



Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People

NCCA Submission

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Introduction

On November 23rd 2010, the Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills launched *Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools* (DES 2010a). Submissions in response to the draft were invited on that occasion, and since then, the NCCA has been contacted formally to submit a response. This document sets out the response of the NCCA to the Draft Plan, focusing on those areas of the plan which have most direct relevance to the work of the Council.

The Introduction to the Draft Plan (1.1) notes that *the skills of literacy and numeracy are essential to almost every part of our lives* and it describes the failure to master those skills adequately as both a *personal tragedy* and *an enormous loss for all of us in Irish society*. In clarifying its focus the plan offers definitions of literacy and numeracy in terms beyond what might have been 'traditionally' understood.

Literacy conventionally refers to reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively in a range of contexts. In the 21st 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).

Numeracy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use mathematics to meet the demands of learning, school, home, work, community and civic life. This perspective on numeracy emphasises the key role of applications and utility in learning the discipline of mathematics, and illustrates the way that mathematics contributes to the study of other disciplines.

(1.1 footnotes, p. 9)

Much of the learning in these areas takes place in the primary school, but critical aspects, the plan states, continue to develop through the period of compulsory second-level education, and as it develops its thinking the plan sets out targets and actions to cover this time-span.

Citing evidence from the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (Eivers et al, 2010), from inspections of primary schools, from second-level teachers and principals, and from employers and third-level institutions, the plan identifies significant challenges for the education system, concluding that *we will have to give*

priority to the improvement of literacy and numeracy over other desirable, important but ultimately less vital issues. (1.3 p.11)

Having established the scope of the challenge, the Draft Plan sets out the steps through which the system should respond, and which it hopes will be replicated at the level of each school and classroom. The approach involves a number of key steps:

- setting realistic but ambitious targets for improvement
- monitoring progress towards the achievement of those targets
- providing necessary interventions and supports
- continuing to target the most disadvantaged
- promoting a culture of continuous improvement through assessment and reporting of progress, and through self-evaluation and inspection.

In addition, the plan looks to enabling greater levels of parental involvement in the development of children's literacy and numeracy and establishing a high-level implementation group and a consultative forum as important actions to ensure success.

Sections 2 to 9 propose a range of actions relating to:

- education and continuing development of teachers and other practitioners
- capacity-building in school leadership
- modification and development of curriculum and assessment
- provision of continuing support in disadvantaged contexts
- performance improvement through assessment and evaluation
- involvement of parents and communities
- structures to oversee the implementation of the plan and to facilitate consultation.

Key themes in the NCCA submission

The NCCA acknowledges that the weight of evidence cited in the Draft Plan—the evidence of 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading, the Incidental Inspection Findings 2010 (DES, 2010b)—and the outcomes of PISA 2009, the publication of which post-dated the launch of the plan, indicate that Ireland's education community faces significant challenges in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The Council welcomes its timely publication and the spirit in which the plan invites dialogue and discussion so that its strategies can be refined and developed more fully. There can be no doubt that the plan represents a serious and

comprehensive response to the challenges, and that the targets it establishes are to be commended for their clarity and urgency. That said, the Council's view is that as the plan presents solutions to the problems it identifies there are areas that would benefit from further clarification and discussion. Among these are:

- definition of terms
- discourse about learning
- the capacity of testing to promote and sustain reform
- assumptions about progress and change, especially the impact of pre-service education and continuing professional development (CPD)
- the role of schools and teachers in the ambition for continuous improvement
- systemic issues relating to the plan's overall strategy.

Although comments on the areas outlined above do not confine themselves easily to individual sections of the plan, in the interests of continuity the submission follows the structure of the Draft Plan and references to paragraph numbers relate to the numbering in the plan. Where the tables in the Draft Plan refer to specific work to be undertaken by the Council they are retained (highlighted in grey) in this document, and the main section headings become the chapter headings in this submission.

Section 1. Introduction

Section 1 of the Draft Plan sets out the aims of the plan, and signals an intention *to refocus* (p.11) the education system on the development of concepts and skills needed to establish sound foundations for literacy and numeracy and to place *a relentless focus* (p.13) on the progress of every child in these domains. While there is no reference specifically to a ‘loss of focus’, there is a strong suggestion that

- the lack of any real improvement over the past thirty years in the literacy skills of Irish students
- the evidence from inspection reports that a significant proportion of lessons in English and maths are not satisfactory
- the evidence of systemic weaknesses in mathematics
- concerns expressed at second level about the readiness among first year students to access the post-primary curriculum

all point to such a loss of focus on literacy and numeracy in the system.

The fact that these points of evidence from paragraph 1.3 of the plan emerge in large measure from testing and evaluation within schools should not be taken to indicate that problems relating to literacy and numeracy have their origins simply within classrooms, or, for that matter, that they can be solved purely from within the education system. Indeed, there is a danger inherent in the education system’s attributing to itself an inordinate degree of responsibility for apparently declining standards, especially when part of the remedy is a declaration that *we will have to give priority to the improvement of literacy and numeracy over other desirable, important but ultimately less vital issues.* (p.11). The report from PISA 2009 (*PISA 2009: The Performance and Progress of 15-year-olds in Ireland*, ERC, 2010) stresses the significance of socioeconomic status and home educational resources (the number of books in the home) as positive indicators of reading performance. Low attainments in literacy and numeracy have their origins in complex societal factors beyond, and sometimes beyond the reach of, the school gates.

Issues of definition in the Draft Plan

Section 1 of the Draft Plan is of particular significance because it establishes the nature and scope of the problem to be addressed. In this context issues of definition—identifying the challenges ahead and the things that need to be done—are of no small importance. Indeed, their significance resides not only in the terminology that is explicitly defined but also in the assumptions implicit in language used to talk about curriculum, assessment, and how educational change happens.

Defining literacy

Clearly, the definitions central to the plan are those of literacy and numeracy. Here is how the document defines literacy in the footnote on page 9.

Literacy conventionally refers to reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively in a range of contexts. In the 21st 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). (Footnote p. 9)

It is a wide definition that includes literacy in new media, although ICT is not mentioned in the rest of the Draft Plan. This wider definition is again flagged in 1.3. Yet, the definition of literacy in the plan refers to one language only: the first language of the school. This monolingual conception of literacy is at odds with international policy and current thinking regarding literacy and language learning, as expressed in Council of Europe recommendations to the Department of Education and Skills about language education in Ireland. Further, a monolingual conception of literacy is somewhat at variance with practice in schools in Ireland.

Since the start of this century, language education policy in Europe has changed focus from education in national languages and a small number of languages from other member states, to take account of the need for enhanced communication skills in an enlarged European Union of 27 member states with diverse linguistic and cultural identities. Moreover, developments in web technologies such as blogging, social networking sites, YouTube, Twitter, etc., have created a situation where individuals interact in virtual communities using a range of language styles in a variety of domains,

to different extents and for different purposes. In this context current understanding of language education and language policy takes a plurilingual approach, referring to the full linguistic repertoire of an individual to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes, which is defined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) as:

.. the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interactions, where a person, viewed as a social agent has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw (Council of Europe [CoE], 2001, p.168).

Section 1.2 of the Draft Plan emphasises the need to prepare young people for a future as Irish, European and global citizens, but the monolingual approach to literacy development in the plan will not meet this need.

