



Reading Association of Ireland
Cumann Léitheoireachta na hÉireann

A RESPONSE

BY

READING ASSOCIATION OF IRELAND

TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS DOCUMENT –

**Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People:
A Draft Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools**

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The Reading Association (RAI) is a voluntary organisation established in 1975 and affiliated to the International Reading Association and the Federation of European Literacy Associations. Our membership includes teachers, schools, teacher educators, literacy specialists, third-level institutions and libraries. The Executive Committee of the Association is elected annually by the members and includes practitioners, researchers and teacher educators at both primary and post-primary levels.

As an organisation, RAI aim to support and inform all those concerned with the development of reading, language and literacy (including teachers, lecturers, researchers, trainers and parents), encourage them in reflection and dialogue, challenge them in their practice, and give public voice to their concerns. A full statement of RAI's mission may be found in Appendix 1.

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Contents

	Introduction	iv
	Executive Summary	v
1	Towards a Broader Conceptualisation of Literacy	1
2	Principles of Effective Literacy Development	4
3	Curriculum Development	6
4	The Generic Skills-based Programme – A Reductionist View of Curriculum	12
5	Early Childhood Care and Education	14
6	Adolescent Literacy	15
7	Support for Parents and Communities	16
8	Assessment for Literacy	17
9	Continuous Professional Development	23
	References	26
	Appendix: RAI Mission Statement	33

Introduction

The Reading Association of Ireland welcomes publication of the *Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools* and the invitation of the Minister of Education and Skills to respond to her Department's plans for improving student performance in these critical areas.

Publication of the *Draft Plan* reflects concerns about literacy levels. The literacy difficulties experienced by students in disadvantaged areas have been known for many years. More recently, the result of the 2009 round of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) seem to suggest that reading standards have declined across the full spectrum of student performance since 2000, though corroborating evidence is needed to verify this. In any event, it is beneficial to look at key aspects of the educational system to identify ways in which students' literacy levels and their interest in literacy might be enhanced.

The *Draft Plan* puts forward several important proposals for action in key areas – time allocated to literacy, curriculum, disadvantage, assessment, parental involvement and school leadership among others. While some of the proposals are well-grounded in research and good practice, others are less well supported, and therefore need to be examined more carefully, bearing in mind that change can have negative effects as well as positive ones.

It is of interest that the *Draft Plan* appears at a time when the resources for improving education are scarce, and fewer support teachers are working in our schools than previously. Nevertheless, literacy is such an important skill that resources must be made available to bring about improvement.

In drawing up its response, RAI has focused on those aspects of the plan that deal with the teaching and assessment of literacy in home and school settings. Other issues, such as the development of numeracy, are outside the remit of RAI and are therefore not examined.

RAI's submission was developed by members of the Executive Committee, whom I thank for their contributions and comments in compiling this response. RAI has particular expertise in the area of literacy at both primary and post primary levels and would welcome opportunity to participate and share their knowledge and expertise at later stages in the development of a national plan for literacy.

Aoibheann Kelly
President, RAI
February, 2011

Executive Summary

RAI thanks the Department of Education and Skills for the opportunity to respond to *Better Literacy and Numeracy for Children and Young People - A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools*. RAI welcome the refocus on literacy and hope that our submission has clarified issues related to effective literacy development from the ECCE to primary and post primary education. RAI also hope that our comments in relation to assessment and effective CPD will inform and influence future drafts of a national plan for literacy (and numeracy). RAI has particular expertise in the area of Literacy at both primary and post primary levels and would welcome opportunity to participate and share this knowledge at later stages in the development of a national plan for literacy.

Towards a Broader Conceptualisation of Literacy

RAI recommends that a clearer and more comprehensive definition and conceptualisation of literacy be provided in a national plan for literacy. Among other considerations, RAI proposes that a clearer and more comprehensive definition and conceptualisation of literacy would:

- Address the apparent conflict between the definition of literacy provided in the second paragraph of the *Draft Plan* on page 9 (where reference is made to ‘understanding’ and ‘critical appreciation’ as key aspects of literacy) and the footnote on page 9 (where literacy is defined as ‘sustainable mastery of a set of competencies’).
- Include reference to communities of readers, reading for enjoyment and prior knowledge, as well as communicating the distinction between literacy in a broad sense and more specific aspects of reading literacy.
- Comment on the changing nature of literacy over a child’s development.
- Include a much stronger focus on multimedia literacy (the ‘new literacies’).
- Be based on a detailed review of national and international research on how literacy should and can be effectively developed in schools.
- Be founded upon detailed rationale for literacy proposals, arising from a thorough review of literature on the teaching and learning of literacy in the Irish context.

Principles of Effective Literacy Development

To enhance the credibility of a national plan for literacy, RAI recommends that a set of research-based principles of effective literacy development should be developed and should drive thinking about how literacy can be improved in our schools. RAI has included in its submission, the key principles of literacy development that it identifies as being crucial. Some of the research that has informed the key principles of effective literacy development identified by RAI is included in this submission.

Curriculum Development

The *Draft Plan* does not include a rigorous appraisal of international best practice in literacy acquisition and development, and does not signal how the *1999 English Language Curriculum* and other curricula should be updated to reflect the major changes and

developments in the field in the past ten years. RAI believes that literacy development in Irish classrooms would be best served by reforms of literacy pedagogy that take clear cognisance of recent international research on best practice in literacy development, and establish stronger links between pedagogy and classroom-based assessment. Included in RAI's submission is a brief review of the literature on best-practice in literacy development, covering the following topics:

- Oral language (including meaning vocabulary)
- Phonemic awareness/approach to phonics
- Reading accuracy and fluency
- Reading comprehension instruction
- Writing

The Generic Skills-based Programme: A Reductionist View of the Curriculum

Overall, the *Draft Plan* proposal to increase attention to and time for literacy development is to be welcomed. RAI feels that progress can only be achieved in the broader context of on-going curriculum reform in English, in conjunction with the provision of continuous and sustained programmes of teacher professional development mediated at a local school level. RAI, however, has reservations about a number of proposals made in the *Draft Plan* as part of efforts to increase attention to and time for literacy, namely:

- RAI believes that the important, core concept of the child as a holistically developing learner is absent from the *Draft Plan* for literacy. This basic and cherished principle of the current and previous Irish Primary School Curricula is of paramount importance and should form the basis for a national plan for literacy (and numeracy).
- RAI is concerned by the proposed narrowing of and diminished role for the wider curriculum, including the sacrificing of some subject areas, to allow for increased time for literacy development. This reductionist view of how students acquire literacy is contrary to the principles of the Primary School Curriculum and international research which recommends literacy development across the curriculum
- RAI has serious questions and reservations about the *Draft Plan*'s proposed development and promulgation of a generic skills-based literacy programme for all schools. RAI would welcome clarification on this matter.
- Elaboration and more explicit, detailed guidance for all involved in literacy education regarding literacy development may be needed and is welcomed, but RAI feels that this should be in the spirit of clarification rather than prescription, and should take a form that enables the programme to continually evolve as research does and respect/promote professional autonomy and reflection. Significant onus should not be placed on a single programme to bring about change in literacy instruction and achievement.

Early Childhood Care and Education

RAI welcomes the *Draft Plan*'s emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and in general, supports the targets to improve oral language competence in both ECCE and primary school settings.

RAI feel that if ECCE is to be advanced, as part of future efforts, consideration should be given to the following:

- The establishment of a proper state-funded pre-school service available to all.
- The need for experienced and well-trained pre-school teachers.
- The inconsistency in thinking regarding the move to amend the primary Infant school curriculum to be more like *Aistear*. Notwithstanding the undoubted value of the *Aistear* framework (particularly its focus on play as a key process underpinning the learning of young children), *Aistear* does not explicitly outline the essential components of effective literacy instruction.

Adolescent Literacy

RAI welcomes the timely attention to the literacy needs of adolescent students contained in the *Draft Plan* and the consequent acknowledged need for the continuing professional development of post-primary level teachers in this respect. RAI seeks clarity, elaboration and consistency regarding the proposals contained in the *Draft Plan* with respect to adolescent literacy development needs and subject curricula reform and the system-wide preparation of post-primary teachers for this key task.

