Barnardos

Submission to the 'Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools'

31st January 2011

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to input into the 'Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools'. Overall, Barnardos welcomes this Plan and its actions. There is a definite need for a national strategy to drive and improve literacy and numeracy standards throughout our educational system. It is heartening to see that the important role that Early Childhood Care and Education can play in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills is recognised and aims to be capitalised on further.

To improve the Plan, Barnardos believes that the language and actions outlined should be more child-focused. Ensuring the actions to be undertaken are in the best interests of children will help motivate adults to make the required changes. As Tim Shanahan correctly identifies improvements for the child are only achieved if they have a more positive experience of learning and of school in general[1].

It is well known that a lack of literacy and numeracy skills affects all aspects of a child's life throughout both childhood and adulthood. Literacy problems are seen as a significant contributing factor for pupils experiencing difficulties settling into secondary school. Children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or in low skilled jobs, to have poorer emotional and physical health, to have limited earning power, and to be imprisoned.

Much of what is in the plan is already under way and is largely school based. This year a revised second-level Project Maths syllabus focusing on practical application of the subject has begun, and draft plans are due to the Department of Education and Skills soon on a revamp of the three years students spend preparing for the Junior Certificate. Implementation of all actions (within school and outside school settings) accompanied with the appropriate resources and supports are necessary to ensure full effectiveness. Moreover, clear monitoring and accountability procedures must underpin the Plan with regular updates on implementation to be given to the Minister for Education and Skills.

<u>Recognition that things are not working</u>

The Draft Plan highlights that change across the board is required because despite numerous interventions to improve literacy and numeracy, the national standards have remained largely unchanged since 1980. One in three pupils from disadvantaged areas continues to have severe literacy difficulties[2].

The Inspectors Reports found significant proportion of lessons in English in primary schools are not satisfactory. The weaknesses identified include teachers' preparation for teaching,

[1] Dr Timothy Shanahan presentation *'Breakthrough thinking on Literacy Learning'* – A Youngballymun Seminar, May 19th 2009

[2] Department of Education and Science (2006), *National Assessment of English Reading in 2004*, Education Research Centre, Dublin

the teaching methods they use, and the ways in which schools and teachers assess and monitor pupils' progress in learning[3].

The Plan notes that teaching and learning of mathematics in Ireland requires even greater attention as repeated assessments at the primary level have revealed weak performance on problem solving and measures.

By international standards, OECD showed a sharp fall in Ireland's maths and literacy ranking. On reading levels among 15-year-olds, Ireland slipped from fifth place in 2000 to 17th place in 2009, while in maths Ireland fell from 16th to 26th over the same period[4].

1 Draft Plan Proposal – Teacher Training Reform

The Plan recognises that high quality teaching workforce across the school system from ECCE services to Leaving Certificate is crucial to improving outcomes for pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Every teacher and ECCE practitioner is a key agent of change, therefore upskilling and continuing professional development is necessary.

Improvements are also required in the provision and uptake of continuing professional development courses for teachers regarding literacy and numeracy. The survey of teachers conducted as part of the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading in 2009 found that up to a third of students were taught by primary teachers who had not participated in any form of continuing professional development for either English or mathematics in the three years prior to the study.

In the interests of consistency and improving the skill base of educators, the Plan recommends amongst other things, the extension of the undergraduate courses for teachers, upskilling of ECCE workforce and providing continuing professional development courses on literacy and numeracy.

Barnardos' Comments

Barnardos believes that any extension of teacher training courses should be coupled with a new vision underpinning it, so to avoid a situation of having just more of the same. Our suggested changes to the Bachelor of Education courses include longer teacher placements, understanding of the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage, mandatory placement in DEIS schools, understanding the importance of literacy across the curriculum and disciplines and the inclusion of Aistear framework. Presently there is a criticism of the teaching courses being overloaded and a call for a rebalance of prioritises for instance the time allocated for religion is four times that of science[5]. The extension of the teacher training course will also mean increased tuition fees for the students and this may be a deterrent for students taking up the course.

Barnardos recommends that the Plan be clearer on how Aistear can be incorporated into teacher training courses. With the roll out of the free preschool year, children thankfully are entering primary school with an increased acquisition of pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. This must be built upon and therefore places an onus on those teaching children in the first two years of primary school to upskill and amend their teaching methods accordingly. It is well proven that participation in quality ECCE settings can be hugely beneficial for children's educational attainment and performance, especially those from disadvantaged areas. Establishing literacy pathways between ECCE settings and Junior and Senior infant classes

[3]Department of Education and Science (2010) *Incidental Inspection Report on the Teaching and Learning of English and Mathematics in Primary Schools*

[4] OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) 2010

[5] Teaching Council – www.teachingcouncil.ie

is essential. While some work has been done in this area with teachers already in post, it is imperative that those in training are aware of how Aistear will impact on them.

