Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People
A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

A Response

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1. The Draft Plan is a welcome statement of commitment to a number of important priorities in Irish education. This short response will refer to two elements of the Draft Plan – the treatment of Teacher Education and the treatment of literacy and numeracy within the curriculum of primary and post-primary schools. The response is presented in short summary-paragraph format as a headline exposition of issues, rather than a more discursive and engaging document, which would require more time than is available.

Teacher Education

2. The proposals presented for structural provision of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Induction and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers are welcome. The case for extending the duration of the undergraduate and postgraduate models of teacher education at primary and post-primary levels are welcome. They confirm the position that has been advocated by teacher educators for some time and by the reviews of teacher education by Kellaghan and Byrne some ten years ago.

3. There are some further considerations that must be borne in mind in any such policy implementation, including the issue of resources for extended duration of ITE provision. These resourcing matters apply both to the providers of ITE and to the participants themselves. There are also important policy and procedural matters to be addressed in relation to Induction and to CPD. In relation to the welcome commitment to Induction, there must be an acknowledgement of the inadequacies of the current model, which has been mainstreamed this school year. A model more securely based within the profession, incorporating defined roles for host schools, mentors and teacher educators must be at the heart of an induction programme. Similar considerations apply to CPD, including provision for credit accumulation and inter-sectoral (primary and post-primary) provision.

4. The challenges involved in restructuring ITE, Induction and CPD, however, should not be seen as deterrents to change. The challenges must be addressed by teacher education providers as much as by the DES and resource scarcity is not an excuse to block change.

Innovations in ITE and curriculum design

5. Provision should be made for a broader model of teacher education that will address the current disjunction between primary and post-primary education. Courses in initial teacher education (ITE) at primary and post-primary levels should incorporate overt treatment of, experience in and engagement with the other sector. There should
also be room for the introduction and growth of new models of professional profile, teachers who would be qualified to teach in some contexts at both primary and post-primary levels. This could involve primary school teachers teaching in the junior cycle of post-primary schools and equally, post-primary teachers teaching in the senior classes of primary schools.

6. There needs to be fundamental rethinking of the nature of teaching and learning over the period of compulsory schooling. Framing this in a continuum of provision from 6 to 16 years is not a new idea, but one that has lain fallow for too long. Such a continuum would have direct relevance for the continuity of curriculum and assessment that is a contributory element to literacy and numeracy education. It would also address issues of pupil trauma at points of transition and of subject continuity, especially in so-called specialist areas like the arts, physical education, ICTs and other domains.

7. The role of the Teaching Council in opening up such possibilities for the profession would of course be vital in this process. The introduction of such bilateral professionals would also require significant planning and organisation by teacher education departments, school management bodies, curriculum designers and associated support structures for teachers. The policy signal of the DES however, would be an essential starting point for such a departure.

8. A weakness of the current DES Strategy document is that, for all its emphasis on radical intervention, it seems to accept as a given the current divide between primary and post-primary levels in terms of teacher education and of curriculum. A truly radical intervention would open up possibilities for this divide to be crossed, not as a universal model but as a developmental approach, involving both initial and continuing teacher education.

Literacy and Numeracy and the Curriculum

9. The interpretation of literacy and numeracy (L&N) in the Draft Strategy appears somewhat confused. The opening paragraphs present a broad interpretation of what L&N mean in the contemporary world. The critical and cultural literacies required for living in contemporary society demand a deeper understanding of L&N than a set of functional skills. While this note is struck at the start of the document, the rest of the Draft Strategy seems to revert to a reductive, skills-based interpretation. Despite statements to the contrary, most of the document presents L&N as ‘more’ English and Maths.

10. Even the advocacy of ‘literacy across the curriculum’ appears to be in the context of how other subjects can reinforce learning in the subjects of English and Maths. By contrast, the document loses the opportunities to advocate a reinterpretation of various subject disciplines in terms of the forms of literacy that they can promote within their disciplinary remit. Thus, for example, the capacity for children and adolescents to learn through (not just about or in) the arts is surprisingly absent for the document, despite the evidence gleaned from the application of multiple
Intelligence theory and of the increasing awareness of complementarity between the arts and sciences in terms of experiential learning, fostering creativity and motivating learners. The development of understanding of concepts involving space and form through three-dimensional art and design, for instance, is an inherently powerful means of developing applied mathematical understanding and capacities for estimation, visualisation and development of spatial intelligence.

11. Contemporary understanding of L&N is not simply a matter of including references and applications of new technologies in learning. There is also a need for critical and cultural literacies to equip learners to engage with an increasingly visual environment. L&N policy that reverts to an essentially ‘back-to-basics’ model is entirely inappropriate for the 21st century. Unfortunately, there are strong indications that this is the underpinning orientation of the draft strategy. Even the use of the term ‘relentless’ at least five times in relation to the focus on L&N implies a simplistic reliance on testing as the ‘stick’ with which to achieve higher performance; the same logic that was used in respect of the Primary Certificate many years ago by Eamon deValera when as Minister for Education he made the Primary Certificate examination compulsory for all school pupils so as to ensure adequate literacy and numeracy standards. The resultant impact on the nature and quality of teaching in primary schools was not positive. The recent experience in the US in terms of high-stakes assessment based on the same premise does not augur for any greater success.

Concern for the Arts

12. Finally, I wish to make a perhaps predictable, but nonetheless valid, protest at the treatment of arts education in the Draft Plan. There is a recognisable ‘code’ embedded in statements such as the following:

… we will have to make hard choices: we will have to give priority to the improvement of literacy and numeracy over other desirable, important but ultimately less vital issues (p. 11);

In recent years there has been a demand from organisations, interest groups and various educators that additional emphasis should be placed on such areas as social and life skills, environmental issues, arts and music education, scientific understanding and numeracy among others (p. 25).

13. Decoded, these statements and the threads running between the lines of the draft plan indicate a further marginalisation of the role of the arts in education.

14. The role of the arts can be justified both on intrinsic grounds (the unique learning experiences that arts education provide) and on extrinsic grounds, including the fostering of L&N (as indicated earlier in point 10 above). However, the crucial point is that arts education (whether in the visual arts in other art disciplines) can contribute to L&N through the arts disciplines themselves, not as a reinforcement of ‘more spelling exercises’ or ‘more maths problems’. The ‘relentless focus’ on, and the
increased timetabling allocations for L&N advocated in the strategy seem to indicate a simplistic, ‘more-of-the-same’ approach.

15. The general curricular thrust of the document is to further marginalise the arts as less important than other aspects of the curriculum (despite the confused set of examples given in the second quotation in point 12 above). It is alarming to hear sense such reductive sentiments emerging form the DES, all the more so when the same document contains much of merit and of constructive orientation. Support for the constructive elements of the strategy should not be seen as allowing some quite regressive policy positions go unchallenged.

In conclusion, I commend the DES on the publication of this important Draft Plan. My colleagues and I in NCAD are more than anxious to engage further with this process and would welcome an opportunity to participate in the next phase of policy formulation.

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