Submission to

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

(Drama)

Prepared for

The National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group

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1. Introduction

The Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools document is a welcome strategy to address issues of literacy and numeracy in Irish primary and second level schools.

This submission is specifically targeted at the proposed diminution of the subject area of Drama in the Primary Curriculum as encompassed in the following recommendations in the Draft Plan (30):

- […] to incorporate Drama activities and the time for this subject within time for L1 to ensure that the specific total time for L1 and mathematics rises from seven hours per week to ten hours per week in first to sixth classes.

- Over time, revise the required learning outcomes in subjects other than L1, mathematics and science to take account of the reduced time available for these subjects and provide guidance on the possibilities for cross-curricular teaching and learning in areas such as drama, music and visual arts.

As an internationally renowned centre of excellence for Drama Education, this response from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, represents 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 DES. The opinions of teachers, student teachers, pupils, parents, academics, research students, international experts, and international arts and drama representative bodies, are represented.

The response is presented in five sections. The first discusses aspects of the role and value of drama education, which leads to a brief summation of the relationship between art and pedagogy in section two, positing that good art equals good learning outcomes and experiences. The third and fourth sections refer specifically to the use of drama in literacy and numeracy development, and emphasise the importance of a balanced artistic and educational approach to the arts. The fifth section identifies national and international imperatives to retaining arts education as linked to our cultural heritage and creativity in society. The final section recognises that drama as a subject is still in its infancy and suggests that it is given sufficient time to impact meaningfully on the formal educational system. It argues that to reduce it to a teaching method will not yield any substantial gains in the areas of literacy or numeracy, and could significantly impoverish Irish pupils’ arts entitlement.

It is hoped that this response can contribute to informing the discussion on improving the pedagogical development of literacy and numeracy without leading to the diminution of drama, and the School looks forward to continued engagement in these discussions.
2. The Role and Value of Drama Education

Life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify. (Goffman, 1969: 78)

Drama touches most people’s lives in some form or other, but typically in contemporary society, through watching television soap operas, going to the movies or attending the theatre. However, drama has a long and distinguished history, being recognised for its ability to impact powerfully on participants since the time of Aristotle (cf Poetics). Its unrivalled capacity to engage people on a personal, social, spiritual, cognitive and emotional level has been used to extraordinary effect throughout the succeeding two millennia. For example, owing to the immediacy of its impact, drama can affect people in different ways, and historically it has been viewed less than favourably by dominant hegemonies and authoritarian regimes wishing to suppress its ability to move audiences and mould attitudes (Banham, 1995). As is the case with all art which has the power to ‘move people’, the educational use of drama has the potential to connect with people both emotionally and cognitively, resulting in what we call ‘felt understanding’; a type of knowing which results in people taking a personal interest in issues and wanting to effect change. This potentially subversive power has been recognised throughout the Ages by different ruling élites and oppressive regimes, who sought to diminish or eradicate its power through banning or severely censoring it. For example, from as early as the fifth century B.C. Aristophanes’ ‘Lysistrata’ attracted censorship (Sova, 2004), and until the Theatres Act of 1968, the British Lord Chamberlain’s Examiner of Plays expunged and refused dramatic texts on a weekly basis (Nicholson, 1906), fearing the connection between political radicalism and social unrest, and the powerful role of theatricality in everyday life (Worrall, 2006).

Despite the impact of censorship (Houchin, 2003 and Goldstein, 2009), drama has been recognised for many years as a useful educational approach in the fields of business, psychology and education. Harriet Finlay-Johnson (1912) and Henry Caldwell Cook (1917) were using dramatic play in schools in England at the turn of the twentieth century, while Jacob Levy Moreno [1908] was similarly exploring its use with children in Vienna, before later developing its application in therapeutic procedures known as psychodrama (Moreno, 1939). Its potential as a valuable educational approach has endured throughout the twentieth century, and with the publication of Maier, Solem and Maier’s training manual for role playing in 1957, an ever-increasing number of researchers have been motivated to use drama as part of their research design in applied disciplines such sociology, education, management science and industrial relations. Maier, Solem and Maier (1957) describe one of the benefits of using drama as being able to demonstrate the gap between thinking and doing.

