BETTER LITERACY AND NUMERACY for CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

Submission on behalf of the INTO

28th February 2011
Introduction
The INTO notes the publication of the draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools and wishes to make a number of preliminary observations on the content. The INTO will also avail of further opportunities to engage in discussions on enhancing literacy and numeracy in our schools. In this submission, the INTO makes a number of general comments in relation to the plan overall, responds to some of the specific proposals in the plan and makes recommendations regarding the improvement of literacy and numeracy in our schools.

General Overarching Comments
The INTO is concerned that the overall thrust of the draft plan represents a simplistic and technical view of education rather than recognising that education is a complex non-linear process. The draft plan treats literacy and numeracy in a reductive and aggressive manner, which does not reflect our education culture. It portrays a narrow view of literacy and numeracy, which can lead to an undervaluing of the process of education itself. The plan suggests that teachers are doing something wrong and that standards in literacy and numeracy have allegedly fallen. Primary education in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade since the introduction of the revised curriculum. Primary teachers have embraced such change enthusiastically. Teachers have implemented a revised curriculum, in spite of the fact that it has not been fully resourced. In addition, the pupil population in Irish schools has become more diverse. Most classrooms now include children with special needs and newcomer children, many of whom do not speak Irish or English as a home language. Classrooms are challenging environments today. What is required at policy level is the building of capacity within schools and resourcing them sufficiently to provide productive learning environments for all pupils.

Definition
The broad definition of literacy outlined in the draft plan is welcome. However, references to ICT literacies and critical literacies are undeveloped in the draft plan. The current definition is also monolingual and ignores the fact that (almost) all pupils learn two languages from the early years of primary school and throughout post-primary level. It is not sufficient to confine literacy development to the language of the school, as such an approach ignores the second language of the school, which may, in some cases, be the mother tongue of many pupils. The primary curriculum seeks to promote literacy in the State’s two national languages, a fact omitted in the current draft plan. Literacy in one language can support literacy development in a second language, a fact also acknowledged in the learning of modern languages and English as second language (EAL). Proposals and actions in the draft plan should reflect these broader understanding of literacies.

Socio-Cultural Context
The draft plan does not sufficiently recognise the socio-cultural context in which the development of literacy and numeracy takes place. The 2009 National Assessments and PISA (2009) highlight the crucial role played by socio-economic and cultural factors in literacy and numeracy achievement. Addressing wider socio-economic inequalities is therefore as important, if not more important, than focusing on school-based initiatives alone.

Curriculum
The INTO acknowledges the central importance of literacy and numeracy in children’s education. However, we are concerned that the ‘relentless focus’ on literacy and numeracy may result in the diminution of a child’s holistic educational experience as promoted in the Primary School Curriculum. Reviews of the curriculum carried out by the NCCA to date have identified curriculum overload as a challenge for teachers, but there remains a strong support among teachers for a broadly based curriculum, which includes the Arts. There is a need to reduce the number of content objectives in the curriculum, while maintaining a holistic view of children’s learning. Literacy and numeracy, while important are only some ways of knowing. Children’s educational experience should also include the imaginative, the symbolic and the creative ways of knowing their world. The INTO will continue to contribute to the ongoing work of the primary curriculum review, including the review of the curriculum in the infant classes, through its involvement with the NCCA.
However, the issue of curriculum has been complicated by the reference to national standards. It is unclear what is meant by national standards in this case, and whether teachers would be expected to teach to the national standards or to teach according to the curriculum. It is also unclear what standards might mean in the context of a child-centred differentiated curriculum, which seeks to enable each child to progress at his or her own rate.

**Continuous Improvement**

Teachers will always strive to do what they do better. There appears to be an assumption in the draft plan that an increase in assessment and testing will lead to improvements in children’s achievement in literacy and mathematics. This is a mistaken assumption in the view of the INTO. The 2009 National Assessments and the Reports of Incidental Inspections (2010) indicate an underutilization by teachers of assessment information. This is perhaps not surprising, given that there has been no comprehensive CPD for teachers in the area of assessment. The strategy regarding professional development that accompanied the introduction of standardised tests was flawed in that it reached only a fraction of the teaching profession at the time and focussed exclusively on standardised testing, which is only one form of assessment in primary schools. The INTO is of the view that enhancing support for teachers in the use and interpretation of assessment information which is currently gathered is far more critical than increasing the amount of assessment, particularly standardised tests, undertaken. Periodic monitoring of standards in English reading and Mathematics should continue in 2nd and 6th class every four years. Periodic monitoring of standards in Irish should also be introduced.

