BETTER LITERACY AND NUMERACY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: A
DRAFT NATIONAL PLAN TO IMPROVE LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SCHOOLS

Response of Mary Immaculate College

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past two decades, the education systems in most economically developed countries have undergone profound educational reform. The primary impetus for this reform agenda stemmed from deep concerns regarding national standards of achievement in these countries. In Ireland, there was no constituency of informed opinion or scholarly evidence to indicate that there was a problem in overall educational standards, thereby explaining why the panoply of standards-based reforms did not take root in this country. More recently, there has been increasing concern expressed in sections of the national media regarding a putative dramatic decline in educational standards although such claims are rarely supported by evidence. What is incontestable, however, is that there has been a persistent problem of underachievement by some pupils in this country at both levels of the school system. It is also evident that despite the introduction of a range of targeted initiatives aimed at combatting educational failure, particularly in literacy and numeracy, there remains an unacceptable achievement gap. It is appropriate, and indeed laudable, that national policy should address this problem - and should do so in a manner that is evidence-based. The causes of educational failure are multifaceted and it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the proposed policy solutions reflect this causal complexity. The history of educational reforms over the past two decades is replete with examples of supposed panaceas and ill-conceived fads which owed more to dogmatic ideology than to empirical evidence. In the words of the philosopher George Santayana, “those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it”. It is vitally important that well-intentioned policy initiatives do not inadvertently lead to unintended consequences which deleteriously impact on the overall educational quality of all pupils. In pursuing necessary reform, we must do so judiciously and in ways that do not jeopardise the existing strengths of our education system.

It is in this spirit that Mary Immaculate College welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Draft National Plan. As a College specialising in education (particularly teacher education, and
early childhood care and education) and liberal arts, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, we
are intensely interested in the quality of our school and education system and we are most
especially concerned for the welfare of pupils in our schools. Given our complementary foci on the
curriculum and pedagogy of our schools and on the quality of the teachers who serve in our
education system, we believe we are optimally placed to respond to this document. Due to our
relationship with the pre-school and primary school sector, our programmes impact directly on the
foundations of the education system. Quality in education is dependent on quality practitioners in
early childhood settings and quality teachers in schools. As a College, we are deeply committed to
ensuring that, through our programmes, we make a significant contribution to achieving a socially
inclusive society and a successful knowledge-based economy.

A national plan which proposes to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children in Irish
schools is to be welcomed. The setting of targets in language and mathematics attainment and the
heightened awareness of the importance of children’s levels of core skill development as a
foundation for their future economic and civic engagement, as contained in this document, is
significant. There can be no doubt that literacy and numeracy are fundamental to primary education.
However, there are also other skills, aptitudes and domains that are also fundamental to primary
education if we are to meet the intellectual demands of the twenty-first century. Gardner’s
conceptualisation of multiple intelligences (1999, 2006) illustrates that we must look beyond the
narrow confines of the dominant discourses of skilling, curriculum, and testing, if we are to help
children to know and understand the world in which they live. As a country, we are particularly
proud of our educational heritage and standards; it is therefore worrying to all sectors of society,
especially teacher educators, if the quality of educational provision does not meet the needs of
children and young people in modern society. Large scale assessments, such as PISA and TIMMS, are
valuable tools when informing policy and the results of the PISA 2009 survey may well be the
required catalyst for educationists and policy makers to engage in curricular reform. However, the
apparent drop in attainment that was recorded in this study needs to be further analysed and
sensibly interpreted. A single set of results, which are themselves at variance with some other
national indicators, and which relate to the performance of 15-year old pupils, should not be over-
interpreted in terms of their significance for the primary school curriculum. This caveat is in no way
intended to strike a note of complacency. On the contrary, it serves instead to underscore the need
to ensure that reform prescriptions are matched to an accurate diagnosis of the actual problems
confronting us.
The Draft National Plan conveys the sense of urgency and energy with which the DES is approaching perceived difficulties within Irish Education. An enthusiasm to tackle challenging issues is to be applauded. Within this context the current iteration of the Draft National Plan is a useful springboard to initiate discussion on the quality of Irish education, to commission research to investigate the causes for differential performance, and to initiate a process of collaboration and cooperation in the design of what could really be considered a ‘National’ Plan. The College welcomes the opportunity it provides to engage with policy makers in the design and content of future strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

EDUCATIONAL VISION

The vision underpinning the 1999 Primary School Curriculum identifies the holistic development of the child as a fundamental value. It identifies three primary aims of primary education:

- to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning.

The curriculum is learner-centred. It recognises the importance of literacy, numeracy, and language, while at the same time responding to changing needs in science and technology, social personal and health education, and citizenship. The child is the core of the educational endeavour, and the multifaceted development of the child is the cardinal objective of primary education. In its totality, the Primary School Curriculum aims ‘to enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future’ (DES, 1999: Introduction, p.6).

It would appear that the Draft National Plan embodies a significant shift away from the principles underpinning the Curriculum and overlooks the human core of education. The document is preoccupied with strategic concerns linked to national economic priorities; consequently, it does not refer to the spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, imaginative, social or physical development of children. There is no consideration within the document of the quality of children’s experiences in schools, the quality of educational relationships, or of the quality of learning environments. While the document is concerned with quality, it is expressed in functional terms, and
does not provide an articulation of educational leadership, vision and commitment to which practitioners, children and parents might readily pledge their loyalty.

It would appear that the Draft National Plan is predicated on a technocratic/rational model where children in primary schools will experience a reduced curriculum in which the role of each subject area is to subserve the acquisition of children’s literacy and numeracy skills, and thereby raise average reading and mathematical scores on standardised national and international tests. The narrowing of the curriculum within schools, with a ‘relentless focus’ on literacy and numeracy, an emphasis on summative rather than formative assessment, the elimination of discretionary time within schools, the elimination of Drama as a subject and the integration of some subjects in order to increase the time allocated to language and mathematics, represents a radical change to the principles and content of the established primary curriculum. The repeated references in the Plan to the ‘prioritisation’ of literacy and numeracy suggest that the document is promoting a hierarchy of subject areas within the curriculum. The contribution of faith and belief, the arts and creativity, physical and emotional health, social and environmental awareness to children’s learning also appear to be downgraded. There is no recognition within the document that, while time may be allocated differentially between subject areas, all areas are essential and each deserves to be taught with skill and depth. Children are entitled to a broad and balanced curriculum and to high standards in all curriculum domains, not just some of them.

The document does not adequately value the varied and active learning processes engaged in by children, or demonstrate an understanding of what schools and teachers do to enable children become autonomous and motivated learners. This analysis of the philosophy underpinning this document is supported by a quick survey of the type and nature of the dominant terms used in the text: ‘Literacy’ is used 285 times, ‘reading’ is used just 40 times, while ‘literature’ is not used at all; ‘numeracy’ is used 285 times while ‘problem-solving’ in mathematics is used on just four occasions. ‘Differentiation’ is used just once in the document, while the following terms do not appear in the text at all: child-centred, constructivism, peer learning, active learning, collaboration, investigate/investigative capacity, co-operative learning, student/pupil involvement, mathematical reasoning, higher-order thinking, inequality, diversity, enjoyment, imaginative, aesthetic, or cognitive development. The absence of such language illustrates very clearly the narrow functionality of the conceptual framework underpinning this document and the dominance given within its discourse to skill acquisition and performance on international competitive tests. There is a singular dissonance between the primary objective of the National Plan – to raise the capacity of
students to attain higher scores on more challenging aspects of international tests which require problem-solving and reasoning skills – and the absence within the text of an emphasis on collaborative and other learning strategies which are essential to the promotion of higher-order thinking within classrooms.

**Recommendation:**

- A clear statement of the aims, values and principles underpinning the Draft National Plan should be made, and an articulation of how this policy aligns with the aims of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) should be provided.

**INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE AND SYSTEM-WIDE REFORM**

The rationale for the substantial changes within the primary school curriculum has not been adequately developed within the Draft National Plan. While there are frequent references to research underlying the approach being adopted within the document, readers would welcome the citing of these sources. The paucity of research evidence to support the policy is disappointing in a context where it is acknowledged that reforms of school systems should be evidence-based and reflect international best practice. The work undertaken by the Cambridge Primary Review and published in *Children, Their World, Their Education* (Alexander, 2009) might be a useful exemplar: this report draws on more than 4,000 published sources, as well as extensive evidence from written submissions, face-to-face soundings and searches of official data. The rigour attached to such a process would ensure that the policy is situated within a research framework and that it is informed by the views and contributions of parents, pupils, teachers, and Irish-based researchers.

An in-depth exploration of international research illustrates that a ‘relentless focus on literacy and numeracy’ and the associated emphasis on summative testing, has not been successful in other jurisdictions. The Cambridge Primary Review states that primary education should empower children for life as both learners and citizens, respect childhood, and that they should be ‘protected from a system apparently bent on pressing children into a uniform mould at an ever-younger age.’ The Review assesses the reaction to recent policy initiative in the UK and finds ‘the apparatus of targets, testing, performance tables, national strategies and inspection is believed to distort children’s primary schooling for questionable returns’ (Alexander, 2009, briefing, p.2).
of the opinion that there is little evidence to support either the efficacy or appropriateness of this approach and has recommended that the British government discontinue their current literacy and numeracy strategy.

Similarly an analysis of research carried out based on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) movement in the United States reveals that this approach has failed. Berliner (2009), Berliner & Nichols (2007), Cochran-Smith (2005), Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006), and Lee (2007) among others have been extremely critical of the impact of a reduced curriculum and the ‘high-stakes’ accountability movement on children, teachers and the school system. There is much evidence to support the argument that the NCLB programme of reforms has been ineffective in achieving the intended purpose – to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Rather, they argue that NCLB leaves teachers void of agency and oversimplifies the process of teacher learning and practice; it undermines the broader democratic mission of education, narrows curriculum, and exercises both technical and moralistic control over teachers and teaching. The NCLB Act, under which states were to measure and publish school performance in mathematics and reading, resulted in an ‘immediate reaction in terms of focusing teaching on relevant subjects or even relevant students near performance cut-offs; of increased exclusions from tests; of explicit cheating on tests; and of like attempts to improve scores in ways other than improving student learning’ (Hanushek, E. 2004, cited by Whelan, 2009:113). Whelan asserts that a narrowly-focused assessment system will ultimately result in some distortion of priorities for students and schools; ‘just half of America’s school students live in states where the tests used to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act include no open-ended questions, and typically a large proportion of multiple-choice questions’ (2009:115). Whelan aver that these types of tests can only measure a small subset of what students actually need to be able to do and understand in order to be proficient in mathematics and literacy. In a thoroughgoing scientific evaluation of the impact of NCLB, Lee (2007) concluded that:

The current test-driven accountability system appears to have fallen into the trap of bringing a vicious cycle of more and more testing to futile ends. It is as though patients took medication but did not get satisfactory results at first, so then doctors prescribed an even stronger dose of treatment, ignoring evidence of harmful side effects... It is time to reexamine the law particularly in light of the evidence on the inefficacy of test-driven external accountability policy for equity.” (p. 141)

Conway et al (2009) have undertaken a comprehensive review of international educational reform and associated research which would enhance the work of policy-making within the DES. They illustrate that Finland, for example, has a strong social-democratic model of education which has
impacted on teaching and teacher education. Since the 1970s, Finland has engaged in a re-orientation of, and investment in, teacher education; the educational reform agenda pursued over the last four decades centred on trust in teachers, vision and support for collegial professionalism, high quality teacher education and limited use of high stakes testing, i.e., only at the end of post-primary education. Conway et al. argue that this reform agenda has run counter to the global education reform agenda (Table 1) focused on standardisation and high stakes testing for teachers, students and in some instances, teacher education programmes (2009:3, 4).

Table 1: Comparing education reform trends: Global and Finnish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global education reform trends</th>
<th>Education reform in Finland</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Standardisation</strong></td>
<td>Flexibility and loose standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting clear high and centrally prescribed</td>
<td>Building on existing good practices and innovations in school-based curriculum development, setting learning</td>
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<td>performance standards for schools, teachers and</td>
<td>targets and networking through steering by information and support.</td>
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<td>students, to improve the quality of outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on literacy and numeracy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Broad learning combined with creativity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic knowledge and skills in reading, writing,</td>
<td>Teaching and learning focus on deep and broad learning giving equal value to all aspects of an individual’s growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>mathematics, and natural sciences as prime</td>
<td>in terms of personality, morality, creativity, knowledge and skills.</td>
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<td>targets of educational reform.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consequential accountability</strong></td>
<td><strong>Intelligent accountability with trust-based professionalism</strong></td>
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<td>The school performance and the raising of school</td>
<td>Adoption of intelligent accountability policies and gradual building of a culture of trust within the education</td>
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<td>achievement are closely tied to the processes of</td>
<td>system that values teachers’ and principals’ professionalism in judging what is best for students and in</td>
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<td>promotion, inspections and ultimately rewarding or</td>
<td>reporting their learning progress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>punishing schools and teachers based on accountability</td>
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<td>measures, especially standardised testing as the main</td>
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<td>criteria of success.</td>
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Irish-based research
There is a broad canon of Irish-based research in the fields of oral language development, reading, writing, and in mathematics development, which could provide rich data to inform and shape the National Plan. In recent years, the DES awarded valuable bursaries to researchers (Leavy 2009; Gleeson 2009; Cregan, 2010) to engage in research in the areas of literacy and numeracy. In addition to these funded research projects, independent research has been completed by faculty in various Irish institutes; in the area of mathematics education for example the following research is
available: Wall, 2001; Murphy, 2002; Leavy, 2004; Corcoran, 2005a, 2005b; Oldham, 2005; Leavy & O’Loughlin, 2006; Hourigan & O’Donoghue, 2007; Delaney, 2008; Hourigan, 2009; Leavy, 2009; Leavy & Sloane, 2010. In the area of English language development, the following are examples of the research available to policy makers: Cregan, 2007, 2008; Doyle, 2005, 2006, 2009; Eivers, Shiel, & Shortt, 2004; Gleeson, 2005; Gleeson, Courtney, Bowe, et.al, 2010; Hall, 2003; and Shiel & Murphy, 2000. This incomplete list is indicative of the wealth of resources and expertise available to the DES in planning future strategies in language and mathematics.

Recommendations:

- Active consideration be given to the comprehensive survey of international research commissioned by the Teaching Council and completed by Conway et al (2009) of the characteristics of positive and successful system-wide reforms.
- Current Irish-based research in the areas of oracy, language and mathematics, be reviewed to inform the National Plan.

LIMITATIONS OF ‘NUMERACY’ AND ‘LITERACY’

Interpretation of numeracy

The dominant use of the term ‘numeracy’ within this document is regrettable. This term may be interpreted in a number of ways; one extreme is that it refers to lower-order mathematics, is concerned with mathematical operations and skill development, and does not encompass other types of literacy in mathematics such as spatial literacy. This interpretation is fuelled by the fact that one strand of the mathematics programme is labelled ‘numeracy’.

At the outset this document defines numeracy in the following terms: ‘Numeracy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use mathematics to meet the demands of learning, school, home, work, community and civic life’ (DESa 2010: 9). Hence, one could argue that the first interpretation above is not justified or appropriate. In contrast, the OECD (2003: 156) defines mathematical literacy as ‘an individual’s capacity to identify and understand the role that mathematics plays in the world, to make well-founded judgments and to use and engage with mathematics in ways that meet the needs of that individual’s life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen’. This extended definition acknowledges the importance of problem-solving skills and constructivist approaches: the
individual must be able to utilise all mathematical skills and concepts acquired in the mathematics classroom in real-life situations and understand the use of such mathematical skills and concepts.

