



Representing Vocational
Education Committees

IVEA SUBMISSION TO DES

DRAFT NATIONAL PLAN TO IMPROVE LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SCHOOLS

Introductory comments

Firstly, IVEA very much welcomes this draft plan. It constitutes a significant step towards improving literacy and numeracy skills of students at all levels in our school system and thus improving the life chances of these young people – in the family, in the community and in the workplace. However, laudable and all as this draft plan may be its implementation must be appropriately resourced and supported. Otherwise, its effect will be much less than it might be.

It is also important to recognise, as indeed the draft plan acknowledges, that literacy and numeracy entail much more than ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’. For example, UNESCO defines literacy as the ‘ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.’

Also, as the UK Department of Education and Skills notes, numeracy ‘is more than an ability to do basic arithmetic. It involves developing confidence and competence with numbers and measures. It requires understanding of the number system, a repertoire of mathematical techniques, and an inclination and ability to solve quantitative or spatial problems in a range of contexts. Numeracy also demands understanding of the ways in

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which data are gathered by counting and measuring, and presented in graphs, diagrams, charts and tables’.

Today, literacy and numeracy are inextricably connected to the whole matter of computer/technological literacy and all these inter-related skills and competences are constantly evolving. The simple facility of being able to read, write and do basic mathematical computations are no longer sufficient to be deemed literate and numerate in a knowledge/technological society. Nor is literacy and numeracy a matter to be resolved in first level education; it is now a matter for educators at all levels. Consequently, second level teachers need to design their teaching programmes in a literacy aware manner. They must also play a part, irrespective of their subject specialism, in improving their students’ literacy and numeracy skills/competences in the context of the wider interpretation of these skills/competences alluded to above.

One further point, the implementation of a plan to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of young people exiting our school system will entail a significant upskilling of the teaching profession at second level; otherwise it will fail. Furthermore this upskilling must be effected without further eroding class contact time; the judicious use of modern information technology is well capable of facilitating this upskilling without teaching time being adversely affected.

Comments on specific elements in the plan

1. The prioritisation of literacy and numeracy should not result in resources being diverted from other areas of the school system. Already, many aspects of primary and second level education are significantly under resourced. It is not possible to say that any area of either primary or secondary education is over resourced.
2. The proposal to extend the National Assessment of Maths and English reading to second year in second level is a desirable development as is the proposal to have schools and teachers make better use of assessment evidence to inform teaching and learning – a development that must be extended to all aspects of the curriculum. Moving schools and teachers to focus much more on assessment for learning rather

than on the assessment of learning must be a major focus for teacher continuous professional development if student-teacher and student-subject engagement is to be improved appreciably and if learners leaving our school system are going to acquire the skills and dispositions to be lifelong learners.

3. The draft plan acknowledges the need for primary schools to transfer information to post primary schools on the learning achievements of students transferring to second level. Indeed, both the Education Welfare and the EPSEN Acts (the relevant section of the EPSEN Act remains to be implemented) also impose duties on 'sending schools' to provide 'receiving' schools with information relevant to the receiving school meeting the education and general welfare needs of the transferring student. The draft plan inevitably focuses on the transferring student's numeracy and literacy achievements. However, there is manifest need for all 'sending' schools to provide all 'receiving' schools with a full and objective report not only on the transferring student's educational achievements but on all matters relevant to the education and welfare of the young person transferring between the two institutions.

The appropriate use of ICT could quite effectively and securely facilitate the transfer of the necessary reports between 'sending' and 'receiving' schools and this option is currently being explored in Northern Ireland.

4. Requiring all first and second level teachers to give priority to language and numeracy skills in the subjects they teach and to integrate language and literacy skills across all areas of the curriculum should deliver improved learner outcomes not only in literacy and numeracy but also in the academic subjects being taught. Indeed, student underachievement in individual subjects can be more a function of literacy and numeracy deficiencies than problems in understanding the subject per se.

Currently, second level teachers, in other than in English and Maths, do not feel a responsibility for either literacy or numeracy and changing this perception will pose a huge challenge - a challenge that will only be tackled effectively in the context of a major reform of junior cycle education. In reality, many of the issues that this draft plan seeks to address can only be resolved successfully through a reform of junior

cycle education where, currently, both the curriculum and the assessment process are hostile to many of the learning outcomes set out in the draft plan.

Ensuring that subject teachers have the time and space to address literacy, numeracy and other core skills issues in their subject teaching will require a serious reform of both the curriculum and the assessment process in both junior and senior cycle. Indeed, as long as the current content laden syllabi are retained in conjunction with the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations, the prospects for progress on the core skills front will be very limited.