**Children as Learners**

The draft plan places an insufficient focus on children as learners. Improving literacy and numeracy standards should not imply a relentless focus on literacy and numeracy skills in isolation. Children’s motivation and emotional readiness to learn play a significant role in children’s achievement. A relentless focus on standards and assessment could be detrimental for all children who need to be nurtured along the learning pathway. It must also be taken into account that in order to achieve in school children must attend. School attendance is still an issue in some cases and schools should be supported in addressing the issue of school attendance for all pupils from the age they start school.

**Resources**

A national plan on literacy and numeracy must take into account the fact that key resources have been withdrawn from schools in the 2011 budget – RTTs, VTTs, EAL teachers, rural coordinators and class teachers in Irish medium schools. These resources, that have now been withdrawn, were relied on by schools to enhance the learning of the most vulnerable pupils in our primary schools. Some of our most disadvantaged children have highly complex social, educational, emotional and mental health problems, and usually live in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

In addition school library grants, a key resource in ensuring an adequate number of books in schools, have been withdrawn. School capitation grants have been reduced and many schools remain in poor buildings that are not conducive to optimising learning. Due to cutbacks in the Health budget medical services for children have also been curtailed. Services such as hearing and sight tests, speech therapy and psychiatric services, which are crucial in terms of supporting children with literacy and numeracy difficulties, are not available to the extent that they are required.

The INTO is astounded that no reference has been in the draft plan to the inadequate resourcing of our education system, including large classes, particularly at primary and early years level. These are the years in which the foundations of literacy and numeracy are set. A national plan on literacy and numeracy that is not resourced is doomed to failure.

**Concluding Comment**

The INTO remains committed to ensuring that no child should leave primary school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills where they have the potential to develop such skills. Empowering and supporting teachers to enhance their teaching of literacy and numeracy requires investment. Parents, as children’s primary educators also need be empowered and supported. It is a responsibility of
Government to create the environments, including educational, cultural, social and economic, in which children can thrive.
Response to Recommendations in Draft Plan

IMPROVING TEACHERS’ AND ECCE PRACTITIONERS’ PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

2.5 Actions on Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development

ITE
The INTO is supportive of the view that the minimum entry grades required for entry into initial teacher education (ITE) should increase from D3 to C3 at ordinary level mathematics. However, this change needs to be accompanied by a significant reform of teacher education.

The INTO welcomes the proposal to increase the duration of the B.Ed programme for primary teaching to four years and but condemns the inertia in the DES which has resulted in this recommendation being ignored for more than a decade. The INTO will engage with the Teaching Council regarding the content and structure of an extended and reformed initial teacher education programme for primary teachers.

Induction
Participation in the National Teacher Induction Programme should not be made mandatory until a holistic induction programme involving a whole school approach, including mentoring at school level is available to all NQTs. The model of induction developed during the pilot stages needs to be further developed and expanded to all NQTs.

The INTO notes the availability of professional development throughout the Education Centre network to all NQTs during the current school year. However, such professional development can only be considered as an aspect of induction, the core of which takes place at school level and involves mentoring support.

Continuing Professional Development
The INTO welcomes the proposed increase in provision of professional development courses for primary teachers in the areas of literacy, numeracy and assessment. The INTO has long criticised the failure of the DES to make such courses available to teachers. However, the INTO believes that a mandatory requirement for teachers to attend courses on these topics for 20 hours every five years indicates a very narrow interpretation of continuing professional development, in that teacher learning takes place in a variety of ways, including at school level through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. CPD should be viewed as a dynamic process, especially at school level, where professional practice, knowledge and skills are shared, reviewed and improved. Schools should be empowered and resourced to provide CPD in accordance with self-identified needs on a regular basis. Many teachers have recognised the limitations of a ‘one size fits all’ model of CPD akin to what accompanied the roll-out of the revised curriculum. A national framework for CPD should include models that respect and recognise that different teachers have different CPD requirements at the different stages of their career.