The desire to improve the professionalization of the ECCE workforce is linked with the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector which was launched in December 2010. This long awaited Workforce Development Plan should help to standardise training for childcare workers but does not make any proposal - or set out a time-frame - for raising the minimum qualification levels over time. No additional funding has been allocated to implementing the plan which is a significant drawback. There are no new training grants and no new incentives for workers to train (e.g. through the prospect of higher wages on the completion of training) or for employers to release existing workers on a regular basis for participation in training courses. In fact, it is disappointing that the plan does not ring-fence the funding that is already there. The protection of resources will be hard given that the funding of training is dispersed among so many different bodies (VECs, FAS, Institutes of Technology, etc.) each of which faces funding pressures of its own[6]. The absence of funding and timeframes will impede the upskilling of ECCE staff to the detriment of themselves and the children. This coupled with the continued under-resourcing of the ECCE sector as a whole, will also have an impact on the effectiveness of a National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools.

Barnardos has concerns regarding the proposed development of a generic skills-based programme. Such a programme could jeopardise the autonomy of teachers and the focus will shift from assessment for learning to mere box ticking, as teachers strive to complete programmes with little time to consider students' learning. Teachers require guidance on how to plan for English classes and knowledge about what effective literacy development entails; the skills, strategies and thinking processes that have to be developed for a student to become a successful reader, writer, speaker and listener. Key components to ensuring effective literacy development according to Tim Shanahan include word knowledge, oral fluency, comprehension and writing. The adoption of this Shanahan framework by teachers has yielded very positive outcomes for children in Chicago where their literacy levels increased[7]. Teachers need access to such research based, balanced literacy frameworks without being too prescriptive. Sample long term and short term plans should be provided for teachers illustrating how all the elements of effective literacy development can be incorporated and developed into effective English plans.

2 Draft Plan Proposal – Principals Reform

The Plan acknowledges that the leadership of principals is essential if schools are to look critically at their own work, identify how improvements can be made, implement actions that can make a difference for learners, and monitor student outcomes effectively.

This is proposed through the provision of guidance and training to principals on effective school self-evaluation in conjunction with principals' professional organisations (IPPN and NAPD), focussing on improvements in the teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy. There is also a proposal to improve the provision and uptake of leadership development programmes for aspiring principals by signalling that the successful completion of such courses will be a mandatory requirement for applicants for principalship from a fixed date.

[6] Start Strong E-newsletter December 2010
[7] Dr Timothy Shanahan presentation *'Breakthrough thinking on Literacy Learning'* – A Youngballymun Seminar, May 19th 2009

Barnardos' Comments

Barnardos believes that instilling leadership within the school does not come from the principal alone but also includes the Boards of Management. Members on the Boards of Management should also be supported on how to create a school environment that emphasises literacy and numeracy across the school.

Barnardos recommends extending the availability and encouraging uptake of leadership development programmes to current principals as well as aspiring principals. All principals should be encouraged to undertake teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy units.

3 Draft Plan Proposal – Curriculum Reform

It is hoped that through the proposed actions, the curricula will be more seamless as a child progresses through the system and that the teachers will know what skills and competence are expected of pupils at different stages in their development.

Some actions include reform of the curriculum at infant level as Aistear is being rolled out. Increase the recommended amount of time devoted to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and improvement in maths instruction by focusing on measures and estimation are proposed at primary level. At secondary school, proposals include revising the current syllabus for English in the junior cycle to connect more effectively with the learning outcomes achieved in primary school. Presently a child's experience of English class in both primary school and first year in secondary school are so different that it causes difficulty for children to ease into the secondary school system. Reducing the numbers of areas studied within the junior cycle to ensure that adequate time is devoted to the development of literacy and numeracy is also recommended.

Barnardos' Comments

Although Barnardos welcomes Aistear, at present it is being rolled out on an ad-hoc basis. To achieve the consistency being aimed for and to improve the transition for children between ECCE settings and primary schools, Aistear must be operational in both in a timely and comprehensive manner and resources allocated to achieve this.

The Plan gives limited reference to the type of learning environment required to encourage literacy and numeracy in the ECCE sector. Nor does the Plan appear to understand how to support literacy and numeracy learning outcomes across the developmental stages of children within the ECCE sector. Of particular importance is the potential to really focus on young children's oral language development in these vital years. A possible recommendation is the introduction of a mentoring system in the ECCE sector to support teachers in building on literacy and numeracy principles and outcomes.

It is highlighted that in infant classes there should be lower adult-child ratios to facilitate the sort of learning that is envisaged in Aistear. While Barnardos would welcome such a move it is difficult to see this materialise given the overall Department of Education and Skills intention to reduce teacher numbers.

