

**Submission from the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI) in response to: *Better Literacy and Numeracy: A Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools***

*Inaugurated in 2010, the Society for Music Education in Ireland is an umbrella group representing music education and community music interests in Ireland. It is affiliated to the UNESCO founded International Society for Music Education*

As an organisation concerned with the music education and overall cultural enrichment of young people, the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI) notes the publication of the DES Draft Report on Literacy and Numeracy and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the report. The SMEI acknowledges the issues raised in the draft report regarding the importance of initial learning in literacy and numeracy, and the need to maintain a focus on these key areas throughout primary and secondary levels of statutory education.

**Balancing teaching time with quality teaching**

The SMEI shares the concerns of the DES with respect to a minority of pupils who do not appear to achieve minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. However, it does not agree that overall standards will necessarily be improved if more time is allocated to reading and mathematics at the expense of other curricular areas, notably the arts. Moreover, the Society believes that any reduction in existing provision for music and the arts will deny all children access to a holistic education, and that the children most affected by any such change would be those already in marginalised communities. Our arguments here are supported by findings of the Cambridge Primary Review (2010). This review, which examined 4,000 published reports and 1,000 submissions from around the world, concluded that efforts in the UK to reduce curriculum breadth in order to increase attainment levels in literacy and numeracy had little to no effect on standards. It further found that there was a need for *more* focus on creative subjects such as the arts in order to develop the whole child and to lead to a creative society and economy:

...as children move through the primary phase, their statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced education is increasingly but needlessly compromised by a 'standards' agenda which combines high stakes testing and the national strategies' exclusive focus on literacy and numeracy. The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and the kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas. A policy-led belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in 'the basics' has fuelled this loss of entitlement, says the Review. This split is exacerbated by the relative neglect of the non-core curriculum in initial teacher training, school inspection and professional development. (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010, p.22)

### **Access to arts education**

Although SMEI agrees with those parts of the DES Draft Report that rightly highlight a concern with maintaining educational standards, it can find no evidence to support the assertion that a reduction in curriculum breadth will result in significant improvements in literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, while a reduction will lead to little or no improvement in these areas, it will certainly result in diminished access to the arts and to other areas of human experience and development. This will effect a loss of entitlement of all children to a broad and balanced education, and will undoubtedly intensify notions of access to the arts as a form of 'social distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984), inasmuch as children's engagement with the arts will be increasingly reliant on parents' ability and willingness to invest in such 'cultural capital' outside of formal education. The loss will not be confined to children's experience of, and development in the arts *per se*, but also to their holistic educational development, a pattern which over time would ultimately inhibit the expression of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship in the wider society and economy, and which would widen the gap in material conditions and socio-cultural experience among privileged and underprivileged communities.

### **Interrelation versus integration**

We now refer to the recommended action on Page 30 of the draft report:

Over time, revise the required learning outcomes in subjects other than L1, mathematics and science to take account of the reduced time available for these subjects and provide guidance on the possibilities for cross-curricular teaching and learning in areas such as drama, music and visual arts...

There are two issues that the SMEI wishes to address in response to this recommendation. First of all, reduced time for music would result in considerably lower standards than those that currently prevail. Numerous reports relating to provision for music education in Ireland consistently note considerable deficiencies by comparison

with most other European countries (for example, Heneghan, 2001, Music Board of Ireland, 2003, Music Network 2003). Related to this, it should also be noted that a review of the implementation of the 1999 primary school music curriculum has yet to be carried out by the NCCA. The second issue relates to the suggestion for 'cross-curricular teaching and learning' in areas collectively considered as 'the arts'. While there are strong epistemological and aesthetic arguments for considering music alongside drama, visual arts and dance, and while further guidance on the 'possibilities for cross-curricular teaching and learning' are to be welcomed, the SMEI rejects any notion that 'integration' of itself can offer a panacea that facilitates adequate provision for education in each of the arts while simultaneously freeing up more time for other curricular concerns. As the NCCA primary school curriculum for Music clearly states: 'Music is an art form deeply rooted in human nature. It is a discrete body of knowledge, a unique form of communication and a means by which feelings and interests are organised and expressed' (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.5). There are of course many aspects of culture in which distinctive art practices may *interrelate* and the SMEI strongly advocates the incorporation of interrelated strategies for both curriculum and community settings. At the same time, due regard must be given to the integrity and to the distinct knowledge, skills and understanding specific to each arts area, and this is certainly the case with music. The principle of cross-curricular learning and teaching is broadly welcomed by the SMEI; indeed, we would argue that Music affords several possibilities for different embodiments of concepts in literacy and numeracy, and offers complementary learning support strategies for these curricular areas (Douglas and Willatts 1994, Anvari and Trainor 2002; Clune 2004). Moreover, if literacy and numeracy are to be regarded as basic skills that need to be acquired, maintained and improved throughout an individual's education, then music holds potential additional benefits (in addition to the intrinsic value of music education *per se*) from early years through to the senior cycle of post-primary school. For this reason, the proposed 'delay' in introducing some curricular areas as suggested in Page 10 of the draft report would prove counter-productive to those wishing to raise standards in literacy and numeracy.

### **Initial teacher education**

The SMEI also notes the draft report's references to initial teacher education (primary level) and welcomes the extension of the BEd degree from a three-year to a four-year programme. It considers that this development will provide further scope to prepare student teachers for the teaching of all curricular areas, including music. The Society has some concerns, however, about comments on the future status of arts/humanities specialisation within the current BEd programme models of the two larger teacher education colleges. We believe that in the absence of a body of evidence that points to

a causal relationship between student teachers' pursuit of a double major at undergraduate level (e.g., Education and Arts/Humanities) and subsequent underachievement of pupils' literacy and numeracy level in schools, such commentary should be taken as largely peripheral and even irrelevant to the task of improving quality education for all learners.

