CPSMA

Church of Ireland
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Joint Submission: Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation

Introduction

CPSMA welcome the opportunity to provide this submission with regard to the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.

Overview

Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), is the representative management body for Catholic primary schools in Ireland and this submission seeks to represent the perspective of those tasked with the governance of Catholic primary and special schools. We also have a number of associate members, comprised of other school patronages. As a management body which provides training, support and advice on a wide range of areas to over 2,800 schools, we are in a unique position of being able to understand and react to the needs of a large number of primary and special schools. We are joined in making this submission by the General Synod Board of Education of the Church of Ireland (Republic of Ireland)[1] with whom we maintain a close relationship by virtue of our shared educational vision and Christian identity.

[1] Referred hereafter as the GSBOERI

Section 1: Enabling Parents* and Communities to Support Children's Literacy And Numeracy Development ***(*'Parents' refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.)***

CPSMA and the GSBOERI welcomes the acknowledgement of the primacy of the parent and the home environment on children's learning, particularly in the early years. As such, partnership with, and support for, parents is a key factor in the promotion of children's literacy and numeracy in their early years. CPSMA and the GSBOERI see the importance that community services can play in the supporting parents in this regard. In particular, libraries are a key service within communities which parents can use to support their child's literacy and numeracy development. Additionally, libraries can be used as a controlled environment for parents to assist in developing digital literacy skills in their children due to the availability of digital resources within. Similarly, family resource centres, which are created on a community- based model, can be used to create communities where good practice is shared and support networks can be created.

Section 2: Improving Teachers' and Early Years Educators' (EYE) Professional Practice and Leadership Skills

CPSMA and the GSBOERI also acknowledges the vital role that early year educators and teachers play in providing quality education experiences for children. As such, the continuous pedagogical development of these educators and teachers is vital in order to achieve improved learning experiences and outcomes for all learners in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. It is essential that effective and engaging programmes of professional learning for EYE and teachers nationwide, particularly in the area of digital literacy. A sustained model of support in the area of ICT and digital literacy for teachers will be necessary to ensure that there is a high quality of professional practice nationwide. CPSMA and the GSBOERI acknowledges the work of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) Technology in Education teams in supporting schools and individual teachers to improve and support the embedding of ICT practice in teaching and learning. This support needs to be expanded further to allow more schools to be able to access sustained support for longer periods of time when attempting to develop practices which will develop digital literacy for all learners.

The development of opportunities for teachers to share good practice with one another will also contribute to the improvement of professional practice. Initiatives such a school clusters and communities of practice give rise to these opportunities for peer learning. The network of Education Centres throughout the country should be considered as hubs for such communities of practice.

Similarly, provision of sustained support to Early Learning Centre (ELC) and school leaders in the area of digital literacy will be necessary to ensure that those in leadership roles have the

requisite knowledge and skills to be able to effectively plan, implement and co-ordinate

whole school plans in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Leadership in schools also requires time to facilitate the administrative responsibility of formulating school policy in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The retention of one principal release day per week for teaching principals and the re-introduction of release days for deputy principals in schools with administrative principals would help to give time to school leadership to carry out these strategic planning and administrative tasks.

Section 3: Improving the Curriculum and the Learning Experience

The improvement of scoring by Irish pupils from 2009 to 2018 in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in addition to the results from the National assessments of English Reading and Mathematics (NAERM) 2014 indicates the success of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young people 2011-2020. In particular, the provision for increased time to be spent on literacy and numeracy in primary school has emphasised the importance of learning in these areas.

Similarly, the required prioritisation of literacy and numeracy in the initial phase of the School Self Evaluation (SSE) process placed a great emphasis on these areas in schools, resulting in improved results. CPSMA and the GSBOERI recognises that the Department of Educations' focused efforts at a national level have been successful in achieving the desired results in these subject areas.

The surveys, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), have indicated that there is a dearth of higher-order digital activities, or development of critical thinking skills when reading via the internet in Irish classrooms, when compared with other countries which participated in these surveys (Eivers, 2019).

This suggests that Irish educators hold a traditional view of digital learning is used to strengthen existing practices, rather than as a practice to develop higher-order thinking in its own right (Butler and Leahy 2020). This is due in part to the compartmentalised nature of individual subjects in the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (NCCA, 1999). This has resulted in confusion in primary and special schools in relation to the integration of Digital Literacy

through the Digital Learning Framework (DLF). In practice, in many cases, it appears to be acting as another subject within that PSC that already contains eleven other detailed subjects. One of the findings of the DLF trial evaluation report (Cosgrove et al., 2018) was that schools had difficulty in unpacking the DLF domains and translating them into practice. The articulation of digital learning in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) is therefore a critical step towards the alignment of policy and practice. The inclusion of digital learning through "being a digital learner as a key competence in the curriculum framework is pivotal. Digital learning and the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (Butler and Leahy 2020).