Likewise it is planned that more assessment of children's competencies would be conducted in infant classes and intervention strategies and supports would be available when problems are identified - especially in the areas of oral language and phonemic awareness. In fact, this is already hindered given the reduction in availability of resource teachers and language support teachers. Barnardos believes that these supports should not be cutback as reducing supports based on student numbers in a school rather than their needs will result in children failing to reach their educational potential. In fact, Barnardos would like to extend the supports available to include speech and language therapists who can work with classroom

teachers. Ensuring the availability of supports for children having difficulties in infant classes greatly improves their outcomes and avoids problems becoming entrenched.

While the Plan suggests increasing the level of time allocated to literacy and numeracy at primary level no further details are given. Tim Shanahan's work has shown that more instruction leads to greater gains for children and recommends teachers in primary schools dedicate 120-180mins per day to literacy and numeracy tuition[8]. For schools in disadvantaged areas additional mechanisms to improve literacy and numeracy standards could include providing after and out of school services.

Another failing of the current curriculum is that it assumes literacy is acquired purely through English class. The curriculum needs to recognise that literacy is needed for all subjects and teachers need to be able to explain and teach how to read, follow or plot graphs, tables, follow instruction manuals etc as required by their specific subject.

While the Plan aims for the curriculum to teach and assess key literacy skills, little focus is given to language development and vocabulary. However, in reality language development and acquisition is required not only at infant level but throughout the system as students must understand words and improve their vocabulary to succeed within it.

Increasing the teaching time on literacy and numeracy will have a knock on effect of narrowing the curriculum and sacrificing some subjects which can have a negative effect on children's holistic development. A balance must be found, because the lack of participation in physical education and arts (i.e. music, visual arts) will exclude many children from excelling in their particular strengths in school, and further turn these children "off" traditional schooling.

4 Draft Plan Proposal - Targeting additional resources

The Plan correctly identifies that some children will require additional supports to achieve greater understanding and attainment in literacy and numeracy. These include children whose first language is not English, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and children from the Traveller community.

Most of the actions proposed involve focusing on the DEIS schools experience including encouraging teacher upskilling and refocusing emphasis of supports into 1st and 2nd year of junior cycle to help transition between primary and secondary schools. Improving the targeting of EAL teachers for students whom English is an additional language is also proposed.

For children in ECCE settings it is envisaged to prioritise the implementation of the oral language development programme in pre-schools that are linked to DEIS primary schools.

Barnardos' Comments

Barnardos is disappointed that the target to be achieved by 2020 is to reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (minimum) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5% in both second class and sixth class. It is not a very ambitious target and gives the perception that this cohort of children cannot improve despite changes in curricula or supports available.

[8] Dr Timothy Shanahan presentation *'Breakthrough thinking on Literacy Learning'* – A Youngballymun Seminar, May 19th 2009

The Plan recognises the importance of vigorously evaluated educational programmes that are being used to support children with the literacy and numeracy skills. However, it should be noted that the Reading Recovery and First Steps initiatives that are being rolled out are yet evaluated. Barnardos' own reading intervention 'Wizards of Words' for first and second class students embeds assessment and evaluation. It is operating in a sample of schools in Dublin and Limerick and is presently being independently evaluated. The intervention uses trained volunteers giving children one-to-one reading sessions consisting of pre-reading, reading and a follow-up activity and adopts a balanced literacy approach focussing on comprehension, fluency, phonics and vocabulary.

The Plan identifies purely the educational supports available but Barnardos believes there is a role for other agencies to play in supporting or identifying children who would have literacy and numeracy difficulties. These include Public Health Nurses, Speech and Language Therapists, NGO's and out of school services. In fact, the availability of those educational supports identified in the Plan are already being reduced, thereby compromising the effectiveness of the Plan to help these children. In Barnardos experience, even a short disruption to a child's schooling such as losing a support teacher or withdrawal of a homework club can seriously impact on their performance and attendance at school.

At present the actions are focused on DEIS schools, but there is no mention of supporting the needs of the 56% of children from non-employed households who attend non-DEIS schools[9]. The needs of these children cannot be ignored.

Barnardos believes that the out-of-school sector should be enhanced as presently it operates largely on an ad-hoc basis while providing a wide range of supports to meet the needs of children. A strategy for the inclusion of the out-of-school sector within the Plan is advised and should not attempt to 'schoolify' the sector by focusing solely on literacy and numeracy supports and programmes. The wider range of supports provided out-of-school (for example, visual and creative arts, social and personal development programmes, cookery skills and sporting activities) indirectly support the academic achievements of children and directly improve their social and emotional capabilities.

