

Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People

A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools

The National Council for Special Education.

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Introduction

The National Council for Special Education welcomes the publication of the draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy in schools (DES, 2010). The Council wishes to accept the Tánaiste's invitation to contribute to improving the teaching of literacy and numeracy for young people and as a first step has prepared this response to the ideas contained within the draft document. We share the Tánaiste's concern that all children should be enabled to develop the core skills of literacy and numeracy to as high a standard as possible and agree that a concerted national effort is required to achieve this objective.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs

One of the stated aims of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN), 2004 is to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way, in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives (Gov of Ireland, 2004). The ability of children with special educational needs to achieve this objective is greatly curtailed without adequate skills in literacy and numeracy, as recognised in the draft plan:

'without adequate literacy and numeracy skills, a young person or adult is cut off from full participation in many aspects of life and cannot participate fully in schooling, further and higher education, nor can they take up satisfying jobs and careers.'

The ambitions of the EPSEN Act can only be realised if children with special needs have, in as far as potentially possible, the basic skills of literacy and numeracy that such participation requires.

The Council therefore welcomes the commitment contained in the draft plan that:

'every child leaving our school system is numerate and is able to speak, read, write and spell at a level that enables them to participate fully in education and in Irish life and society' (DES 2010: 9).

The vision for improved literacy and numeracy among all learners reflects the commitment in the EPSEN Act that people with special educational needs have the same right to avail of and benefit from an appropriate education as those without such needs.

The national plan goes on to highlight the need to target available additional resources on learners at risk of failure to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. Four subgroups of learners are identified in this context, pupils without English as a first language, those from socio-economically disadvantaged, children from the Traveller community and those who become disaffected from schools.

Council would like to point out that there are certain children with special educational needs who also experience significant difficulties in acquiring the basic skills in literacy and numeracy and as a consequence fail to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. This can include pupils who are deaf/hard of hearing, pupils with dyslexia, pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, pupils with general learning disabilities etc.

In order to illustrate this point, Council would like to refer to an international review of the literature of deaf education commissioned by NCSE. In this study, the author points out that the impact of early hearing loss on children's ability to reach their developmental and educational potential is highly significant (Marschark, 2009). The academic achievement levels of deaf children remain significantly delayed compared to those of hearing children even in those cases where the non-verbal cognitive potential is similar. Marschark refers to the work of Allen (1986) and Traxler (2000) who reported that the median level of reading comprehension for deaf and hard-of-hearing school leavers in the US approximated that of hearing children at fourth grade level (age nine). In addition, deaf and hard-of-hearing school-leavers were shown to function at only the 80th percentile of the average mathematics score of hearing students. That means that students aged 17 or 18 with hearing loss obtain mathematics scores like those of hearing students in the fifth or sixth year of school (aged 10 to 12). Marschark concludes that these difficulties in literacy and mathematics clearly affect this cohort's abilities to acquire information and skills in other academic areas.

The draft national plan to improve literacy and numeracy does not explicitly highlight pupils with special educational needs. This is an important plan with potentially far-reaching effects and Council is concerned that the needs of this diverse group of pupils ought to be addressed in a focused and pro-active way in the plan's development and implementation. The plan should also address how its proposals will complement and 'fit within' the new NCCA Junior Cycle Curriculum Framework for students with general learning disabilities currently under development (NCCA, 2009).

The research literature indicates a considerable overlap between the above mentioned four groups of learners, all of whom can be considered to have additional learning needs. For instance, the evidence suggests that learners from socio-economically disadvantaged communities have higher levels of special educational needs than others (Banks and Mc Coy 2011 forthcoming; Lindsay, Pather and Strand 2009, Smyth, E et al. 2009) and that children from recently arrived families are frequently socio-economically disadvantaged (INTO 2006). This suggests that a coherent and overarching approach to additional learning needs whether arising from socio-economic disadvantage, ethnicity or special educational needs, will be vital to ensuring that no child is left behind by this strategy.

Improving Teachers' Professional Practice

Many of the research studies commissioned to date by the NCSE have contained extensive recommendations in relation to the need for on-going professional training and development of teachers of pupils with special educational needs (Cooper P. 2010, Marschark, M. 2009, Parsons, S et al, 2009, Ware et al, 2009). The issue of developing national standards and competencies for special needs education was also raised.

