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Pedagogy or politics?: cyclical trends in literacy and numeracy in Ireland and beyond

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In 1999, the primary curriculum was published in Ireland, with emphases on 'breadth and balance', recognition of the role of language and the arts and commitment to each child's potential and holistic development. In 2011, the Irish government published a strategy aimed to improve standards of literacy and numeracy among children and young people in Ireland, 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020'. The approaches to address concerns over literacy and numeracy in Irish schools, taken by the Strategy, require deconstruction, and in this paper, we argue that the focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other educational objectives in Ireland at present threatens the holistic ethos of the curriculum. We challenge those involved in education in Ireland to ensure that pedagogical rather than political concerns motivate our strategies and policies.

Keywords: PISA; primary curriculum; literacy; numeracy; standardised testing; politics

Introduction

In 1999, the primary curriculum was published in Ireland and remains the mandatory curriculum followed across all primary schools. The points of revision from its predecessor (Government of Ireland 1971) include a characteristic emphasis on 'breadth and balance', recognition of the role of language and the arts and commitment to each child's potential and holistic development. In 2011, the Irish government published a strategy to improve standards of literacy and numeracy among children and young people in Ireland, 'Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020'.

According to the Strategy document, a key driver behind its publication was the poorer than usual performance of Irish 15-year-olds in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), with Ireland dropping from fifth to seventeenth place (OECD 2009). The approaches to address concerns over literacy and numeracy in Irish schools, taken by the Strategy, require deconstruction. In this paper, we challenge those involved in education in Ireland to ensure that pedagogical rather than political concerns motivate our strategies and policies. We present the experiences of Britain and America regarding narrowing of curriculum and emphasis on standardised testing, and argue that failure to learn from the experience of other nations may lead to dubious outcomes for

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children in our education system. We look to two high scorers on PISA 2009, namely Shanghai and Finland, as examples of the importance of context in interpreting test scores. We caution against the use of business models and political imperatives in understanding and developing educational policy, and we appeal for maintenance of the characteristic depth and breadth of the Irish approach to curriculum.

Dilution of the ethos of the 1999 primary school curriculum and the need for mindful debate

At the time of its introduction, the Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999) was lauded for its breadth of vision, and it continues to garner the highest praise from educationalists, such as emeritus Professor John Coolahan (2011), who referred to it as a 'splendid' curriculum. It attracted plaudits from the Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) (2009c) regarding the equal footing given to all subjects, and it has been recognised by many writers (e.g. Downes 2003) as a holistic, child-centred curriculum, incorporating the importance of emotional expression and recognising the abilities of all children.

This curriculum built on the principles of its predecessor (Government of Ireland 1971) and expanded them to include commitment to the uniqueness of the child; development of the child's full potential; recognition of the child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity as a primary motivating factor in learning and the importance of the child's social and emotional development, drawing on constructivist approaches to learning and assessment. This is in line with the balanced education Dewey (1915, 18) called for that appeals not only to the intellectual aspect of children's nature but to their 'impulses and tendencies to make, do and create'. The 1999 curriculum also:

represents a clear challenge to a Cartesian compartmentalisation between reason, on the one hand, and emotion, on the other. The teacher's role can no longer be to have minimal regard to the child's emotional development through focusing solely on his or her intellectual development. (Downes 2003, 94)

The curriculum seeks to 'enable children to acquire knowledge, concepts, skills and values that are relevant and appropriate to their present and future lives' (DES 1999, 75), exemplifying the kind of balance that CPR (2009a) argues ought to be included in any statement of aims. With respect to content, together with an emphasis on literacy, numeracy, language, science, technology and citizenship, the curriculum included for the first time, Social, Personal and Health Education (S.P.H.E.) and an addition to the arts area, in the form of Drama. Thus, the values of the overarching vision were not merely aspirational, but were reflected in the breadth of subjects selected for inclusion.

There is a real danger that the current focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other curricular areas could thoroughly undermine this ethos. While the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy maintains that 'placing a strong focus in schools on the development and monitoring of students' literacy and numeracy skills is not incompatible with a broad and balanced curriculum' (DES 2011b, 44), it emphasises the need to 're-prioritise spending away from *desirable but ultimately less important* activities' (DES 2011b, 15, emphasis added). It also indicates that the curriculum cannot include everything that might be desirable. We have to be realistic in the expectations that we set for students, teachers and schools (DES 2011b, 44).