Support for Parents and Communities

The *Draft Plan*'s renewed emphasis on the role of parents and communities in the promotion and improvement of literacy levels is praiseworthy. However it is unclear how support for parents and communities will manifest. RAI would welcome greater clarification on a number of matters:

- What initiatives will be put in place to support parents and communities?
- How such initiatives will be funded?
- Who will be ultimately responsible for designing and implementing such initiatives?

Assessment for Literacy

The *Draft Plan* includes a range of proposals relating to literacy assessment. RAI broadly welcomes the enhanced emphasis on formative, assessment for learning but would welcome clarification as to what the DES proposes in the *Draft Plan* for classroom-based assessment. In particular, RAI recommends that while the plan is still at the development stage, the following issues should be addressed:

- How teachers will be supported in implementing classroom-based assessments in large classes?
- The imbalance in favour of standardised tests proposed by the *Draft Plan*.

- The need to enhance reliability by implementing strong forms of moderation, if the outcomes of classroom assessments (based on standards) are to be reported to Boards of Management.
- The importance of having curriculum development precede the development of standards and supports.

Although RAI welcomes the enhanced emphasis on assessment for learning, it has serious reservations about expanding the use of standardised reading tests in the manner proposed. In its submission, RAI presents a number of caveats regarding:

- The technical aspects of the proposed testing regime which are not discussed and clarified in the *Draft Plan*.
- The potential and less desirable effects of high-stakes standardised testing.
- The omission of reference to assessment of reading in electronic formats.

Continuous Professional Development

RAI welcomes the *Draft Plan*'s acknowledgement that the provision of high-quality CPD opportunities for ECCE, primary and post-primary practitioners will play a pivotal role in the development and sustainment of high-quality teaching and learning. However, the *Draft Plan* makes little reference to the importance and challenge of designing, funding, supporting and enabling all teachers to participate in CPD experiences that are more effective in terms of bringing about lasting change in teachers' practices for literacy.

RAI would welcome greater clarification regarding the funding available to and the modus operandi of future plans and actions for CPD and the opportunity to respond to such details.

RAI recommends that future actions for CPD yield a long-term realistic plan informed by an assessment of current CPD provisions and a review of the literature on effective professional development.

RAI would also propose that subsequent drafts of a national plan for literacy would benefit from an additional section outlining the key CPD activities and requirements that will be needed to ensure that CPD in literacy is effective.

1. Towards a Broader Conceptualisation of Literacy

The Reading Association of Ireland recommends that a clearer definition of literacy be provided in a national plan for literacy. Two different and opposing definitions of literacy are provided on page nine of the *Draft Plan*, in paragraph two and in a foot note. Neither one offers a comprehensive definition of literacy that reflects recent developments in the field. RAI believes that the following elements should be considered when formulating a clearer definition and conceptualisation of literacy:

- Move the second definition of literacy from the footnote to the main body of the text, and present a revised definition. A clear and unambiguous definition is central to the development of a literacy strategy (e.g., the definition of literacy has implications for the content, structure and format of any assessment measures proposed in the *Draft Plan*) and therefore should not be relegated to a footnote.
- Address the apparent conflict between the definition in the second paragraph on page 9, where reference is made to ‘understanding’ and ‘critical appreciation’ as key aspects of literacy and the footnote on page 9 where literacy is defined as ‘sustainable mastery of a set of competencies’. While the definition in the second paragraph begins to deal with application and higher-level thinking (evaluation, appreciation, critical reading), the definition in the footnote has a basic skills’ focus, yet it is with higher-order skills that many of our students struggle, according to recent national and international studies (OECD, 2009a; Eivers et al., 2010).
- Since literacy is so broadly defined in the footnote, it should be complemented with a definition of reading literacy, such as that used in the National Assessment of English Reading or PISA. The definition of reading literacy provided in the 2009 National Assessment Report (Eivers et al., 2010) is as follows:

[Reading literacy is] the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader’s existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation. Young readers read to learn, to participate in communities of readers, and for enjoyment (Eivers et al., 2005, p. 15).

This definition includes reference to communities of readers (suggesting the importance of communicating about what has been read, both orally and in writing, with peers and others), and reading for enjoyment, which is missing from the definitions in the *Draft Plan*. Crucially, the National Assessment definition also refers to ‘the reader’s existing knowledge’ (i.e., background or prior knowledge) which is fundamental to comprehension of text, yet is not acknowledged in the *Draft Plan*. Again, a clear reference to the role of background knowledge would have implications for the teaching and assessment of reading in schools.

According to PISA, reading is ‘understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts [both print and electronic], in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society’ (OECD, 2009, p. 25).

Attention to this definition would help readers of the *Draft Plan* to understand the distinction between literacy in a broad sense and more specific aspects of reading literacy.

- Some commentary on the changing nature of literacy over a child's development would also be appropriate (i.e., is there a difference in what we mean by literacy for a 5-year old and for a 15-year old? What changes would be expected?) According to one commentator, literacy is "not in isolated bits of knowledge but in students' growing ability to use language and literacy in more and broader activities" (Moll, 1994, p. 202).

The following definition of literacy, from UNESCO (2008), acknowledges a continuum of reading development:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve [their] goals, develop [their] knowledge and potential and participate fully in the community and wider society' (p. 18)

- Finally, while the '21st century' definition of literacy in the footnote on page 9 makes some reference to multimedia literacies, suggesting that capabilities relating to both conventional (print-based) and multimedia literacies are important, there is no further reference in the *Draft Plan* to multimedia literacies, and a quite narrow conceptualisation of literacy underpins proposals for developments in curriculum and assessment elsewhere in the document.

RAI recommends that the conceptualisation of literacy in the *Draft Plan* be broadened to include a much stronger focus on new literacies and the changing nature of literacy. The NCTE (2008) provides some insights into the types of skills that 21st century readers and writers need:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyse and synthesise multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyse, and evaluate multi-media texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

(NCTE, 2008)

RAI recommends that an improved definition of literacy that includes appropriate attention to multimedia literacy (the 'new literacies') be developed, and that it becomes the basis for all subsequent recommendations in future drafts of a national plan for literacy.

RAI also believes that the *Draft Plan* requires and could have been enhanced by a detailed rationale for and contextualisation of the plan and its proposals, based on a review of the wide range of reports pertaining to the implementation of the English Language Curriculum published in the past decade. Reports published by the NCCA, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre, as well as a wealth of other literacy research (e.g., overviews of whole school evaluations and all official reports on literacy (and numeracy) in disadvantaged schools) offer significant and informed research findings and recommendations for the development of literacy in the specific Irish context.

As well as omitting to provide an adequate definition and conceptualisation of literacy, the *Draft Plan* lacks a sufficient rationale to underpin its proposals, and no reference is made to any of the seminal national and international research on how literacy should and can be effectively developed in schools. If the approach envisaged in the *Draft Plan*, “concentrating our work and resources on the teaching of literacy and numeracy and at times giving priority to these skills over other goals” (p. 5), is to have a positive impact it needs to be more strongly grounded in empirical research evidence, which we present in subsequent sections.

2. Principles of Effective Literacy Development

RAI has recently identified the following key principles of literacy development as crucial to enabling individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. To enhance the credibility of a national plan for literacy, a set of principles should be developed that would drive thinking about how literacy can be improved in our schools. The principles of effective literacy development as identified by RAI are that literacy. . .