The monolingual definition of literacy in the plan differs quite significantly from recommendations regarding language education in the *Language Education Policy Profile: Ireland* agreed and published collaboratively by the Council of Europe Expert Group and the Department of Education and Skills. Section 4 of that report, *Conclusion: Guiding Principles and Action Priorities for the Department of Education and Science* states that

...the aim of language education is to support language learners in developing a plurilingual repertoire, as part of their personal, social, cultural and civic education. The DES remains committed to diversifying and strengthening language learning. (CoE, DES, 2008, p.51).

The report also refers to the importance placed on strengthening and diversifying language learning in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 *Transforming Ireland* (2007) and the development of an integrated language policy.

Literacy is one of five key areas of communicative competence described in the CEFR, and a strategy to improve literacy in education in Ireland should take account of, and include actions to promote literacy in all the languages that students experience: the language of the home, the language of the school, second, third and other languages learned in school, and languages students encounter in the community or online.

It can be argued that the understanding of literacy in the Draft Plan is not fully reflective of the reality of language and literacy education in Irish schools by virtue alone of the complexity of Ireland's language landscape. By recommending that teachers prioritise the development of children's literacy in one language only, across all subjects, their responsibilities for the development of literacy in other languages are effectively ignored. This raises questions for teachers in different school contexts. For example:

- What, if any, priority should Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools give to developing literacy in English?
- What, if any, priority should English-medium primary and post-primary schools give to developing literacy in Irish?
- How does the Draft Plan support the actions for education outlined in the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 (Government of Ireland, 2010)?
- How can schools support young people whose first language is neither Irish nor English to develop and maintain literacy skills in their first language?

By its own account, the Draft Plan provides an 'expanded' definition of literacy, focusing not just on mastery of capabilities in the *use and production of traditional texts*. It also includes capabilities associated with *new communications technologies... print and multimedia* (p.9). The Introduction to the plan notes that *our understanding of literacy is evolving to include new forms of technology* (p.11). However, the impact of these new forms of technology on our understanding of literacy (and the capabilities it includes) is not explored, nor is there any reference to the use of ICT to improve literacy and numeracy in the targets outlined.

It is unclear if the definition of literacy in the Draft Plan concerns how ICT can support the development of a *traditional* literacy or if, on the other hand, it concerns how ICT transforms our fundamental understanding of literacy. For example, in the transformative sense, an expanded definition of literacy might include a learner expressing meaning through ICT, e.g., creating a digital text (an electronic document, blog, podcast, or Wiki) and another learner (the receiver) engaging in some form of critical understanding.

It is of interest that the term 'digital literacy' when first used in the late 1990s referred to critical *thinking* rather than technical competence as key (Gilster, 1997). More recently,

definitions of digital literacy refer to both. For example, Martin (2009) describes three levels at which the term digital literacy operates. The first of these focuses on *digital competence* (technique). The second concerns the *application of digital tools* in appropriate contexts (thoughtful use). The third level focuses on understanding the transformative human and social *impact of digital actions* (critical reflection). It is of note that using this definition, digital literacy at level one (technique) is a requirement for developing literacy at levels two and three. However, none of these dimensions of literacy features in the targets outlined in the Draft Plan.

Across the numerous definitions of ‘literacy’ and ‘digital literacy’, we find a common focus on this capacity to communicate meaning—from speaker to listener, from writer to reader, from creator to viewer. The concept of ‘participation’ is central as is the realisation that new technologies afford new forms of participation (Casey and Bruce, 2010). For example, Rheingold (2009) has argued that an expanded understanding of literacy must include social media literacies involving the use of technical skills in tandem with other literacy skills including encoding, decoding, etc. This (curriculum-) embedded use of ICT is consistent with the NCCA’s position on the use of ICT (NCCA 2004; 2007).

In conclusion, while the NCCA welcomes the renewed focus on literacy and the expanded definition of literacy in the plan, it is important that further consideration be given to how that definition might be reflected fully in the targets and proposed actions. This is especially important if the approach to literacy is to be seen to harmonise with general principles of language education and not to be branded as a ‘back-to-basics’ initiative of the kind that has been tried and subsequently abandoned in other jurisdictions.

Defining numeracy

Turning to the question of numeracy, the Draft Plan defines this area 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. This perspective on numeracy emphasises the key role of applications and

utility in learning the discipline of mathematics, and illustrates the way that mathematics contributes to the study of other disciplines. (Footnote p 9)

The definition of numeracy offered is closely aligned to the rationale for Project Maths and, as such, sits well with current NCCA work. Key to the success of this work is its capacity to bring about and support attitudinal change through the positive impact of the investigative and interactive approaches adopted in Project Maths. This in itself can assist in students becoming more fully engaged in the subject and thus contribute to identifying and addressing problems in numeracy. In turn, these approaches to maths education align well with the methodologies advocated in the *Primary School Curriculum* for Mathematics (NCCA 1999) and the holistic approach to numeracy development in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009). It is important that in this regard the proposals for pre-service education and for continuing professional development in Section 2 of the plan would build on these approaches. In this regard, the proposal on page 20 of the plan 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

is worthy of further interrogation and reflection as its scope and intention seem unclear. However, the plan's ambition to guarantee that literacy and numeracy education have a strong cross-curricular dimension should ensure that education for numeracy is not unfairly confined to activity within the mathematics classroom.

It is of some significance that on page 11 the plan reminds us that *teaching and learning of mathematics in Ireland requires even greater attention than literacy*. This concern for greater urgency to be given to numeracy development is not always reflected in the detailed provisions of the plan; neither has it been a feature of the discussion that has followed the plan's publication, which has been dominated at times by concerns about young people's reading performance. In this regard, the plan has not been helped by its decision to couple the terms *literacy and numeracy* in its discussion, and to continue their treatment in that order when it sets out proposals for action. In order to avoid a propensity to have *numeracy* thought of as a minor adjunct to *literacy* it may be necessary to strengthen the plan's specific treatment of numeracy in line with the priority mentioned on page 11.

The importance of learner dispositions

The Draft Plan does not offer a definition of curriculum as such, but in advance of its explicit treatment of curriculum in **Section 4** certain aspects of the language used to describe priorities and targets imply a vision of curriculum that merits some comment. Paragraph **1.4** describes the need to set targets for what we want to achieve, and it asserts that *every teacher is a key agent of change* (p.12). The subsequent targets are expressed as actions for the system and for teachers and schools. The heading of paragraph **1.6** is of some significance in this regard: **What we have to do to achieve those targets**. The overarching ambitions that follow cast the ‘educators’ as the main actors, which, while understandable in the context of a national plan, confers little enough agency on the learners. The voices of learners are, in fact, conspicuously and somewhat ironically absent from the document. This has particular relevance in the context of an absence of focus on ‘dispositions’ in relation to literacy and numeracy.

Taking literacy as an example, there is much research evidence that highlights the importance of children’s motivation in the development of reading. A keynote address delivered to the 2010 Annual Conference of the Reading Association of Ireland on *Reconceptualising Individual Differences in Reading* (Prof Peter Afflerbach) examined the crucial importance of learner motivation in this regard, especially in the context of the assessment of reading. The report of the recent PISA assessments highlights the fact that approximately 42% of 15-year-olds in Ireland do not read for pleasure. Engendering a love of reading in the early years and sustaining this is an important part of the work of schools and of the education system. Nurturing a disposition to read and a love of language needs to be part of our understanding of children’s language and literacy development and needs, in turn, to influence the decisions made and actions taken to bring about improvements in our education standards.