The provision of handbooks, on-line courses, video and other resources on the areas of teaching and assessment in literacy and numeracy, while welcome, is insufficient without comprehensive continuing professional development.

It is the view of the INTO that it is inappropriate to require all providers seeking recognition of CPD summer courses to include units on the teaching of literacy and numeracy. The integration of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum may be appropriate in some courses, however, there are other course topics and curriculum areas where this will not apply. Teacher professional development includes the personal, professional and pedagogical dimensions of teaching. Therefore, summer courses must continue to offer teachers professional development options relevant to any aspect of primary education.
The work of the DEIS cuiditheoirí have been a valuable resource and support to DEIS schools. The INTO is of the view that the total number of DEIS cuiditheoirí to support DEIS schools should be increased but not at the expense of the broader professional development support service to schools. In addition, the INTO argues strongly that support should be available to all schools to support work in literacy and numeracy.

The INTO is concerned about the proposal to develop for all schools a generic skills-based programme that adopts the principles and practices of approaches such as Reading and Maths Recovery. Both Reading Recovery and Maths Recovery programmes have been very well received in the DEIS schools where they are appropriate to meet their needs. However, Reading Recovery, in particular, is a targeted intervention aimed at a specific age group and requires significant staffing resources, and may, therefore, be unsuitable for broader application within schools. While generally used in Senior Infants and first class the principles underpinning Maths Recovery, could transfer readily to other age groups. What is required is a framework to support literacy and numeracy which reflects the primary curriculum, and which reduces the reliance on commercially produced textbooks.

**Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Sector**
The INTO reiterates its view that a Level 5 qualification on the NQAI framework is insufficient for preschool leaders and recommends that all preschool services should be graduate led. All courses for personnel in the ECCE sector should include modules on early language literacy and mathematical development appropriate to the early years. Professional development should also be available to all personnel in the pre-school sector in the philosophy and approaches in the curriculum framework *Aistear*. It is important to ensure that the learning outcomes associated with early literacy and mathematics do not equate with starting formal literacy and literacy and mathematics at an earlier age and there is a role for the DES Inspectorate to ensure that early literacy and mathematics in the pre-school sector are appropriate for the age group concerned. Early intervention, including high-quality pre-school education is vital for children at most risk of underachievement at school. Therefore, Early Start should be further developed and expanded to meet the needs of these children.

**BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

**3.2 Actions to support principals**

The INTO supports the view that principal teachers have a key role in leading and guiding school staffs in enhancing the learning of all pupils but recognises the very real constraints under which principal teachers and especially teaching principals work in terms of very little time for such work, a lack of adequate secretarial support and the dismantling of in-school management.

**Self-Evaluation**

*Looking at Our School* should be reviewed in light of significant changes that have taken place since its publication to support self-evaluation in schools.

The provision of on-line advice and support materials to support self-evaluation is welcome. However, such support should be available to all teachers to encourage a collaborative approach to school planning, review and assessment and the identification of priorities. The INTO cautions against portraying the view that advice and support is determined externally and that the role of the principal is to impose it on staff. Such an approach is contrary to the culture of school development planning that has evolved in schools over the years and which was supported and encouraged by the DES. Placing further demands on schools in relation to self-evaluation requires additional release time for teaching principals. Provision of on-line materials must also take account of the totally inadequate roll out of a national broadband service and recognise that many schools do not have adequate connectivity.
Whole school evaluations already take account of a school’s own self evaluation process.

The INTO believes that the inclusion of mandatory units on the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy on leadership development programmes for aspiring principals will be counterproductive and serve no useful purpose. Principals have a role as instructional leaders in their school which applies to the whole curriculum and all aspects of teaching and pupil learning in schools. Literacy and numeracy should be considered in the context of a holistic curriculum.

The INTO also opposes a mandatory requirement that applicants for principalships should have completed leadership programmes prior to appointment on the basis that access to such programmes is not available to all aspiring leaders. The INTO supports the provision of comprehensive induction and leadership development programmes for all newly appointed principals and for principals throughout their careers and commends the work of the LDS to date.