However, the DES document does not use the OECD definition of numeracy; rather it has generated a more economical and reductionist definition, which loses the wealth of interpretation and understanding associated with terms such as ‘well-founded judgements’. The distillation of the OECD definition into a more truncated and less nuanced statement has not served the document well, and has impoverished the Draft Plan, thereby contributing to the nature of the criticisms levelled at it. While we are willing to extrapolate broader and richer interpretations of the intent of the Draft National Plan, by referring to the critique contained in the ERC’s National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (2009) and reference to the NCCA’s Project Maths initiative at second-level, the Plan itself does not provide a sound basis on which to make such interpretations.

Interpretation of Literacy

The Draft National Plan defines ‘Literacy’ as ‘reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively in a range of contexts’. It continues to state that in the twenty-first century, ‘the definition of literacy has expanded to refer to a flexible, sustainable mastery of a set of capabilities in the use and production of traditional texts and new communications technologies using spoken language, print and multimedia. In this plan, literacy refers to the development of these capabilities in the first language of the school (L1)’ (DESa, 2010:9).

Reading literacy is defined in PISA as the ‘ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society’ (OECD, 2003). Although the definition in the Draft National Plan has been expanded to include new technologies, it has lost the sense of agency and autonomy inherent in the PISA definition which recognised both the skill of ‘learning to read’ and the power of ‘reading to learn’. The role that reading can make in developing students’ personal goals and potential is not captured in the DES document – there is no reference in the text to reading for enjoyment, the capacity to engage with literature, the capacity of reading to develop identity, and the role reading plays in developing critical members of society. It has been argued that the many layers of literacy, such as the sociocultural and socio-political dimensions, have been omitted from the DES document; these include literacy to create art and literature, visual literacy (Riddle, 2009), physical literacy (Whitehead, 2010), literacy for empowerment, and literacy to effect social change (Cummins, 2001), all of which should not be neglected.
Similarly, while the document pays some attention to the process of ‘learning to write’, the concept of ‘writing to learn’ has not been developed. The document asserts the importance of writing skills, stating, ‘Ensure adequate emphasis and elaboration in the curriculum on the teaching and assessment of key literacy skills (such as phonemic awareness, phonics, sight vocabulary, spelling and the development of fluency and comprehension) and on writing skills (DESa 2010: 29). However, it does not seem to acknowledge in an unambiguous manner the equal contribution that both reading and writing make to a child’s language development.

The general thrust of the document in relation to writing (included under the umbrella term literacy, rarely on its own) seems to be on the acquisition of writing skills, particularly those which are easily assessed, e.g., spelling, grammar. There is little discussion of the importance of writing in helping the learner to make sense of his/her reading, thoughts, his/her social world, or in order to think critically and to learn.

Process Writing is the approach to writing advocated in the English Language Curriculum, and by extension in this document. It is an acknowledged effective approach to the teaching of writing. However, it is only one approach. There are others such as Genre-Based Approach, On-Demand Writing, Strategic Writing, Writing Across the Curriculum. The promotion of one genre and approach for all schools is not advisable.

Advocating the exclusive promotion of programmes such as First Steps in all schools should also be cautioned as the individuality of children, teachers and schools will not be enhanced in any single approach. While the adoption of research-led programmes is commendable, schools and teachers should be empowered to develop and select the programmes most suited to their local needs.

While the importance of developing children’s oral language is referred to in the context of early childhood settings (DESa 2010:12, 21, 27, 28), it is a source of concern that the document is silent on oracy and language development throughout middle and senior primary and second-level education.

Finally, the repeated use of the term ‘relentless’ in relation to the focus on literacy and numeracy has not been explained in the document – what does the DES mean when it uses this term? How will a ‘relentless focus’ translate into practice in classrooms and schools? How will it distort the
curriculum? How will it impact on the lives of children? There is no attempt in the document to interrogate this term and its impact on schools.

Recommendations:

- Recognising the power of words and language to convey philosophical messages and pedagogical concepts, the use of terms and definitions within the document should be re-examined.
- The widest and most enriched definitions of literacy and numeracy should prevail.

AN GHAELGE

Luaitear sa dréachtphlean ar litearthacht agus uimhearacht go mbaineann an dréachtphlean seo le chéad teanga na scoile (DES, 2010a: 9, 29), an Ghaeilge i gcás na scoileanna Gaeltachta agus na scoileanna lán-Ghaeilge. Ach tuigtear dúinn gur litearthacht Bhéarla amháin atá faoi chaibidil. Má tá litearthacht sa Ghaeilge san áireamh, an bhfuil aon fhianoise sa dréachtphlean a léirionn go bhfuil géarghá le plean náisiúnta litearthacha don Ghaeilge do na scoileanna T1? Ní dhearnadh aon bhreathnú ar aon cheacht Ghaeilge i Scoileanna T1 nó T2 mar chuid de thuairisc na gcigirí (DES, 2010b).

The Draft National Plan (DESa, 2010: 9, 29) states that literacy refers to the development of children’s capacity to read, write, speak, view, and listen in the first language of the school (L1). However, throughout the document it is evident that the literacy to which the document refers, is literacy in the English language. If literacy in the Irish language is also to be the focus of a national plan, it is curious that the document makes no reference to the rationale and research supporting this. The incidental inspections reported upon by the DES in 2010, whether in English- or Irish-medium schools, did not include evaluations of Irish language lessons.

Nonetheless a strategy which would aim to improve the standard of literacy in all-Irish schools and Gaeltacht schools would be very welcome. In this situation however, it would be important to recognise the complex sociolinguistic contexts which obtain in these schools; predominantly, English is the first language of children in all-Irish schools, while Irish, English or another language may be the first language of children in Gaeltacht schools.

Within these schools, emphasis should be placed on the development of literacy skills rather than on assessment and reporting of attainment. For example, Gaeltacht schools should be supported in generating school and community-based literacy programmes which are specifically designed to promote the culture, tradition and heritage of their locality, using a cross-curricular approach. The materials published by the Curriculum Development Unit at MIC (Ó Cathasaigh, 1998, 2003, 2009) are excellent examples of resources which would support literacy acquisition in a cross-curricular manner in Gaeltacht areas.

Má tá trialacha caighdeánaithe le cur ar na leanaí ba chóir go mbeidís ‘ar aon dul leis na tascanna foghlama a bhfuil taithi ag an bpáiste orthu’ (An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaiochta, 1999b: 174). Is trialacha caighdeánaithe critéirthagartha bunaite ar na feidhmeanna teanga sa churaclam Ghaeilge a bheadh ag teastáil chun an aidhm seo a bhaint amach. Maidir le forbairt trialacha caighdeánaithe don Bhéarla agus don mhatamaitic i scoileanna T2 tugtar spriocanna do chur i bhfeidhm an phlean ar leathanaigh 44 agus 45. Ach, faraoir, ní thugtar aon sprioc d’fhhorbairt trialacha caighdeánaithe don Ghaeilge. Caithfear a chinntiú nach mbeidh na scoileanna seo fágtha in áit na leathphingine. Dá bhri sin ba chóir go mbeadh na trialacha caighdeánaithe don Ghaeilge ar fáil ón tús. Ba chóir go mbeadh na trialacha matamaitice ar fáil i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge ón tús do na scoileanna seo.
The Draft National Plan refers to the development of standardised tests in both English and Mathematics (DES, 2010: 44, 45). It is expected that whatever mathematics/numeracy tests are to be applied in schools are also available in the medium of Irish from the outset. If the first language of the school is to be equally valued and promoted in all-Irish schools and within Gaeltacht regions, then it is essential that standardised tests in the Irish language are developed.