It is not only the Maths and English curriculum that need to be reformed. All junior cycle subjects and, indeed, the whole junior cycle programme need to be reformed so they articulate seamlessly with the primary syllabi, allow for a more effective focus on skills and competences and make provision for the integration of literacy and numeracy skills.

5. While it is manifestly desirable to build the capacity of school leaders to lead teaching and learning (including the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy), the reality is that this can only happen if all second level schools are provided with a fit-for-purpose in school management system – thus releasing the school leader to lead teaching and learning.
6. The whole issue of school self-evaluation is critical to improving our schools but it is not only the skills to undertake self-evaluation that are essential, schools must be provided with the time and space to carry out the self evaluation process. Though each element of the self evaluation process would not require the involvement of the whole staff, even meetings of individual subject departments impact on class contact time. A way has to be found for schools to have the time essential to carrying out self evaluation without impinging on class contact time. It is not reasonable to expect schools to create this time through ‘creative’ time tabling.

Looking to the future, might time for school development planning and other activities essential to the effective operation of a 21st century school be provided for in agreements between the DES, the management bodies and the teachers’ unions

around the matter of the standard school year? In making this proposal, it is appreciated that schools would not wish to have particular days and times specified for these activities. However, school managements would find it very helpful if they knew that they had a specific number of hours available to them, over the course of a school year for planning and related purposes. This is a matter that would need to be addressed in the context of the Croke Park negotiations.

7. Clearly, given the extent to which literacy and numeracy is influenced by the home and 'preschool' experiences of children before they enter primary school, the commitment to improving the skills of early childhood care and education teachers is a welcome development. Again, there are resource implications here given the cap on further education places in VEC further education programmes and the limited financial capacity of many child care workers to fund their own upskilling. The plan would need to address explicitly this reality, notwithstanding the current economic climate. It is appreciated that the current capitation premium paid to early childhood education centres with better qualified staff can assist in this regard.
8. The commitment at page 21 to encourage the upskilling of early childhood care and education practitioners gives cause for concern as it is insufficient to merely encourage these practitioners to upskill; there is a **need to ensure that they are upskilled**. VECs have the capacity to facilitate this upskilling through their further education programmes, provided these programmes are adequately resourced and provided sufficient BTEI and other further education places are allocated to VECs.
9. The proposal to enhance the capacity of parents to support their children's literacy and numeracy development will require a much greater investment in family literacy programmes. It will also require the establishment of a greater level of partnership between individual schools and VEC adult literacy services.
10. Appropriately equipping newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to ensure that they are capable of delivering educational programmes effectively, including the integration of literacy, numeracy and other generic skills, will depend on the provision of robust induction/mentoring systems for NQTs. The current proposals for the introduction of

induction programmes for both primary and post primary NQTs, while welcome, are insufficient to support NQT development appropriately. In designing appropriate NQT induction/mentoring programmes, it would be important to have regard for the European Commission's Staff Working Document SEC (2010) 538 final¹, which provides clear practical guidelines for the development of NQT induction programmes.

- 11.** The provision of CPD programmes to give all teachers the skills and competences to improve their learners' outcomes and, in particular, the skills to appropriately address literacy and numeracy issues in their subject classrooms, especially in the support of learners who are struggling with the curriculum, is appreciated. But such CPD must be delivered without withdrawing teachers from the classroom. This is an issue that should be addressed in the context of the Croke Park discussions. Furthermore, ICT needs to be used to the maximum to deliver key elements of these in-service training programmes. A further point here is the need to have much of this in-service provided at a school level and to have it integrated into well thought out and adequately resourced programmes for improving schools on a continuous basis.
- 12.** The current work of the Teaching Council in reviewing and accrediting teacher training programmes is very much a step in the right direction. However, the whole area of initial teacher training, NQT induction/mentoring and teacher continuous professional development needs to be integrated. Also, there is a need to identify proactively our best classroom teachers and to involve them in teacher education programmes – either in the school or in ITE programmes – without losing them to the classroom. It is imperative that those who teach the practical skills and competences of teaching to trainee teachers should be expert, practicing teachers themselves – rather than persons with an academic knowledge of teaching practice. On the other

¹ A copy of this document entitled 'Developing coherent and system-wide induction programmes for beginning teachers: a handbook for policymakers' may be accessed from: <http://www.uni-mannheim.de/edz/pdf/sek/2010/sek-2010-0538-en.pdf>

hand, our school system cannot afford to lose its top classroom practitioners to academia.