In fact, the Strategy contains numerous examples of such contradictory sentiment regarding narrowing of curriculum. For example, it maintains that:

All learners should have an opportunity to engage in a broad, balanced and fulfilling curricular experience that supports all aspects of their development – not just the academic dimension but the social, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, and physical dimensions as well. (DES 2011b, 43)

However, it goes on to advocate that the time allocated to subjects other than literacy and numeracy should be significantly cut. Eisner (1992) holds that the curriculum we prescribe for schools shows children what adults believe is important for them to learn, and there is no more telling indicator of the perceived importance of subjects than the amount of time allocated to them. In the initial draft of the Strategy (DES 2010), one suggestion to facilitate this increase of time allocated to literacy and numeracy was to alter the status of Drama from a subject to an element of literacy. This was not maintained in the final document following the consultative process. However, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) were asked to revise subject allocation timings of the curriculum in line with the new strategy and accordingly, Circular 56/2011 directed schools that literacy and numeracy should be prioritised through

- integrating literacy and numeracy skills with other curriculum areas
- using some or all of discretionary curriculum time for literacy and numeracy activities
- re-allocating time spent on the other subjects in the curriculum to the development of literacy and numeracy
- prioritising the curriculum objectives which are considered *most valuable* (emphasis added) in supporting children's learning and delaying the introduction of elements of some subjects. (DES 2011a, 4)

With these approaches, not only is the time allocated to other curricular areas reduced, potentially *all* discretionary time is allocated to literacy and numeracy, limiting the ability of teachers to plan 'for learning [that] reflects the needs and interests of the learner' (DES 2011b, 43). As such, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy provides significant levels of 'mixed messages'. For example, the Strategy purports to present a broad, non-utilitarian definition of 'literacy', embracing the notion of multiple literacies (critical literacy, digital literacy etc), rather than as a set of technical skills to be acquired. However, the *aims* of the strategy present a somewhat different conceptualisation. The word 'literacy' is quickly replaced by the word 'reading' and concerns shift to performance on national and international standardised tests indicating a rather narrow understanding of the term. 'Success' is to be measured in the following ways:

- At primary level, increasing the number of children performing at Level 3 or above (the highest levels) in the national assessments of reading and mathematics by five percentage points
- Reducing the percentage performing at or below the lowest level (Level 1) by five percentage points
- At post-primary level, increasing the number of 15-year old students performing at Level 4 or above (the highest levels) in the OECD's PISA test of literacy and mathematics by at least five percentage points

- Half the numbers performing at Level 1 (the lowest level) in PISA test of literacy and mathematics
- Improve early childhood education and public attitudes to reading and mathematics. (DES 2011b, 17–18)

We argue that these developments in Irish educational policy present a significant threat to the holistic nature of the Irish curriculum. In times of rationalisation, the Arts are particularly vulnerable and the aims of the Strategy evidence that the original threat to the Arts is still imminent albeit in a new guise. Drama was the last curricular subject introduced to primary school children (in 2007/2008), and has not yet, been the subject of research or evaluation, for example (see DES 2005a). It would seem wise that any alteration to its status or indeed time allocation be based on empirical evidence regarding its contribution to children's lives. A meta-analysis of both qualitative and quantitative international studies on the contribution of arts education to children's lives (Iwai 2003, 13) revealed that arts education enhances 'children's socioemotional, sociocultural, cognitive skill, and academic development'. The survey further found evidence that arts education helps children to cultivate positive attitudes towards themselves and others, encourages experimental learning through trial-and-error and greater success in other academic fields (Iwai 2003). Further, Drama has been recognised as an effective approach to supporting emotional expression in children, affecting their physical and mental health, reducing stress levels and improving the learning experience (Hall et al. 2005). Research has highlighted the potential of affective interaction in drama and storytelling as far back as the 1970s (e. g. Stotland et al. 1978). While the research presented here supports the case for increasing children's engagement with Drama and other arts areas, it is a functional view that does not emphasise the equal importance of artistry. If we take a broader definition of literacy, such as 'a yearning to make sense' (Greene 1995, 125), we could imagine that a literacy strategy would support rather than threaten the value of the Arts. Drama is concerned with meaning-making through artistic engagement with elements of both child's play and theatre. In Drama, children explore, construct and deconstruct stories. They are encouraged to look for multiple interpretations of verbal and non-verbal interactions, of space, and of consequence. They reflect on the significance of movements, interactions and events. They wonder in what ways and why certain moments resonate. While the suggestion that literacy and numeracy are integrated with other curricular areas may give the impression of a broad, non-utilitarian interpretation of 'literacy and numeracy', there is significant danger that perceptions of the inherent value of curricular areas beyond literacy and numeracy could be eroded, potentially to the point that they are only seen to hold importance as vehicles to develop narrowly defined conceptualisations of literacy and numeracy. This would represent an unhelpful move for Irish children since research evidence points to value of such subjects for children's holistic development.