- is responsive to the needs of all learners and should be recognised, understood and supported as a powerful agent for fostering potential, opportunity and change in learners' lives
- recognises and reflects the integrated nature of language and should be inclusive of the four language skills: listening, speaking reading and writing
- should provide opportunities for reciprocal links between the child, school, home and community, promoting an integrated, vibrant, literacy-friendly learning environment
- should be understood and fostered both implicitly and explicitly, reflecting informal acquisition and explicit teaching using a variety of active, engaging and meaningful approaches, methods and activities
- should take full advantage of new technologies and promote response to a range of multimodal, print-based and digital texts
- requires classroom teachers with knowledge of a range of instructional approaches to accommodate the developmental needs of children in diverse settings
- requires high-quality continued professional development to support teachers in effective literacy instructional practices
- requires systematic and structured planning, implementation and assessment of progress in all literacy activities
- should foster the imaginative and creative development of the child, drawing on multiple genres and quality children's literature

The translation of these principles to effective classroom literacy instruction and practice requires familiarity with research on current international best practice. Fortunately, the research is voluminous, of high quality and for the most part unequivocal on the key instructional components necessary to support the literacy development of all children. Such knowledge has been identified from some seminal reviews of the scientific research literature of the past twenty years including: *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* (Adams,1990); *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns& Griffin, 1998); *Report of the US National Reading Panel* (2000); *Handbook of Reading Research* Volume 3, (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson & Barr, Eds., 2000); *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction* (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002); *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (Dickinson & Newman, 2002/2006); *Teaching Reading* (Australian Government, 2005); *Reading Instruction That Works* (Pressley, 2006); *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction* (Gambrell, Mandel Morrow & Pressley, 2007); *National Early Literacy Panel Report* (2008) and most recently the *Handbook of Reading Research (Vol. 4)* (Kamil,

Pearson, Moje & Afflerbach, 2011) and the *Handbook of Early Literacy* (Vol. 3) (Neuman & Dickinson, 2011).

The insights gained from these reviews and the contributions of researchers of international repute on key instructional elements such as word identification, (Ehri, Blachmann, Stanovich, Shaywitz, Stahl), vocabulary, (Baumann, Beck, Mc. Keown, Kucan, Graves) fluency, (Rasinski, Kuhn,) comprehension (Pressley, Duke, Pearson, Afflerbach, Collins-Block, Keene, Harvey, Raphael) and assessment, (Walpole, McKenna, Rathvon) have contributed significantly to the debate and knowledge on how best to enhance children's literacy development in schools.

2.1 Balanced Literacy Instruction

A confluence of opinion among international literacy researchers regarding the above elements has led to the promotion of balanced literacy instruction as the means by which literacy should be explicitly developed in schools. This balanced approach envisages literacy instruction by knowledgeable teachers who have the ability and confidence to select the most appropriate instructional approach to facilitate the literacy development of each individual child. One useful definition and example of this integrated balanced approach is offered by Cowen (2003):

A balanced reading approach is research-based, assessment-based, comprehensive, integrated and dynamic, in that it empowers teachers and specialists to respond to the individual assessed literacy needs of children as they relate to their appropriate instructional and developmental levels of decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, motivation and socio-cultural acquisition with the purpose of learning to read for meaning, understanding and joy. (*p. 10*)

Disappointingly, the *Draft Plan* does not acknowledge the internationally accepted notion of effective balanced literacy instruction or its components. If implemented as it stands, the plan could result in an overly-narrow focus on a limited range of literacy skills, at the expense of a broader-based approach that develops cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and enhances students' interest in reading/writing, both for enjoyment and as learning tools. Instead, the *Draft Plan* risks promoting the development of a narrow range of basic literacy skills as the means to improving overall literacy standards. This does not reflect the accepted need for teachers to combine the strengths of different approaches that include an appropriate balance of authentic reading and writing activities, and instruction in both basic and higher-order literacy skills, across a range of genres and text types.

Subsequent drafts of the plan need to move from a clearly-articulated conceptualisation of literacy and key principles of effective literacy development towards a clear rationale for informed change. Unless our understandings of the content and pedagogy of literacy are founded on research and best practice, the teaching of literacy and the outcomes of learning may not improve.

3. Curriculum Development

The *Draft Plan* does not include a rigorous appraisal of international best practice in literacy acquisition and development and does not signal how the 1999 English Language Curriculum should be updated to reflect the major changes and developments in the field in the past ten years. This is unfortunate as the *English Language Teacher Guidelines* (NCCA, 1999) are somewhat at variance with international best practice in the crucial area of children's early reading development, especially in the context of a balanced model of literacy development (see above). RAI believes that literacy development in Irish classrooms would be best served by reforms of literacy pedagogy that take clear cognisance of recent international research on best practice in literacy development (see below), and establish stronger links between pedagogy and classroom-based assessment.

3.1 Oral Language

RAI welcomes the emphasis on oral language in the definition of literacy (*Draft Plan*, p. 9), as a topic of teacher professional development (p.17), as a course requirement for ECCE practitioners (p. 21) and as a focus of the early assessment (p. 28). We also welcome proposals to implement an oral language programme in preschools linked to DEIS schools (p. 35) and efforts to ensure continuity between pre-school oral language programmes and those offered in school settings (p. 35).

RAI believes that oral language is a key to success in learning to read and write, and that emerging proficiency in reading and writing also contributes to children's oral language development, as children discuss what they have read and written. According to Tough (1977), children's knowledge of language, their understanding of its communicative function, and their orientation towards particular kinds of language (e.g., the language found in books) are major determinants of their ability to succeed in school (also see Dickinson & Sprague, 2002; Sénéchal, Oulette & Rodney, 2005; Pellegrini & Galda, 1988). This perspective is reflected in the recommendation in the Primary School English Curriculum (DES/NCCA, 1999) that a child's oral language be well-developed before the introduction of formal reading instruction. Watson (2002) observed that, in interactions with parents that involve language, children typically move from simply naming objects to asking questions, interpreting, defining, explaining, considering missing objects, and describing events – discourse activities that are centred around 'signification and interpretation rather than enactment or experience' (p. 50). According to Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), 'decreased reliance on the immediate context as a support for communication is a developmental accomplishment that may ease the transition into school, where decontextualised language is highly valued' (p. 49). The corollary of all this is that, for some children, the language interactions at home may not provide opportunities to develop decontextualised language. This, in turn, supports proposals in the *Draft Plan* relating to oral language development in preschools and schools in disadvantaged areas. In Ireland, work by Cregan (2007) highlights the need for teachers to be aware of language variation in disadvantaged children and its

implications for academic and literacy success. Cregan's conclusions focus on a need for teachers to develop oral language not just in the Infants classes but throughout schooling:

- Teachers need to plan more carefully and systematically for targeted, focused, developmental oral language teaching in school, with particular emphasis on those aspects of language knowledge which appear crucial for success, i.e. 'literate' style language.
- More time than appears currently to be the case needs to be given to oral language development in school at all levels, but particularly at middle and senior class level.
- Teachers need to articulate clearly, model appropriately, and intervene and scaffold effectively desired uses of language in school in an attempt to teach such language skills where necessary. Children need to have more opportunity to talk in school as part of legitimate, purposeful learning tasks.
- Language learning time in school needs to be more equally balanced between oral and literacy development (p. 197)

Biemiller (2005) reports on a strong association between vocabulary knowledge in pre-school and reading comprehension at Grade 11 (Fifth year, post-primary). Further, he warns educators that the significance of oral language in learning to read may be underestimated because it is not a prerequisite for reading success in the first or second grades. Rather, it is not until reading texts involve age-normal vocabulary demands that early (kindergarten) vocabulary becomes a significant predictor of comprehension. This supports RAI's view that oral language (and vocabulary development in particular) needs to be a focus of teaching and learning from the infants' classes onwards. Surprisingly, then, the *Draft Plan* includes just one reference to vocabulary development (and then in the context of building sight vocabulary). RAI believes that teachers need to know when and how to select meaningful vocabulary for instruction, and how best to support children's development of vocabulary knowledge, using both direct instruction and contextual approaches.

As children develop as readers, oral language discussion in a socio-cultural context can play a key role in supporting reading comprehension (and vice versa) (Almasi & Garas-York, 2009). Two types of discussion to foster reading comprehension are identified by Almasi and Garas-York:

- Teacher-led discussion that scaffolds student learning through open-ended teacher questions, queries and probes, and that facilitates general overall comprehension of texts;
- Student or peer-group discussions, where students develop comprehension and interpretative processes (personal reactions, responses to text) and the teacher's role is to scaffold the development of interpretative strategies before or after but not during peer-group discussions.