One way of retaining our best teachers in our classrooms and using them to lead the induction of NQTs and in-school improvement in teaching and learning might be to amend the career structure for teachers to establish the post of chartered teacher, along the lines of what has been done in Scotland. These chartered teachers acquire their status by satisfying strict conditions laid down by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and they receive a special salary premium for leading teaching and learning in schools. Currently good teachers, who enjoy being in the classroom, must abandon it if they want promotion to senior management, so emulating the Scottish approach would resolve what is a significant weakness in the Irish school system.

The mere renewal of ITE programmes will not dramatically reform initial teacher training, there is need for a more holistic reform of teacher education. This reform will entail a reassessment of the competences required of those who are involved in teacher education and development at any level – third level lecturers and tutors who work in teacher training programmes, those who supervise the teaching practice of trainee teachers, NQT mentors, heads of subject departments in schools, principals and deputy principals, those involved in designing and delivering continuous professional development programmes for teachers, etc. Once the competences required of this heterogeneous group have been determined, it will then be necessary to develop continuous professional development programmes to fill in any perceived competence gaps.

While it is acknowledged that a school-based NQT mentor would not need to possess exactly the same competence set as would the lecturer in a third level teacher training institution, nevertheless all involved in the training and development of teachers would need to have a common understanding of the skills and competences required of effective teachers. They would also need to appreciate and support the work of others involved in the training and development of teachers. For example,

the NQT mentor should have a general appreciation of the work done in the third level teacher training programme and the third level tutor/lecturer should have an appreciation of the role of the school principal or subject department head in the development of NQTs. Significant work has been undertaken at EU level around the whole issue of teacher educator competences and the outcomes of this work should be considered in devising strategies for improving the quality of teacher training and development programmes.²

The work of the Teaching Council in developing a draft policy on the teacher education continuum should also greatly inform the integration of ITE, NQT induction and teacher continuous professional development.

- 13.** The proposal to re-configure the content and duration of ITE courses is desirable. However, lengthening the duration of ITE courses is not, in itself, a solution, if the trainee teacher simply spends more time attending lectures in the third level institution.

In the case of second level teachers, in particular, an increased emphasis needs to be put on the acquisition of evidence-based practical teaching skills, where the emphasis is on the facilitation of learning rather than on teaching per se. These skills can only be acquired in the classroom with the support and guidance of what might be termed 'master-teachers'. In this context, a case can be made for NQTs (teachers who have already obtained their PGDE) being appointed to schools, in the first instance, as trainee teachers, under the supervision of a master teacher. Then, over the course of, say two years, the academically qualified teacher, while teaching a restricted

² Snoek M, Swennen A, van der Klink M: 'The quality of teacher educators in the European policy debate, Actions and measures to improve professionalism of teacher educators'. Paper presented at the ATEE Conference 2009, Palma de Mallorca.
Swennen A, Jones K, Volman M: 'Teacher educators: their identities, sub-identities and implications for professional development', *Professional Development in Education* Vol. 36, Nos. 1–2, March–June 2010, pp. 131–148
Swennen A, van der Klink M (Eds.): 'Becoming a Teacher Educator: theory and practice for Teacher Educators', Springer, 2009.

number of hours per week, could attain registration as a teacher by developing his/her teaching competences, to a specified standard, through a mix of supervised classroom practice and participation in education/training programmes operated by the teacher training college. Subsequently, to retain their teacher registration, teachers might be required to undertake a certain amount of appropriate continuous professional development annually.

The proposal to require all entrants to second level teaching to demonstrate satisfactory skills in the integration of literacy and numeracy into their subject teaching is laudable but it will be important to ensure that the teacher training programmes use appropriate experts to train the trainee teachers in these skills. Here, VEC adult literacy services may be able to assist.

- 14.** The provision of effective CPD programmes on literacy and numeracy to the teaching profession, especially, at second level, will require a considerable building of capacity, as it would be important that such CPD is delivered by practicing teachers skilled in teaching literacy and numeracy skills to school students and integrating such teaching into subject specific teaching.
- 15.** The commitment to providing leadership development programmes for aspiring school leaders is long overdue. But it is not just a matter of providing development opportunities for those who would aspire to principalship. There is an urgent need to make the role of the school principal attractive to those with the personal attributes and dispositions suited to effectively leading schools in the 21st century. Many teachers feel the job of the school principal is currently undoable for a variety of reasons. The in-school management system is not fit-for-purpose; there is no clear agreement around what constitutes school leadership including the notion of distributed leadership; the rights and responsibilities of school management are neither codified nor agreed and many schools pay little attention to succession planning.