GIVING PRIORITY TO LANGUAGE SKILLS, LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD, PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION

4.3 Actions to Improve Literacy and numeracy in the early years

The INTO supports the review of the infant curriculum to bring it into line with the philosophy and approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the *Aistear* curriculum framework. The INTO calls for a comprehensive professional development programme for all teachers in relation to *Aistear* with priority being given to current infant teachers. The INTO agrees that a revision of the infant curriculum should ensure that an adequate emphasis is placed on all aspects of early language development which includes listening skills, oral language, phonological awareness, and early mathematical skills such as classifying, matching, comparing and ordering. The revised curriculum for infants should also address the issues of language and literacy development in both Irish and English, in order to reflect the diverse learning contexts, including Irish-medium schools, English-medium schools, and language and literacy development for pupils for whom neither English nor Irish is a home language.

The INTO welcomes the suggestion that priority should be given to reducing the number of children in the infant classes in order to facilitate learning environments that are more appropriate for three to six year old children.

The INTO welcomes the development of an assessment tool to enable assessment of pupil language competencies and pre-literacy and numeracy conceptual development in the early years, with a view to planning for appropriate intervention. However, as comprehensive assessment can be time consuming, the INTO calls for a judicious balance between time spent identifying difficulties and the time spent addressing those difficulties.

In order to support children’s language, pre-literacy and numeracy conceptual development in the early years it is necessary to ensure that the class size in the infant classes in primary school is a maximum of 15 children in junior infants and 20 children in senior infants to second class, as the foundations for literacy and numeracy are laid during these years.

The INTO supports the proposal to provide intervention support to pupils experiencing difficulties in oral language during the second term of junior infants. However, this recommendation will require a change in the ratios currently applied in the general allocation system as early intervention will necessitate additional time from the SEN team in school. Appropriate screening or assessment tools would also be required.
4.5 Actions to improve literacy and numeracy in primary schools

Curriculum
The NCCA has commenced a process of reviewing the primary school curriculum with an initial focus on the language curriculum in the early years. In reviewing the contents of the language curriculum the issue of the learning intentions or objectives in each of the strands in both the English curriculum and the Irish curriculum will be reviewed in order to clarify what is expected of pupils at the various class levels in both Irish and English for both L1 and L2 schools. Mathematical language should also be addressed.

Any work on clarifying learning outcomes or content objectives at each class level must take into account the fact that the primary school curriculum is premised on the basis of the individual child and teachers differentiate their teaching in order to ensure that the needs of each child are met. Therefore, learning outcomes or learning intentions at each level can only be considered as guidelines. However, in order to ensure progression, teachers would welcome more explicit information on the learning intentions associated with the various class levels in the different school contexts.

Teachers have identified challenges in relation to the oral language dimensions of the curriculum and would welcome guidance and professional development on the teaching and assessment of oral language in both languages.

Time Allocation
The INTO opposes the abolition of discretionary time in the curriculum. Teachers use discretionary time in order to teach areas of the curriculum as determined by their school plan. In many cases this discretionary time is already spent on literacy and mathematics. Therefore, expectations that standards would improve through a formal re-allocation of discretionary time for literacy and numeracy may lead to disappointment. It is essential for teachers to have the flexibility of discretionary time for activities such as SPHE, swimming, field studies, and school concerts. The retention of some discretionary time in the guidelines on the allocation of time should, therefore, remain.

The INTO is concerned about the proposal to incorporate drama activities and the time for drama into the time for language. Drama is used to develop language and other relevant skills in both English and Irish in schools. A review of the Drama curriculum has not yet been carried out by the NCCA, and any change to the Drama Curriculum should await such a review.

The INTO is of the view that sufficient time has been formally allocated to the teaching of literacy in the primary school curriculum but that teachers need additional support to enhance the teaching of literacy across the curriculum.

The INTO, through its own research, is aware of the difficulty teachers experience in addressing all aspects of the Mathematics curriculum due to a decrease in the allocation of time for mathematics in the primary school curriculum since 1999. Any reorganisation of the guidelines on time allocation by the NCCA should take into account the need for some additional time for mathematics.