Of course, it is not enough to argue that the current approaches to literacy and numeracy represent a narrowing of curriculum when teachers have identified curriculum overload as a significant barrier to implementing the curriculum (NCCA 2005, 2008, 2010). It is important also to explore whether such narrowing might indeed represent a negative development for the Irish educational system and Irish children. The NCCA (2010) draw on the work of the CPR (2009a) in identifying the problems faced by teachers:

The Review argued that as teachers endeavoured to attain high standards in 'the basics' there was little time for thinking, reflecting, problem-solving or exploration and the time for subjects such as Art, Music, Drama, History and Geography was often diminished. (NCCA 2010, 7)

Although a narrowing of curriculum may seem like an appropriate response to 'curriculum overload', these are very different concepts. 'Curriculum overload' is the idea that there are too many disparate subjects placing demands on both teachers' and children's time. 'Curriculum narrowing' is a different idea, which refers to the totality of experiences as inadequate for a child's holistic development. In other words, it refers more to quality, whereas 'overload' has quantitative connotations. We argue that increasing time allocated to 'the basics' and reducing even further the time allocated to 'thinking, reflecting, problem-solving or exploration' in other curricular areas is unlikely to solve these difficulties. The NCCA (2010, 14) acknowledge that 'in this context, it is interesting that the Cambridge Primary Review (2009b) has advocated teaching all subjects in equal balance in order to preserve the breadth and richness of the curriculum'.

In fact, many of the problems identified by NCCA (2010) regarding the 'overcrowded curriculum' will not be solved by reducing time allocated to 'less important' subjects. For example, the NCCA (2008) found that poor resources in some schools, like lack of space for storage of visual arts materials, fed into some teachers' perceptions of the curriculum as unmanageable. The issue of 'a significant and unnecessary amount of repetition and redundancy' (Sugrue 2004, 200) in curriculum documents is equally not addressed through this approach, nor is the dearth of support in curriculum documents for teachers for classroom planning (NCCA 2010). Other concerns in relation to literacy and numeracy identified by NCCA (2005, 2008, 2010), such as over-reliance on textbooks and workbooks, and lack of focus on critique of texts and higher-order thinking are equally not addressed by allocating more time to literacy and numeracy. Teachers could conceivably simply use the same old methods for longer periods of time each day. While acknowledging the valuable emphasis placed by the Strategy on providing support and continuous professional development for teachers, we echo the work of the NCCA in suggesting that what is required to address perceptions of 'overload' is not to skew children's learning towards a limited number of areas seen as 'core', but rather to 'creat[e] a more user-friendly, accessible curriculum for teachers' (2010, 15).