Those suited to principalship will only seek the role if they can clearly see that the job is doable and thus professionally rewarding. In the absence of such perception, there

is the real possibility that those with ambition but not the necessary attributes to be effective principals will seek and obtain school leadership positions to the detriment of schools and their students.

- 16.** We know from the work that the ESRI has undertaken in DEIS schools that certain supports and educational interventions can improve the literacy of children who are performing poorly in literacy. We also know that, while some schools are using the resources provided to them to improve the literacy outcomes for their least literate students, other schools are not doing well in this regard. It is imperative that best practice in the remediation of numeracy, literacy, and related issues be disseminated to all schools, and that a mechanism is put in place to ensure that this best practice is implemented for all students experiencing difficulty in these areas. While it is right and proper that there should be a particular focus on DEIS schools, it is important to acknowledge that there are students in all schools that experience serious difficulties with literacy and numeracy.

In Ireland, entitlement to public services tends to be categorical. Falling into a particular category entitles a person to a 'full service' while falling outside the category entitles the citizen to nothing. This tendency must be avoided when it comes to addressing numeracy and literacy difficulties.

Essentially, a transparent set of protocols and entitlements must be put in place to ensure that literacy and numeracy difficulties are identified as early as possible in the child's life. Then, once literacy or numeracy problems have been identified, all reasonable supports and other remedial action should be put in place to address these difficulties. A system for assessing and reporting on the progress of the children provided with these supports also needs to be put in place.

The recommendations for action set out at pages 34 and 35 have considerable merit. Their weakness lies in the extent that they focus on schools or groups of schools rather than on individual students. Ultimately, it is the individual child that counts and thus the individual, rather than the school must be the focus of all action. The primary commitment should be to 'leaving no child behind'.

17. When it comes to EAL, learner progress will only be maximised if EAL support is provided by teachers with an appropriate skill and competence set. To ensure this, wherever possible only appropriately trained personnel should be delivering language support and this is not currently the case. It is acknowledged that the State is expending some €100M annually in providing language support to students whose first language is other than English. However, these funds could deliver significantly improved learner outcomes if those delivering the language support were trained to do so.

A further difficulty here is that, notwithstanding the NCCA guidelines and the resources made available on the DES website, significant numbers of those who deliver language support do not have ready access to appropriate teaching and learning materials and they simply make do with whatever they can locate. In fact, anecdotal evidence would have one believe that many teachers are unaware of the existence of these resources.

Though supporting students whose first language is other than English is very much a learner-specific activity, those providing English language support would greatly benefit from having access to graded language exercises and other materials to support the teaching and learning of English to these students. In this regard, it needs to be appreciated that, whether this is desirable or not, that second level teachers generally tend to rely significantly on textbooks to support their teaching so the absence of appropriate teaching materials presents them with real problems in teaching something (English language) they have not been trained to teach.

Furthermore both the DES and NCCA resources are not easy to locate on the web and so they are not as accessible as they should be to schools and teachers.

The establishment of a 'one-stop-shop' to support the teaching of English to students whose first language is other than English could be expected to improve learner outcomes flowing from the State's investment of €100M. The VEC has accumulated considerable expertise in the delivery of English to speakers of other languages and this expertise could quite easily be harnessed to support EAL provision within the

second level school system. One way of putting this one-stop-shop support service in place might be to extend the role of the national Adult Refugee Programme office (http://www.adultrefugee.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8&Itemid=2), based in Co Dublin VEC, to provide a support service to all schools.

- 18.** There needs to be a significant upskilling of Youthreach and CTC teachers/tutors around the whole matter of teaching numeracy and literacy – both as individual disciplines and integrated across the teaching of particular subjects. It is also likely that there will need to be further investment in resources to support the work of these tutors if the literacy and numeracy issue is going to be addressed effectively. In many respects, it could be said that participants in Youthreach and CTC programmes have one last chance to resolve their literacy and numeracy problems before entering adulthood and the consequences of not resolving these difficulties are extremely serious. Consequently, this is a matter of the highest priority.

Concluding remarks

Literacy and numeracy in a knowledge and technological society is a complex matter. It encompasses a broad range of skills and competences essential to persons operating effectively in the family, in the community and in the workplace. As such, it is not something that can be taught or learned in isolation. Rather, numeracy and literacy is something that is integral to everything that is taught and learned – either in or outside of school.

There is much merit in the draft plan and the proposals for action set out in the plan are all eminently laudable. On the other hand, there is a strong case for including the various elements of the plan relating to second level education as part of an integrated plan for reforming junior cycle education, as doing so would be more likely to improve overall learner outcomes. In fact, it is difficult to envisage significant progress being made in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes other than in the context of overall education reform at junior cycle.

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