**INCLUSION AND DISADVANTAGE**

**Social Justice**

The Draft National Plan recognises the significant impact of academic achievement on children’s life chances: ‘We know too that children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or in low skilled jobs, to have poorer emotional and physical health, to have limited earning power, and to be more likely to be imprisoned (DESa, 2010:.9). While Ireland still enjoyed the roar of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, Coolahan (2003) in his country background report to the OECD publication *Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* alerted readers to the fact that during the 1990s the gap between the rich and poor in Irish society widened; ‘a significant minority of the population remained disadvantaged and in danger of marginalisation and of being poorly positioned to cope within a fast-changing society’ (OECD, 2003: 3). However, the Draft National Plan does not look beyond the immediate school environment to identify causes of poor attainment. Berliner cautions, ‘Although the power of schools and educators to influence individual students is never to be underestimated, the out-of-school factors associated with poverty play both a powerful and a limiting role in what can actually be achieved’ (AERA Presidential address 2005). Berliner (2009) identifies six out-of-school factors that significantly affect the health and learning opportunities of children and accordingly limit what schools can accomplish on their own: low birth-weight, inadequate medical, dental or visual care, food insecurity, environmental pollutants, family relations and family stress, and neighbourhood characteristics.

Meaningful educational reforms must address the political, economic and cultural environments children inhabit. The correlation between poor attainment levels and the levels of poverty experienced by children must be examined: In Ireland during 2009, the level of households living in consistent poverty rose to 5.5% from 4.2% in 2008; 8.7% of children were living in consistent poverty in 2009; this figure had risen from 6.3% in 2008. By international standards, the comparative analysis for 2008 shows Ireland had an at-risk-of-poverty rate of 15.5% in comparison to an EU27 average of
16.5%, ranking Ireland thirteenth highest in the EU27 in 2008. The highest at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2008 were in Latvia (25.6%) and Romania (23.4%) while the lowest rates were in the Czech Republic (9.0%) and the Netherlands (10.5%) (Source: www.barnardos.ie). UNICEF, in its recent Report Card: The Children Left Behind: A League Table of Inequality in Child Well-Being in the World’s Rich Countries, states,

Child poverty is about more than poverty of income. It is also about poverty of opportunity and expectation, of cultural and educational resources, of housing and neighbourhoods, of parental care and time, of local services and community resources. But from the child’s point of view, these different dimensions of poverty are rarely separate. Family circumstance, employment and income, health and education systems, and the local environment all play interacting roles in determining well-being (2010:7).

The State of the Nation’s Children 2010 (OMCYA 2010: 64-83) clearly illustrates that children’s attainment in schools is related to their social and economic status. Children in the lowest social class category were significantly less likely to report that their parents discuss with them how well they are doing at school several times a week (37.9%) when compared to children in the highest and medium social class categories (46.6% and 43.6% respectively). In relation to non-attendance at school, for primary level, the average percentage of children missing 20 days or more was almost twice as high for schools in urban areas (15.1%) when compared to schools in rural areas (8.4%). There was also a clear relationship between 20-day absences and levels of disadvantage. Using the DEIS categories and participation in the School Support Programme (SSP), the average percentage of children missing 20 days or more tended to be higher in SSP schools when compared to non-SSP schools (OMCYA 2010:70). For post-primary schools, the average percentage of children missing 20 days or more was higher in Community /Comprehensive and Vocational schools. This was almost twice as high in DEIS schools (26.5%) when compared to non-DEIS schools (14.8%) (OMCYA 2010:71).

Reading achievement is also related to social class and this has been a persistent finding across the three PISA cycles (2003, 2006, 2009). In 2009, the mean score of children from the highest social class category (535.5) was significantly higher than the mean score of children in the lowest social class category (459.5). Similarly the mathematics score of children from the highest social class category (523.4) was significantly higher than the mean of children from the medium or lowest social class categories (490.1 and 452.3 respectively) (OMCYA, 2010:79).

We also need to recognise the increasing diversity of children in Irish schools. In 2006, there were 62,800 foreign national children in Ireland. This accounted for 6.1% of the total child population of
Ireland (OMCYA, 2010:27). We are an increasingly multinational and multicultural society and this has an impact on education and student achievement. The mean score on the OECD-PISA Reading Literacy Scale for immigrant children in Ireland (473.1) was significantly lower than the corresponding mean score for all other children (501.9) in the country (OMCYA, 2010:75). The OECD, in its document on *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Meeting the Challenge*, states,

Data from PISA 2003 and 2006 indicate that the educational challenges posed by family background, socio-economic context, and migration status are not only strongly linked to student outcomes, they are the main determinants of student performance over and above the influence of the school. School education must therefore seek to overcome socio-economic inequalities and, at the same time, utilise the benefits that diversity brings to schools and classrooms (OECD, 2010:3).

**Teachers matter**

While it is essential to recognise the influence of out-of-school factors on children’s performance and attainment, international literature informs us that the most important factor affecting a child’s performance during the million minutes they spend in schools (from age 4 – 18 years) is the quality of the teaching they experience (Whelan, 2009:30). It is essential that teachers have the appropriate skills and capacities to support children in all schools. We acknowledge that schools can and do make a difference in alleviating social and educational inequality; excellent teaching and excellent teachers not only make a difference, they can transform lives.

Consequently, we welcome the commitment within the Draft National Plan to continuing to ‘support enhanced literacy, numeracy and language development in DEIS urban Band 1 and 2 primary schools’ (DESa, 2010: 34). However, the lack of provision of specialised initiatives for disadvantaged pupils in rural DEIS schools and in non-DEIS schools which also enrol students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is to be lamented. The removal of all HSCL support to rural schools under recent funding cutbacks is a retrograde and very serious curtailment of what few resources were available to such schools, particularly in light of the importance of linking with children’s families to support them in helping their children. In addition, the decision to re-assign all Traveller education supports to mainstream activities will have detrimental impact on the most vulnerable children in schools. We also note that while the number of DEIS cuiditheoiri was reduced in June 2010, it is now envisaged that a team of ‘twenty literacy development advisors’ will be introduced (DESa, 2010: 35). While we welcome the re-instatement of this support to schools, we are concerned that the number planned by the DES is insufficient to meet actual needs.
The proposal to ‘develop a generic skills-based programme adapted for all schools (DEIS and non-DEIS) that adopts the principles and practices of approaches such as Reading and Maths Recovery to empower teachers to deal with a range of literacy and numeracy issues in the classroom’ (DESa, 2010:20) requires careful consideration. ‘One-size’ does not fit all classes/schools and there is a danger that an over-reliance on programmes like Reading Recovery or First Steps may result in class teachers viewing these programmes as the only route to good classroom teaching. These programmes are merely two approaches from a wide range of approaches from which the teacher should select, to complement good classroom practice, as options which may support children in accessing and engaging with their classroom curriculum. Schools should be empowered to develop/mediate programmes and pedagogies appropriate to local needs.

**Recommendations:**
- Priority must be given to eliminating child poverty
- Maintain a focus on supporting disadvantaged children and children at risk.

*Exceptional children*

More sophisticated data analyses have been carried out on the findings of PISA 2009 within the *State of the Nation’s Children 2010*, which have provided policy makers with adequate information to enable them to focus on the needs of the more vulnerable groups of children in Ireland, including Traveller children, immigrant children and children with a special educational need. Unfortunately, while the Draft National Plan makes five references to the performance/needs of immigrant children, it makes just one reference to Traveller children, identifying them as belonging to the ‘at risk’ category (DESa, 2010:33). There is no reference in the document to talented children; it is estimated that approximately five per cent of the student population could be identified as gifted or talented (SESS 2010, NCCA 2009). This document does not consider how the creativity and capacity of these students can best be harnessed and promoted within schools.