RAI strongly supports the use of both teacher-led and peer-group discussions to establish a bridge between oral language and reading comprehension, and to support the development of basic and higher-order comprehension. We also point to the potential of teacher-led reading comprehension strategy development (see section on Reading Comprehension Instruction below) to draw on and develop students' oral language proficiency.

3.2 Phonemic Awareness/Approach to Phonics

Given its prominence in the research literature during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Adams, 1990; Ball & Blachmann, 1991; Nation and Hulme, 1997; Juel, 1988 and Stanovich 1986b), it is difficult to understand why phonemic awareness has been excluded from the current Primary School English Curriculum. Perhaps it is assumed that the translation of sound to print undertaken in the shared writing process might provide sufficient exposure to phonemic awareness to render further training unnecessary? If this is the case, one might reasonably expect this process to lead naturally into children's emergent writing through the process of invented spelling. However, the impact of phonemic awareness training and opportunities to develop increasing insights into the internal structure of words through the process of invented spelling are not fully recognised in the 1999 Primary School English Curriculum or Teacher Guidelines either.

Furthermore, while the development of knowledge of letter-sound relationships is encouraged in the curriculum, it seems as if this is to be achieved mainly through an onset-rime approach, rather than through the more effective systematic phonics instruction. There is no reference to the direct teaching of phonics, whether synthetic or analytical. This is surprising given the recommendations regarding systematic phonics instruction in every major report on reading instruction from *The First Grade Studies* (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) to the (US) National Early Literacy Panel (2008).

The recommendations regarding the application of letter-sound associations to confirm predictions are not consistent with advances in eye movement studies which indicate that fluent readers fixate on virtually every content word in text and that visual information is carefully analysed in the process of rapid word identification (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1985 cited in Adams, 1990). At the very least, it needs to be acknowledged that strong use of contextual clues by young children to identify words is a transitional phase and children who continue to over-rely on contextual information are at risk of reading difficulties.

3.3 Reading Accuracy and Fluency

The application of strategies to promote accuracy and fluency as part of a balanced integrated programme of early reading development is not included in the Primary School English Curriculum. This is contrary to the prominent role given to reading fluency in the literature as a fundamental element of effective instruction. Interestingly, one of the strategies recommended in the research literature for developing fluency – *Readers' Theatre* – is included in the section of the Primary School English Curriculum dealing with response to fiction (1999, p. 67). However, this is not included in the context of providing much

needed motivation and practice at a success level for the emergent reader. Apart from the recommendation to use text that contains natural language, little consideration seems to have been given to the most appropriate form of text for building beginning readers' accuracy and fluency.

3.4 Reading Comprehension Instruction

Recent research indicates that learners need to understand how to orchestrate, coordinate and apply multiple strategies in order to improve comprehension. (Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Schuder, 1996; Courtney, King & Pedro, 2006; Dole, 2000; Miller, 2002; National Reading Panel, 2000; Pressley, El-Dinary, Wharton-McDonald & Brown, 1998b; Serafini, 2004, 2006; Keane & Zimmerman, 2007). Irish studies have found that the teaching of reading comprehension strategies is one of the weakest aspects of reading instruction (Concannon 2009; Department of Education and Science, 2005; Martin & Morgan, 1994; Shiel & Hogan, 1997).

The Primary School English Curriculum envisions the 'development of higher comprehension skills from the middle classes on' (DES/NCCA, 1999, p. 61). In fact, prediction is the only comprehension strategy that is advocated between junior infants and second class. It is only in third class that comprehension strategies such as evaluation, analysis, assimilation and summarisation are to be introduced. Proficiency in word identification skills is prioritised in the early years, with comprehension being developed when the child can read with accuracy and fluency. However, current research suggests that comprehension strategy instruction is also an essential component of effective early reading instruction (e.g., Pressley, 2006).

Of the ten comprehension 'skills' addressed in the Primary School English Curriculum, only five correspond with those validated by international research – summarisation, inference, prediction, synthesis and evaluation. Despite the international debate on the importance of distinguishing between 'skills' and 'strategies' (Duffy & Roehler, 1987; Afflerbach et al., 2008), there is much imprecision in the language used in the 1999 curriculum. The curriculum would benefit from greater precision in this respect, as well as appropriate examples of effective comprehension instruction based on current research.

A strategic approach to comprehension instruction from the earliest stages of children's reading development is recommended based on the following key strategies: prediction, visualisation, making connections, questioning, clarifying, determining importance, inferring and synthesising.

In this respect it is noteworthy that the first recommendation arising from the 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading suggests the promotion of self-regulated comprehension strategies at all class levels across a range of paper and digital texts (Eivers et al., 2010, p.89) and this clearly should be a key action point in a national plan for teaching literacy in our schools.

3.5 Writing

RAI welcomes the focus on writing in the *Draft Plan*, including reference to writing in the definitions of literacy (*Draft Plan*, p. 9), a need for adequate emphasis on the teaching and assessment of writing in the L1 curriculum (p. 29), and a stronger emphasis on functional writing in a revised Junior Cycle curriculum (p. 31). We are, nonetheless, surprised that writing is mentioned so infrequently in the *Draft Plan*, since there are strong associations between reading and writing (e.g., Tierney & Pearson, 1983; Shanahan & Lomax, 1986), and instruction in reading has been shown to enhance performance in writing and vice versa (Graham & Herbert, 2010). Since reading and writing are interrelated processes, a balanced approach to literacy instruction would include a strong focus on supporting writing development in students at all levels, ranging emergent writing in infants (where children invent written texts to communicate concepts and ideas) to proficient writing across a range of genres and content area writing in secondary school.

Research conducted in Ireland has amassed considerable evidence of difficulties experienced by teachers in implementing the writing component of the Primary School English Curriculum. For example, an evaluation of curriculum implementation conducted by the DES inspectorate (DES, 2005) concluded that:

Improvement in the quality of the teaching of writing should now become a priority for all involved in the implementation of the English curriculum. Teachers' understanding of the writing process should be enhanced, and additional professional development is required on approaches to writing such as shared writing, modelling writing, scaffolding pupils' writing, and conferencing (p. 53).

The 2009 National Assessment of English Reading provided further evidence of a strong need for CPD. The teaching of writing was identified as the aspect of English in which teachers needed additional CPD, with 48% of teachers of Second class pupils, and 59% of teachers of Sixth class pupils indicating additional support in this area as being among their highest priorities (Eivers et al., 2010).

In reflecting on how curriculum content and teacher support might be improved, it is important to make a clear distinction between the mechanic skills of writing (grammar, spelling and punctuation) on the one hand, and the higher-level compositional skills (drafting, revising, editing) on the other. There is a danger that, in attempting to secure high student performance on mechanical skills, teachers may not provide students with adequate opportunities to engage in composing texts. Research evidence shows that children can engage in composing text from as early as Junior Infants (Graves, 1994; O'Rourke, 2010). Indeed, the development of compositional skills and writing across genres can be supported throughout the primary years and beyond by engaging students in structured activities such as Writers' Workshop (Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994) – a framework for engaging children in sustained writing on self-chosen topics on a daily basis, with the support of mini-lessons

(focusing on the craft and skill of writing), conferencing and feedback, and share sessions in which students have opportunities to share their work with peers and receive feedback.

RAI believes that curriculum development in writing and associated CPD for teachers must include the following elements:

- A framework such as Writers' Workshop, that teachers can draw on to teach the compositional aspects of writing and establish a community of writers (Calkins, 1994)
- Student selection of writing topics in ways that enhance student interest, motivation and self-efficacy
- The registers and characteristics of different writing genres
- Effective strategies for establishing links between reading and writing (Graham & Herbert, 2010)
- Strategies for fostering children's voice, style, imagination and thinking as they engage in writing (DES, 2005)
- Procedures to support the assessment of children's writing.

3.6 Specific Reforms in Line with a Balanced Literacy Approach

An overall review of contemporary research suggests that a revised English Language Curriculum or national plan for literacy should include a balanced integrated approach to effective literacy instruction which comprises research-based and research-informed instruction in language, reading and writing (see previous sections). RAI suggest that subsequent drafts of a national plan for literacy should take cognisance of research recommendations and include a balanced literacy approach which encompasses explicit skills and strategies instruction in the context of real reading, writing and communicative activities.