Narrowing of curriculum and psychological impacts on learning

While failing to address perceived difficulties with curriculum overload, in fact, the approaches arising out of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are likely to contribute to a whole new set of problems related to narrowing of curriculum. Some argue that if children fail to grasp basic literacy and numeracy skills, they are excluded from other forms of learning and self-esteem, as well as academic achievement may be damaged as a result (DES 2011b). This represents a simplistic analysis when one considers the wealth of evidence that sole concentration on linguistic and logical-mathematical competencies simply does not work in the context of a broader understanding of education (Gardner 1985, 1993, 1999). For example, a focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other 'intelligences' (Gardner 1985) undermines the

self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1994) of children whose talents lie elsewhere. This may lead to a motivational 'vicious circle' whereby children with lower levels of self-efficacy beliefs shy away from difficult tasks, because they dwell on their personal deficiencies, the obstacles they will encounter, and so on. By constricting activities and undermining motivation, disbelief in one's capabilities creates its own behavioural validation (Bandura 1994). To put it simply, if a child, such as a struggling reader, only ever experiences situations where they are unlikely to succeed, such as in classrooms focussed solely on literacy and numeracy, they tend to disengage from learning generally, and reduce effort accordingly (Bandura 1994). As a result, there is a well-documented two-way interaction between self-efficacy and achievement known as 'reciprocal determinism', and Williams and Williams (2010) have shown evidence of the existence of this paradigm across 33 cultures.

Thus, there is extensive evidence of the impact of psychological factors such as self-esteem (the value one places upon oneself), self-efficacy (one's belief in one's abilities) and locus of control (whether one believes internal or external factors control outcomes in one's life) on academic achievement (Bandura 1994; Humphreys 1996; Minton 2012; O'Donnell 2012; Slavin 2012), and limiting the forms of 'knowledge' viewed as 'valuable' impacts significantly on these factors in children (Olson and Bruner 1996; Gardner 1985, 1993, 1999). As Olson and Bruner (1996, 23) have pointed out, pedagogy is never 'innocent':

Each form of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of learners that may in time be adopted by them as the appropriate way of thinking about themselves, their learning indeed their ability to learn.

The value we place on particular curricular areas can communicate subtle messages to children about *their* value as learners (Toshalis 2010), which are in turn internalised, forming the basis of their academic self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1994). As Bourdieu and Thompson (1991) put it, education, instead of telling the child what he must do, tells him what he is. Subjects such as Drama offer an opportunity for children to achieve and be successful in areas beyond the verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical domains of literacy and numeracy (Gardner 1993). The experience of achievement in such domains has been shown repeatedly in the literature to impact on children's self-esteem (Reay and William 1999), self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1994) and motivation (O'Donnell 2012). When children re-engage with learning through experiences of success in such domains, it may have an impact on their effort and locus of control, and hence, on their academic achievement, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy (see Galbraith and Alexander 2005). Conversely, in classrooms where there is a strong emphasis on literacy, numeracy and in particular on testing, students begin to value themselves and construct their emerging identities in relation to narrow definitions of academic success (Reay and William 1999). Moran (2010) found that doing poorly on a high stakes test can result in the student being unable to overcome the effect of being labelled 'unsuccessful', and perhaps disengaging from learning in a process of reciprocal determinism. Thus, the narrowing of curriculum through reduction of time allocated to other curricular areas advocated by the Strategy could conceivably contribute to precisely the problems in literacy and numeracy achievement that it seeks to address.

Standardised testing and PISA

The current focus on literacy and numeracy in the light of the PISA results fails to address the fundamental question of what test scores can actually tell us about children's learning. Koretz (2008) points to the mismatch between the simple answers often demanded of society by way of easily comprehensible test scores and the complex procedure of assessment. Part of the difficulty with test scores (Koretz 2008) is that they are incomplete measures or proxies and much like political opinion polls, they include very small samples of behaviour that are used to make estimates about very large domains of skills and knowledge. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy makes repeated reference to the performance of Irish children on standardised tests, particularly PISA, as a key driver in its development, for example, noting that:

There has been a decline in the performance of post-primary students in Ireland in international literacy tests. In 2006, Irish fifteen-year-old students performed at the "above average" level in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) but in the 2009 round of the assessment, Irish students performed at the "average" level, ranking 17th out of 34 OECD countries. (DES 2011b, 13)

In examining PISA as an indicator of the success or otherwise of our educational system, it may be useful to take a broader look at the changing landscape in the Irish educational system in the period between OECD tests. Between the years 2003 and 2009, changes in Ireland included the enactment of the EPSEN Act (2004), leading to increased inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schooling. Additionally, a significant change in demographics resulted in much higher numbers of children for whom English was an additional language (Perkins et al. 2009). The PISA results have also been questioned given the disproportionate amount of students participating from 'low-scoring' schools (Perkins et al. 2009). A significant proportion of Irish pupils left questions unanswered and Perkins et al. (2009) have suggested 'test fatigue' as a possible reason for this, given that Ireland took part in three international assessments within a two-year time period and many of the students sitting for the PISA exam were preparing to take their Junior certificate, a high-stakes national exam, some three months later.