Most disconcerting of all, the document is silent on provision for children with special educational needs. It is estimated that, at any one time, as many as eighteen per cent of the school population may have special educational needs (Holland, 2009: 7). The majority of these children with SEN have needs arising from borderline general learning disability, mild general learning disability, or dyslexia. These children’s needs are complex, but what they have in common is their need to learn how to read; ‘Enabling the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills is a high priority for all schools and it is
vital that children and young people with special educational needs acquire these skills at an early stage of their school careers’ (Griffin & Shevlin 2007:184). In recent times the ability of these pupils to access the language and mathematics curricula has been severely hampered by cuts in special education support. These cuts include the deferral of the EPSEN Act 2004, which originally was to be fully implemented by 2009, and the reduction in the number of special needs assistants (SNAs).

The absence of reference to, and provision for, these children with special educational needs within the Draft National Plan is unexplained and troubling.

Recommendation:

- Review the provision made in Irish schools for the education of exceptional children.

PARENTS

Parental/familial involvement in children’s education is found to be positively associated with academic achievement across race and culture (e.g. Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003; 2005; West et al., 1998). There are consistent findings in the literature that children who come from homes where parents have higher levels of education and higher income levels have more advanced language skills than other children (e.g. Mantzicopoulous, 1997; Snow et al., 1998; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Cognisant of the strong and well-established link between the home environment and student achievement, we endorse the emphasis on enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development. Again however, the narrow emphasis on the role of parents within this document is limiting - children’s lives and those of their families are increasingly complex and the unit of support for children needs to be both their families (grandparents are frequently caregivers) and the community in which they live.

It is essential that families and communities are involved in an authentic and mutually respectful relationship with schools and teachers in the support of children’s educational development. The development of parent-family-school-community relationships and the process of maintaining supportive models of partnership with parent communities has been researched and developed by the Curriculum Development Unit at MIC. The work of Higgins (2008), Ryan & Galvin (2006, 2007), Tormey & Haran (2003), and Galvin, Higgins & Mahony (2009) are examples of the work published in this area and illustrate the complexity and benefits of developing sustainable and authentic
partnerships with families and communities. Successful partnership programmes demand a cultural shift away from traditional home/school/community interaction towards collaboration and partnership (Galvin, Higgins & Mahony, 2009: 111). This is not a linear process which can be imposed within schools; rather it must be generated and nurtured over time; it will mean a change in many of the everyday practices in schools and a willingness by all stakeholders to engage in a partnership that will need time and commitment.

In this context the suggested approaches within the Draft National Plan, such as the development of a national information campaign and the provision of an ‘information leaflet/pack on literacy and numeracy activities’ (DESa, 2010:48), are initial steps in addressing the complex area of partnership with parents. While an awareness-raising media campaign on the benefits of ‘complementary learning’ (within the home/community, with teachers/family members/volunteers within the community) would be beneficial, deeper and more meaningful approaches must be developed by schools. Barriers to participation in the education of their children exist for parents on many levels. It is essential that each school community examine these barriers and begin the process of addressing these issues, informally and formally, with the parent body. Many schools have already initiated programmes of shared/paired-reading, story sacks, shared maths in schools, while some have ‘parent rooms’. The work of the numerous, very experienced, Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Co-ordinators should be recognised in this regard.

Research-based evidence from schools and parents indicates that parents have difficulty supporting the reading/language aspects of the curriculum as well as the mathematical literacy of their children. This may occur as a result of their own language/ literacy/ mathematical competence, their attitudes and experiences of literacy/mathematics, or due to lack of familiarity with new pedagogies and approaches to teaching reading/mathematics (for example, in mathematics the ‘decomposition’ versus ‘borrow-and-pay-back’ methods of subtraction proves challenging). Schools should, in collaboration with the parent body, identify the supports required to help parents become active agents in their children’s learning.

Recommendations:

- There is a need to increase teachers’ skills in finding new ways to involve ‘hard-to-reach’ families, especially those who are in the most marginalised circumstances.
- Schools hold the ‘gate-keeper’ role in partnership development and they must be aware of the commitment that a genuine partnership process requires and be supported in the development of effective partnerships with parents. Projects such as the Family School
Community Educational Partnership which was hosted by MIC should be funded and promoted.

- Systematic opportunities must be provided to parents within their own communities to refresh and update their own understandings of mathematics and reading skills, with a view to supporting their children’s development.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Early childhood settings

We welcome the emphasis within the Draft National Plan on the quality and competence of early childhood care and education practitioners. The document identifies the core contribution practitioners in early childhood settings make to the development and capacity of children. This recognition of the expertise required to implement the AISTEAR framework within early childhood settings and to design the curriculum for children in these settings is significant. There is an expectation within the document that these practitioners will be able to generate baseline data, engage in assessing the children in the settings, and set appropriate learning goals. The level of critical engagement required and decision-making powers to be demonstrated by practitioners is considerable, and requires appropriate academic qualifications and experience on the part of the practitioner. Within this context, it is useful to review the staffing associated with the introduction of the free pre-school provision for three-to-four year olds in January 2010. While the establishment of this provision is a welcome development, it is evident that the qualifications of the majority of staff providing this early education are minimal. In June 2010, a total of 3,787 ECCE services were under contract to deliver the Free Pre-School Year Scheme. Of this figure, 82.0% of settings met the basic capitation criteria and only 11.0% met the higher capitation criteria (OMCYA, 2010: 68). The higher capitation criteria are: all Pre-school Leaders in a setting hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education (minimum of Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or equivalent) and have three years’ experience working in the sector, and where all Pre-school Assistants hold a relevant major award in childcare/early education at level 5 on the NFQ or its equivalent.

The fact that so few settings have employed the minimum of one Level 7 degree holder to lead the programme within their organisations is most disappointing. Equally, it cannot be assumed that the 82% of providers who met the basic criteria for inclusion in this programme all have a FETAC Level 5 qualification; until September 2012 experienced applicants who have lower level qualifications are
deemed to have met the criteria. If the Government is convinced of the strategic role early childhood practitioners play in providing children with the ‘appropriate developmental experiences that foster a firm foundation in literacy and numeracy’ (DESa, 2010:27), then the minimum educational qualifications of staff in settings must be raised. In addition, minimum payment scales for appropriately qualified staff should be identified; the status of the profession is closely related to the levels of remuneration of personnel. The most recent data on salaries in early childhood settings are based on 2008 scales: staff with up to four years’ experience, earned on average an annual salary of €18,799.56 in 2008, while staff with more than ten years’ experience earned an average salary of €20,340. The average industrial wage in 2008 was €36,000 (Barry and Sherlock, 2008). Currently, many staff in early childhood settings, both community based and privately owned (many of which are currently in receipt of State funding, via the Childcare Subvention Scheme (NCIP, 2006-2010) and the ECCE scheme (OMCYA, 2010) are regularly paid the minimum wage. Given the financing of these settings by the Government, it is essential that the Government now assures citizens that their investment in early childhood provision is used to employ the most highly qualified personnel possible at appropriate salary levels.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen and extend early learning provision
- Develop an early years workforce strategy that will:
  - plan for an increase in the minimum educational qualifications of staff in early childhood settings
  - outline the ratio of staff holding Level 7/8 degrees to other staff
  - prescribe minimum salary scales for ECCE personnel.