4. The Generic Skills-based Programme – A Reductionist View of the Curriculum

RAI believes that the important, core concept of the child as a holistically developing learner is absent from the *Draft Plan* for literacy. This basic and cherished principle of the current and previous Irish Primary School Curricula is of paramount importance and should form the basis for a national plan for literacy (and numeracy).

Furthermore, RAI is concerned by the proposed narrowing of and diminished role for the wider curriculum, including the sacrificing of some subject areas, to allow for increased time for literacy development. This reductionist view of how students acquire literacy is contrary to the principles of the Primary School Curriculum. This proposal does not take into account the reality that students acquire literacy skills across the spectrum of subject areas and such areas allow for the development of literacy skills in a rich context. While there is frequent reference to the development of higher order thinking skills throughout the *Draft Plan*, the interpretation appears to be that cognitive strategies such as prediction, visualising, questioning, making connections, clarifying, making inferences, determining importance and synthesising are learned only in the context of the English Language Curriculum. The view is similar with respect to word identification, vocabulary and oral language development. In this light, many of the proposals of the *Draft Plan* represent a restricted view of literacy development and worryingly reduce the curriculum to merely what is easily measurable and quantifiable.

One of the key suggestions of the *Draft Plan*, which will serve to narrow the current holistic Primary School Curriculum, is the proposed development of a generic skills-based literacy programme for all schools. A ‘one size fits all’ literacy programme is not and cannot be a curriculum. RAI has serious questions and reservations about this proposal along the following lines:

- Where would such a programme lie in relation to the English Language Curriculum?
- What is the envisaged nature and format of the generic programme?
- Will it represent a synthesis of research-based referenced practice?

Elaboration and more explicit, detailed guidance for all involved in literacy education regarding literacy development is needed and should be welcomed, but RAI feels that this should be in the spirit of clarification rather than prescription, and should take a form that enables the programme to continually evolve as research does and respect/promote professional autonomy and reflection. Significant onus should not be placed on a single programme to bring about change in literacy instruction and achievement. There are significant dangers of adopting and promulgating a generic programme, which we consider to include:

- Over-dependency on generic literacy programmes as the ‘cure-all’, measured by standardised tests and divorced from individual need and planning.
- The propensity for generic literacy programmes to fail to acknowledge difference and the need for differentiation.
- Moves to create a generic system would be fraught with difficulty, not least the considerable resources in training and support that would need to be deployed. In the absence of clear evidence of the efficacy of one generic programme over another it would be foolish to impose a single approach. We know that there is no magic formula that will solve the problems of developing literacy (and numeracy) proficiency. There is no generic route to good practice.

The *Draft Plan* speaks of the importance of learning outcomes, skills and competencies pertaining to literacy. While these are laudable and desirable aspirations, adequate consideration has not been given as to how these might be achieved. No mention is made of the need for literacy activity to be contextualised, meaningful and purposeful to the learner. What about the necessary and related development of positive attitudes, values and motivation pertaining to literacy, vital for progression in literacy, which are not mentioned? RAI is concerned that these pre-requisites for effective literacy development will not be catered for because of the narrow approach envisaged. A narrow curriculum focus does not take into consideration the individual and complex needs of the range of literacy learners now included in our schools. Differentiation to ensure maximum participation is a key component of current classroom instruction and RAI has difficulties envisaging how a generic skills-based programme can accomplish this.

Overall, the *Draft Plan* proposal to increase attention to and time for literacy development is to be welcomed. However, rather than imposing one potentially damaging generic literacy programme for all literacy learners, RAI feels that progress can only be achieved in the broader context of ongoing curriculum reform in English, as previously outlined, in conjunction with the provision of continuous and sustained programmes of teacher professional development mediated at a local school level. Such programmes should develop and expand teachers’ understanding and practice of research-informed balanced and effective literacy development across the curriculum rather than attempting to achieve this through a dubious dilution and narrowing of the valuable holistic developmental experience offered to our students by the current curricula.

5. Early Childhood Care and Education

The emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the *Draft Plan* is to be welcomed. RAI generally supports the targets to improve oral language competence in both ECCE and primary school settings.

The emphasis on ECE intervention is also welcome but this requires an on-going commitment to resources and training of all involved partners. If research indicates that ‘high quality preschool education enhances success’ (*Draft Plan*, p. 16), then there should be a proper state-funded pre-school service available to all.

At ITE level there is a proposal that students should spend more teaching practice time in classrooms of high quality experienced teachers of literacy. RAI feels that our pre-school children would also benefit from experienced and well-trained teachers with greater than level 5 qualifications.

The *Draft Plan* advocates that the primary school curriculum be amended to be more like *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) but *Aistear* does not ‘define unambiguously what children should learn at each stage of their development’. Neither does it advocate a ‘relentless focus on literacy and numeracy’ (*Draft Plan*, p. 51). The *Draft Plan* report needs to address this inconsistency in its thinking.

It can be inferred from the *Draft Plan* that the *Aistear* framework would be adapted and adopted as the Infant Curriculum. Notwithstanding the undoubted value of the *Aistear* framework (particularly its focus on play as a key process underpinning the learning of young children), it does not explicitly outline the essential components of effective literacy instruction. These components namely, language development, phonological and phonemic awareness development, letter knowledge, basic sight vocabulary, phonics, guided reading of levelled texts, comprehension strategy instruction, spelling (approximate), fluency, and vocabulary development, need to be clearly identified within a coherent instructional framework covering all levels including ECCE. *Aistear* is a curricular framework as distinct from a curriculum. Its aims and learning goals, though appropriate and valuable, are focused on learning experiences and not on learning outcomes. *Aistear* emphasises process and relies on teacher expertise to provide learning experiences for children which will result in rich (unarticulated) outcomes.

6. Adolescent Literacy

RAI welcomes the timely attention to the literacy needs of adolescent students contained in the *Draft Plan* and the consequent acknowledged need for the continuing professional development of post-primary level teachers in this respect. Although accepted by international research as a key stage of literacy development with very specific requirements (see e.g. Garbe, Holle & Weinhold, 2010; Jacobs, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), adolescent literacy has up to now often been ignored and neglected in official Irish educational policy and in many post primary subject classrooms due to a misguided perception that it is outside the remit of the teacher at this level.

The *Draft Plan* is however inconsistent in its proposals in this regard. While at some points adopting the understanding and desirable position that all subject teachers are literacy teachers, in specific proposals it paradoxically contends that continuous professional development will be offered to teachers of English only. This idea that post-primary English teachers alone should carry responsibility for literacy development is at odds with the current broader understanding of adolescent literacy as the responsibility of every teacher. If the core issue of adolescent literacy development is to be catered for in post-primary classrooms and the very substantial task of officially inducting and preparing subject teachers for this key responsibility (marking a sea change in the culture and practice of Irish post-primary schools and classrooms), RAI feels that subject curriculum reform and substantial sustained system-wide CPD in literacy is required in all subject areas and for all post-primary teachers. This reality is highlighted by current research on adolescent literacy development in schools (see e.g. Hall et al., 2010; Harrison, 2004; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Jetton & Dole, 2007; Loudon & Rohl, 2006) which demonstrates that post-primary teachers not only require a generic understanding of literacy and how literacy is developed in the classroom, but also require understanding of the literacy development needs of their adolescent students pertaining to their specific subject areas in light of the substantial varying literacy skills, practices and tasks required across each disciplinary area.

RAI seeks clarity, elaboration and consistency regarding the proposals contained in the *Draft Plan* with respect to adolescent literacy development needs and subject curricula reform and the system-wide preparation of post-primary teachers for this key task. In this light it seeks more comprehensive and detailed consideration of this key stage of adolescent literacy development in line with recent international research and best practice.

Finally, while the ‘Google generation’ is not a homogeneous population (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) nevertheless, adolescents privilege virtual worlds and online activities to a greater extent than the general population (Roberts, Foehr & Rideout, 2005). Social media and social networking sites such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, and the sharing of original content (photographs and videos) are central to the lives of adolescents today (Alvermann, 2008). Educators need to be supported in identifying the possibilities afforded by adolescents’ out-of-school, digitally mediated literacies within the school curriculum.

