A Response to

‘Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People’ – Draft Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

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The staff of St Catherine’s NS.
The committee of ACAE, the Association for Creativity and Arts in Education.
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The opening words of the draft plan ‘Every Young person needs to be literate and numerate’ offers a premise with which few would disagree. The contention that literacy and numeracy levels are falling is acknowledged by all stakeholders and is something that concerns us all as teachers. It is a positive thing that the Department of Education and Skills seeks to address this and to improve the standards in these areas throughout the system.

However, the proposed manner in which this issue is be addressed is a cause of concern on a number of fronts. We contend that to adopt the proposals of the draft plan would be to deny children the holistic and broad education which is their right. In seeking to marginalise the arts in general and drama in particular, to remove discretionary time and to focus on standards and results, this plan is the antithesis of true education.

It is difficult to see where international best practice is being consulted and learned from. In his book The Fourth Way Andy Hargreaves writes that where measures similar to those proposed in the draft document were introduced the results were not what we appear to expect:

Standards raised the bar but didn’t help children reach it. As measures of performance rose in tested literacy, rates of reading for pleasure actually fell. The costs to the quality, depth, and breadth of children’s learning were considerable. School dropouts increased site-based innovations declined, teacher quality suffered and so did teacher retention.

At this time, we should consider the quality of our children’s lives....

The biggest challenge, therefore, is not just to provide learning opportunities that inform but, through the aquisition of knowledge and experiences, through the development of skills, explicitly add to the quality of our children’s lives, not just as a future goal but for now.1

It raises questions as to our vision for and philosophy of education in Ireland!

Clearly the nature and substance of our education system should be under scrutiny. It is essential that as a society, we develop a philosophy of education and debate the value and nature of education. To what extent is this document based on recent

1 Gerver Richard, Creating Tomorrow’s Schools Today, Contium 2010
research and discourse on education? Was there collaboration with stakeholders on the vision for education that would underpin the proposals?

It would appear to run counter to international practice.

......autocratic imposition of targets and testing, technocratic obsessions with data and spreadsheets, and effervescent indulgence in securing quick lifts in test gains......make education short-sighted and superficial, preventing deeper transformations in the quality of teaching and learning that can produce higher-order thinking skills and develop deeper virtues and values.²

In Wales national testing has been abolished up to the age of 14. In England there are calls for all testing to cease. In Finland testing is avoided altogether. Finland is currently the lodestone for quality education by attracting highly qualified teachers with supportive working conditions, a high degree of curricular autonomy and an emphasis on creativity.

This document seems to be founded on a narrow and .....view of education. We, if the draft document is anything to go by, appear to be advocating a Mr Gradgrind school of education:

'NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. ....... Stick to Facts, sir!'³

We note that the draft document posits an approach to education that appears to be regressive, wanting as Richard Gerver has put it, to return to the certainties of the past rather than exploring the possibilities of the future. It appears to us that while ‘standards’ may be raised through the proposed changes they will be raised in a narrow range of skills and competencies at the expense of the child’s potential as a fully rounded human being. Something we believe will be detrimental to society as a whole in the long term.

What are the ‘standards’ towards which we strive?

Business people and others decry the lack of creativity and imaginative expression in our curriculum yet this document proposes lessening the opportunities for children to be imaginative and expressive by marginalizing the arts further. It is useful to note that many education systems worldwide, not least our UK neighbours, include creative thinking and creativity in their curriculum and have invested significantly in research in this area. Yet, we do not seem to learn from this.

We need to listen to all segments of our society and not simply respond to the results of tests and league tables

The Primary School Curriculum in1999, revised in collaboration with representatives of parents’ bodies, managerial bodies, unions and the DES, offers sound educational principles to guide our education system. It posits a vision for primary education that celebrates the uniqueness of the child and seeks to nurture all dimensions of his or her life. Can we say that this draft document in keeping with this vision? Do we intend to abandon these principles?

What of the main stakeholders, our children? Have they a voice in this document?

In the words of Robert M. Hutchins:

² Hargreaves, Shirley: The Fourth Way, Cormin, 2009
“Education is not to reform students or amuse them or to make them expert technicians. It is to unsettle their minds, widen their horizons, inflame their intellects, teach them to think….’