We note, and as many OECD observers have emphasised, the very high entry level to teacher education in all colleges of education in Ireland, the high status in which the profession is held, and the low levels of teacher attrition compared to other jurisdictions. While we cannot comment on the quality of teacher education in neighbouring jurisdictions, we note that many providers in the UK are, by definition, not aligned to the Primary Curriculum in Ireland, nor do they provide the breadth and depth of curricular learning that teachers in Ireland experience in Level 7 and Level 8 degrees. Of concern is that many teachers presenting for probation are now trained outside of the mainstream colleges of education. Furthermore, we note that demographic trends point to a substantial proportion of young teachers in the system at present, particularly in schools of educational disadvantage. Since effective teaching of children in literacy and numeracy is highly correlated with a teacher's experience - at least 7 years (Berliner, 2004; Conway et al., 2009) - we believe that the continuing resourcing of DEIS schools and the continuing professional, school-based support of teachers through various interventions will generate positive outcomes for pupils and teachers alike. Given that DEIS is still in its infancy, we look forward to the evaluation of this important endeavour.

### ***Positive benefits of music studies in teacher education***

Aside from the absence of evidence to support a *negative* relationship between a double major at undergraduate level and the quality of teaching as described above, we note the very positive and important role played by a modest but significant number of BEd graduates who emerge as music specialists and contribute significantly to the development of music in schools and in the wider community. Some of these graduates advance their knowledge of music and music education to go on to take leadership and expert roles in colleges of education, in statutory education agencies and in arts administration. The SMEI argues for maintaining the option of music major specialisation within the BEd; it also recognises the opportunities to enhance professional training in musical leadership and curriculum leadership under the expanded four-year model, and welcomes the potential for future developments in music pedagogy studies at third level.

## **Inservice education in context**

Whilst much attention is focused on initial teacher education in the Draft Strategy, Conway et al., (2009) note the situated and contextual nature of teachers' learning and the importance of continuing professional development (CPD). For CPD to have an impact on teacher's work and pupil achievement, Penuel et al. (2007) argue that effective professional development should have greater proximity to teachers' everyday practice. They assert that reform oriented CPD allows for more in-depth engagement than is typically provided in a standard workshop. Such reform oriented activities include active professional learning strategies such as observing and being observed, followed by interactive feedback and structured discussion, being mentored or coached, participating in a committee or study group, and generally demanding a more embodied engagement than traditional models.

We note that the typical model of professional development for teachers (namely the "summer course") does not reflect such active learning strategies and as it is offered outside of the normal school year at a remove from real classrooms, it lies in a weak position to impact directly on teachers' practice. Furthermore, as evidenced in the list of approved summer courses available to primary teachers in the past 7 years, we note the dearth of provision of professional development courses in mathematics education in particular, even within the summer course model. We argue therefore that in the interest of improving educational outcomes—literacy, numeracy, music and other areas—a framework for high quality CPD, and its attendant rights and responsibilities, needs to be developed for *all* teachers across *all* subject areas.

## **Music education and academic and social benefits**

Elsewhere we note a vast and growing body of evidence-based research and extensive academic publications that attest to positive links between music education and academic and social benefits (mostly recently: Rauscher 2009; Southgate & Roscigno 2009; Hallam 2010). Such links point to increased achievement scores in literacy and numeracy, spatial and temporal reasoning, self-efficacy, creativity, social and civic responsibility to name but a few. (e.g., Bamford, 2006; Deasy, 2002, UNESCO Road Map for Arts Education, 2006; 2010). Whilst such studies are important in the realm of research and advocacy, *until now*, the music education community has not found it necessary to seek utilitarian arguments for the justification, inclusion or support of music education in schools from a curricular perspective. We believe that engaging in such arguments would be a regressive step for music education and education as a whole. Instead we focus on the holistic nature of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum*

*Framework and the Primary School Curriculum* as articulated, for example, in the vision for primary education on page 6 of the Introduction (Government of Ireland, 1999).

The Primary School Curriculum celebrates the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development. It is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life—spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical.

The curriculum recognises the integrity of the child's life as a child and aims to cater for his or her needs and potential as they evolve day by day. By meeting these needs, the curriculum enriches the child's life and the foundations are laid for happiness and fulfilment in later education and in adult life.

The holistic thrust of this statement is echoed in a complementary document that also involved many years of collaboration and consultation with all the partners in education, resulting in much anticipated legislation (Education Act, 1998) and the enactment of the Teaching Council. In this the Codes of Professional Conduct for teachers have been critical in reflecting the culture and ethos of teachers' professional practice. We note how teaching is viewed in a holistic way, as expressed in the core values (p. 11):

Teachers are committed to a holistic vision of education which includes the aesthetic, cognitive, intellectual, critical, cultural, emotional, imaginative, creative, moral, social, political, spiritual, physical and healthy development of their students. (p. 11)

We argue therefore that efforts to improve standards in education should not be conducted with a relentless focus on one aspect of education at the expense of another, but that increased attention to improvement across the many dimensions of the curriculum, in a systematic manner, through support for implementation and formative evaluation, will be beneficial to *all learners* in the education system and beyond. Music's unique contribution to individual holistic development - coupled with its added value in promoting general abilities of thinking, reasoning, arguing, and communicating – places it at the core of the primary and secondary curriculum.

*National Committee of the Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI)*

*February 2011*

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