

## **CÓNAIDHM ÉIREANNACH NA MÚINTEOIRÍ OLLSCOILE**

### **IRISH FEDERATION OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS**

#### **IFUT Response to *Children and Young People: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools* (DES, November 2010)**

This paper was written with the cooperation of IFUT Members in (1) the Church of Ireland College of Education; (2) St Patrick's College, Drumcondra and (3) Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

#### **GENERAL**

IFUT members in the Colleges of Education endorse the principle that 'it is essential 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' (p. 9). But how that objective is to be achieved, and the role which is to be played in its achievement by primary teachers and those involved in the professional education of primary teachers, requires full and thorough examination.

Members are united in their belief that the B.Ed. programmes in the Colleges of Education need effective reform and there is a general welcome for the report's proposal for a four year B.Ed. programme. However, members have expressed serious concerns about aspects of the Draft Plan.

#### **1. LACK OF CONSULTATION**

The recently published *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* explicitly recognises that 'institutional autonomy is regarded internationally as the key principle that characterises high-performing higher education institutions' (p. 39), and emphasises that 'a diverse range of strong, autonomous institutions is essential if the overall system is to respond effectively to evolving and unpredictable societal needs' (pp. 13-14). The announcement of a sweeping range of reforms to the B.Ed. programmes in a Draft Plan ostensibly about standards of literacy and numeracy and without prior consultation with the institutional providers of the programmes is, by contrast, a significant abrogation of the principle of institutional autonomy. As MIC one member stated: 'it is lamentable that the DES, for whatever reason, decided to cast aside the consensus approach to education policy and launch this plan with no consultation

with ITE providers (as was the case with Hibernia) or with leading academics in the areas of numeracy and literacy education'. They, not the DES nor the Teaching Council, should be the authors of the review.

Members were also very critical of the short deadlines prescribed in the Draft Plan. Comments on it had to be submitted by the end of January 2011 and the implementation date for primary education is 2012-13, and 2014-15 for post-primary education. However, the deadlines for comments has now been extended until the end of February 2011. This is very necessary as three related documents have also just been published: the Report of the Review Panel to the Teaching Council, the *Draft Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (December 2010) and the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (January 2011). The contents, policies and proposals of these documents require detailed and careful consideration in the context of the reform of the B.Ed. programmes.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Members consider it reprehensible that a Plan which so frequently refers to 'research' and 'research evidence' is devoid of references and lacks contextualisation.

- Who wrote this Plan (there is no mention of any nominated author or authors)?
- What kind of methodologies and data are being used to support this evidence ?
- What other areas are being improved?
- Is it intended that assessment of literacy and numeracy be evaluated holistically or simply functionally in terms of testing?
- What kind of evidence does the Inspectorate use?
- Does the self-perceived lack of competency by teachers translate to actual lack of competency in the classroom ?
- If 86% of lessons are satisfactory, why is such a radical overhaul of the system being proposed ?
- Is there data indicating whether there are particular cohorts of children or particular age groups having difficulties?
- What adjustments are being considered for the emergence of new forms of technology? What literacy and numeracy will the children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need ? What research has been done on this?
- Do we have comparative data? Have numeracy and literacy indeed declined absolutely (and not just relatively to OECD tables) ?
- It is not clear why *these* specific changes are being suggested rather than others which might seek to better promote the education of our students as critical and reflective practitioners.
- It is disturbing that on p. 19 the Plan refers to 'the B.Ed. programme', the authors seemingly unaware of the basic fact that there is no one B.Ed. programme in the Republic. The degree offered in each of the Colleges of Education is different, indeed some of them do not include an academic subject.
- The language used in the Plan, 'learners' progress in literacy and numeracy is *carefully monitored* (p. 26), 'teaching maintains a *relentless focus* on ... literacy and numeracy' (p. 26), '*specify learning outcomes* at each level of the curriculum' (p. 29), indicates an evident desire to impose a national curriculum for teacher

education which values only what can be packaged and neatly assessed. This is surely anathema to *A Vision for primary education* as set out in the 1999 curriculum: 'The Primary School Curriculum celebrates the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life - spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical'.

- With regard to mathematics, there is an assumption that the effective teaching of mathematics relates solely to achievement in maths at Leaving Certificate level.
- Does the fact that 60% of students undertake Honours at Junior Cert and 30% undertake Honours at Leaving Cert mean anything? The elitist attitude to Honours Maths in post-primary schools, the hugely overcrowded syllabus and the failure of teaching methods to include most students, have resulted in the need for programmes like Project Maths. This may be at odds with the target of promoting better attitudes amongst children and young people (p. 130).

Members have noted the Plan's lack of clarity and, indeed, confusion about what is understood by literacy and numeracy and about the kind of approaches which would result in changing the nature of teaching within the B.Ed. programmes. The Plan has not even considered the recent important Cambridge Primary Review which, unlike the Draft Literacy and Numeracy Plan, rejects 'training' for 'delivery' or 'compliance'. The Draft Plan, in the words of one member, 'undermines the role that we as academics have in teacher education by reducing it to that of teacher training'.

The comments on pp. 25 and 28 in relation to the expanded curriculum at primary level also concern members. We are informed that the inclusion of 'a broader range of issues, topics and subjects' has resulted in an erosion of the time given to core skills (p. 25). This is reiterated on p. 28. Members find it difficult to understand how the inclusion of subjects such as SPHE, Science, Drama and Music can be deemed to erode the time given to literacy and numeracy skills. The very nature and content of these subjects means that children consolidate their core skills. They engage in discussion, analysis, problem solving, language development, communication, data recording and analysis, sorting and classifying, and many other aspects of literacy and numeracy through engagement with these and other subjects.