In the succeeding fifty years, drama has been widely used in education (see Bolton, 1998; Grady, 2000; O’Neill, 2006; Crimmens, 2006; Fleming, 2006), and most recently, in the area of on-line role-play where people engage in on-line roles through their experiences of playing video games or participating in virtual worlds (Gee, 2004 and Shaffer, 2006). These experiences, while usually recreational, can also offer valuable educational outcomes, such as the acquisition of the literacy practices of collective intelligence, problem-solving, strategic thinking, interpreting contexts and imaginative play (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2009).
2. **Good art is required for good pedagogical practice**

Despite its long history in education, the School would suggest that drama education has had mixed success in terms of establishing itself in the formal education system, and this has left the subject vulnerable, as is the case in the Draft Plan (30), where it is proposed to subsume it into other areas of the curriculum, and reduce it to a teaching method. Research conducted in the last two decades is conclusive in confirming that drama education is most effective when due attention is paid to the development of the art form (Nicholson, 1999, 2008 and 2010; Fleming, 2008). Thus, good art results in effective learning and good practice, and poor art can result in significantly inferior learning and shoddy practice (i.e. where neither art nor learning are occurring). A balance between the art form and its use in applied practice ensures maximum efficacy.

Despite its relatively recent introduction to the Irish Primary Curriculum, there have been many postgraduate studies completed in the Irish context alone (over 150 at diploma, masters and doctoral level in the last ten years in TCD), which confirm its contribution to the intellectual, emotional and physical development of the child (as emphasised in the Primary Curriculum). These studies have shown that art without pedagogy, and vice versa, is ineffective when used in primary and secondary education (Fleming, 2000; Heathcote, 2000).

3. **Literacy and Drama Education**

Notwithstanding the somewhat limited definition of literacy provided in the Draft Plan, which currently does not account for a broader conception of ‘literacies’ (for example, verbal, mathematical, kinaesthetic, media, musical and visual), drama education can and does play a valuable role in the development of children’s literacy skills. However, it similarly relies on a broadening conception of its role as a subject, which incorporates both the art form and best pedagogical practice as alluded to above. The School strongly argues against any reduction or narrowing of its role in the education system, as is implied in the current Draft Plan. This would severely impair and distort its educational impact, and reduce its use to a ‘bag of educational tools or tricks’, which research has demonstrated, quickly becomes tedious and repetitive, and over time fails to engage learners.

Research is conclusive in its findings that drama education has been significantly influential in improving not only pupils’ attitudes to literacy in its broadest sense, but also in terms of substantially improving pupils’ skill levels in such areas as reading, writing, speaking, listening, poetry appreciation, engagement with Shakespeare and literary texts, first and second language learning, vocabulary development, approaches to genre studies and active engagement with grammar (see Montgomery and Ferguson, 1999; Kempe, 2003; Fleming, Merrell and Tymms, 2004; Crumpler, 2005; Cremin et al. 2006; Chan, 2009). The use of drama education is reported in the research and related professional literature as being specifically effective with pupils’ with general and specific learning needs, and in creating an inclusive and motivating learning environment. But unlike the approach advocated in the early stages of the National Literacy Strategy in the UK, which focused on a ‘back to basics’ conception of literacy and engaged learners in a repetitive routine of functional activities (Stannard and Huxford, 2007), including drama and word games, the research-informed understanding of drama education as envisaged in the Irish Primary Curriculum, is effective only when practised as a subject and not reduced to a stand-alone teaching method (Bowell and Heap, 2005; Neelands, 2009).
4. **Drama education and its cross-curricular application**

The School welcomes the recognition in the *Draft Plan* (30) of the valuable role that drama can play in literacy and numeracy development, and acknowledges its role as an effective teaching strategy:

 [...] role-play is a spontaneous, dramatic, creative teaching strategy in which individuals overtly and consciously assume the roles of others. It involves multi-level communication and is a powerful affective teaching strategy that influences attitudes and emotions and promotes higher-level cognitive and affective thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and valuing. (Sellers, 2002: 498)

This definition underpins the claim that role-play is an effective strategy for learning because it encourages participants to think about the person whose role is assumed, is connected to real-life situations, and promotes active, personal involvement in learning (Billings and Halstead, 2005). These conceptions of drama rely on the understanding that it operates most effectively when a balance is achieved between the art form and the pedagogy, and not one without the other (O’Sullivan, 2011). This emphasis is borne out in the literature which is replete with empirical accounts of studies where drama education has been highly effective in both primary and second level schools (see O’Toole and Burton 2005; Bergen, 2009; Kempe, 2009). The proposed re-allocation of time from the subject of Drama to use as a teaching method in literacy and numeracy will result in false economy, and would operate in contradiction to the evidence from the literature which supports the use of drama as an art form in classrooms, rather than a stand-alone teaching method (Heathcote, 1980; Heathcote, 1991; O’Neill, 1995; Bowell and Heap, 2001).