7. Support for Parents and Communities

Renewed emphasis on the role of parents and communities in the promotion and improvement of literacy levels is praiseworthy. The acknowledgment of the importance of the students' home backgrounds for their academic/literacy development is also to be welcomed as is acknowledgement of the relative weightings regarding the time spent in and influence of home, school and community. The role of parents as first educators and the need to support them is also commendable but it is unclear how this will happen in reality or, indeed, how it will be funded.

The commitment to enhance parents' capacity to support their child's literacy (and numeracy) skills, while both laudable and worthwhile, would require a huge investment in resources to attract and support parents. Similarly, the education of parents regarding the promotion of literacy is vital. This pressing need to educate necessitates a broader paradigm to include education of the wider community and society (including the media). Strategies to understand, interpret and contextualise literacy, literacy development, literacy testing and assessment should form an integral part of this education.

While there is an urgent need to facilitate parents in their child's learning, there is no indication as to who will carry this out. RAI would welcome clarification as to who would have ultimate responsibility to facilitate parents and communities in their children's learning.

RAI would also point to research which documents serious reading loss, especially among disadvantaged children, over the summer months (Entwhistle, Alexander & Olson, 2000; Mraz & Rasinski, 2007). Worryingly, some students may never make up losses incurred during the summer. Summer reading loss can average two months of reading achievement each year, which some students may never regain. The *Draft Plan* needs to identify strategies for dealing with summer reading loss so that hard-earned gains achieved by children during the school year are not eroded. Part of the response to summer reading loss should involve supporting parents in disadvantaged areas to engage their children in meaningful reading and writing activities over the summer months.

8. Assessment for Literacy

The *Draft Plan* includes a range of proposals relating to literacy assessment. RAI endorses the enhanced emphasis on assessment for learning, but has serious reservations about expanding the use of standardised reading tests in the manner proposed.

8.1 Classroom-based Assessments Aligned to Curriculum-based Standards

Firstly, RAI agrees that “gathering evidence about how well students are learning and using this information to improve learning opportunities” is an essential element in language and literacy development (*Draft Plan*, p. 39). We also agree that “good practice in assessment means using a variety of assessment methods in order to provide a full picture of a learner’s achievement” (p. 39). This position is fully consistent with the NCCA document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007), which outlines strategies for integrating assessment into teaching and learning, including strategies for assessing aspects of oral language, reading and writing. A number of other proposals in the *Draft Plan* are also consistent with RAI’s view on how teachers can be best supported in furthering their knowledge about the nature and content of effective classroom assessments, and how best to implement and interpret the outcomes of such assessments. These include:

- The commitment to ‘develop national standards of student achievement for literacy and numeracy’ (*Draft Plan*, p. 44). Such standards are overdue, and should provide teachers with a good indication of how children develop in their literacy acquisition over the course of compulsory education, as envisaged by the Primary School English Curriculum.
- The development of exemplars of students’ achievement (p. 44), which, we assume, will be linked to the national standards to be developed.
- The commitment to providing continuing professional development opportunities and information to teachers (p. 44) (though we would argue that CPD on classroom-based assessment should have been provided to all teachers in conjunction with CPD on the Primary School English Curriculum in 2001, or at least following publication of *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum – Guidelines for Schools* in 2007).
- The development of tasks and tests which teachers can use to assess their students’ progress against standards (p. 44). Such tests are already a feature of classroom assessment in countries such as Scotland and New Zealand. Assessment of standards in reading literacy can be supported with reference to performance on specific reading texts, as task difficulty is often related to the complexity of the underlying text.
- The provision of on-line and other information to parents about national standards and how to understand their child’s progress and learning needs (p. 45).
- The extension of formative assessment to the second year of post-primary schooling (p. 42, 44). This is in line with a view of literacy development that spans the range of class levels from Junior Infants to Junior Cycle and beyond, and calls for a better understanding of literacy development from birth to the end of compulsory schooling.

There is much support in the international literature for assessment for learning (AfL) (formative assessment) that is classroom-based (Black & William, 1998). In making a case for assessment for learning, in the context of curriculum-based literacy standards, the DES should draw on the extensive research base summarised by Afflerbach and Cho (2011):

- AfL can contribute to enhanced student learning, as teachers accurately identify students' learning strengths and needs, and teach within students' zones of proximal development.
- AfL conducted in classrooms can take into account the situated nature of learning and assessment (i.e., the specific contexts in which teaching and learning occur, including students' states of affective and emotional development).
- AfL can accommodate a broad definition of literacy that includes paper-based and electronic texts, as well as non-cognitive outcomes of instruction (self-concept, self-esteem, attributions of performance, locus of control, motivation and attitude).
- AfL can provide teachers with information that enhances their role as 'reflective practitioners' which, in turns, can contribute to better-informed teaching.
- AfL can improve students' ability to assess their own learning through the enhancement of their metacognitive skills. Access to the scoring rubrics that teachers use to rate performance assessments can inform students about the criteria against which they will be assessed, increasing the likelihood that they will internalise those criteria (i.e., self-assess).
- AfL can modify the socio-cultural space of classroom discourse. Teacher discourse patterns may change as teachers focus on higher-level thinking and problem solving, since traditional discourse patterns do not support assessment of such learning.
- AfL could enable teachers to focus assessment efforts on students with the greatest needs (e.g., children with learning difficulties, children in disadvantaged areas, English language learners). Indeed, Black and Wiliam's (1998) review of the research showed that at-risk children were the group most likely to benefit from enhanced classroom-based assessment.

Notwithstanding RAI's largely positive response to formative, classroom-based assessment, there is a need for clarification of what the DES proposes in the *Draft Plan*. In particular, the following issues should be dealt with while the plan is still at the development stage:

- Class size may be a factor in implementing classroom assessments to large numbers of students. How can teachers be expected to gather, interpret and use assessment information in several domains if class sizes are too large? What forms of support will teachers receive in implementing classroom-based assessments in large classes?
- The balance between implementation of formative, classroom-based assessment on the one hand, and standardised tests on the other needs to be thought through. How does the DES intend to redress the current imbalance in favour of standardised tests, given the strong emphasis on expanding the use of standardised tests in the *Draft Plan*?

- If the outcomes of classroom assessments (based on standards) are to be reported to Boards of Management, does the DES intend to enhance reliability by implementing strong forms of moderation (e.g., aligning teacher judgements with standardised test results, appointing moderators to ensure that schools generate accurate assessments of student performance against the standards)? Would this not run the risk of undermining the emphasis on standards-based teacher assessment outlined in the *Draft Plan*?
- According to the *Draft Plan*, revisions to the Primary School English Curriculum are to be completed in the 2012-13 school year (*Draft Plan*, p. 28). However, according to page 44, standards and supports for assessing English are to be available by the end of 2012. RAI suggests that curriculum development precede the development of standards and supports. There should be proper alignment between curriculum development/ implementation and improvement of classroom-based assessment.

8.2 The Expansion of Standardised Testing and the Introduction of ‘Schools Like Ours’

RAI has significant reservations about plans to extend standardised testing as proposed on pages 45-46 of the *Draft Plan*. First, we have concerns about the technical aspects of the proposed testing regime:

- There is a need to have a sufficient number of pupils enrolled at a given class level to justify reporting performance and comparing results from year to year – in Ontario, Canada, for example, data are not reported for schools with fewer than 16 students at the target grade level. In Ireland, in 2009-10, just 40% of schools had more than 16 pupils across all Fourth classes. If we strip out ELL and special needs students (i.e., those who may be exempted from testing) as well as those absent at the time of testing, the figure could be closer to 30%. There is a serious danger that school principals, teachers and Board of Management members will make incorrect inferences about school-level achievement based on insufficient numbers of pupils (i.e., year-on-year scores will fluctuate widely because student composition varies from year to year). The same concerns relate to plans to ‘ensure that all whole-school type inspections evaluate and report on literacy and numeracy standards in the school’ (p. 46).
- The report on the 2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English (Eivers et al., 2010) shows that the vast majority of schools are close to the ‘fit line’ (reflecting the association between reading achievement and a composite index of socio-economic status) on a test of reading administered to pupils in Sixth class. Those that are not may well be small schools whose enrolment in Sixth class fluctuates from year to year. Is it worth investing substantial resources in a standardised testing programme and associated ‘Schools Like Ours’ initiative that may find just a small number of schools performing significantly better or worse than expected (for whatever reason)?
- The *Draft Plan* does not deal with the important issue of exemptions from testing. Will students in receipt of special education services or those with limited proficiency in English be expected to sit the same tests as students without such needs? If not,

how can consistency in respect of exemptions from school to school be guaranteed? If students are absent on the assigned day of testing, will schools be expected to organise additional testing sessions to ensure fair comparisons between schools?