In this context, it may be useful to look at two high achievers on PISA 2009 namely Shanghai and Finland. Shanghai ranked first place overall and there was low variability in test scores between schools, indicating a very strong performance. Media reports celebrated this result, highlighting the extraordinary work ethic amongst Shanghai students and the Chinese belief in discipline and hard work. Another contributing factor reported is the relatively well-educated teaching body in Shanghai, all of whom have bachelor's degrees, most of whom have masters degrees and all of whom are obliged to take 360 hours of continuing professional development every five years (NCEE 2001, online). While these factors may explain the success in part, other factors to consider include demographics and in particular the socioeconomic backgrounds of students living in Shanghai, a business hub, as opposed to rural China, for example – the number of students from impoverished backgrounds taking part in PISA in Shanghai is limited. The OECD (2010a) reported that almost 80% of Shanghai students attend private after-school tutoring, which focuses on exam preparation. This coupled with the culture of testing children from an early age and the promotion of test success is certainly worth factoring in when considering the reliability of PISA as an indicator of quality education systems.

However, the value placed on test performance is not true of Finland, another consistently high scorer in the PISA rankings. The Finnish system is renowned for its lack of high-stakes testing, favouring teacher-designed tests instead. This is certainly relevant regarding the concept of 'test fatigue' – Finnish children are unlikely to face the 'overload' of testing experienced by Irish children (Perkins et al. 2009). The decentralised, personalised, broad curriculum in Finland may also be influential, and two areas comparable to Shanghai include highly qualified teachers and demographic factors. Certainly, the relatively homogenous, socially equitable nature of Finnish society could be hypothesised to offer an explanation for their high performance, particularly given the well-documented link between socioeconomic disadvantage and difficulties with standardised tests (MacRuaire 2009). Research shows a strong correlation between a student's family income and test scores (Koretz 2008), and Rothstein (2004) holds that a school's score is more likely to reflect its students' average family income than teaching or curriculum. Thus, as with the case of Shanghai, it may be that demographics are more influential on achievement with PISA than other putative influences. However, emulating the Finnish model of social equity would involve taking a more measured, long-term approach and considerable investment of resources. In political terms, creating a just and equitable society conducive to achievement by all children is less appetising than 'quick-fix' solutions like reducing time allocated to curricular areas beyond the 3R's.

Going round and round with the 3 R's: the case of standardised testing

To the uncritical eye, the approaches outlined in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy may appear to be new and innovative. However, Meyer et al. (1992) describe educational changes as 'world movements' whereby an idea spreads across the globe and is interpreted and implemented based on local needs. As NCCA point out:

measures of curriculum control are cyclical and highly responsive to social change, economic needs, or the prevailing political culture. It is of note, for example, that the outcomes of recent international studies in countries' performances in literacy and numeracy—especially if performances are below average—can serve as a spur to adjust control and prescription. (NCCA 2010, 31)

According to Goodson (2004), we are well served to identify where our practices fit within an international and historical perspective, because otherwise we can fall victim to the 'amnesia' that accompanies excitement about 'new' educational directions, sometimes leading to 'wilful disregard' of experiences (and pitfalls) of other nations and times. He cautions that educators should nurture their critical thinking skills to avoid being 'beguiled' by movements that are politically, rather than educationally, motivated.