The mean score of students who read for enjoyment for more than one hour per day was almost 100 points higher than that of students who did not read for enjoyment. (PISA 2009: The Performance and Progress of 15-year-olds in Ireland, ERC, 2010, p.9)

Even when viewed from the essentially pragmatic perspective of the above quotation it is clear that learner motivation and dispositions are central to curricular issues.

2. Improving Teachers' and ECCE¹ Practitioners' Professional Practice

This section of the Draft Plan focuses on initial and continuing teacher and early childhood care and education practitioner education, building on the strong research evidence that, after socio-economic status, the quality of teaching is the biggest factor in determining educational success.

Of note in this section is a recognition that over time, the infant curriculum will be replaced by *Aistear* and that *the focus in Aistear on communicating, on exploring and thinking and on the role of play as one of the foundations for literacy and numeracy will be new to many teachers working with infant classes (p.16).*

Section 2.5 details proposals for teacher education and continuing professional development and in the table of actions two refer specifically to the NCCA:

| Focus the provision of Department-supported continuing professional development for teachers on the teaching of literacy and numeracy and the use of assessment | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide detailed guidance and resources to teachers and ECCE practitioners on best practice in the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy through handbooks, online courses, video and other resources | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA with DES <i>Indicative target date:</i></p> <p>First materials and resources to be available by summer 2011</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Target the development of the teaching of literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools: re-focus the work of existing DEIS <i>cuiditheoirí</i> (support personnel) and redeploy other posts to create a team of twenty advisors to work with DEIS primary and post-primary schools and Youthreach staff on the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i></p> <p>DES and Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) in conjunction with NCCA, drawing on expertise in such</p> |

¹ Early childhood care and education

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| | <p>bodies as the Centre for Literacy Studies at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> Initial team members to be in place for 2011-12; expanded in 2013 and beyond</p> |
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The *Aistear* toolkit is in development and some elements of it are already available on the ACTION website. Setting-based work with ECCE practitioners and infant teachers is planned for 2011. In time, this work will give rise to examples of teaching and learning some of which will relate to literacy and numeracy. While literacy and numeracy could be prioritised in future phases of work, it would not be feasible to have material available by the target date suggested.

On-going co-operation and engagement with the PDST is planned for in the Council's strategic plan. However, the degree to which such engagement is feasible given the other work suggested in the Draft Plan is questionable. Effectively, NCCA has 6.5 people to deploy on all of the work in curriculum and assessment proposed for Early Childhood and Primary contexts in addition to their general organisation responsibilities.

3. Building the capacity of school leadership

This chapter looks at the role of school leaders in evaluating current school practice and leading the process of planning for, implementing and evaluating change. Of note, while not explicitly discussed, the idea of the school as a site of change, rather than just the place where change is 'implemented' is closely aligned with the NCCA strategy of working with schools and educational settings in the change process.

While none of the actions proposed has a direct bearing on NCCA work, the perspective on leadership in the NCCA discussion paper, *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools*, can contribute to the development of the ideas in this section. This is particularly true of the view of distributed leadership that informs the NCCA document. The Draft Plan places a singular focus on the principal as the embodiment of leadership within the school, asserting that principals *have a critical role in creating a school climate that supports effective teaching and learning* (p.23). While there can be no doubt that this is true, it is the experience of the NCCA that in working with schools in collaborative and developmental initiatives what works best is to think about the whole community of the school, with lots of different people having opportunities to show leadership. *Leading and Supporting Change in Schools* expresses this conviction in the following terms:

Leadership in making meaning out of and developing ideas for change, in building effective personal and institutional relationships for change, in encouraging innovative and creative thinking and action, in establishing effective services for change, in motivating the next person or network to be involved in change, is critical to achieving deep and lasting change. (p.14)

Indeed, the Draft Plan, in paragraph 1.5, acknowledges that *the whole-school commitment is essential to achieving change and improvement* when it asserts that *every teacher is a key agent of change*. In the context of building the capacity of school leadership then, it is important that a shared sense of purpose be encouraged between all the stakeholders and change agents involved.

Within that context of distributed leadership however, the overall responsibility for what happens in schools rests with school principals. Supporting them in the work of leading

improvement in literacy and numeracy, at a challenging time for schools more generally, will be particularly important. Attributing an assessment function to the principal in the context of a shared ambition to improve literacy and numeracy in the school will need to be sensitively handled.

4. Giving priority to language skills, literacy and numeracy in early childhood, primary and post-primary education

This section focuses on curriculum priorities and the place of literacy and numeracy in the curriculum for children and young people. It is of note that the commitments articulated in this section are associated with a particular view of the school curriculum, its nature and purpose, along with a particular view of children/young people as a group, and of how they learn and develop. This view of curriculum, although it is not discussed in the Draft Plan, merits some comment from NCCA. If curriculum theories could be mapped on a continuum between the idea that the school curriculum is the process through which children create themselves in the never ending conversations of culture and history and the idea that the curriculum is what we decide children should learn at school – then the view of curriculum informing the four stated commitments seems to be much closer to one end than the other!

The plan's view of curriculum is reflected to a degree in the general heading: **Getting the learning experience right** and the declaration that this requires four commitments:

- ensuring that all teachers prioritise the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills in all the work they do with children and young people
- being very clear about the priorities that guide decisions about the content of curricula
- ensuring that school curricula define unambiguously what children should learn at each stage of their development
- ensure that children and young people experience a seamless development of their literacy and numeracy skills from early childhood to the end of compulsory education.

As mentioned earlier in this document, in addition to skills, dispositions are particularly important in the case of young children. For example, is being *able* to read while not *wanting* to read a desired outcome for children?

It is worth noting too that the view/image of children as young learners which lies at the heart of *Aistear* is somewhat different from the image underpinning the Primary School Curriculum. The principle of *Children as citizens* states that *they [children] have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy (Aistear p.8)*. In addition, the principle of *the adult's role* states that *early learning takes place through a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child – sometimes the adult leads and sometimes the child leads*.

Introducing and embedding the teaching and learning approaches espoused in *Aistear* and in particular, play, in infant classes, will require supports for schools as the Draft Plan notes. However, the supports needed are not confined to physical supports such as reduced class sizes and CPD. A fundamental shift in the image teachers hold of themselves as professionals and of young children as learners, is part of the necessary change process. The different image *Aistear* presents of the teacher-child relationship and ultimately of how early learning happens, at times sits somewhat uncomfortably with the idea about being *very clear about the priorities that guide decisions about the content of curricula*. If we are to nurture a love of language and literacy, we have to be open to emergent curriculum content while at the same time being focused on learning intentions and outcomes. This approach requires significant skill, confidence and competence on the part of teachers, and a certain shifting of curriculum control from the centre to the teacher.

The discussion and actions which follow this introduction are organised in three sections beginning with early childhood education, followed by primary education and post-primary education. Early childhood education is taken to apply to the first six years of a child's life with the last two years generally provided in primary schools and complemented by the free pre-school year for all children. The Draft Plan (p. 26) refers to three age groups as part of early childhood. Significantly, both *Aistear* and *Síolta* are premised on three overlapping age groups in order to take account of children's different patterns and rates of development. These developmental differences become especially important when thinking of outcomes and the articulation of standards.

The importance of developing children’s language awareness and their language development in these years is underscored here. This section endorses the emphasis placed on children’s early literacy and numeracy skills in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). It notes that Aistear goes beyond the prevailing theory and practice on how young children learn in the 1999 curriculum; it recognises the particular value placed on *play* in Aistear. Challenges associated with the approaches to learning espoused in Aistear are also noted and the plan recommends prioritising infant classes in the allocation of available teachers.