CPSMA and the GSBOERI welcomes the embedding of digital literacy in the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC), the proposed embedding of digital literacy in the new primary maths curriculum and the proposed embedding of "being a digital learner" as a key competency intended to be a learner outcome in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) as a means of overcoming this issue of integration. These inclusions of have provided nascent signs of the integration of digital learning throughout the curriculum. The key competency of "being a digital learner" espoused within the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework must be embedded throughout each subject area to ensure that digital learning and digital literacy development can be prioritised in an already bloated curriculum. Failure to include learning outcomes to guide teaching will result in the curriculum merely paying lip service to the notion of digital literacy.

CPSMA and the GSBOERI recognises that curriculum change does not occur by just changing content, but depends on convincing stakeholders, especially teachers (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). CPSMA believes that enhance such practices, consideration should be given to:

- Developing opportunities for the inclusion of Digital Literacy in the design and implementation of the new primary curriculum
- The inclusion of Digital Literacy as an area of focus in the School Self-Evaluation Process, where a school considers such a focus to be a priority.
- Ensuring that teachers exposed to innovative Digital Literacy teaching pedagogies share this best practice with colleagues in their schools and that they benefit from appropriate support structures (including the support of key stakeholders) in doing so. Positive peer coaching strategies can enhance staff development efforts and offering support for teachers implementing new strategies.

The Department can also take learnings from the introduction of the PLC when implementing the revised primary curriculum. The introduction of the PLC in stages lead to inconsistent implementation of the curriculum at school level. We believe that it is imperative that the entirety of any new curriculum is provided to schools from the outset to ensure that new developments can be embedded in a whole school approach.

Section 4: Supporting Diverse Learners to Achieve their Potential

The expansion of the DEIS programme has been a major development in the area of supporting diverse learners, particularly those who experience social and economic disadvantage. The funding and support provided to schools under this scheme is an important factor to help diverse learners from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their potential. Continued support for, and expansion for the DEIS scheme will be a key component in ensuring that the needs of these diverse learners are met. In this regard, it is our view that sporadic reviews of access to the DEIS programme is inadequate as such intermittent reviews fail to recognize the ongoing change and development schools. It is our view that schools should have the opportunity to apply for DEIS status on an annual or biennial basis.

The Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2019) study stated that at fourth class in primary level, Irish students were the top performing in the EU in Mathematics. It also highlighted that lower-achieving students in Ireland perform well on TIMSS compared to those in many other countries. However, there is a disparity between higher achieving pupils when compared with their peers in other countries, suggesting that more work needs to be done to meet the needs of the high achieving pupil as a diverse learner. Professional development for schools and teachers to help extend the learning of these exceptionally able pupils will be required.

The Assistive Technology Grant plays an important role in ensuring that diverse learners are able to access the whole curriculum, thus allowing for appropriate literacy and numeracy development. In addition, the grant scheme allows for the development of digital literacy of diverse learners through the use of the assistive technology. The expansion of the criteria for approval under this scheme, in addition to an increase in the funding which is provided

to schools when successful, would greatly support the promotion of the literacy, numeracy

and digital literacy development of diverse learners. In addition, more guidance and advice for educators on pedagogical strategies for using assistive technology with learners who have special educational needs (SEN) and managing devices in the classroom for these learners with SEN rather than just focusing on tools.

Section 5: Improving Assessment and Evaluation to Support Better Learning in Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy

In order to improve assessment and evaluation skills so that the learning in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy can be supported, it is important to understand the types of assessments already being carried out across schools. Assessment practices at school level vary largely, both in terms of assessment types used and also how assessment data is used. Therefore, it is essential that professional development is provided to educators in both formative and summative assessment practices. In addition, it is important that the role of digital technologies in assessment and evaluation is developed with educators.

Section 6: Digital Literacy

One of the benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic was the response of schools and teachers to the implementation of digital technologies in their practice. Much of the development happened organically, from the ground up, with schools sourcing digital platforms, equipment and applications and teachers upskilling in their own time to support learning. To develop the practice of developing digital literacy in the longer term, improved and sustained investment of finance, resourcing and support for schools will be required.

The levels of proficiency with digital technology vary widely between schools and, indeed, between staff within in schools also. In order for a plan to develop the digital literacy of all pupils to be successful, we propose that a comprehensive and sustained model of upskilling and support will be required for teachers.

Similarly, available ICT infrastructure, including access to adequate internet access varies between schools. As such, we believe that it is imperative, if the goal to reduce equity gaps is to be achieved, that sustained investment is provided to schools, in addition to the improvement of the quality and speed delivered to schools through the School Broadband Programme.

The CPSMA and GSBOERI are grateful for the opportunity to present our views on this important issue and we hope that in making this joint submission we are signaling importance of this issue to both our Boards.

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