*Early years in primary schools*

We welcome the recommendation within the document of a seamless connection between the experiences of children in pre-school provision and in infant classrooms in primary schools. While the document states that the alignment of the AISTEAR framework to the infant curriculum will be challenging, there is no real attempt to address the process associated with implementing this change. However, the document recognises that adequate resources will be required to ensure that there is a uniform curriculum framework across the sectors. In this context, we welcome the proposed introduction of lower teacher-pupil and adult-child ratios in infant classrooms.
TEACHERS AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Teacher professionalism and autonomy

It is a universally accepted truism that the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (McKinsey, 2007). Teaching has deep, traditional roots in Irish society, and enjoys high social status; ‘Traditionally the role of teachers has been respected by the Irish public and this regard is deeply rooted in historical circumstances. Even when teachers did not benefit from a high salary there was still regard for their scholarship, the nature of their work and their roles in communities (Coolahan, 2003:7). Teachers retain the confidence of the public and entry to teacher education programmes remains competitive from highly qualified candidates (Drudy, 2004). In policy documents the Government has periodically paid tribute to the work of teachers, affirming their role in the development of a knowledge society (OECD 1991, 2003, 2005).

In the literature, there is an emerging consensus around the essential dimensions of powerful teacher education (Conway et al., 2009:123). Conway’s analogy with medical education is useful – medical education is: student-centred, problem-based, integrated, community-based, evaluation-focused and special studies oriented (SPICES). Like medicine, teaching suffers from the ‘curse of complexity’ (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Teacher education needs to address the complexity, situatedness, uncertainty and negotiated nature of teaching. It should focus on the need to educate teachers who are able and committed to engage intellectually in examining, analysing and reflecting on practice in order to inform and modify new instruction / assessment practices, to meet new contextual demands. Teacher quality is defined by the ability to negotiate these dynamic contexts and demands, drawing on multiple forms and funds of knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

As part of the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy in the UK (1998-99), the Government there determined both the content and pedagogy to be adopted in schools. While younger teachers may have welcomed the structure and strategies, this approach resulted in the erosion of established teachers’ professional freedom and creativity (Review, 2009:28). Readers of this Draft National Plan see patterns within the document which are reminiscent of the strategy implemented in the UK – generic approaches in schools, reduction in the breadth of the curriculum, and an emphasis on standardised achievement.
We believe that the way to improve literacy and numeracy is to engage with teachers in a collaborative and cooperative manner, to co-engage in problem-solving and dilemma-managing, so as to generate context-appropriate solutions to achievement gaps within the Irish education system. We agree with the assertion, based on experiences in implementing the DEIS strategy, that ‘whole-school commitment is essential to achieving change and improvement, and that every teacher is a key agent of change’ (DESa 2010: 12). However, the Draft National Plan presents an erosion of the level of autonomy currently accorded to teachers to determine priorities, needs, and pedagogical approaches. Any policy that moves to narrow and control the work of teachers in schools, to reduce the opportunities for professional autonomy and decision-making, contravenes international research and best practice, and will not attract the most talented and creative candidates into the teaching profession.

**ACTIONS ON TEACHER EDUCATION**

Throughout the Draft National Plan there are repeated references to Actions; however these are ‘actions to support’ or ‘actions to improve’ various sectors. There is only one sector on which actions will be imposed: teacher education. Based on the fact that this is a document produced by the DES, focusing on literacy, and that we have not been advised of errata, then we can assume that this is not a typographical error on the behalf of the authors. Such an approach is regrettable.

*Teacher education*

At present the length of the undergraduate teacher education programme is of three years’ duration, while the postgraduate programme takes 1.5 years on top of an initial degree qualification. Such lengths are among the shortest in the countries partaking in the OECD (2005) study. In several countries, the period available for initial teacher education is regarded as inadequate and since then some countries have extended the duration of teacher education courses in an effort to improve the quality of the programme on offer e.g. Finland extended its course from four to five years, and Australia increased the duration of its teacher education programme from four to six years (OECD 2005). While internationally a bachelor’s degree is considered the minimum qualification for teaching, in Finland all primary level teachers hold a master’s qualification.

Within this context we welcome the introduction of a four-year BEd programme and a two-year graduate diploma programme as basic qualifications for teaching.
Such an extension facilitates a prolonged school-based experience for students. The Draft Plan advocates an ‘aggregate of one year’ to be school-based and also an increase in the time spent in the classroom of ‘high-quality, experienced teachers of literacy and numeracy’. MIC currently benefits from the enormous goodwill of schools and individual teachers who accept in excess of two thousand placements each academic year. These placements range from two weeks to five weeks in duration. The changes to teaching practice suggested in the document imply a greater level of partnership between schools and colleges than currently exists. A partnership approach is integral to many teacher education programmes internationally (Buchberger et al., 2000; Bullough et al., 1997) and indeed Kirk (2003) recognises the potential benefits collaborative partnerships provide to both schools and colleges. However, while partnership is regularly cited as a guiding principle of teacher education programmes (Korthagen et al., 2006, Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Zeichner, 2010), the challenges involved in developing worthwhile partnerships should not be underestimated (Grundy et al., 2001; Chapman et al., 2003; Sachs, 2003; Geen & Bassett, 2004; Taylor, 2008).

Without strategic support for partnership, the rhetoric surrounding partnership will not lead to improved practices in teacher education. Models of partnership which exist more as rhetoric rather than reality and which are not supported by both parties can be avoided when the purposes and parameters of partnership are negotiated and accepted by all parties. As a starting point, singling out ‘high quality, experienced teachers’ as suitable for partnerships does not bode well for a whole staff mutually beneficial approach to partnership. This approach, though well meaning, adopts the simplistic structures of partnership which do not reflect the complex worlds of teachers and teacher educators (Edwards et al., 2002) and the commitment to the systemic change required to sustain meaningful partnerships (Cameron, 1998).

Communication between partners and mentoring expertise are just two aspects which are integral to successful partnership approaches in teacher education and need time and resources to be developed. In our experience, teachers have demonstrated considerable professional integrity and goodwill in their interaction with students on teaching practice. Proposals to develop partnership can build on this goodwill. However, it should be recognised that a model of partnership which ‘is a statutory requirement of the one party but optional for the other, is not operable’ (Stephenson, 1999). MIC welcomes the opportunity to become a partner with schools and to work towards a strategy which is defined and supported by all stakeholders, principally the college, the schools, the DES and the Teaching Council.
In relation to the composition of the BEd programme the Plan proposes to ‘Discontinue the study of academic subjects currently included within the BEd programme in favour of academic subjects currently related to education in order to allow more time for the development of the professional skills and knowledge of teachers described above’ (DESa, 2010:19). The College finds this proposal unacceptable. We wish to re-affirm strongly the role of the academic subject in the BEd degree and we envisage the extension of the range of academic elective subjects offered within the degree. We note that the Teaching Council’s Draft Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education adopts a more nuanced approach to this issue. The College has, however, concerns about the changed role of the academic subject which seems to be prescribed in that document. Without always directly contributing to the pedagogical formation of teachers, the Liberal Arts elective subjects play a critical role in the cultivation and enhancement of the literacy and numeracy skills of the student teacher and foster the development of teachers as ‘reflective, enquiry-oriented, lifelong learners’ (Mary Immaculate College [2010] ‘B.Ed. Programme Accreditation Submission to the Teaching Council’, p. 6).

The Arts disciplines in general, and foreign languages and cultures in particular, revolve entirely around the acquisition of the essential skills presented in the introduction of the report as encompassed by the modern definition of literacy: ‘the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, print, broadcast media, and digital media’ (p. 9).

We also note a statement is made in the Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (footnote 1) that: ‘literacy refers to the development of these capabilities in the first language of the school [L1]’. It is also important to consider the research available, which has shown clearly that second/third language [L2] learning improves first language [L1] skills, such as ‘listening skills and oral language development and phonemic awareness’. There is evidence of positive transfer for first language as a result of learning an additional language. The benefits of L2 learning for L1 skills apply especially to languages such as English [L1] and German [as L2 or L3], as they are both Germanic languages, i.e. they belong to the same language family. We wish to stress that learning European languages, such as German or French, therefore caters directly for current educational priorities, such as improving literacy among schoolchildren in Ireland.