Two points are made about assessment at this stage of education. Firstly, the plan notes the value of evidence-based assessment to inform teachers about progress with learning and individual learning needs. Secondly, it suggests that initiating intervention in senior infants (current DES policy) may be too late, particularly when problems stem from difficulties with children’s oral language development.

The Draft Plan proposes the following set of actions to improve literacy and numeracy in the early years in table 4.3 here:

| Restructuring the infant curriculum so that it builds seamlessly on the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear framework | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the infant curriculum to bring it into line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the <i>Aistear</i> framework. Ensure that teachers are enabled to place adequate emphasis on listening skills and oral language development, early phonemic awareness and other skills necessary for early literacy development and on early mathematical skills, such as classifying, matching, and ordering. Replace the additional subject-specific material included in the infant curriculum in the <i>Primary School Curriculum</i> by using integrated environmental education rather than history, geography and science | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i></p> <p>NCCA, DES and schools</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i></p> <p>Revised curriculum to be available from 2012-13.</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide for a print saturated environment within the infant classroom • Provide continuing professional development for teachers in the roll-out of the revised curriculum (as discussed under teachers' professional development in chapter 2) | |
|--|--|

The infant curriculum and the language area were identified as priority areas of work by Council in June 2010 (*Primary School Curriculum: Mapping the developments*).

The NCCA, in collaboration with the Education Centre Network, is currently working with 55 Aistear Tutors to provide workshops on play (as a methodology, and for developing language) and on assessment in *Aistear* to self-selecting infant teachers nationwide.

In 2011, the NCCA will begin work with infant teachers to capture their experience of introducing and using play as a teaching and learning methodology. This work will contribute to the development of the primary curriculum for the infant classes. It will focus not just on *approaches* to teaching and learning (4.3, first bullet point) but also on the *content* of the infant curriculum and *assessment* of children's progress beginning with the language area.

Development of the infant curriculum will be cumulative. It is envisaged that by the end of 2012, we will have a curriculum structure for the infant classes which includes the aims and purposes of infant education in primary schools and specifies the content of the language curriculum for infant classes. The *initial components* of the language curriculum for infant classes will be ready for use in schools by the end of 2012.

It is important to note that the structure and content of the infant curriculum—including the potential for integration (of existing/new subjects/areas)—will be led by the agreed aims of infant education and the research consensus concerning the purpose of this educationally and developmentally distinct phase of primary education. It is not planned to pre-empt possible outcomes of this process by replacing history, geography

and science with integrated environmental education in the infant curriculum at this time.

Regarding the proposed *roll-out of the revised curriculum* (4.3, fifth bullet), in line with *Leading and Supporting Change*, we envisage that the *highly centralized 'cascade' format* (Murchan et al, 2008) of the professional development programme for the Primary School Curriculum (1999) would be replaced by a 'decentralised' model of support for infant teachers which is relevant to their needs and affords opportunities for classroom-based inquiry and ongoing conversation and collaboration with colleagues in the profession. The NCCA's experience with the Aistear Tutor Network will be relevant to the development of this support for the infant teachers.

| Ensure that children's development of language and early literacy and numeracy skills are adequately assessed and monitored in early years education | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce an early assessment system to allow for the assessment of children's oral language competencies and pre-literacy and numeracy conceptual development through encouraging the use of existing and/or new assessment tools for early years development • Continue to assess a child's strengths and weaknesses in early literacy and numeracy capabilities within the infant classes through encouraging the use of appropriate existing and new assessment tools • Implement intervention strategies in the second term in junior infants for those students identified as having difficulty, especially in the areas of oral language and phonemic awareness, and provide additional support in the form of in-class support by the learning-support teacher in junior infants | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i></p> <p>DES, NCCA, ECCE providers and schools NCCA to issue advice on the use of the assessment tools and to support this with online resources</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i></p> <p>2012-2013 school year</p> |

The NCCA has developed guidelines on the use of assessment in primary schools (2006) and more recently, guidelines on assessment in Aistear (2009). The NCCA's current work with Aistear Tutors focuses explicitly on the use of assessment to support learning in infant classes and the preparation of workshops for infant teachers on early childhood assessment and the expansion of the online Aistear Toolkit (available at: www.ncca.ie/earlylearning).

Sample assessment materials which support teacher judgment have been developed through the Assessment strand of the Primary School Network and are currently being published on the ACTION website at: www.action.ncca.ie/en/afl-primary. It is important to note that the teachers who participated in the NCCA's Assessment initiative received a significant level of support to engage in and reflect on assessment practice through school visits, cluster meetings, seminars and an on-line forum. Nonetheless, our experience with this initiative has highlighted the particular challenge for teachers in gaining access and entry to assessment discourse and ultimately making changes to practice. The next phase of the Assessment strand will focus on generating samples of student work which support the issue of standard and progression in language, to be published on the NCCA website beginning at the end of 2011.

However, it is important to note that without appropriate opportunities for professional development in assessment, these online samples will have limited impact on teachers' assessment practice.

Concerning the development of an early assessment system (first bullet), the NCCA will advise on the appropriate use of Early Childhood Indicators if such a system is to be funded and resourced for use in the Irish context.

4.4 Primary education

Concerns about the size of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) are raised in the introduction to this section and the NCCA's curriculum reviews are cited in this context. Two issues are highlighted, namely the reduced time for literacy and numeracy (following the introduction of three new subjects in the 1999 curriculum) and the lack of focus on developing children's literacy and numeracy outside the discrete time

allocated to English and mathematics. The potential for improvement in the teaching of English and in teachers' preparation and assessment practices is noted based on findings from Inspectorate evaluations.

This section goes on to say that reports by the inspectorate and researchers (not cited) in the last decade have noted *limitations in standards achieved in mathematics*. It argues that children's ability to apply mathematical concepts to learning in other subjects is hampered by their limited attainment of fundamental concepts such as measures and estimation. The value of problem-solving and real-life scenarios in mathematics teaching is highlighted and this section concludes by noting that *much current practice in primary schools does not reflect these principles* (p.29).

| Review the contents of the L1 curriculum at primary level to clarify the learning outcomes to be expected of children | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the contents of the L1 curriculum to make clear the learning outcomes to be expected in each of the strands; this review to build upon the alignment of the infant curriculum with the <i>Aistear</i> curricular framework • 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 • Specify the learning outcomes expected at each level of the curriculum and develop and provide guidance to teachers on how literacy and numeracy skills should be developed in curriculum areas other than L1 and mathematics • Provide guidance to teachers on assessing the oral language, literacy and numeracy skills of students at each stage of the primary cycle • Ensure that the reading tastes of boys are catered for in curricula at primary level | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA and DES</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> 2012-2013 school year</p> |

In Section **2.3** we noted that the development of the language curriculum for the first two years of primary school is a priority area of work for NCCA. This work will involve asking fundamental questions about the range and continuum of language learning experiences that are most desirable and appropriate for our young children today.

In the process of developing the language curriculum, we do not intend to compartmentalize children's language learning in terms of their experience with their first language (L1), second language (L2) and modern languages as is currently the case in the *Primary School Curriculum*. The language curriculum should provide a common structure for planning appropriate language experiences in *all languages* for *all children* in infant classes including those for whom English is an additional language.

