Submission to

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

Prepared for

The National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group

Prepared by

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February 2011
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1. Introduction

The Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools document is a sincere effort to address issues of literacy and numeracy in Irish primary and second level schools. In the opening invitation to that document, the Minister for Education and Skills notes:

This draft plan is only a beginning: I need your contribution to getting our plan and our actions right. That is why I am inviting your ideas and suggestions about how we can plan and work to improve the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy for our young people. Full details of how you can make your suggestions are at the end of this document. All the ideas and suggestions received will help to finalise a national plan for improving literacy and numeracy in schools.

This response from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, reflects a process of engagement with its staff and students, and offers comments and suggestions on the Draft Plan in an effort to promote meaningful engagement with the Department.

This response is presented in four sections. The first provides a summary of some of the general responses from staff and students in the School. This feeds into a general consensus on good teaching, and leads to some related points on Teacher Education in the second section. The third and fourth sections offer specific comments and recommendations in the areas of literacy and numeracy.

In its response, the School acknowledges and welcomes the positive contributions that the Draft Plan can make to an important dialogue within Irish education and society, and identifies some issues in the document that might be changed with a stronger focus on research.

It is hoped this response can contribute to improving the pedagogical development of literacy and numeracy in the short and longer-term future of Irish education and schooling, and the School looks forward to continued engagement in these discussions.
2. **General Feedback**

- **Reference to research:** the *Draft Plan* does not allude to its sources or present a comprehensive review of research as relevant to the issues discussed in the document. It may be easier to respond constructively if the sources or approaches on which the draft plan is based were explicitly identified.

- **Definitions:** the document fails to present a comprehensive and/or adequate definition of literacy and numeracy or identify the models of language underpinning them. There are two issues here: one is about an adequate model of literacy in terms of learning, and the second is about its functionality in the 21st century. The School of Education emphasises the need for a broader approach to literacy and numeracy learning and teaching, which avoids a narrowing of focus on the basics, and reflects a wider conception of ‘literacies’ (for example, verbal, mathematical, kinaesthetic, media, musical and visual).

- **Funding and resource issues:** these are not clearly identified. Such identification will be necessary in the final version of the plan.

- **Assessment:** the *Draft Plan* places significant emphasis on increased ‘assessment of learning’. Less attention is given to ‘assessment for learning’, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that requiring a teacher to test his/her pupils more frequently may have little or no impact on pupils’ literacy and numeracy abilities unless a teacher knows how to modify practice so as to meet pupils’ needs. In this context it should be noted that, while the emphasis on early intervention is welcomed, a distinction exists between early assessment and early action. The School is concerned that early assessment may have little impact on literacy/numeracy learning and teaching if teachers do not know ‘how to act’, and if other partners in education are not adequately resourced so that they can contribute to early assessment and action.

- **Comparisons:** reference to the ‘Schools Like Ours’ initiative is of concern, as school comparisons could result in league tables without due consideration.

- **Emphasis on good initial teaching:** the School is supportive of the orientation towards fundamental *good teaching* that appears to underpin the *Draft Plan*, and notes that ‘recovery-type’ programmes have thrived where they reflect appropriately good teaching approaches, complemented by CPD and whole-school support. For example, in respect of ‘First Steps’, the limited research on its success highlights the pertinent role that effective, school-based, sustained CPD and effective school leadership has played in its implementation. In this context there is evidence to suggest that no single programme can provide a universal remedy.
or provide a substitute for effective lifelong professional development, reflection and adaptation given the needs of a particular school and its pupils.

3. **Teacher Education**

The School of Education supports the *Draft Plan* in recognising the need for providing appropriate teacher education, and argues for its primacy in realising good and well supported teaching which must underpin all initiatives in education and schooling.

- In particular, the School supports the proposal to increase the length of ITE programmes at both primary and second level. This would provide valuable time to incorporate more pedagogy / methods in all subjects, as well as specific work on literacy / numeracy (including all aspects of ‘literacies’ as identified above).

- The School also notes that research supports a higher entrance requirement in Mathematics for primary teaching, as suggested in the *Draft Plan*. As pointed out in the document, the entry requirement currently is a D3 in the Ordinary level Leaving Certificate; research has indicated the likelihood that holders of ‘low’ grades (C and D) at Ordinary level do not have the appropriate content knowledge / skill level for third-level study involving Mathematics (Close et al., 2007; Oldham & Forrest, 2009). The School suggests that at least a B grade might be appropriate; the requirement could be higher.

- The key issues for the School relate to entry level, mentoring in schools, appropriate induction and CPD.