We also believe that the promotion and enhancement of language awareness (e.g. grammatical meta-language, morphological, phrasal and clausal structures, etc.) will support logical thinking as
well as enhance first language awareness. In the alphabetic writing systems that dominate in the Western world, the connection between the development of transmissible standards of literacy and the deep immersion in classical literary works which the study of many Liberal Arts subjects to degree level requires is demonstrable; there is a now significant body of research which indicates a highly positive correlation between the standard of literacy attained by learners and their immersion in culturally-relevant literature (Bonisse, Rougle, & Langer, 1998). As one Educational researcher recently put it, ‘Literacy, and perhaps above all, the advanced forms of literacy made available in the humanities, constitutes the very ground of educational possibility, the substance of both efficient and reflexive communication as well as a significant element in critical and creative thinking’ (Higgins, J., 2007).

Furthermore, in a context where the various electronic media are now commanding such prevalence, the concept of ‘new literacies’ needs to be considered within the core concept of literacy. There is a need to develop skills to evaluate these media as well as to address what it means to be literate in them. Barnes and O’Neill (2008) note that a central aim of media literacy is to foster critical autonomy, a higher order skill which all educationalists aspire to inculcate in their students and one which enables the child to become a fully functioning, independent adult citizen.

**Recommendations:**

- That appropriate resources be provided to enable teacher education providers support extended and reconceptualised programmes.
- That resources be made available to colleges and schools to develop models of partnership which draw on the expertise of all involved and which impact positively on the learning of all participants.

**Selection of candidates for teaching**

A review of international literature (McKinsey 2007; Whelan 2009) illustrates that school systems which have made teaching an attractive career choice, and which are rigorously selective about who becomes a teacher, tend to be among the top-performing school systems in the world. In Finland there are several rounds in the selection process for primary teachers: initial tests in literacy, numeracy and problem solving, followed by university-based tests to assess communication skills, willingness to learn, academic ability and motivation to teach (McKinsey, 2007: 17). In Helsinki, the number of teacher education places is limited, and there are 15 applications for each place on teacher education programmes (Whelan, 2009: 54). The care with which governments preserve the
number of teacher education places, and the entry qualifications of those who teach, is positively related to the levels of attainment of the children in their schools.

While Ireland continues to prize the quality of its teachers, and colleges can still attract high achieving candidates, the traditional status and culture long associated with being a teacher is under threat. In sharp contrast to the high levels of selection practised in Finland, in 2001 the Irish Government deregulated teacher education, and while the number of student teachers recruited on concurrent and consecutive college-based programmes remains controlled and capped by the DES, there is no control on the number of candidates being recruited by private operators. In November 2010 there were approximately 1,050 enrolled on Hibernia College’s initial teacher education programme (this is before the intake of students in January 2011), while there were 3,769 students enrolled in five State-funded colleges; 647 students graduated from Hibernia in 2010, while 1,552 students graduated from state colleges (www.kildarestreet.com, 9.11.2010 Question 132 to the Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills). The consequence of this policy of deregulation is that in 2011 there are more graduates than posts in education. Oversupply of candidates will result in unemployment among graduates, and consequently will make teaching less attractive to the more able students (McKinsey, 2007:18).

The statements within the Draft National Policy in relation to the protection of the status and quality of teachers do not resonate with the position taken by the Government and Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the Education (Amendment) Bill, 2010. This amendment would undermine the objective of Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act, which is to ensure that all teachers in state-recognised schools have satisfied the Teaching Council’s professional standards. Acknowledging the surplus of qualified teachers who are registered by the Teaching Council, and who are available to provide short-term substitution within Irish schools, we support the stance taken by the Teaching Council in objecting to the employment of unqualified personnel in teaching positions (www.teachingcouncil.ie Statement in relation to the Education (Amendment) Bill, 2010, 2.11.2010).

Statements regarding the high calibre of entrants to teaching in Ireland are usually supported by data from the CAO process each year. An analysis of the CAO points for 2010 entry to universities illustrates that the points’ requirement for integrated Children’s Nursing and General Nursing programmes in UCC (500 points random), TCD (495 points) and UCD (490), exceeded the points required for teaching in all of the colleges. The points in MIC slipped from 480 in 2009 to 475 (random) in 2010. The points required in all other colleges are 475 or lower. As teaching remains a
highly feminised profession, we cannot be complacent about our capacity to continue to attract the best quality candidates to teaching.

In addition, the top performing systems impose high entry requirements on their teaching candidates. In Ireland, the Government has set minimum entry requirements, which generally are exceeded by the CAO points system. Nonetheless, candidates are eligible to gain entry to teacher education with minimum standards in English (D3 Higher level, or C3 Ordinary level), Mathematics (D3 Ordinary or Higher level), and Gaeilge (C3 in Higher level).

We welcome the proposal in the Draft National Plan to raise the entry requirements in Mathematics.

In addition, however, some mechanism needs to be identified to attract candidates to teaching who are high achievers in other domains – for example, the arts and sports. If we are to retain a balanced and broad spectrum of capacities among our teachers, then we need to consider entry criteria other than those identified by Leaving Certificate attainment. This may mean the introduction of a system that recognises and validates the achievement of elite artists, musicians and athletes, who may be under-represented within the teaching population.

Recommendations:

- The deregulation of the teaching profession should be reviewed immediately.
- Entry requirements for teacher education programmes, as specified as grades attained in the Leaving Certificate (Established) examinations, should be raised.
- Consideration should be given to establishing a mechanism which can validate the achievement of elite athletes, artists and musicians, and attract them to the teaching profession.

ASSESSMENT

The NCCA’s *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for schools* (2007) identified a continuum of assessment which is best suited to both the curriculum and teachers’ and schools’ needs, which is authentic and which ‘is about building a picture over time of a child’s progress and/or achievement in learning across the Primary School Curriculum. Information about how the child learns (the learning process) as well as what the child learns (the products of learning) shapes
the picture. The teacher uses this information to identify and celebrate the child’s current learning, and to provide him/her with appropriate support for future learning (2007:6). The *Guidelines* recommend the use of a broad range of assessment approaches including self-assessment, conferencing, portfolio assessment, concept mapping, questioning, teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and tests, and standardised testing. The first seven of these approaches are teacher designed and mediated, and when combined, are strong and effective tools in gathering evidence of children’s performance and achievement. In relation to standardised tests the NCCA asserts, ‘When used in combination with information from other assessment methods standardised test results contribute to the accuracy of the teacher’s monitoring, and assist in identifying the needs of individual children (2007:60). The *Guidelines* advise teachers to avoid over-reliance on a single test score to measure a child’s ability and provide a number of reasons why a score may not accurately reflect a child’s capacity (2007:61). Similarly, The Joint Force on Assessment of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English (IRA and NCTE) issued *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* (2010) which are to guide decisions about assessing the teaching and learning of literacy. These standards state that:

- The interests of the student are paramount in assessment.
- The teacher is the most important agent of assessment.
- The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.
- Assessment must recognise and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing.
- The consequences of an assessment procedure are the first and most important consideration in establishing the validity of the assessment.
- The assessment process should involve multiple perspectives and sources of data.

However, the ideology contained within the Draft National Plan where summative and standardised testing are emphasised and prioritised, contrasts starkly with the above examples of best practice. The word ‘test’ appears 34 times in the document and the specified purpose of testing is in order to compare children’s achievement/ability levels with others. The form of assessment advocated in the document is narrowly focused, restrictive and misleading. It is predicated on the assumption that testing itself drives up standards or that SATs are the only way to hold schools to account. Overemphasis on summative assessment means that the learning opportunities provided in formative assessment are not realised; this approach will undoubtedly impact on the type of teaching/learning enacted in the classroom.
Recommendations:

- That the nature and purpose of assessment recommended within this document be extended to reflect the complexity of assessing language and mathematics attainment.
- That the assessment system should be aligned with the broad set of outcomes that the school system seeks to develop and should not be restricted to what is measured by national/standardised tests.

QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP

Literature on school leadership is filled with references regarding the essential role of principals in ensuring that schools are effective. Although a substantial amount of literature also discusses shared leadership, fundamental to all of the discussion regarding effective schools is the role of the principal. Few would argue that the leadership of any organisation is other than a complex task.

According to the Department of Education and Science:

A leader requires the ballast of a comprehensive range of management skills to meet the current challenges of principalship, to balance the need for continuity and stability within the school community with the increasing demand by policy-makers and the wider community for change, innovation and transformation (1999, p. 27).

Research conducted over the last twenty years on school improvement and school effectiveness consistently cites good leadership as key to success. In a 2003 study on the conditions and concerns of principals in Virginia, USA, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) state, ‘There is a general belief that good school principals are the cornerstones of good schools and that without a principal’s leadership, efforts to raise student achievement cannot succeed’ (p. 1). Fullan (2006) asserts unequivocally that principals are not only crucial for school-wide improvement, but that they are key to system improvement, stating:

The principal is the nerve centre of school improvement. When principal leadership is strong even the most challenged schools thrive. When weak schools fail or badly underperform ... the research is irrefutable in concluding that the principal is the pivotal figure when it comes to success (2006, p. 9).

We welcome the emphasis within the Draft National Plan on building the capacity of school leaders. The commitment to invest in programmes to assist aspiring principals and established principals develop their skills in leading schools, creating a shared vision, and sharing responsibility for attaining goals, is significant. The Draft National Plan recognises the role principals play in leading the development of contextualised whole school plans. The commitment to providing appropriate professional development programmes to prepare aspiring principals to engage actively in instructional leadership is particularly welcome in light of ‘increasing concerns in Ireland about the difficulty of attracting potential school leaders to the role of school principal’ (Leadership Development for Schools, 2007). Research published by the Irish Primary Principals’ Network (IPPN, 2006) points to an emerging crisis in the recruitment and retention of principals in primary schools. They describe the leadership of our schools as being at a ‘critical juncture’. The average age of principals is increasing, rates of application for the principalships are decreasing and the negative perceptions of the role, coupled with job difficulties and salary issues, are leading to what Gronn and Rawlings-Sanaei (2003) describe as ‘leadership disengagement’.

**SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION**

The Draft National Plan promotes a strong culture of school self-evaluation. This approach, which places trust in the leaders of schools and the professionalism of teachers to self-evaluate and to generate the data on which they will be held accountable, is affirming of schools and motivating for teachers. This process recognises that external inspection, while having the potential to stimulate reflection and change, cannot implement change within schools. Schools must design and implement change for themselves, if change is to be authentic and sustained. The move towards greater school self-evaluation is evident in many regions and countries, for example Slovakia, Denmark, Flanders, and Scotland (www.sici-inspectorates.org). Inspectorates in these countries are moving to a shorter form of inspection through examination of a number of risk factors and assessment of school self-evaluation reports.

We recognise the shift initiated by the DES within the Whole School Evaluation process and welcome the evolution of the WSE process into a self-evaluative procedure.
POLICY PROCESS

The partnership/consensual approach to curriculum design and reform developed during the 1990s has been the subject of positive comment and praise within international publications (OECD, 2002). Following the publication of the Green Paper on Education in 1991 there was an unprecedented level of debate throughout the country at meetings, conferences, symposia and seminars. Almost 1,000 written submissions were lodged with the Department of Education in response to the Paper. In advance of the Government finalising its policy decisions in a White Paper, the Minister for Education convened the National Education Convention. It took place over two weeks in Dublin Castle in October 1993, and was attended by representatives of forty-two organisations. The Minister for Education at the time attended the convention and actively listened to the contributions made; ‘ideas were on the move’ (Coolahan, 1994). This process of engagement with the public, practitioners, and partners in education, gave rise to the concept of partnership, which has ensured in the intervening two decades that time and effort is invested in processes of genuine consultation and collaboration in advance of the launch of new policies/initiatives. Ireland was at the forefront of consultation and cooperation and was recognised as a leader in the field of consensus policy development.

However, the established procedure for policy formation generated over the last two decades has been disregarded in the development of this Draft National Policy. It is understandable given the political uncertainty and the evolving fiscal crisis enveloping the country in November 2010 that political leaders required a ‘quick-fix’ approach to the perceived problems with the educational system. This impetus has resulted in the formulation of a reactionary document and a truncated period for submissions, both of which reflect a limited and exclusionary approach to policy making. The formation of policy ‘behind closed doors’ followed by a foreshortened period of consultation is to be regretted.

CONCLUSION

The study of the history of Irish education informs us that there have been cyclical attempts to narrow the focus of education and to introduce assessments with a view to improve standards. However, it also informs us that the narrow delineation of curriculum and annual assessment within
the Payment by Results policy of the nineteenth century and the reduction of curriculum and the associated assessment of English, Gaeilge and Mathematics within the Primary Certificate programme of the twentieth century did little to improve the actual quality of educational provision or attainment in their respective eras. It is historical myopia to consider that a similar approach with a somewhat twenty-first century construct will be any more successful.

Recent literature on the nature of school system performance and student attainment illustrate that most school systems have struggled to improve but few demonstrate that substantial and sustained improvement over time is possible (Whelan, 2009:13). The earliest representative national record of educational performance for the United States was the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which was established in 1969. The NAEP scores illustrate that the average level of literacy and numeracy among Americans leaving school today is almost exactly the same as it was when the tests were initiated. Despite a massive increase in spending, resources and employment of teachers, there is no difference between the scores of 17-year olds today in both reading and mathematics and the scores of 17-year olds in the 1970s (Whelan, 2009:19). Similarly, in England there was no improvement in average levels of literacy and numeracy between the years 1948-1996. Most school systems tolerate a level of failure and inconsistency no longer tolerated in other sectors of society (Whelan, 2009: 192). Whelan’s thesis is that school systems may achieve improvements in standards, but following a period of growth, they reach a plateau, above which they find it difficult to rise. Indeed their standards on assessments may stagnate.

However, some school systems are successful and have strong records of educational achievement. Following an international search to find the best and most effective school systems, Whelan identified a small number of systems which deliver high quality schooling and where the children consistently achieve high standards, and identified the seven ‘lessons’ for improving performance in school systems:

- Have fewer but better teachers
- Get the right people to become teachers
- Ensure that every school has effective leadership
- Set high standards and measure whether they are achieved
- Create structures which empower people, hold them accountable and encourage collaboration
- Invest in teachers’ professional knowledge and skills
While the Draft National Policy attempts to learn the above lessons, and plans a policy which will address each in turn, the depth of engagement with these ‘lessons’ is limited and fails to capture the richness of interpretations provided by Whelan. Hence, for example, Whelan’s advice to ‘set high standards and measure whether they are achieved’ becomes translated into the DES policy as an affirmation of standardised testing. This is a very pale interpretation of the complex arguments presented by Whelan. Throughout the Draft National Policy, Whelan’s framework is visible, but the interpretation of this framework within the Policy is, to date, shadowy and superficial.

The challenge of improving teaching and learning within modern schools is a shared one, and should be addressed on a number of levels, with greater sophistication than exhibited in previous centuries. There is considerable willingness among teacher educators to participate collaboratively in the design and implementation of a National Plan to improve the literacy and numeracy of children. Given the commitment and energy already demonstrated by the DES in developing this draft, and the enthusiasm among teacher educators and education partners in general to cooperate and collaborate in the further development of the document, we are entering a really fertile period of growth and development. If the opportunity to collaborate is grasped and exploited, if adequate time is invested in the process, and if there is a willingness to delve below the surface of the proposed new framework, then Irish education could be on the cusp of one of the most exciting periods of reform in its history.
References


34


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