- The *Draft Plan* needs to justify the types of scores that it intends to use – raw scores, gain scores, scores adjusted for socio-economic status – and the reasons for such decisions. As the *Draft Plan* currently stands, it is unclear what it is proposed to measure.
- The potential of many high-scoring schools, including those with high average SES, to make significant additional improvements must be very limited. The RAI question the value of allocating resources to enable schools to set targets when standards may already be very high. The RAI recommends working more intensively with a small number of schools that need additional support (for example, the most disadvantaged schools), rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all standardised testing model that will consume time, energy and financial resources, but does not guarantee real improvement.
- If ‘whole-school type inspections’ report on literacy (p. 46), does this mean that data on literacy standards will enter the public domain (e.g., the DES website)? If the average scores of schools or the targets set (whether achieved or not) are published, could not newspapers draw comparisons across schools, even without formally constructing league tables?

8.3 Potential Effects of High-Stakes Standardised Testing

RAI also has concerns about the quantity of standardised tests to be administered, and the effects of standardised tests on schools and students:

- With standardised tests to be administered at Second, Fourth and Sixth classes, and Second year, standards-based assessments at Senior Infants, Second, Fourth and Sixth classes and Second year, national assessments in representative samples of Second and Sixth classes, and international assessments in samples of Fourth classes (PIRLS and TIMSS) and Third year (PISA) classes, there will be an intolerable burden on the schools, teachers and pupils. Further, if plans to implement all of these assessments in primary schools by 2014 come to fruition, schools will be under even greater pressure. Rather than strengthening links between assessment and instruction, the proposed model runs the risk of focusing almost all additional efforts on assessment, without any obvious benefits to instruction.
- By privileging standardised testing over other forms of assessment, and other outcomes of literacy instruction, there is a risk that key factors such as motivation, attitude to reading, frequency of reading for leisure, and metacognitive knowledge will be overlooked. Along with reading comprehension, these are important outcomes of instruction and schools should be encouraged to gather and interpret data on them.
- According to the *Draft Plan*, the inspectorate’s WSE reports indicate that “there is limited use of the outcomes of standardised tests to identify strengths and weaknesses and to connect the teaching approaches with the learning needs identified in the tests”

(p. 40). RAI argue that standardised test results, while informative, cannot provide detailed formative data that teachers and schools can use to plan their teaching to meet the needs of individual learners. If a child or group does poorly on a measure of reading comprehension, it could be for one or many reasons such as (i) they lack the required vocabulary and background knowledge; (ii) they are unable to decode the text; (iii) they lack key reading comprehension strategies; (iv) they are unmotivated to perform well; (v) they lack the home supports associated with high literacy levels; (vi) one or more has a learning disability; (vii) their oral language proficiency is insufficient; (viii) previous instruction at school has not addressed their difficulties or (ix) the text is set at too high a level for them to demonstrate the comprehension skill they possess. Standardised tests are not intended to have a diagnostic dimension. On the other hand, strong investment in classroom-based assessment (with provision of assessment tools and in-service support) would yield valuable diagnostic information that could be used by schools and teachers to effect real improvement.

- The *Draft Plan* does not examine in any systematic way the effects of large-scale testing programmes in other countries. In England, National Curriculum Assessment testing at age 14 has been dismantled (though teacher-based assessment continues), with proposals to replace it with enhanced national sample testing and more-strongly moderated teacher assessments (Expert Group on Assessment, 2009). In the United States, there appears to be a growing awareness that the targets underpinning *No Child Left Behind* (every child in Grades 3-8 will be reading at proficient level or higher by 2014) are unrealistic, and that more realistic targets, that reflect real gains in achievement rather than improved performance on state tests, are needed (Popham, 2009; Gamse et al, 2008).
- There is ample international evidence of how high-stakes standardised testing can narrow the curriculum to only those aspects of a subject that are tested (Shiel, Kellaghan & Moran, 2010). For example, Collins, Rise and Stobart (2009) have shown how many aspects of investigatory science have been abandoned in English Year 6 classrooms in order to prepare children for Key Stage 2 paper-and-pen science tests.

8.4 Assessment of Reading in Electronic Formats

Although the *Draft Plan* refers to provision of national standards and suitable assessment instruments in on-line format, there is no discussion on the assessment of students' skills in electronic reading. Research suggests that print-based text and online reading formats are not isomorphic (Leu, 2000). Therefore, we need to consider the complexities introduced for the reader when reading online (see for example, Afflerbach & Cho, 2009; Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Duke, Schmar-Dobler & Zhang, 2006). Further, we need to help students develop the skills, strategies and dispositions necessary to fully exploit electronic reading formats, such as the Internet, as sites for deep learning (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). These skills and strategies include: (a) posing effective questions for inquiry; (b) generating and revising search strings; (c) investigating search results critically, speedily and efficiently; (d) locating and critically evaluating the usefulness of information retrieved with regard to reliability,

accuracy, credibility, and author stance; and (e) synthesising and communicating information to others.

The OECD PISA study includes an assessment of electronic reading, albeit in a closed environment format rather than an open networked environment such as the Internet. The *Draft Plan* needs to be at least open to the possibility that the assessment of electronic reading formats could replace print-based assessment in the next few years. It seems likely that assessment of reading, at lower-secondary level if not at primary level, will include (or consist wholly of) electronic reading tasks within the next decade. A national plan for literacy needs to anticipate this trend.

Currently, there is little research focussing on the development of online reading comprehension assessment tools (Leu & Reinking, 2005). Still less research is focussing on the development of teacher knowledge, pedagogies, and curriculum to accommodate the new literacies within classroom contexts (Castek, 2008; Dwyer, 2010). Further, many questions remain about the associations between print and electronic reading (e.g., are students who are proficient in electronic reading also proficient at print reading?), and the equivalence of print and electronic reading tasks. The DES needs to take a lead in supporting research in these areas so that the system is ready to prepare our students for their multimodal digital futures.

9. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The *Draft Plan* states that “a focus on developing a high-quality teaching workforce within a framework of strong school leadership will have a positive impact on student achievement” (*Draft Plan*, p. 15). RAI concurs with this view and it welcomes the plan’s acknowledgement that the provision of high-quality CPD opportunities for ECCE, primary and post-primary practitioners will play a pivotal role in the development and sustainment of high-quality teaching and learning.

The *Draft Plan* also states that there is “considerable scope for improving the...continuing professional development of teachers” in the area of literacy in Ireland (*Draft Plan*, p. 16). In addition, the *Draft Plan* notes that improvements are required in the “provision and uptake of continuing professional development courses for teachers regarding literacy and numeracy” (p. 16). RAI agrees that there is considerable scope for improving the CPD of teachers in the area of literacy and that improvements are required in the provision and uptake of CPD courses for and by teachers. RAI would however stress that it is the provision of CPD in literacy and not its uptake by teachers that stands as the greater challenge. Although a number of positive developments in CPD have occurred in recent years, access by all teachers and schools to sustained Department-supported CPD in literacy has not been achieved. At present, considerable onus still lies with teachers and schools to source and fund their own CPD in literacy, in a context where there is little if any regulation of CPD providers.