5. **Cultural heritage**

The School’s defence of drama education continuing as a subject on the Primary Curriculum, is based not only on its long established history in educational settings as alluded to above, but also on its valuable tradition as part of our cultural heritage. Ireland was one of the first countries in the world to introduce drama as a subject in its Primary Curriculum, a position that is being advocated in international discussions on arts education currently. A major outcome of the Second UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education (25-28 May 2010) was a plan of action entitled *The Seoul Agenda: Goals for the development of arts education*. This document calls on ‘UNESCO Member States, civil society, professional organisations and communities to recognise its governing goals, to employ the proposed strategies, and to implement the action items in a concerted effort to realise the full potential of high quality arts education to positively renew educational systems, to achieve crucial social and cultural objectives, and ultimately to benefit children, youth and life-long learners of all ages’ (2). [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=41117&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=41117&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

This conference was entitled: *Arts for Society, Education for Creativity*, and recognised the ‘critical value’ of arts education and ‘promoted the value of high-quality arts education for all in developing capacity for creativity in the twenty-first century and strengthened cooperation among the main actors (national authorities, local governments, teachers, artists, researchers, associations and NGOs) in order to work together to develop practices and reinforce the position of arts education in schools and in societies’. In order to achieve this, the Director-General of the United Nations is being called upon to ensure adequate inter-
sectoral cooperation between the Culture and Education Sectors of UNESCO in promoting and integrating arts education. Further, in October of 2010, the Executive Board of UNESCO unanimously adopted a resolution inviting Member States to implement the action items contained in the Seoul Agenda.

The School is concerned that the proposal contained in the Draft Plan (28, 30) regarding the subject status and time allocation to Drama appears to be in contravention of the UNESCO Executive Board recommendations cited above. This position has been confirmed to staff in the School by the holder of the UNESCO Chair in Arts and Learning, Professor Larry O’Farrell, Head of the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Ontario, Canada. The School wishes to emphasise that the proposal to reduce the subject of drama to a teaching method only in the Primary Curriculum would serve to destroy its integrity as an art form and also its efficacy as a teaching approach.

Pupils’ entitlement to participate freely in cultural life and the arts under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is an issue of key concern to many well-established arts and education groups in Ireland currently. The establishment of the Special Committee on Arts and Education by the Ministers for Arts and for Education to ‘advise on how best to align Arts Council strategies for the promotion and encouragement of the arts with the priorities of the formal education system’, led to the publication of the Arts Council report Points of Alignment (2008). This report has been followed up by a series of three high profile conferences interrogating the relationship between the arts and education, in an effort to further enhance pupils’ experiences of the arts in relation to the formal curriculum, research, policy and leadership in this area. There have also been several recent conferences exploring the artistic importance and economic relevance of the relationship between the arts, creativity, education and the economy. For example, the Douglas Hyde Conference (2010) entitled: Inside Creativity: Education - Innovation - Economy – Society, launched by Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. One of its keynote speakers, Joe Hallgarten, the Programmes Director with Creativity, Culture and Education, UK, discussed how creativity in schools and universities, and the quality of teaching and the curriculum provided, all affect the way young people’s skills develop, and whether they have the skills they will need for living and working throughout their lives.

In light of these significant national and international initiatives which are reinforcing the positive and productive link between arts education, creativity and personal and social innovation in society, the School expresses serious concern at the proposal in the Draft Plan to reduce the current provision of arts education, by diminishing the status of drama as a subject in the Primary Curriculum.

6. Developing drama education
The School recognises that Drama as a subject in the Irish Primary Curriculum is still in its infancy, and has only recently been introduced to practising teachers in schools via the PCSP. Newly qualified teachers who have experienced its study during their pre-service education will only begin to have an impact in the school system over the next five to ten years. Only then will the personal, social and economic influence that is associated with arts education and creativity begin to emerge and develop on a much wider scale than has hitherto been seen in Irish society. Student teachers entering the profession in 2010 are more positively disposed to drama education, having experienced its benefits, both aesthetically and cognitively, in schools
themselves. However, their influence will take a further five years to filter back into the system before being able to realise and reap the acknowledged rewards of engaging with drama education, as posited earlier in this submission. When most or all primary school teachers are trained to work in and through drama education, its impact on the development of pupils’ literacies and numeracy skills, will be fully honed and realised, through using a balanced approach which pays due attention to both the art form and its pedagogical application.

The School applauds the DES for its innovation in being one of the first countries in the world to formally recognise the relevance and potential of drama education at primary school level, and encourages it to maintain this progressive policy, which is now being supported formally through UNESCO. To begin to dismantle and erode this valuable subject at this stage is premature. The School suggests that the proposal in the Draft Plan to incorporate it as a teaching method is not in keeping with the research in the field, and therefore is unlikely to yield the intended effect on literacy or numeracy.
References