The emphasis on standardised testing in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy may be a case in point. While the admirably broad interpretation of 'assessment' in the Strategy must be acknowledged, it proposes an increase of points of standardised assessment from two to three times in primary schools, in spite of evidence of potential negative outcomes of a focus on standardised testing (O'Donnell 2010; Velde Pederson 2007), including, according to MacRuaire (2009) a 'teach-to-the-test' culture in schools (Anagnostopoulos 2005; McNeil 2000), proliferation of inadequate pedagogy (McNeil 2000) and avoidance of risk-taking and innovative practice (Williams and Ryan 2000). It seems that this increased emphasis on standardised testing in Ireland echoes the warning that:

the quality of education systems and the overall nature of the educational experiences for children can be sidelined in the pursuit of policy agenda based on accountability and escalation of standardised measurement of learning outcomes. (MacRuairc 2009, 49)

In particular, MacRuairc (2009) has shown that the standardised tests used in Irish schools, show significant bias against working-class children, perhaps explainable through Bourdieu and Thompson's (1991) concept of 'linguistic habitus' whereby the language of the home and that of the middle-class school system are incompatible. MacRuairc (2009) maintains that, while a number of national reports regarding reading attainment in Ireland have shown large gaps in achievement between children in disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged communities, (Cosgrove et al. 2000; Weir and Milis 2001; Eivers, Shiel, and Shortt 2004; DES 2005b), and responses have been extensive through initiatives, such as DEIS,¹ 'problematizing the test itself in an effort to examine the potential therein for linguistic or cultural bias has never been part of the discussion' (MacRuairc 2009, 57).

When one considers the commendable emphasis placed in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy on supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, this increased focus on standardised testing seems misguided. It comes in spite of further research findings showing that 'lack of national targets and universal standardised assessment has not proved to be an obstacle to effective learning' (INCA 2003, 65, cited in NCCA 2010), as in the Finnish example. The Strategy maintains that the work of improving literacy and numeracy in schools should not be used to compile 'league tables' (DES 2011b, 79), and traditionally in Ireland, such aggregated data has been used in a positive manner to support schools that need additional resources to achieve high standards, through initiatives such as DEIS. However, in times of change, it may be useful to sound a note of caution. The policy of 'collecting the aggregated outcomes of standardised tests nationally and using this information to monitor standards' (DES 2011b, 5) could potentially, given the current climate of emphasis on 'value for money' be diverted into approaches virtually indistinguishable from the development of league tables, if those in power in political and educational circles are unaware of the inherent hazards associated with such approaches. For example, Lynch, Grummell, and Devine (2012) have noted the neo-liberal influence of Britain and America on Irish educational policy, and in this sense, it is appropriate, as indicated by Goodson (2004), to look to the recent experiences of our neighbours to the east and west regarding the potential pitfalls of reliance on standardised testing as a measure of educational success.

Britain

In Britain, the National Curriculum introduced by the Thatcher government in 1987, was trumpeted as the application of business models to education. However, education is not business, and it seems that many of the ideals of a democratic education were lost in the drive for efficiency (Kelly 2009). These approaches view schools as factories, where teachers are tasked with 'delivering a product' subject to 'quality control mechanisms' and 'economic costings' (Blenkin, Edwards, and Kelly 1992). As part of the drive towards 'accountability', schools in Britain are evaluated by 'National Standards' which are published in league tables. According to Kelly (2009), the assessment forms used in Britain are designed to provide information for these league tables rather than providing

information about the learning of individual children. NCCA (2010) make a similar point, indicating that:

evidence from the United Kingdom (U.K.) shows that an over-emphasis on standardised testing can cause teachers to focus on the basics of literacy and numeracy, thus reducing the time for other subjects/areas which become regarded as lower priority. (NCCA 2010, 17)

According to Goodson (2004), the introduction of the British National Curriculum and the emphasis on standardised testing is a good example of both the politicisation of educational reform, and the 'amnesia' that can infect governments possessed with a politically based educational idea, since these approaches had been used unsuccessfully in Britain in the past. As such, we would be wise to caution against similar approaches being applied to literacy and numeracy in Ireland, although 'it is important to remember that the stakes attached to these tests [in Britain] have been higher than in the Irish context' (NCCA 2010, 17).