9.1 Actions on continuing professional development

Given the limitations of CPD in literacy to date and at present, RAI welcomes some of the *Draft Plan*’s Actions on CPD, namely to:

- “Focus the provision of Department-supported CPD for teachers on the teaching of literacy...and the use of assessment” for ECCE, primary and post-primary practitioners (p. 20),
- “Provide access to approved professional development units on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum for second-level teachers” (p. 20),
- “Ensure that continuing professional development courses for teachers are adequately assessed and evaluated” (p. 21).

As discussed in *Section 4*, however, RAI has serious questions and reservations about the *Draft Plan*’s proposed development and promulgation of a generic skills-based literacy programme for all schools (see *Section 4*).

The *Draft Plan* clearly communicates that developments in the provision of CPD are important and sought. Nevertheless, under its *Actions* section and elsewhere, little if any reference is made to the importance and challenge of designing, funding, supporting and enabling all teachers to participate in CPD experiences that are more effective in terms of bringing about lasting change in teachers’ practices for literacy. The *Draft Plan* does however signal that the Teaching Council, in collaboration with other educational stakeholders, will

play a significant leadership role in the formulation of future policy on CPD and that this policy is “being informed by research, best practice in other countries and the Council’s experience to date arising from its review and accreditation of teacher education courses in Ireland” (*Draft Plan*, p. 17). These qualities align with RAI’s standpoint on planning for CPD in literacy, insofar as RAI recommends that future actions for CPD yield a long-term realistic plan informed by an assessment of current CPD provisions and a review of the literature on effective professional development.

The provision of Department-supported CPD, and more importantly effective Department-supported CPD, is a complex endeavour. The complexity of this endeavour is arguably exacerbated in the Irish context given the current economic recession and limited funding for education. A major challenge facing those charged with the task of improving CPD, will be to maximise the potential of what limited resources are available at present and in the near future. Thus, RAI would welcome greater clarification regarding the funding available to and the modus operandi of future plans and actions for CPD and the opportunity to respond to such details.

9.2 Key topics for teachers’ professional development

The *Draft Plan* states that “A review of strategies in literacy from other countries suggests that, while teachers must be familiar with the many characteristic variations in literacy teaching and learning practice, there are particular items that are regarded as core” (*Draft Plan*, p. 17). The reader is directed to the previous sections of RAI’s response which aim to shed light on RAI’s standpoint regarding the many and core characteristic variations in literacy teaching and learning practice that teachers must be enabled to become familiar with over the course of their teaching careers. As previously noted, although the *Draft Plan* provides some detail in respect of key topics for teachers’ professional development, little elaboration is given regarding the envisaged modus operandi of future CPD activities. RAI propose that a national plan would benefit from an additional section outlining the key CPD activities and requirements that will be needed to ensure that CPD in literacy is effective.

Research on the effects of diverse forms of professional development on teacher and student learning is in its infancy (Wilson & Berne, 1999; Garet et al., 2001; Borko, 2004). Although, as Borko (2004, p. 3) writes, “We are only beginning to learn...about what and how teachers learn from professional development”, existing research and theory “provide some preliminary guidance about the characteristics of high-quality professional development” (Garet et al., 2001, p. 917). The following represents a list of some of the salient and more common characteristics that emerge from a review of literature on the attributes thought to be associated with more effective professional development initiatives.

More effective professional development initiatives are thought to include those that:

- Are based on data collected about pupils’ learning and teachers’ practices (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Tillema & Imants, 1995; Guskey, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Hall & Hord, 2006).

- Are clearly focused on student achievement, emphasise how modified practices improve student attainment and promote whole-school curriculum coherence (Fullan, 1995; Guskey, 2000, 2002; Newmann et al., 2001; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Kennedy, 2010).
- Simultaneously attend to individual and organisational change and thus typically aim to develop the individual teacher, but also his/her staff and school's capacity to deal with change (Fullan, 1995, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Hall & Hord, 2006; Johnston et al., 2007; Loxley et al., 2007).
- Provide validated knowledge that is explicitly defined, clarified and relevant to teachers and focused on the particular subject matter (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Tillema & Imants, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Kennedy, 2010).
- Blend experience-based and conceptual-based training (Tillema & Imants, 1995; Guskey, 2000).
- Incorporate teaching methods that reflect the methods teachers are expected to use with their pupils (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Tillema & Imants, 1995; Nagin, 2006, Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Johnston et al., 2007; Kaplan, 2008).
- Address the logistical, social, economic and emotional realities of teachers, schools and pupils (Fullan, 1995, 2001; Hargreaves, 1995, 1997; Loxley et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 2007).
- Promote the gradual implementation of prioritised changes guided by larger educational goals as part of sustained efforts (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991; Guskey, 2000; Newmann et al., 2001).
- Do not simply deliver 'new ideas', but promote teacher-inquiry, reflection and the reconceptualisation of knowledge and communication among teachers within and outside of the school (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Borko & Putnam, 1995; Tillema & Imants, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002).
- Combine a multitude of professional development models and cultivate the professional learning conditions needed to ensure their optimal impact, namely that they facilitate teacher interaction, and reflection and promote collegiality (Wilson & Berne, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Hall & Hord, 2006).
- Offer follow-up, on-going, sustained and intensive professional development (Fullan 1995, 2001; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Guskey, 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Au et al., 2008; Kennedy, 2010).
- Are led by teaching colleagues and/or delivered by trainers that are adequately versed in research-based best practice and adult learning and are perceived as credible by their consumers (Tillema & Imants, 1995; Hall & Hord, 2006; Johnston et al., 2007).

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Reading Association of Ireland Mission Statement

1. The Reading Association of Ireland aims to support and inform all those concerned with the development of reading, language and literacy (including teachers, lecturers, researchers, trainers and parents), encourage them in reflection and dialogue, challenge them in their practice and give public voice to their concerns.
2. The purposes of the Association are to:
 - (i) provide a coherent voice on the acquisition, teaching and learning of reading, language and literacy in English and Gaeilge (L1 and L2)
 - (ii) encourage the development of reading, language and literacy at all educational levels from early childhood through adolescence to adult level;
 - (iii) foster an interest in and love of reading in all its forms;
 - (iv) promote an interest in children's literature at national and international levels;
 - (v) stimulate, promote and conduct research on reading, language and literacy at national and local levels;
 - (vi) study the various factors that influence progress in reading, language and literacy;
 - (vii) publish where possible the results of pertinent and significant investigations and practices;
 - (viii) assist or advise on the development of teacher education programmes;
 - (ix) act as a clearing house for information related to reading, language and literacy;
 - (x) disseminate knowledge helpful in the solution of problems related to reading, language and literacy.
3. In pursuit of these purposes, the Association engages in such activities as:
 - (i) advocating to shape national policy on reading, language and literacy;
 - (ii) organising conferences, seminars and workshops, to disseminate research and best practice in reading, language and literacy;
 - (iii) publishing conference proceedings and a journal, *Reading News*;
 - (iv) maintaining a website and archive, www.reading.ie;
 - (v) providing information about reading development to parents;
 - (vi) maintaining links with and contributing to the activities of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the European Federation of Literacy Associations (FELA);
 - (vii) maintaining links with national organisations, including the Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Teachers' Professional Network (TPN), colleges, universities and teacher unions;
 - (viii) supporting student research through the Biennial Outstanding Thesis Awards;
 - (ix) supporting children's literature through the Biennial RAI Book Awards;
 - (x) supporting teacher research and school development through the RAI Literacy Development Awards for Schools;

4. The Association also seeks to achieve its purposes through the work of Regional Branches. The regional branches, which work under the auspices of the national association, engage in such activities as:
 - (i) organising symposia, seminars, workshops and presentations on the development of reading, language and literacy;
 - (ii) developing membership at local level;
 - (iii) promoting the dissemination of current best practice in research in reading, language and literacy, including practitioner-based research at local level;
 - (iv) liaising with local libraries, parents'/ community groups and national organisations with local presence, in the promotion of all aspects of children' literacy development including children's literature, poetry, technological and new literacies;
 - (v) liaising with first, second and third level institutions in the advancement of effective pedagogical practice in the development of reading, language and literacy.

The Association's membership include teachers, students, teacher educators and parents, but any person interested in literacy or language development is welcome to join, as the Association seeks to expand its membership.