Does this document support this way of thinking? One would hope that such a vision would underpin all teaching and learning across the curriculum. However, by restricting the breadth of the curriculum, and ousting the areas that are most likely to support this philosophy, it seems less likely that such a vision will not take root. If we value creativity, if we truly celebrate what John Quinn calls the ‘wonder-full ness’ of our children, if we want to inflame their intellects, then we should not deny them exposure to a broad curriculum, one that includes and promotes the arts.

The draft plan seems to ignore the rationale for including a quality arts education in our curriculum developed by the NCCA between 1990 and 1999.

Do we no longer believe that children have a right to an arts curriculum that includes and respects all art forms? Do we no longer believe that an arts education promotes holistic development, that it encourages abstraction and symbolism, provides for an integrated experience, that the arts are non discursive, that the arts are ways of knowing, that the arts are a language, that the arts are vital, that the arts foster creativity, that they develop personal intelligence, that they focus on celebration?

Do we no longer understand that the arts must be part of an unbiased curriculum, that they create balance, that they develop exploration and discovery?

Have we forgotten that the arts foster uniqueness and provide enrichment? Can we not see that the arts foster discipline and are part of daily life?

Are we in danger of ignoring the fact that children have a right to a high quality arts education that encompasses all art forms equally?

We need to be cognisant of the fact that because we as educators and policy makers have been successful in an education system that is heavily dependent on what are perceived to be academic subjects, subjects that are referred to as “core”, there always exists the danger that such a system becomes self-perpetuating and begins to marginalise what are deemed the “soft subjects”. We can regard the arts as peripheral and confuse creativity with artistry. We then see the arts as something which is the preserve of the skilled and talented, something for which parents can provide – should they be able to afford it – as an extra-curricular add on.

We fail to acknowledge that the arts is the birthright of each individual and should be prioritised on any curriculum. The arts has always been the medium through which humanity has explained itself to itself and we have a responsibility to develop children’s literacy in the area of the arts as much as we do in Language.

The draft plan recommends that guidance is provided on the possibilities of cross-curricular teaching and learning in the arts areas (p30), as a means by which more time could be devoted to literacy and numeracy.

Cross-curricular teaching and learning is to be advocated. However, the nature of this needs attention. True integration must be at the core of this. We must still be true to the essence of the subjects involved. Music and visual arts, drama and dance are not merely means to an end they are an end in themselves.

Art, after all, is about rearranging us, creating surprising juxtapositions, emotional openings, startling presences, flight paths to the eternal.4

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4 Zander; The Art of the Possible: Penguin 2000
The proposal to remove drama as a subject and to put ‘drama activities’ into the English curriculum needs thorough examination. We need to be aware of what we lose when we remove drama as a stand alone subject and diminish it by relegating it to a series of activities as methodology.

Through drama as a stand-alone subject we have an opportunity to give our children something wonderful but right from the start drama was compromised. A new subject, it was the last to be in-serviced and even then, by insisting that one of the three sessions available be used to show how it might be employed as a methodology to teach Gaeilge, the essence of drama was diluted if not contradicted. Things were not helped by the fact that drama was the only subject not afforded a year of independent in-school support following in-service.

What is drama? The question appears to need to be asked. What is its value? Why should it be on our curriculum as a stand alone subject?

Research indicates that:

5th and 6th class children’s participation in improvisational drama throughout a school year resulted in greater use of expressive and interactional language skills as well as more traditional classroom informational language skills. Informational language skills involve lower order thinking skills while expressive language used by these drama participants reveal and develop the ability to speculate, imagine, predict, reason, and evaluate their own learning—or, higher order thinking skills. Interactional language skills were found in students’ exchanges with each other and later reflection on interactions. Students’ own reflections on the improvisations brought up moral issues, not typical in information-driven classrooms. The authors believe that, “Drama puts back the human content into what is predominantly a materialistic curriculum.”

Drama is the means by which we investigate ourselves. Through drama we explore ourselves as individuals first and then as individuals in community. It enables us to become aware of and understand ourselves in space. It allows us to examine in detail how we interact with the world around us and the people we encounter. It is, in essence, the core subject, in that it incorporates all that we know of ourselves physically, spiritually and intellectually. Its purpose is the elucidation of truth, the exploration and creation of meaning. Through improvisation meaning is forged, thoughts and ideas clarified, concepts developed and understanding formed.

