Better Literacy and Numeracy Draft National Plan
Response of the School of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology

The response from the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) will focus on the role of early childhood education within the overall document, *Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People*. The critical importance of literacy and numeracy for children and young people is well recognised in the literature and in the current document. In particular, the emphasis on understanding, expressing, communicating through language and other symbolic systems is well placed as well as the focus on mathematics as life skill. This thinking leads beyond de-coding signs and symbols and leads to an age appropriate critical awareness of making meaning by young children through active learning and play.

We welcome the inclusion of early childhood education in the consideration of better literacy and numeracy for children and young people. Early childhood education is an important stage of development and learning for young children from birth to six years of age and it is at this period that the foundation for later learning is laid down in regard to dispositions, attitudes and skills. If children can be regarded by themselves and others as competent achieving people, then present learning and the laying of the foundation for later learning have a high chance of succeeding. The foundation for literacy in all its modes is oral language and early childhood setting offer a unique opportunity to develop and support young children’s oral language skills (Gee, 2002).

In our experience, some young children come to early years settings with well developed oral language competencies but other children have not had adequate opportunities to participate in the language practices of their communities. In some cases a range of language functions remain underdeveloped, such as participating in conversations, turn taking, negotiating in an age appropriate way and developing narrative skills. Vocabulary is built up through direct experience, conversation, exploring books and other forms of literature. Without adequate exposure to a wide range of literacy opportunities in a supportive environment, children’s language skills will remain at a low level and they will not have the rich foundation required for successful, enjoyable and meaningful reading and writing. Similarly, without explicit reference to mathematical concepts, children’s understanding of these concepts in practice will remain underdeveloped.

**Training**

One of the recognised factors in helping children attain their potential is a well qualified workforce. Therefore we welcome the emphasis on high quality professional practice for all those working with children. *(Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, page 16).* *Siolta*, the national quality standards and *Aistear*, the early years’ curriculum framework offer principles and concrete guidance in regard to professional practice. The free preschool year with attendant requirements also helps promote better practice in regard to early years practice. High quality pre-service and in-service training for all those working with children is necessary to prepare practitioners to work appropriately and effectively with young children.
The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) have been engaged in providing high quality training for early years practitioners since 1977, and now offers training opportunities to school leavers and to practitioners as recommend by the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills 2010). The BA (Hons.) Early Childhood Education provides a wide ranging programme that focuses on the holistic development of young children. Several modules specifically focus on developing emergent literacy and numeracy skills. The socio-cultural context of literacy learning, play and literacy, emergent literacy, active storytelling, literacies in more than one language, mark making, emergent reading and writing, children’s understanding of number, providing a positive climate for numeracy and supporting children in their mathematical learning are some of the topics considered. Other, more specialised modules include First and Second Language Acquisition and Development. Students are also required to carry out practical work with children on placement as part of their assessment. We therefore meet the requirements set out in Action Point 2.5, Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, page 21.

With reference to building the foundation for literacy and numeracy in the early years before starting school, many authors state that the emphasis should be on building up oral language competencies, using language in context and learning how to use a wide range of language functions (Browne, 2009, Makin and Whitehead 2004, Watson, 2002). This necessary stage precedes the decoding and phonetic skills of early reading and writing outlined on Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, page 17. It is particularly important in regard to children with Language Delay as they cannot work with symbols that refer to objects, events and concepts they have not experienced. Cognisance should also be taken of the developmental stages of language acquisition as many children begin to play with the sounds of language in their fourth year and tend to focus on rhyme in the initial stages of language play (Buckley 2003). Conscious awareness of initial phonics tends to come later and should therefore not be the basis of testing in the pre-school years.

Languages

We also note children attending early years’ settings and schools speak and learn languages other than English. The approach to teaching and learning the Irish language is one of the strengths of the current Primary School Curriculum, with its emphasis on understanding, learning through play, puppets and stories and building up capacity through structured language scenarios. Naíonraí and Gaelscoileanna provide Irish language immersion education at pre-primary and primary levels, mainly for learners of Irish as a second language. (Mhic Mhathúna 2010). Elements of this approach could be adopted into mainstream early years’ settings and schools, using the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, by presenting content through Irish for one of more elements of the curriculum.