The INTO is opposed to the downgrading of arts in any form. The arts can also play a role in enhancing literacy and numeracy, as programmes such as Musical Pathways to Learning demonstrate. The arts also provide children with diverse opportunities to succeed in learning.

In order to address the issue of curriculum overload the INTO is of the view that the number of curriculum objectives should be reduced in all curricular areas in order to retain a broad balanced curriculum and to allow sufficient time to address literacy and numeracy adequately.
5.4 Actions to improve literacy and numeracy achievement in schools serving disadvantaged communities

The INTO welcomes the continued support for DEIS and the additional professional support for teachers in DEIS schools.

The INTO demands comprehensive professional development for all teachers in the teaching of literacy and numeracy to all pupils including children of disadvantaged backgrounds who are not in DEIS schools.

The INTO notes with concern the focus on the review of supports for target setting in DEIS schools and its focus on measuring. Very often children’s progress in literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools does not show up on standardised tests, as such tests are generally culturally biased (MacRuaire, 2009). Achievement in standardised tests should not be used as the sole yardstick to measure progress of children who struggle with literacy or numeracy. An overemphasis on standardised tests runs contrary to the spirit of inclusion.

The INTO welcomes the development of an oral language development programme for preschool children (including Early Start). However, the INTO is of the view that such a programme should be available to all preschool settings and not confined to children in feeder preschools for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools.

The INTO is also of the view that an oral language development programme should be specifically developed for the Irish context and that an oral language development programme should also be available in the Irish language for children whose first language is Irish and for children in immersion settings.

5.6 Actions to improve levels of achievement for students for whom English is an additional language

Teachers welcomed the Assessment Toolkit which provides information on whether EAL students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitude and confidence to become proficient in communicative and academic language. Teachers are concerned, however, that when pupils achieve a high score using the Assessment Toolkit, they are no longer entitled to additional language support. Teachers are of the view that pupils’ high achievement as demonstrated by using the Assessment Toolkit does not translate into an ability to access the curriculum. Many of these pupils continue to achieve below the 10th percentile on standardised tests and therefore avail of learning support, though their difficulty is generally due to language.

The recognition that all teachers are language teachers is welcome. All class teachers should be able to avail of professional development support in language acquisition and development for migrant pupils. There is a lack of guidance for teachers in this area at present. However, the recognition of the importance of the role of class teachers should not be used as an excuse to reduce the number of language support teachers supporting EAL pupils. Both teachers and parents need guidelines in relation to supporting mother tongue development for migrant pupils. The language needs of migrant pupils in Gaeltacht schools should be given consideration, as it is necessary for these pupils to acquire fluency in both Irish and English.

6.9 Actions to support teachers, school and the school system to make sure that students make progress in learning literacy and numeracy skills

The almost exclusive focus on assessment as a means of improving literacy and numeracy standards is mistaken. Ireland should avoid the standardization and testing movements that developed in the US and the UK in particular, as being anti-educational, and focus instead on investing in teaching and teachers with a view to providing a high quality holistic learning experience for pupils.

The INTO opposes the development of national standards that are not part of the primary school curriculum. The INTO will continue to support the work of the NCCA in providing exemplars of student achievement at various levels in other to support teacher judgement.

The INTO rejects the excessive reliance on tests and testing to improve literacy and numeracy standards. Continuous testing takes time away from teaching, and where testing becomes high stakes, leads to teaching to the test (Haladyna et al, 1991)\(^2\). Continuous testing also takes time away from student learning. It is a matter for schools to decide on the most appropriate assessment policy for their own schools, taking into account their obligations under Circular 138/06.

The INTO welcomes the proposal to provide continuing professional development opportunities and information to teachers and principals in relation to the interpretation and use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning. Teachers also require support in enhancing their practices of Assessment for Learning (AFL) and in assessment of children with special needs. The INTO reiterates its strong criticisms of the scope of the professional development that accompanied the introduction of standardised testing in primary schools, which was a politically motivated rather than educationally-based initiative. The professional development strategy was flawed in that it reached only a fraction of the teaching profession at the time and promoted the view that assessment was associated with standardised testing. Teachers have yet to be given opportunities to avail of comprehensive professional development in assessment for learning.