This is because the subject matter of drama is life, the mundane as well as the extraordinary.

True drama, as opposed to the limited form that constitutes drama as methodology, is transformative as well as illuminating. It is concerned with understanding rather than with learning fact and figure. It is enriching rather than instructive. It is an organic art form that encompasses all aspects of ourselves in its use. It allows for within itself the employment of multiple intelligences and caters to all learning styles. Through drama we can develop the children’s ability to articulate feelings, thoughts and ideas and lead them to an understanding of themselves and themselves in the world in an organic and holistic manner that is not available to us in quite the same way in any other subject.

5 Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Developments, 2002, pp. 50–51 study; Nadie Papers No. 1, Drama, Language and Learning. Reports of the Drama and Language Research Project, Speech and Drama Center, Education Department of Tasmania
Drama has always been the means by which mankind has explained itself to itself. Long before people taught themselves to read and write we told and acted out our stories. The bardic tradition is a dramatic tradition still extant today in the monologue much used by Irish playwrights.

Drama is a social artform. This is the source of its power. It is a collaborative artform in which the smallest contribution is as valid and essential as the largest. It allows each of us to contribute what we can and to feel a part of the whole.

The type of drama envisaged in the curriculum is predicated on improvisation that allows children to explore themselves and their world. It is not about teaching a predetermined fact or topic. It is about finding out, discovering and uncovering. It is about the creation of meaning, the classroom being a crucible where meaning is forged in an environment that encourages risk taking and gives voice to the child’s imagination. It is about developing the child’s understanding of the elements of drama so that as they become more accomplished they may shape those elements to focus attention, to shift perspective and to convey the truth or meaning they have discovered through improvisation.

This is not simply play, this is a life skill that enables children to “read” people and to become more observant of their world. They become conscious of the semiotics of drama, they become drama literate and by doing so become more fully aware of what it is to be a human being in society. This, however, must be taught. It does not simply happen by “doing drama” anymore than skills and techniques in music, visual arts or any other subject can be developed be learned without discrete lessons. Drama deserves no less attention than any other art form. Just because the skills involved may be less obvious does not make them any less deserving of being taught.

What are these skills? They include but are by no means limited to:

Communication skills, group and social skills, theatre skills, empathetic skills, thinking and comprehension skills.

These are selective and by no means exhaustive but should serve in themselves to indicate the value of having drama as a standalone subject.

However, if we limit drama to a methodology or to a set of strategies or techniques, we limit severely such understanding. Suddenly drama becomes a tool. A means to an end. We strip it of its essence and it becomes an utilitarian methodology, the purpose of which is to teach specific content. If we understand educational drama to be a box of tricks and tips we will certainly have an effective means to teach a wide variety of facts and figures but we will deprive our children of the means to discover themselves, to shape themselves, to invent themselves and the world around them.

Drama actively encourages children to take risks and gamble, to explore aspects of themselves and the world around them that in other circumstances they might turn away from. In essence drama is education as it involves and promotes questing and questioning, thinking and postulating, acting and being.

It is essential that such opportunities be provided for children in discrete drama time. When we employ drama as a methodology our focus, by necessity, is on the learning outcomes of the subject being taught not on drama. If we use drama to teach the child how to cross the road our attention is on that fact. If the focus were on drama we would concern ourselves with who was crossing the road and how they felt, where they had come from, where they were going and why they were going there. Drama provides a much broader learning palette.

To dismiss drama is to dismiss and misunderstand the purpose of the arts as a whole. Surely the purpose of the arts is to give voice to the child. The arts begin
where words end. I would include poetry and creative writing here because they strive to forge new meaning through words. Drama, Music, Dance and Visual Arts enable us to furnish the child with a new and different imaginative vocabulary that enables the child to speak through these art forms.

We can and need to be literate in ways other than that conceived by the document referred to at the beginning of this piece. We need to provide authentic opportunities in all art forms in order that children may discover where their voice for imaginative expression lies.

Mark Patrick Hederman⁶ describes artists as the prophets of our times. We need prophets. We need voices of hope. We need artists to illuminate our paths. We need our schools to be places that encourage people of vision, places that allow for discovery and experimentation, places that provide for risk and see failure as a positive thing in that it is only by trying and taking risks that we can create the new and forge our future.