The Council welcomes the focus on improving teachers' professional practice contained in the draft plan and the actions outlined in the plan to achieve this. There are a number of actions specified in relation to the re-configuration of the content and duration of initial teacher education courses for primary and post-primary teachers which Council regards as most worthwhile. In addition to the actions specified, Council recommends that further actions are included to ensure that:

- all teachers, primary and post-primary, understand and appreciate the particular difficulties faced by certain children with special educational needs in relation to the acquisition of literacy and numeracy.
- All teachers successfully complete mandatory units in relation to the development of literacy and numeracy and related assessment and reporting strategies for children with special educational needs who struggle to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills
- All teachers are equipped to draw up individual education plans to include learning objectives focussed on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy.

Council also acknowledges that there are likely to be a small number of children who will always struggle with mastering literacy and numeracy to the level necessary to function adequately in our society. Teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to assist these children to communicate to the best of their ability using all the available materials, methodologies and technologies.

Achieving Outcomes for all Learners

The NCSE welcomes the emphasis in the document on measuring outcomes in relation to the development of skills in literacy and numeracy, and appreciates the sensitivities that tracking outcomes raises for those involved in education.

There have been significant increases in investment to support the education of children with special educational needs over the past decade or so, as well as policy and legislative commitments to better services and greater inclusion of these children in the mainstream education system. Despite these changes and supports, there is currently limited evidence available which relates to the educational engagement, progress or outcomes of these pupils. The NCSE Implementation Report noted the historical basis of this evidence gap, in stating that there had been '*no structured emphasis on outcomes and an almost endemic fascination with inputs, with no means of ascertaining what outcomes are being achieved for children with special educational needs.*' (NCSE 2006:17).

An increased participation of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools has been well documented. However, we have little evidence about whether these children are achieving educationally in relation to their potential. The availability of robust data on formal (e.g. literacy, numeracy) as well as more informal (e.g. well being, socialisation, independence) educational progress and outcomes is crucial to helping us understand whether children with special educational needs are engaged with school and achieving relative to their learning needs. This data should be designed and available for children in all educational settings, mainstream primary and post-primary, special classes and special schools. Such data will also provide baseline information for children with special educational needs against which the impact of interventions, such as this strategy, can be measured.

However, as acknowledged in the document, the issue of measuring educational outcomes can be difficult. It raises questions about the fundamental aim of education and the kind of measures that should be used to indicate progress. It is complicated by the fact that learners have a very wide range of needs, interests, capacities and aptitudes, and by the impact of a range of factors such as social class, gender, culture and school contexts and resources on pupil educational engagement and achievements.

These difficulties have been articulated in debates about the publication of school level state examination results and a fear that a focus on these kind of results would create 'league tables' in which schools with the highest levels of academic attainment will appear to be doing best. These types of data fail to capture significant levels of progress and achievement among many

pupils with special educational and other needs or aptitudes, as well as the educational achievements of schools which serve greater numbers of these students. It is therefore important that the national plan endeavours to develop mechanisms which capture these factors in the intended focus on outcomes.

Currently some formal educational outcomes data are recorded nationally on a range of measures and from a number of sources, both within national and international initiatives in Ireland (e.g. standardised test results or national assessments in primary schools, state examination results, PISA). However, there are limitations associated with these data which may have implications for what can be learned about educational outcomes and progress among children with special educational needs. For example, available data may not be collected in a way that allows for the disaggregation of the outcomes for children with special educational needs and standardised tests may not be best suited to assessing progress among these learners.

The NCSE proposes that the national plan address the needs of learners with special educational needs not just in the implementation of the strategy, but also in the design and development of progress indicators and outcomes. The NCSE is currently engaged in research on the topic of measuring educational engagement, progress and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs, which may be pertinent to the work of the group.

In addition, a three year longitudinal research project, Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools), was commissioned by the NCSE in 2008 to carry out an in-depth study of special and inclusive education. The study will consider, among a number of issues critical to the effective provision for pupils with special educational needs, the development of a framework for evaluating academic, social and administrative outcomes.

Finally Council is of the opinion that, while important, there should not be a disproportionate emphasis on the measurement of outcomes in relation to literacy and numeracy. It is also important to emphasise different approaches to the teaching of literacy and numeracy which should be adopted and which may require a fundamental change of culture in schools.

Implementation Steering Group

Council notes that the Minister will appoint a National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group to support the implementation of the actions in the national plan. Among others, this body will include senior officials from the Department of Education and Skills, the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and relevant statutory bodies.

Council is conscious of its statutory obligation, under Section 20 (j) of the EPSEN Act, 2004 to advise the Minister in relation to any matter relating to the education of children and others with disabilities. Council therefore attaches considerable importance to engaging with the Implementation Group in the development of the National Plan, having particular regard to the requirements of children with special educational needs within the plan.

References

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