5 Draft Plan Proposal – Standardised Assessment

The Plan proposes the introduction of more standardised testing of reading and mathematics at fixed points to assess student's competence and skill. It is proposed to then share and use this data within and between similar type schools to allow schools judge how their students are faring and adjust their teaching accordingly to strive for better outcomes. At present, according to the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading, the results of standardised tests are widely discussed at staff meetings, but are not used to set goals for classes or the school or to influence teaching approaches.

The *Schools Like Ours* proposal also aims to transfer results and evidence of primary school tests to secondary schools, which can then help to inform teachers' plans for 1st and 2nd year and make them aware of the difficulties experienced by some students.

National standards will also be developed underpinned by clear learning outcomes so that teachers and parents will know what students should know or be able to do at each level of the curriculum. It is also planned to develop tests against which teachers can readily, validly

[9] Barnardos (2009) Written Out, Written Off, Dublin

and reliably interpret and communicate their students' progress in achieving the national standards.

Barnardos' Comments

Barnardos is concerned that the widespread use of standardised testing will lead to a culture of teaching to the test i.e. that the emphasis will be getting children to do well in the test and that all other types of learning and subject matter will not be as relevant in the classroom. The information gathered by means of standardised testing alone while informative is limited to achievement results and does not explain what factors have influenced the results. It is also unclear what happens if a teacher has poor results; will they be required to attend additional training or will there be the follow up from poor test results?

Internationally, the use of standardised testing has had limited impact on student achievement and improved teacher performance. The standardised testing on the scale suggested in the draft plan has been associated with the springing up of "testing" industries which focus on how best to teach children to the test, which becomes a huge drain on finances, instructional time, teaching expertise, and has the opposite of its intended effect on children's in-depth understanding of the concepts that are being tested. Posting and ranking standardised assessment scores by school and children has exacerbated these issues associated with large scale testing in places like the USA and Canada, and put enormous (and unrealistic and developmentally inappropriate) pressure on children, teachers, principals, and parents.

The aim of these standardised tests is to use the results to identify gaps and reform teaching practice or avail of supports to remedy these gaps. However, Barnardos again reiterates that the reduction and withdrawal of educational supports hampers this Plan and the actions within it. What benefit is it to a school to go through standardised tests, identify the gaps and have no access to supports to rectify the situation in the best interests of the children concerned?

Despite the Plan stating that the *Schools Like Ours* proposal is not to create 'league tables', Barnardos fears that such testing could lead to a further stigmatisation of disadvantaged schools and a tacit acknowledgement that it is acceptable if they do not meet the national average. Barnardos believes all schools should strive towards the national average and be supported to achieve it.

At present the exchange of information between principals at primary and secondary level is largely ad hoc and based on personal relationships. If enhanced communication is envisaged between primary and secondary school principals, Barnardos recommends the introduction of a protocol to facilitate this and to formalise it more at a systemic level. Likewise, more guidance is needed for schools in how to disseminate this information to parents, to use it as an effective tool to encourage parental involvement in their child's literacy and numeracy development.

Parental involvement

The Plan correctly identifies the correlation between parental involvement and improved student outcomes and how parents need to be encouraged to support their child's literacy and numeracy development.

It is proposed to launch a national information campaign, provide direct supports to parents and encourage parental involvement in each school's teaching and learning strategy and within ECCE settings.

Barnardos' Comments

Barnardos welcomes the initiatives outlined to improve parental involvement throughout the educational system and hopes that it will be implemented in full and on time. Presently, the extent of contact between parents and the school varies across schools. Some schools have more developed structures for involving parents than others. Interestingly, the ESRI found that one in four parents said some teachers discouraged their involvement because they were not very approachable and one in six said they felt the school did not want parents involved[10]. The role of the Home School Liaison Officer is under-recognised in the Plan and is a vital resource to encouraging parental involvement in their child's learning.

Enhanced parental involvement could be achieved in ECCE settings, with parents being guided on practical examples of how to connect classroom learning to home learning.

The Plan is very school focused so does not adequately reflect the need to engage fully with the broad spectrum of potential resources available to support child literacy outcomes in disadvantaged communities. It fails to propose marshalling the resources of other statutory agencies and community organisations such as child health services, family resource centres, the youth work sector in addition to school completion programmes and after-school projects in contributing to children's literacy and learning.

Conclusions

Barnardos welcomes the draft Plan and looks forward to the roll out of a National Literacy and Numeracy Plan. Barnardos' calls for our concerns to be taken on board when finalising the Plan and hopes that full implementation will be possible by allocating the appropriate funding required. We strongly believe that supports to children must be given on the basis of need rather than budgetary criteria, otherwise positive change in literacy and numeracy standards cannot be achieved.

[10] ESRI (2011) Behind the Scenes: A Study of Parental Involvement in Post-Primary Education, Dublin