### **3. LIBERAL ARTS AND THE ACADEMIC SUBJECT**

On pp. 18-19 of the Plan it is stated that 'the Minister will cooperate with the Teaching Council to re-configure the content and duration of initial teacher education (ITE) courses for primary teachers to ensure the development of teachers' skills in literacy and numeracy teaching [and] discontinue the study of academic subjects currently situated within the B.Ed. programme in favour of academic subjects more closely related to education in order to allow more time for the development of the professional skills and knowledge of teachers described above [i.e. such

areas as children's learning, language acquisition, the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy and in related assessment and reporting strategies]'. This is one of the most contentious aspects of the Plan.

- There is no evidence that the academic subject is in any way responsible for the poor literacy and numeracy that are now being experienced in the schools and also amongst our primary teachers.
- Regrettably, the Plan sees the education of primary school teachers mainly in terms of training, not formation. It is another instance of the short-sighted view of third-level education.
- Attenuating the academic subject will produce a narrow technical type of teacher and that is not what is required at present. Anything that reduces the ability of teachers to think creatively is a detrimental step.
- The proposal in the Draft Plan to 'discontinue the study of academic subjects currently included within the B.Ed. programme in favour of academic subjects more closely related to education' (p. 19) does not appear to be consistent with the recommendations of the Teaching Council Review Panel that 'the linkages between the Education and the Arts departments be strengthened and made more explicit.' (*Report of the Review Panel to the Teaching Council following the Review of the Bachelor of Education, Mary Immaculate College, p. 10*).
- The elimination of the B.Ed.'s Arts component in St Patrick's and Mary Immaculate College would be a retrograde step. B.Ed. graduates will be expected to teach a range of subjects in primary schools and a solid grounding in one or more subjects can only enhance their ability to teach those subjects.
- There are very successful Liberal Arts degree programmes operating in both St. Patrick's College and in Mary Immaculate College at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The inclusion of the Liberal Arts subjects has been a long-standing formal requirement for the validation of the B.Ed. degree within the Irish university system, and repeated inter-faculty reviews of the degree structure within the College and at national level have endorsed the role of the Liberal Arts component of the programme as providing the necessary backdrop for the education of primary teachers.
- It is an integral part of the professionalism required of our graduates that they will be equipped to build incrementally on their knowledge as part of a life-long learning process, to respond positively to changing social mores and technological innovations, and to adapt and apply such knowledge pedagogically in the course of their careers.
- The Liberal Arts provide career flexibility by facilitating postgraduate work in the Liberal Arts subjects, and thus enable graduates to move into occupations other than primary teaching.

#### **4. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

- There is a complete lack of understanding that, for some people, literacy and numeracy pose significant difficulties. There is no understanding of the nature of the problems faced by these learners.
- On p. 9 there is the presumption that **ALL** children can acquire or become competent in literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills. This does not stand up in the international literature: a stubborn 20% seems to have great difficulties with literacy. There is no reference to a child's innate ability, unique learning propensity and disposition.
- What about notions such as inclusion, participation, experience that are at the heart of the primary curriculum ? National assessments such as those noted only

serve to marginalise those with difficulties in literacy and numeracy and define them in terms of how they deviate from the norm.

- What about those with learning support needs, socially and culturally disadvantaged groups, and those with Special Educational Needs who are not part of these groups ?
- The application of generic strategies to students with such diverse needs is only scratching the surface. Teachers need to be able to cater for individuals, according to their strengths and needs. This involves being able to draw upon a range of methods and approaches to delivering content, designing suitable activities and determining the form and assessment of these educational outcomes.

## 5. INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION (ITE) and CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

- Why is the Teaching Council being prioritised over the colleges ?
- On p. 18 it is suggested that there will be an '[i]ncrease [in] the time spent in school-based teaching practice in the classrooms of **high-quality**, experienced teachers of literacy and numeracy'.
- But how will such high-quality teachers be identified ? And if there is a limited number of these, how will places in their classrooms be allocated? Will teachers be disqualified from taking students on Teaching Practice if they are not so designated? How are the Colleges to make provision for Teaching Practice places for all students?
- On p. 19 it is stated that 'teachers are required to demonstrate satisfactory skills in the teaching of literacy and numeracy during the teaching practice component of their initial teacher education course'. This ignores the fact that students must demonstrate satisfactory skills across all subject areas in the current system. So does this mean that there will be separate assessments of the teaching in these areas? If students are satisfactory in these areas but unsatisfactory in other areas will they still pass ? How are these areas to be weighted in comparison to other curricular areas?
- Regarding sections 2.1 & 2.2 (pp. 15-16) on improving teachers' professional practice, there is very little evidence for the assertions about the low level of mathematics teaching.

## 6. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- The reference on p. 27 to realigning the Infant stages of the Primary School Curriculum with *Aistear* is most welcome.
- We also welcome the emphasis on oral language and phonemic awareness as the foundation for literacy, and on early mathematical skills. However, it is less clear that these will be embedded within the kind of pedagogy envisaged by *Aistear* as opposed to being added on as distinct programmes.

## OTHER POINTS

Members also referred to the neglect of foreign languages and to the importance of recruiting more international students.

**IFUT,  
21 February 2011**