The INTO is of the view that it is more important to provide information to parents in a variety of formats about the primary school curriculum, its philosophy and its methodologies in order to ensure that they understand the progression routes and content being taught in primary school.

The outcomes of standardised tests carried out in the school are communicated to and shared with parents. The guide on understanding and interpreting standardised tests prepared by the NCCA is a useful resource in this respect.

Teachers communicate to parents both at the formal parent teacher meetings and informally throughout the year in relation to the progress of their children. Teachers take an on-going dynamic and pastoral role to their responsibilities in communicating with parents. The INTO will not cooperate with the transfer of any information to post-primary schools which leads to the streaming or placing of pupils in post-primary schools.

The INTO opposes the proposal that students should be assessed at the end of 2\(^{nd}\), 4\(^{th}\) and 6\(^{th}\) class at primary school on the basis that the provisions of Circular 138/06 should be sufficient. Most infant teachers also use non-verbal tests. It is current policy that children are assessed using standardised achievement tests in literacy and numeracy at two stages during their primary career. However it is a matter for the schools to decide whether the mandatory standardised tests are administered at the end

of 1st or the beginning of 2nd or the end of 4th or the beginning of 5th. This policy was arrived at following extensive consultation and advice from the NCCA.

The INTO is opposed to aggregated data on student achievement on standardised tests being removed from schools. The INTO is concerned that proposals referring to the Schools Like Ours initiative where data from individual schools would be aggregated by the DES, or an agency on its behalf, and returned to schools so that they compare their results with Schools Like Ours could lead, perhaps unintentionally, to the establishment of league tables and competition between schools. It is the view of the INTO that this process is problematic in that it is very difficult to determine schools that are similar given that there are so many variables involved. Classes within schools can also vary for a number of reasons. It may be more productive for schools to concentrate on improving their own achievements. The purpose of assessment at school level is to inform the teaching and learning process. Any other use of assessment distorts the process of assessment and leads to high stakes testing which has a negative impact on teaching and learning (Wall, in INTO, 1997)\(^3\). A targeted focus on literacy and numeracy may lead to improvements in the short term as measured on standardised tests. However, this improvement may not be sustained as scores on standardised tests tend to plateau. Teachers are also of the view that pupils’ progress is not always reflected in standardised test scores. Notwithstanding the importance of literacy and numeracy, it is important not to lose sight of the overall goal of the primary school curriculum which is the holistic education of the child.

Importing a business model of setting targets and evaluating the achievement of targets following interventions is inappropriate to an educational context where children’s learning is complex and unpredictable. Inspectors already have access to a school’s standardised test results as part of the process of whole school evaluation. As part of the evaluation process inspectors engage in a professional dialogue and conversation with teachers in relation to overall achievement in literacy and numeracy taking into account standardised results as one element of the process.

Schools may find the setting of targets in literacy and numeracy useful as part of the process of planning for the teaching of literacy and numeracy. However, it is important that the targets do not dominate the process of teaching and learning at the expense of the overall goals of education. It is unclear what role the setting of national targets would play given that any target set at school level reflects the unique context of the school.

The INTO supports the current National Monitoring Programme, where national assessments in English reading and Mathematics are carried out periodically in a number of randomly selected schools in order to monitor trends in the system. The INTO also supports the involvement of primary schools in international surveys such as PIRLS and TIMMS and recommends that schools be encouraged to co-operate when requested to participate in international surveys approved or commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills.

### 7.2 Actions to support parents and communities

The INTO endorses the recognition of the pivotal role of parents and communities in supporting children’s literacy and numeracy. Indeed children spend a small proportion of their time in school. Therefore, the importance of home environment cannot be overemphasised. Campaigns to encourage parents to read with their children and providing information for parents on how to support their children are crucial. How this is to be done is vital and it is important, for example, that all means of communication are fully utilised in this regard.

However, in the context of the current economic situation it is important that any national information campaign should not be funded at the cost of supporting schools to enhance the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Parental involvement is encouraged by schools particularly in the early years.