4. **Literacy: Comments and Suggestions**

A meaning-centred approach is often used in the literature to encompass literacy teaching that attends to literacy skills and competencies in a meaningful and purposeful way. Concerns in the School were expressed that the *Draft Plan* and its treatment of literacy prioritises a skills-orientated view of literacy, and that in its ‘relentless focus’ on such a narrow conception of literacy skills and competencies, it disregards the importance of their exploration in meaningful, imaginative and purposeful contexts, and sacrifices such areas as drama and media studies, multi-culturalism, literacy across the curriculum and links between English, IRIS and MFLS.

There is one mention of grammar in the *Draft Plan* (31), notably: ‘...greater emphasis on skills such as grammar...’. However, there is no explication of what grammar might be featured in schools, or the value of such an inexplicit grammar. Current research suggests that grammar is important in relation to children progressing more strongly in their development of both spoken and written English, as well as coming to a more nuanced understanding of the differences between written and spoken English.
The School suggests that the National Implementation Group could consider appropriate ways of introducing English grammar in schools, at all levels of the education system (see Schleppegrell, 2004 and Myhill and Jones, 2007), and explore the distinction between language awareness and knowledge about language (KAL).

There is a single mention of the term genre in the Draft Plan (30) which states that there should be a focus on, ‘…literary texts and genres such as poetry, novels, short stories and plays…’. However, there is no explicit definition of the term genre and no reference to the strong (and contested) academic background of the term in relation to literacy development. Literacy programmes have been developed in several countries based on genre and the relation between specific genres (rigorously defined) and the grammars that underpin the successful realisation of the genre by students in schools. Such literacy programmes have accounted for differences between spoken and written aspects of schools genres. The School suggests that the National Implementation Group could explore site-specific pedagogies based on genre theory (such as the Scope and Scales project, 2004; also see Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Hasan and Williams, 1997; and Unsworth, 2000). Such efforts have sought to extend the definition, and application, of genre within the classroom, and offer potential for heightening students’ understanding and use of genres both in school and daily life. It is not suggested that the Group adopt any of these programmes. Rather, the School is proposing research into their use in ways specifically adapted to Irish schools at primary and second levels.

There is little evidence within the Draft Plan of the precise language demands placed on students in the development of literacy and numeracy. There has been significant research into the specific features of English that are required in the learning of Maths in primary and second level schools. A feature of such research is that students can learn that which is taught to them and a key focus of such teaching is via language, including the subject-specific language required in learning (for instance, in Maths). The School suggests that international research in the field of linguistics which has informed the specific features of literacy and numeracy (see Halliday, 2007; Schleppegrell, 2004) could be compared with recent Irish research (see English Language Support Programme) in the same area in order to determine if research in specific countries might contribute to better teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy within Irish schools in the future.

5. **Numeracy: Comments and Suggestions**

   The School concurs with the Draft Plan that numeracy should be a priority area and accorded more time than is currently the case, but argues against a narrow understanding of numeracy; rather, it argues for prioritising good initial teaching of Mathematics (see for example Westwood, 2001, 2004). This recommendation is made in the context of the erosion of time for Mathematics over at least four decades and notably in the last decade. When the Primary Curriculum was revised in the 1990s (with the Mathematics section being introduced in 2002), the minimum intended time allocation per week for Mathematics was specified as only three hours. This was notably less than the time then typically given in school classes (over four hours per week in Fourth class, according to the 1999 National
Assessment of [Fourth Class] Mathematics Achievement (Shiel et al., 2006). Subsequent assessments have shown that, although the recommended time of three hours is typically exceeded, the allocation falls short of that recorded in the 1999 study (Eivers et al., 2010). Similarly, when the Junior Certificate was revised in the 1990s, the content was geared to an allocation of 5 periods per week for three years; data collected since then indicate that in many cases less time is given. In both curricular revisions, some content was removed to allow for a greater focus on understanding; the reduction in time negated the intentions, and may have contributed for instance to the poor results in the recent PISA study (Perkins et al., 2010). Against this reality, the Draft Plan is to be commended in aiming to redress this reduction in time.

The use made of the time is of key importance. The School recommends the full implementation of the Mathematics curricula, again via good teaching, which would allow for the development of conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, strategic competence (for problem solving), adaptive reasoning (for logical thought and explanation) and productive disposition (seeing mathematics as making sense and as worth while) (Kilpatrick et al., 2001). Specifically, it endorses the support given in the Draft Plan to Project Maths, with its focus on teaching for understanding and on solving problems in meaningful contexts, which is particularly important in addressing numeracy issues.

As mentioned earlier, the School endorses the Draft Plan in terms of raising initial teacher education entrance requirements for primary teaching programmes, and the length of these programmes, and providing appropriate course in Mathematics within the degree programme. At present, B.Ed. programme time has to be given to teaching material that should be, but is not, well understood and competently used. The time could be reallocated to study that provides the special mathematical knowledge for teaching that is uniquely appropriate for primary teachers (Hill et al., 2008), and also to engaging in mathematical studies likely to enhance the students’ interest in the subject and deepen their appreciation of its power.
Select References