It is important to note also that children's language learning in primary school is not the preserve of English, Irish and modern languages, alone. It is often argued that language unlocks thought; given the relationship between language and cognitive development, it is important that the language curriculum is concerned with children's development of language across all subjects and all areas in the infant classes.

It would be pre-emptive to speculate in any detail on the *key literacy skills* (4.5, second bullet) to be included in the new language curriculum. This work will be led by the significant body of international research in the last decade concerning reading, writing and oral language—and how these elements of language interact—including for example, the importance of social interaction models of language teaching. The development of the language curriculum will also be informed by findings from curriculum reviews and research in the Irish context such as the recent recommendation to promote pupil self-regulation of reading comprehension strategies (ERC, 2010).

Section **4.3** noted that the structure and content of the infant curriculum will be led by the agreed aims of primary education, and more specifically, the aims for infant education. Alongside the specification of content, it will include approaches to language teaching/learning and assessment of children's progress. This work will be informed by

the NCCA's experience working with teachers in the various strands of the Primary School Network. The Language strand of the Primary School Network has focused on exemplifying different approaches to documenting children's learning and progression in Gaeilge (L1) with implications for English (L1). The Assessment strand of the Primary School Network has shown the value of using samples of student work to illustrate teachers' shared sense of standard and to support teacher judgment. This work with schools provides a generative starting point for the development of the language curriculum. Further discussion on assessment, standards and outcomes is provided in Section 6 of this document.

| Increase the recommended amount of time to be devoted to the teaching of literacy and numeracy | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue guidance to schools to use all discretionary curriculum time for the teaching of literacy and numeracy and 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 | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> DES and NCCA</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> Reallocation of discretionary time could be in place as early as 2011</p> |

The NCCA's curriculum reviews have identified as problematic the several thousand content objectives in the Primary School Curriculum (1999). The reviews have shown that primary teachers in Ireland struggle to implement the curriculum within one school day, week and year which has remained the same length, despite the increased specification of curriculum content (NCCA 2005; 2008).

The *suggested minimum weekly time framework* in the Primary School Curriculum (1999) allocates 52% of secular instruction teaching time to literacy and numeracy

(English, Gaeilge, Mathematics). The eight remaining subjects (History, Geography, Science, Physical Education, Visual Arts, Music, Drama and Social, Personal and Health Education) compete for the remaining 48% of teaching time (9.5 hours weekly), including the two hours accorded for discretionary curriculum time. When these two hours are removed, just 7.5 hours are provided for eight subjects, weekly. These allocations highlight the particular difficulty for teachers of dividing (time) and conquering (all subjects). It is clear that time is in short supply in the primary classroom. In addition, approximately 15% of primary schools (those participating in the *Modern Languages in Primary Schools* initiative) have already allocated discretionary time to a modern language (French, German, Spanish or Italian). Many schools have reported using discretionary time for subjects which teachers believe have been allocated insufficient time in the school week such as PE (one hour) and SPHE (30 minutes). It is important to note that while many schools currently use discretionary time for language and/or mathematics, for the schools that don't, the recommendation provided in the table above, simply shifts the pressure on time from one curriculum area to another.

Any advice on the use of time during the school day (first bullet) must be informed by teachers' current experiences with the curriculum as well as a fundamental re-engagement with the purpose of children's primary education and the priorities for our primary curriculum. Analysis of data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study has been commissioned by NCCA to examine teachers' allocation of time to different subjects during the school day and this work is due for completion in Summer 2011. The development of the language curriculum for infant classes will require us to return to key questions about what we want of our primary schools today and what kind of curriculum is most likely to achieve those aims. The contribution of all curriculum subjects, including Drama, will be interrogated in the context of agreed priorities for primary education. Short-circuiting this process by subsuming Drama within the L1 curriculum would be a matter of re-naming only. Re-naming components of the existing curriculum does not necessarily make the curriculum more manageable in practice.

The challenge is no longer to improve the primary curriculum by tweaking and or/ adding further layers to it, but to improve it by changing it.

Literacy and numeracy in post-primary education

This section of the plan turns its attention to literacy and numeracy in post-primary education. It draws attention to the contribution that the on-going Project Maths initiative is making and can make to consolidating and developing numeracy. In particular, it cites the recent provision of a *Bridging Framework* that connects the experience of learners of primary mathematics with those of post-primary mathematics as valuable; a step, indeed, that might also usefully be taken in the case of first languages. The plan also underscores the direction taken by Project Maths, towards mathematics that aims to take understanding to a deeper level that draws on real and relevant contexts, that immerses learners in problem solving, and that results in more students being more engaged with mathematics at every level.

| Continue the development and roll-out of Project Maths | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to implement Project Maths and monitor the effect of implementation on standards achieved in mathematics using a range of indicators, including commissioned research, thematic evaluation by the Inspectorate and national sample testing in first and second year • Increase the time devoted to the teaching of mathematics to a minimum of five periods per week. Require that mathematics be taught for a minimum of three periods per week during Transition Year • Work towards implementing the recommendations of the Report of the Project Maths Implementation Support Group | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA, DES and schools</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> On-going</p> |

The rollout of Project Maths continues as planned. All schools are now involved in the project. Research has been commissioned that will look at the scale of the changed teaching and learning that is happening for students in the classroom. Data on the time devoted to mathematics in schools can be generated but the likelihood is that the vast majority of schools already meet these minimum guidelines.

The commentary on literacy in this section focuses initially on the need to review the Junior Certificate English syllabus with a view to its making a greater contribution to the development of literacy. The syllabus, it is suggested, needs to attend to the interface between modern electronic media and aspects of literacy and needs to place a greater emphasis on use and study of non-literary expository texts and factual prose.

| Prioritise the revision of the English syllabus and the Junior Certificate English examination | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise the revision of the English syllabus as part of the reform of junior-cycle education • Revise the current syllabus for English for junior cycle to connect more effectively with the learning outcomes articulated for the subject in the primary curriculum (the lack of a bridge between the sixth class and first-year experiences of English at present means that first-year English is often a missed opportunity for raising students' literacy levels) • Ensure that the reading tastes of boys are catered for in curricula at post-primary level • Provide necessary online and other supports to support teachers' practice in the teaching of English • Revise the Junior Certificate English examination paper to encompass a greater emphasis on literacy skills; a greater range of non-fiction and graphical sources; and greater emphasis on skills such as grammar, editing and functional writing | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA, State Examinations Commission and DES</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> New syllabus for 2013, first examination 2016</p> |

The junior cycle developments are seen as providing an opportunity for review on this scale to take place. First languages are treated as areas of the curriculum that should be prioritized in the forthcoming *Framework for Junior Cycle*. When developmental work connected to the Framework gets underway, revision of curriculum components such as the JC English syllabus will be prioritised. The suggested changes to the syllabus and the rationale for them will be the subject of considerable contestation in

that review. The contribution of the current (1989) English syllabus to literacy development is characterised in the plan in the following terms.

Literacy teaching at post-primary level is addressed in the English syllabus in broad outline and is elaborated in the accompanying teacher guidelines. However, the current English syllabus, introduced over twenty years ago (1989), does not adequately address the social and cultural applications of literacy skills in the modern age, such as in electronic communications. While the objectives of the syllabus refer to reading skills to cope with factual prose in diverse forms, the content of the current syllabus is heavily weighted in favour of literary texts and genres such as poetry, novels, short stories and plays.
(p.30)

The plan is not quite accurate here in its reference to the *content of the current syllabus* in that a hallmark of that syllabus is an open course, which affords teachers the freedom to choose the course elements their students will study. The review of the syllabus will evaluate the extent to which the open course currently facilitates the kind of language experiences that the syllabus envisages for students. Of considerable moment in that context is the degree to which the 1989 syllabus aligns with the current set of examinations in the subject. Indeed, a feature of the junior cycle developments more generally is the emphasis placed on achieving consistency between the essential learning taking place in subjects like English and the evidence of that learning gathered in the assessments or examinations used.

