. Blended learning to include online modules could be explored. The Education Centre Network is well positioned to manage training for teachers from pre-school to post-primary level.

2.3 The Role of Parents in improving Literacy and Numeracy

Section 37 (i) of the Education Act 1998 states ‘in this section education support centre means a place in which services are provided for schools, teachers, parents, boards and other relevant persons ...

The Education Centre Network agrees and supports the statement in the Plan that ‘there is clear evidence that parental support and engagement has a significant impact on children’s educational achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy development (P. 47)
Parents are the primary educators of their children. Strategies need to be developed to involve parents in their children’s learning in relation to Literacy and Numeracy. Parents need much more information about the curriculum and teaching methodologies currently used in our schools. The curriculum and methodologies are much changed since the time many parents attended school. Perhaps a more hands-on approach is required in the form of practical workshops to up-skill parents. A positive example of community parental involvement is the Tolka Area Partnership ‘Better Maths Programme’ which is a successful community response to a numeracy deficit in local schools (Appendix 1).

Chapter 7 in the Plan emphasises a number of areas where Education Centres are currently making a contribution to the support of children’s literacy and numeracy development:

- The focus on ‘ensuring the message about the importance of parental involvement gets through to parents and the wider community’ is already a key action area for Education Centres. Centres provide courses for parents to further their understanding of the English, Mathematics and Gaeilge curriculum. Such courses have enabled parents in understanding and supporting the curriculum strands and the focus in the particular subject areas.
- The NESF evaluation highlights that ‘greater leadership, quality assurance and support’ are a need for the sector. The Network of Centres nationwide are positioned to co-ordinate, evaluate and standardise the quality assurance. Indeed, the availability of many retired teachers linked with Education Centres would bring significant voluntary experience to such a standardisation process.
- The ongoing support of Education Centres for after-school community activities such as robotics clubs, homework clubs, TY initiatives, further highlights the positive contribution Centres are currently providing in the wider school community and the expansion of this role would significantly support the literacy and numeracy document.

**Conclusion**

As stated at the outset the Education Centre Network welcomes the opportunity to engage in the current debate on a way forward to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all our children. Despite the current economic restrictions, we would argue against a piecemeal approach and contend that the children can’t wait! Therefore, all aspects of a national approach: leadership, in-school practices, Teacher Education / CPD and parental involvement need to be developed simultaneously in a coherent and cohesive way.

The Education Network is well positioned and delighted to assist in the development and in the efficient and economic roll-out of programmes designed to up-skill school communities in the teaching methodologies and in-school practices needed to implement and embed better standards of numeracy and literacy for the children in our care.
References


Appendix 1.

2. Youngballymun - ‘write minded’ literacy initiative.
3. The Education Centre Network’s - ‘Write a Book Project’, ‘Write a Poem Project’ and the ‘Scríobh Leabhar Initiative’ etc.
4. First Steps
5. Reading Recovery
6. Maths Recovery