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\(^3\) INTO (1997) *Teaching & Learning: Issues in Assessment*, Dublin: Author
However the complex nature of the school day cannot be ignored and it is not always feasible to have parents involved in schools during the school day. Schools should be supported in providing information and support to parents in relation to curriculum and their children’s learning. The issue of supporting and guiding parents in relation to their children’s educational milestones from birth should also be considered. The potential of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme in this regard should not be underestimated, as HSCL coordinators play a pivotal role in developing links between the home and school. Consideration should be given to allocating HSCL teachers to all schools.

The support provided for parents through the NCCA website is welcome but there is a need to research who is this reaching and more importantly who it is not. Not all homes have access to technology and broadband. Information and support for parents should be available in a variety of forms.

The INTO looks forward to the findings of the existing early intervention pilot programmes currently supported by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in relation to literacy and numeracy development in disadvantaged communities.

The INTO welcomes the development of community projects in disadvantaged areas that support both parents and children in enhancing levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy and recommends that such programmes should continue to be funded.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Scope of Plan

The INTO recommends that a national plan for literacy and numeracy should reflect the fact that almost all pupils learn Ireland’s two national languages in school, that some pupils speak neither English nor Irish as a home language and that some pupils also learn modern languages.

Curriculum

The INTO recommends that

The Primary School Curriculum should remain a child-centred curriculum and retain its focus on providing for the holistic development of the child.

The number of content objectives should be reduced across all curriculum areas in order to reduce curriculum overload.

The curriculum should be inclusive of ICT literacies.

A programme to support oral language should be developed in both Irish and English for all class levels.

A greater emphasis should be placed on developing the language of mathematics.

Assessment

The INTO recommends that teachers be supported through professional development to enhance the use of assessment in schools, including assessment for learning (AfL) and using the results of assessments, both formative and summative, to plan for the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

Professional Development

The INTO recommends that

The capacity of the professional development service for teachers (PDST) should be developed in order to be in a position to provide professional development support to all schools and teachers according to need.

All teachers should be able to opt to take the Diploma courses in special education and learning support that are currently only available to learning support / SEN teachers, as these courses offer teachers a rich engagement in developing their understanding and teaching skills in literacy and numeracy.

High quality evening courses should be provided in Education centres on literacy and numeracy during term time, which would attract EPV days.

All teachers should be given an opportunity to avail of professional development in relation to the early years curriculum framework Aistear.

Professional development in EAL teaching should be available to all teachers

Accredited professional development courses should be available to teachers who wish to become literacy and/or numeracy experts, rather than experts in the promotion of particular programmes, either as part of the PDST or otherwise.
The Infant Classes

The INTO recommends that

The curriculum for the infant classes in primary schools should be revised as a matter of urgency with a view to reflecting the philosophy and approaches to learning in the Curriculum framework Aistear and that its introduction be accompanied by comprehensive professional development for infant teachers, and their principals.

The maximum number of pupils in any Junior Infant Class should be 15 pupils and the maximum class size in all other classes up to second class be 20, on the basis that the foundations of literacy and numeracy are laid during the early years of primary education.

Pupils that require a three year infant programme should be offered a year in middle infants.

Targeted Support

The INTO recommends that

The support programme for DEIS schools be continued, sustained and well-resourced.

All schools should be allocated the appropriate number of learning support / SEN teachers according to the ratios agreed under the general allocation model.

The general allocation model should be reviewed in order to enhance the ratios to take account of earlier intervention at Junior Infant level.

Language support should be available to all EAL pupils requiring support.

Resources

The INTO recommends that:

The pupil teacher ratio in all schools should be reduced to the European average.

The library grants should be restored and the library system supported to provide a comprehensive service to schools, parents and communities.

Graded reading materials and concrete materials for mathematics should be available in all schools, and schools provided with funding to purchase them.

The design of all school buildings should include library and ICT facilities.

Technical support in ICT should be available to all schools.

Parents and Community

The INTO recommends that:

The NCCA should be supported to provide information to parents, in a variety of forms, on how to support children’s literacy and numeracy development at home, both at pre-school stage and during school years.

The HSCL service should be expanded within the system, in both urban and rural communities, in order to support parents in enhancing their children’s learning from birth in language, literacy and numeracy.

All communities should have access to library facilities.

Transitions

The INTO recommends that guidance be issued to schools regarding the transfer of information regarding pupils’ progress from pre-school to primary schools and from primary schools to post-primary schools.