As an initial means of ensuring that the junior cycle English can *connect more effectively with the learning outcomes articulated for the subject in the primary curriculum* the potential for the development of a Bridging Framework for English, similar to that completed for mathematics, can also be pursued.

| Prioritise the development of literacy and numeracy across all subject areas and areas of learning in the revised junior cycle curriculum | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all revised curricula/syllabuses provide objectives for the integrated development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum, and include learning outcomes supporting these objectives • Reduce the numbers of areas studied within the junior cycle to ensure that adequate time is devoted to the | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA, DES and schools</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i></p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>development of literacy and numeracy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pending the introduction of the revised junior cycle curricula/syllabuses, place an upper limit on the numbers of subjects that students may take in the State Junior Certificate examinations | <p>With introduction of revised junior cycle curricula/syllabuses</p> |
|---|---|

The embedding of basic and key skills in outcomes-based curriculum components is an area that the NCCA has gained considerable experience of in recent years in the senior cycle developments, for example. Of course, the real achievement is to effect the shift in teaching and learning practice where the same skills are given life and expression in all aspects of teaching and learning – a more complex, long-term task!

The forthcoming *Framework for Junior Cycle* provides for schools having greater flexibility in planning and designing education programmes that are smaller than the current Junior Certificate programme commonly is. That flexibility extends to schools placing a heavy emphasis in their education programmes on the consolidation and development of literacy and numeracy.

Furthermore, the qualifications associated with the Framework would involve a lower number of curriculum components and subjects than the current Junior Certificate. Moving quickly to introduce the Framework in schools represents a better policy approach than tweaking the existing Junior Certificate examination, with all that this could give rise to in terms of unintended consequences.

5. Targeting available additional resources on learners at risk of failure to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy

This section of the Draft Plan looks at learners at risk of not achieving adequate levels of literacy and numeracy and how resources are best targeted in this context. The focus is mainly on three groups of learners – those included in the DEIS initiative, those for whom English is an additional language, and those included in Youthreach. In all cases, the successes associated with work in these areas are recognised. The plan suggests that the levers for success lie in continuing to offer flexibility for schools and centres to adjust their approaches to meet the needs of the students and learners involved. This involves continuing to plan, set targets for, devote resources to and track the development of literacy and numeracy skills in the learners involved. Emphasis is also placed on disseminating good practice among schools and centres in this context.

Proposed actions to improve literacy and numeracy achievement in schools serving disadvantaged communities are set out in the following table.

| Develop and implement an oral language development programme in pre-schools that are linked to DEIS primary schools | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritise the implementation of an oral language development programme within pre-schools (including Early Start units) that act as feeder preschools for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. This programme would consist of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A train-the-trainer programme in a proven oral language development programme. - Continuing professional development for preschool staff to acquire the necessary skills in assessment techniques and in a proven oral language development programme | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA and DES</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> 2012-2013</p> |

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure continuity between oral language development programmes in pre-schools and in Junior Infant classrooms | |
|---|--|

In reference to the plans for continuing professional development for pre-school staff described in the table, it is important to note that approximately 40% of ECCE practitioners have yet to achieve basic level qualifications required for participation in the Free Preschool Year Initiative which commenced in January 2010 (Workforce Development Plan, 2010). In addition, the Workforce Development Plan (2010) has identified challenges relating to the skills and qualifications of those delivering courses within the Further Education sector. While the focus on a high quality oral language experience for young children at pre-school level and in junior infants is to be welcomed, the date for achieving this in the pre-school sector in particular seems highly aspirational. It may be more advisable in the short-medium term to incorporate a focus on children’s language and literacy learning in the Council’s work on showing *Aistear-in-action* across a range of early childhood settings.

The planned development of the infant curriculum focuses on the nexus of the language area and the early years, in the first instance. This work will provide an opportunity to connect children’s language and literacy development in infant classes with their experience in these areas during the free pre-school scheme.

NCCA does not, at present, have the expertise or the resources to develop a specialist oral language development programme although we are aware of the successes of the GLEN programme run under the auspices of the City of Cork VEC. If one of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) projects were to focus on language development, this might provide an opportunity for the Council to collaborate with other early childhood organisations/agencies to develop such a programme in the context of *Aistear*. The NEYAI is for a period of three years ending in 2014.

NCCA will continue to collaborate with the Education Centre Network to develop *Aistear Tutors’* early childhood experience and expertise and to enable them to provide workshops for early years practitioners and teachers.

The Council has been contacted by the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative for similar types of support, again providing potential opportunities to focus on early literacy and numeracy.

Actions to improve levels of achievement for students for whom English is an additional language are set out in the next table.

| Improve guidance to schools on best practice in teaching students for whom English (or Irish) is a second language | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the use of the available guidelines and other online resources for schools on best practice in supporting EAL students Encourage teachers (of EAL, in particular) to give due cognisance to the importance of mother tongue. Migrant students should be encouraged to maintain a connection with their mother culture and language as enhancing their mother tongue proficiency also enhances their competence in English | <p><i>Responsibility for this action:</i> NCCA, DES and schools</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> ongoing</p> |

The NCCA website houses significant resources for schools and teachers involved with EAL students. Through undertaking further work with these schools and enhancement of the website, the materials and their use in classrooms could be improved. The NCCA is not in a position to allocate resources to this work at present.

A draft of the DES Language Policy is presently under consideration. Some of the elements of that policy e.g. a process for establishing the languages to be included on the curriculum could have significance for encouraging continued engagement of migrant students with their mother tongue.

6. Fostering continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy in schools

This section of the Draft Plan, on the highly contested concept of *continuous improvement*, deals with how the evidence of student learning can be generated and gathered by schools and by the education system for a range of purposes – system information, teacher planning, learner feedback, and school self-evaluation are all mentioned. These themes are discussed in both primary and post-primary contexts.

The basis for ensuring continuous improvement in literacy and numeracy is set out in **6.1** as gathering evidence about how well students are learning and using that evidence to improve their learning opportunities. The evidence needs to be gathered at individual learner, school, and national levels.

Section **6.2** echoes the *Primary School Curriculum* and the *NCCA Assessment Guidelines* in stating that good assessment practice employs a variety of assessment methods to provide a full picture of a learner's achievement. It goes on to say that 'teachers' use tests and tasks to assess learner progress and to plan for future learning. Equally, it says, 'teachers' use this evidence to give feedback to students and to make them aware of their strengths as learners. It is unclear whether this refers to current practice among teachers in Ireland or to teachers in the abstract, although **6.3** notes evidence from the National Assessments and the reports of the Inspectorate pointing to 'rare[ly]' or 'limited' use of the outcomes of standardised tests in this way. Furthermore, section **6.3** states that using *formal and informal evidence of achievement well is one of the most challenging tasks in teaching*. This is important, because significant change in this regard is to be underpinned by the actions in section **6.9** one of which is to

Provide continuing professional development opportunities and information to teachers, principals and boards of management on the interpretation and use of achievement data to inform teaching and learning (p 44 - 45)

The overarching emphasis of the tabulated actions is on processes of assessment of learner achievement through standardised tests and the use of evidence from those tests to report to others, to self-evaluate for schools, and to plan for improvement both of the school and of learner instruction. In this context, priority is accorded to

- developing national standards to support teachers
- supporting teachers and schools to use the national standards to assess and report
- requiring schools to implement standardised tests, to report outcomes, and to use the outcomes to inform school evaluation and improvement
- collecting national test data and enabling schools to use that data comparatively
- using aggregated national data to promote evaluation and improvement

In this context it is important that the plan takes account of the school-going population with special educational needs (SEN), for whom measurement of achievement against national norms can have little meaning. In the case of high stakes tests the information gathered may be of little use for the individual student—especially so for the student with special educational needs—and commentators have documented a range of unintended effects of high stakes tests on students and classrooms in countries where such testing is widely used.