A curriculum that deprives its children of a full and true education in the arts stifles children’s voices and has widespread and significant impact on society as a whole. It is no accident that where emotional trauma occurs therapy often includes drama, music, art and dance. We should not wait for trauma before recognising how important engagement with and understanding of the arts is to each of us as we strive to make sense of what it is to be alive in the world.

John Holt wrote:

_We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do. We destroy this capacity above all by making them afraid – of not doing what other people want, of not pleasing, of not making mistakes, of failing, of being wrong. Thus we make them afraid to gamble, afraid to experiment, afraid to try the difficult and the unknown._⁷

If we believe in the arts, if we believe that there is a place for creativity in our educational system we cannot allow ourselves to be so shortsighted as to deny our children the opportunity to engage meaningfully with drama. To engage in a dialogue with themselves and others that has the power to cast light on how we think and behave that has the power to shape our selves and our world.

As Leigh Hunt said:

_There are two worlds, the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world that we feel with our hearts and imaginations._

The arts explore the second world. Our children need and deserve to have this world opened to them.

A curriculum that does not prioritise the arts is a curriculum that looks to produce people too reliant on:

_…..the rationality of the left-hand hemisphere at the expense of the more sensuous, intuitive and holistic aspects of consciousness and perception._⁸

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⁶ *Underground Cathedrals*, Mark Patrick Hederman. Veritas 2010  
As someone put it, it's a bit like training for a marathon by exercising one leg and allowing the other to atrophy.

The arts and creativity must not be seen as merely adding to our curricula they must, as they do in life, be seen as central to what it means to be fully human, central to our understanding and to our ability to express that understanding. Any curriculum that marginalizes the arts and creative thinking and expression is too narrow in focus and will be proven to be counter-productive.

Is it not significant that in selling Ireland and the Irish in The United States we chose to do so through Imagine Ireland? We chose to ask Gabriel Byrne an actor to harness the talents of our writers, musicians, actors and artists to sell and promote what Ireland is and can be. Where will the artists of the future be if this proposal goes ahead?

Yes, we need to raise literacy and numeracy standards. The draft plan offers relatively broad definitions of literacy and numeracy, yet it fails to address the different literacies that we engage with as human beings. Should we not be artistically literate, musically literate, visually literate, drama literate, dance literate? We urgently need to raise standards in emotional literacy, in expressive literacy, in physical and spiritual literacy. We need to provide our children with the means to understand their world and themselves in that world beyond mere words. We need to furnish them with vocabularies and lexicons that range far beyond language. In so doing we grow and transform not only the children themselves but the world in which they live. We extend the boundaries of the possible.

Rather than marginalizing one area in order to bolster another, let us look instead at how we teach Literacy and Numeracy. We notice the the draft document proposes increasing time for literacy and numeracy and does not deal in depth with how the time currently spent is used. It appears to us that quality of teaching is far more significant a factor than the amount of time spent. We feel we need to look at how we teach more carefully than for how long we teach.

Let us scrutinize how we prepare teachers to teach in these areas. Let us articulate high expectations and demand high standards. Let us resource schools to achieve these standards but let us not diminish our pupils and by extension our society by depriving children of an authentic and quality arts education in order to attain these aims.

Let us not lose sight of the need to promote, encourage and demand that creative thought and expression be at the forefront of who we are as a people.

Let us not forget our responsibility to develop the whole person to their full potential. Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see. Yes, they need to be literate and numerate to a high standard but also, they need to be emotionally literate. They need to be creative and innovative thinkers. They need to be able to appreciate and express themselves in forms beyond language.

Let us look closely at the quality of our teaching in all areas. Let us articulate our expectations and high standards. Let us strive toward those standards but let us do so in all areas that are core to us as individuals and as individuals in community.

Let us be rigorous and demanding in the standards of teaching we expect in our schools. Let us support our teachers with a rich and extensive CPD programmes.

But let us not lose sight of the responsibility we have to develop the whole child. Let us not confuse what we deem core subjects with what is core to us as human beings.
We owe our children this much.

_Everything that counts is not countable. Everything countable does not count._

Albert Einstein