The concept of learning more than one language should be included in the consideration of literacy. (Mhic Mhathúna 2008). Gaeltacht schools provide education through Irish as a community language. The richness of this type of input should be celebrated and enhanced and should permeate every aspect of the curriculum. The home languages of newcomer children should also be visible in an explicit way in the curriculum as valuing the home language is documented as providing a sound basis for emotional and cognitive growth and as providing a strong foundation for learning English as a second language for
children of all ages (Cummins, 2000) The recognition of the role of class teachers in providing support for children learning English as an additional language is welcome, in addition to the work of the language support teacher (Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, p. 36). We therefore support the inclusion of biliteracy in the consideration of literacy for children and young people.

**Active Learning**

We particularly welcome the value placed on the thinking underpinning Aistear regarding the way in which young children learn and develop (Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, page 27). Children’s early literacy and numeracy development is supported through active learning. Through active learning children follow their personal interests and goals in first hand learning experiences. The adult thus has a responsibility to provide print rich environments where children are able to touch, explore, manipulate, discover and experiment with a broad range of diverse and real life materials and where children can pose questions and talk about their discoveries (French, 2007). Play is one of the key contexts for children’s literacy and numeracy development. Children learn in collaboration with others, yet have to construct learning themselves. We recommend that all environments should offer children opportunities to work independently and with others, to make decisions and follow through with their ideas, to solve problems encountered in play and to experience symbolic, dramatic or pretend play (French, 2007).

**Assessment**

Educational research supports the notion that young children learn in context and that they should be assessed in context. This provides challenges for standardised national assessment tools but Aistear (Guidelines for Good Practice, pages 71-102) provides some guidance on strategies that can be used to assess children’s learning in a formative way. The emphasis is on assessment in context by collecting, documenting and reflecting on children’s learning and encompasses much more than specific decoding skills in relation to literacy, for example. Children’s dispositions and attitudes are valued as much as skills. Further development of this approach would support the implementation of Aistear, avoid overload of assessment methods and facilitate the continuity between pre-primary and primary sectors.

**Continuity**

The Supporting Early Childhood Educational Provision within a Cluster of DEIS Preschool and Primary School Settings study commissioned by the Department of Education and Sciences highlighted the importance of continuity between the sectors for children’s learning and development. O’Kane and Hayes (DES/CSER 2010) recommended that schools should develop close links with their feeder preschools and that knowledge and information about the children’s learning should be shared across
the settings. The tool they developed for this type of collaboration, the Child Snapshot, included a great deal of information about literacy and numeracy learning. This type of cooperation should be considered in the literacy and numeracy plan.

Evaluation

The Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People Draft National Plan recommends (page 46) developing quality evaluations of preschool provision. Many aspects of quality provision are currently being undertaken through Síolta evaluations. Síolta is a national quality framework guided by agreed principles, standards and components for quality practice which emerged from a wide ranging consultative process across all early years settings up to and including the infant classes of the primary school. This, in turn, will be evaluated in the near future, but the current system is broad ranging and extensive. We recommend that duplication of tasks should be avoided and that one system of evaluation should be in place.

Role of parents

The role of parents is mentioned in Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People, pages 47 and 48 and again we note the more extended consideration given to this important collaboration in the Guidelines for Good Practice in Aistear, pages 7-25. We recommend the inclusion of parents in their child’s formal and informal education in the holistic way outlined in Aistear. This approach values the many literacy practices that exist in the home, some similar, some dissimilar to education settings and includes parents in the more formal educational approach to literacy and numeracy.

Conclusion

The DIT welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important document. With respect to the early education dimensions of the document we urge you to take account of existing quality and curricular frames when considering aspects of assessment, continuity and evaluation. Síolta and Aistear have emerged from a wide ranging consultation process and are accepted by all parties in the early years’ sector. It would be advantageous to build on this strong foundation.

We urge a strong emphasis on oral language as the basis of literacy development and on the understanding that the Irish language and the home languages of newcomer children should be included in the overall consideration of literacy. We too recognise the importance of a high quality workforce at all levels of education, including the early years and welcome the proposals to upskill practitioners in the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (DES 2010). We support the inclusion of parents in their children’s literacy and numeracy development and propose that the approach to literacy includes the socio-cultural context in which literacy and numeracy practices reside.
The DIT welcomes the proposed setting up of a National Literacy and Numeracy Forum and Implementation Group and would be happy to participate in these developments in the future.

References