Using assessment evidence effectively and in a manner that will promote learner development is challenging. Simply having access to assessment tools is not a sufficient condition for teachers to use the consequent data to inform their teaching and it is essential that teachers know ways to interpret data and to use it in an evidence-based approach to teaching and learning (Griffin et al, 2010, Halverson et al, 2005). Teachers do not necessarily link their teaching to patterns of student achievement, but may at times attribute student outcomes to factors such as children's background that are beyond the teacher's control (Timperley & Robinson, 2001).

Griffin et al (2010) argue that while there is a growing body of research linking the formative use of data from standardised assessments to the improvement of student learning outcomes, to bring this about teachers need *a process by which they can analyse the data, link the information to their own teaching, and test the links using parallel, but different, evidence from others in professional learning teams* (p 386). In other words, improvement in learner achievement will not happen without significant

change in teacher belief and behaviour, and this change will not happen unless teachers can engage in critical and collaborative analysis and discussion of the data. Work in the assessment strand of the NCCA Primary School Network bears out this perspective. Information, however comprehensive, from effective assessment practice is insufficient in itself to bring about teacher change. In the medium term teachers may adopt suggested approaches, but, as noted also in Griffin et al, this adoption is likely to be of a surface nature. Sustainable change in practice occurs only through critical engagement – through a process of ‘making one’s own’ of approaches or methods.

The continuous improvement envisaged in Section 6 is predicated to a considerable degree on an expanding programme of standardised testing as a driver of change and as a necessary support for literacy and numeracy. Whether it is desirable to gather more precise and comprehensive information about learner achievement is not at issue here. Having clear evidence about the progress of learners at individual, school or system level can help to promote high expectations for learners and can facilitate the meaningful exchange of information between schools. The issue for further reflection in the context of the Draft Plan is whether simply putting a programme of evidence-gathering in place will bring about the required level of change to the way in which assessment evidence is used to support learning, at school or system level. It is important to reflect too on whether the kinds of evidence gathered are sympathetic with the aims of the curriculum, whether the data gathered will be used wisely and effectively, and whether gathering the data from tests will not simply become an end in itself.

Section 6.4 of the plan posits a lack of engagement with assessment in primary schools and suggests that this might well have its roots in the *Primary School Curriculum*, which does not include information about what students are expected to know or be able to do at the end of each level of primary education. It is noteworthy that this lacuna has been flagged by teachers working with NCCA in the Primary School Network on assessment for learning. The section is quite detailed on what a ‘better’ primary curriculum might contain to support better assessment and reporting – real examples of student achievement at each level of the curriculum and clear learning examples. Such a curriculum, it is suggested, will provide *robust national standards against which teachers will be able to judge and report on the progress of their*

students (p.42). Reference is made to the work NCCA has already begun on exemplification of standard in the context of the revision of the English curriculum. This work, the section concludes, should be completed as a priority and extended to include mathematics. However, when the plan turns in Section 6.9 to the proposed actions to *support teachers, schools and the school system to make sure that students make progress in learning literacy and numeracy skills* some ambivalence requiring further clarification emerges.

| Develop national standards of student achievement for literacy and numeracy to support teachers in generating and using assessment data on students' learning | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop national standards of student achievement for literacy and numeracy at five stages (infant classes, junior primary, middle primary, senior primary, lower secondary) and at various proficiency levels by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ensuring that the curricula for L1 and mathematics are stated in clear learning outcomes ○ Providing examples of student achievement to inform teachers' judgements regarding the achievement of individual students • Develop tasks and tests against which teachers can readily, validly and reliably interpret and communicate their students' progress in achieving the national standards | <p><i>Responsible for this action:</i></p> <p>This is a considerable research task which may have to be commissioned from a research institution working in conjunction with the NCCA and DES</p> <p><i>Target dates:</i> English standards and supports (primary) by end 2012 Maths standards and supports (primary) by end 2013 English standards and supports (post-primary) by end 2014 Maths standards and</p> |

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| | supports (post-primary by end 2015) |
|--|-------------------------------------|

This set of actions seems somewhat at odds with 6.4 where the standards are to be determined by the learning outcomes and the exemplification at each level. First, there is a reference to *proficiency levels* which are not mentioned in the text. Second, tests and tasks are proposed to assess and report on student progress in achieving the standards – again, not mentioned in the discussion in the text. Finally, in the Responsible for this action column the entire process is referred to as a *considerable research task* that would happen outside the NCCA and the DES.

| | |
|--|---|
| Support teachers and schools to use the national standards to assess and report on the literacy and numeracy achievements of students to parents and boards of management | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make the national standards and suitable assessment instruments available in online format to schools ▪ Ensure that schools assess the literacy and numeracy achievement of students at fixed points (infant classes, junior primary, middle primary, senior primary, lower secondary) for formative purposes and report individual student outcomes to parents ▪ Ensure that the principal reports aggregated data on student achievement in the school to the board of management ▪ Provide continuing professional development opportunities and information to teachers, principals and boards of management on the interpretation and use of achievement data to inform teaching and learning ▪ Provide on-line and other information to parents about the national standards and how to understand their child's progress and learning needs | <p><i>Responsible for this action:</i></p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i></p> <p>DES working with NCCA, schools and others</p> <p>English primary: 2013-14 Maths primary: 2014-15</p> <p>English post-primary: 2015-16 Maths post-primary: 2016-17</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| | |
|--|--|

As with the previous table, there would appear to be some ambivalence here about what constitutes *the national standards* and in particular where they are to be located. Are they to be located within the curriculum, as is clearly implied in **6.4**? Or are they to be located outside it and in an assessment and reporting system? Are teachers to work with learning outcomes, and illustrative examples, AND a set of national standards? There are resonances here with approaches currently being disbanded in a number of other jurisdictions.

Finally, there is confusion here over purpose, whether the assessment evidence gather is to be used for formative purposes or for reporting outcomes to parents. Fixed point reporting can only be summative. There are also some five assessment points mentioned. It is unclear as to whether these would be in addition to the *Schools Like Us* standardised tests at three points. Does this mean that students' literacy and numeracy would be 'measured' seven times in the course of compulsory schooling?

7. Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development

The importance of parents’ support for, and engagement in their children’s learning is noted at the beginning of this chapter as is the strong link between the general home environment and student achievement (cited in the National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading, 2009).

The plan suggests that all parents need to understand the relevance of literacy and numeracy for their children’s future as well as their own role in supporting their children’s education and development. In real terms, the plan suggests that parents need to know how they can contribute to both their children’s learning of literacy and numeracy and also the work of the pre-school and the school in this context.

The particular role of the community in fostering and supporting children’s literacy and numeracy is also highlighted in this chapter. The plan notes the success of projects which have linked schools and communities more closely together and enabled community members to support children’s learning; findings from the NESF evaluation are cited in this context. The table below sets out proposed actions to support parents and communities.

| Provide direct supports to parents to encourage them to support their children’s language, literacy and numeracy development | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using <i>Aistear</i> as the curriculum framework, develop resources to expand the knowledge of parents in the techniques they can use to support the oral language development of children aged 0-6. (<i>Aistear</i> is for children aged 0-6; it can be used by parents and the NCCA has already developed tip sheets parents on | <p><i>Responsible for this action:</i></p> <p>DES and Office of the Minister for Children and Youth</p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>how to play with children)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide parents with information leaflet/pack on literacy and numeracy activities that they can use to support their child's reading at each stage • Co-ordinate the distribution and provision of these resources with adult literacy provision by VECs and targeted to those in most need; for example, the disadvantaged and hard-to-reach | <p>Affairs in conjunction with NCCA</p> <p><i>Indicative target date:</i> 2012-13</p> |
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The NCCA welcomes the importance the Draft Plan attributes to parental involvement in supporting children's literacy and numeracy. We agree that 'Parental engagement is critically important in the early years, particularly in the development of children's language skills and emergent literacy and numeracy skills' (p.47).

Parents' need for information about the curriculum and the approaches and methods used by teachers was a key finding in the NCCA's first review of the curriculum in primary schools (2005). The DVD and booklet for parents (*The What, Why and How of children's learning in primary school*) published by NCCA in 2006 has provided the basis for a growing bank of resources for parents which includes information sheets (e.g., on standardised tests) and tip-sheets on supporting aspects of children's learning (e.g., early literacy). More recently, the NCCA developed tip sheets on how to support children's learning and development, including language learning, through play.

The Draft Plan rightly calls for the use of *Aistear* as a framework for developing resources for parents. *Aistear's* guidelines, *Building partnership between parents and practitioners*, offer information and examples of working with parents to help them support their own children's learning at home. Through ongoing work with infant teachers and Aistear Tutors and in collaboration with the National Parents' Council, Primary, the NCCA will develop additional resources to support parents during early childhood and in the primary years.

The value of parents' involvement in their children's education is no less significant at second level. Findings from a study of parental involvement in post-primary education (ESRI, 2011) showed that parents are the main source of advice for young people on a

range of decisions concerning what subjects to take, which programmes to select, what to do after leaving school and whether to remain in school or not.

Findings from the ESRI's research showed that while parents at second-level have a high level of informal involvement in their child's education, formal contact was less well developed and typically involved parents *receiving* information. The research noted that more active forms of engagement by parents (e.g., involvement in the parents' council), were less common and generally limited to more highly educated, middle-class parents. Similar findings were reported for parents of primary school children (UCC, 2008):

Such [engaged] parents are more likely to have experienced themselves as successful in school, to have been able to exploit the resources of the education system to enhance their and their children's status, wealth and symbolic capital (including negotiating powers) in the world. Their life experiences equip them to be able to negotiate their meanings in the school-home experience of reporting, to have their issues and concerns addressed, and so to develop even further continuities between what is valued at home and what is valued in school (p. 234-135).

In contrast, both studies identified a significant cohort of parents for whom the perceived lack of openness of the school was a potential barrier as were their own negative educational experiences (UCC, 2008; ESRI, 2011).

It is of note that in many systems, differentiated support for parents is cultivated to provide opportunities for *all parents* to be more actively engaged in and supportive of their child's education (McKinsey, 2010). This recent analysis of school systems that have achieved significant, sustained and widespread gains noted that the more parents engage with the school, the more likely it is that they will actively support their children's education and help raise performance accordingly.

The concern to provide opportunities for *all* parents to be actively involved in their child's education is underscored by recent findings which showed that over half of all school leavers from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds and non-employed households attended non-DEIS schools (ESRI, 2010). While the NCCA welcomes the target to 'support family literacy initiatives in communities served by DEIS schools' (p. 49) targets to support parents and communities in non-DEIS areas should be included.

The growing evidence and consensus concerning the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education and the benefits that accrue to children from this, challenge the decision to place these targets concerning parents and communities in a discrete section of the Draft Plan, rather than including them alongside relevant targets throughout the document. For example, the targets set out in Sections **2.6** of the plan would benefit from a focus on including parents as a key concern of these, rather than as an 'add-on section' as is currently the case in the Draft Plan.

Conclusion

Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People; A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools is a welcome and timely contribution to educational debate. Since its publication in November 2010 it has been the focus of intense scrutiny and at times heated discussion. This is in no small measure due to the fact that the issues it highlights are real and serious ones, the targets it sets are challenging, and the actions it commits to have significant ramifications for stakeholders. The language in which it couches its ambitions is straightforward, at times bordering on blunt; this is because of the urgency of its convictions. In the course of preparation of this submission the NCCA has sought the views of its overarching committees—Early Childhood and Primary, Post-Primary Junior and Senior Cycle—and of the Early Childhood and Primary Language Committee. The views of the members of those committees have been trenchantly argued: sometimes they have disagreed with the particular emphasis in one area or more in the document; sometimes they have problematized what they felt the plan had taken too lightly; and at other times they have seen a need to tease out in greater detail the changes in priority and practice the plan implies. But underpinning the discussion there was agreement about the relevance and seriousness of the issues and about the need for the education system to respond to the challenges.

The NCCA welcomes the focus and scope of the Draft Plan and the emphasis it places upon partnership and inter-agency collaboration in seeking solutions to the challenges it poses. A number of areas for further discussion and clarification are recommended in this submission including

- the need for clearer definitions of key terms used in the plan and how the actions set out in the plan are consistent with those definitions
- a sharper focus on the ways in which the plan for better literacy for children and young people fits with relevant policy proposals on language education
- a clearer mapping of how the plan for better literacy and numeracy fits with priorities for children’s learning more generally
- proposals to meet the needs of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and learners at risk of failure, including students in non-DEIS schools

- more detailed proposals to involve *all* parents in supporting their children’s literacy and numeracy and a closer alignment with the targets outlined for sections **2.6**
- further clarification on the proposals to support literacy and numeracy through assessment and, in particular, through the use of national standards
- further clarification on proposals to support literacy and numeracy through specific teaching approaches and methods, including the use of ICT
- further consideration of engagement with principals, teachers and schools, parents and pupils/students as to how the proposals for change might be supported.

The prioritisation of literacy and numeracy in this Draft Plan raises fundamental questions concerning what we want for our young people’s education today and the kinds of learning experiences that are most likely to meet those priorities. Both the entitlement of all children to competence in literacy and numeracy, and the need to improve the current situation are uncontested. But a *relentless focus* on literacy and numeracy must be balanced with a concern for children’s learning more generally. It is of note, in this context, that the importance of fostering innovative endeavour in our learners—concerned with risk-taking, failing and using these experiences to imagine and develop different and better ways of living, learning and being—has been a focus of discussion by NCCA (2011). The skills of reading and mathematics matter not just when children have them, but when they choose to use them.

Further engagement on the issue of vision of the change process in schools would be welcome. Plans to improve children’s literacy and numeracy litter the educational landscape of the developed world. Formulated on good intentions, they now form part of the archaeology of initiatives in many education systems. In some well-documented cases, initial improvements for children were not maintained, but the impact on teachers and schools has been lasting.

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