While children's achievement does appear to have improved since the introduction of the National Curriculum (Earl et al. 2000), there appears to be discontentment with it in Britain, due to its 'debilitating narrowing of curriculum opportunities' (Goodson 2004). Harlen and Deakin-Crick (2003, 4) found 'high weight evidence' to suggest that following the introduction of the National Curriculum tests in England, low-achieving pupils had lower self-esteem than higher-achieving pupils. They (Harlen and Deakin-Crick 2003) further found an increase in transmission modes of teaching, which favoured those students who preferred to learn in that way thereby disadvantaging and lowering the self-esteem of those who prefer more active and creative learning experiences.

Perhaps some of this was taken into consideration when the National Primary Strategy, tellingly entitled, 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (DfES 2004) was published, offering a more flexible and creative approach to the curriculum. However, Ofsted (2009) reported that teachers continued to focus on planning for covering the objectives of the literacy and numeracy strategies instead of meeting individual pupil's needs. Wyse, Mc Creery, and Torrance (2008) suggest that this is indicative of contradictions in 'Excellence and Enjoyment' which encourages more creative and flexible practices, while at the same time maintaining and even intensifying the emphasis on the literacy and numeracy strategies, mixed messages reminiscent of those in the Irish Strategy.

The teaching of literacy in the UK has been significantly influenced by the controversial 2006 Rose Review, which recommended teaching reading through synthetic phonics. According to Wyse and Styles (2007), this recommendation runs contrary to extensive research evidence advocating the efficacy of 'judicious balance' (7) between a range of pedagogical strategies (Dombey 2006; Torgerson et al. 2006). However, as Wyse and Styles (2007, 37) point out:

One of the difficulties of forming policy recommendations for reading pedagogy is that this judicious balance can easily be disrupted by policy thrusts that lack a sufficient evidence base.

This has been borne out by the introduction in June 2011 of a national phonics test for 6-year-olds. Besides the questionable impact of introducing a culture of testing to such young children, the test has also been criticised by teachers (NUT 2011), the media (Jackson 2012), and other interested parties, such as the UK Literacy Association

(Reedy 2011) for its sole focus on phonics to the exclusion of other skills of reading in context. Particularly controversial is the use of ‘pseudo-words’ whereby children must sound out nonsense words that have no contextual meaning. A DfE-commissioned report on the pilot phase of the initiative (Coldwell et al. 2011, 9) also found that the proportion of teachers advocating suitability of the test for some populations was low as 28%,² and over half (55%) of schools surveyed felt that the Check had not helped them to identify pupils with phonic decoding issues that they were not previously aware of.

Rose’s more recent Review of the educational system (2009) was met with greater support than its 2006 counterpart (Duncan 2010). Its key recommendations were less prescription, a more flexible curriculum and greater emphasis on localised curricula and cross-curricular approaches causing many primary teachers to ‘herald a return to a curriculum which seriously and properly valued the important part which children could and should play in decisions about curriculum content and pedagogy’ (Duncan 2010, 341). Brundrett, Duncan, and Rhodes (2010) refer to the Rose Review (2009) as the first curriculum change for the last two decades which schools in Britain have actually welcomed. In fact, it legitimised what was already happening in some of Britain’s more successful schools (Ofsted 2009): the opening up of curriculum programmes to embrace a richer, more spacious curriculum which allowed greater scope for new, more flexible forms of teaching and learning (Duncan 2010). While there was major concern about the recommendations of the 2009 Review to maintain current practices of national testing, league tables and the national strategies in line with 2006 recommendations, it was hoped that the new approaches would enable particularly inclusive practices, empowering all children to learn well in British schools (Duncan 2010).

However, in May 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government shelved the Rose Report, and it has not been revisited in spite of the fact that since then, the Cambridge Primary Review (2006–2012), the most comprehensive independent review of primary education in England, has echoed, and indeed strengthened, many of its central arguments, calling for a reinstatement of ‘children’s entitlement to breadth, depth and balance, and to high standards in all the proposed domains, not just some of them’ (CPR 2010, 8). The CPR paints a pessimistic picture of the British educational system, indicating that:

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. (Cambridge Primary Review 2010, 493)

Predictably, the draft review of the National Curriculum published in February 2013 (DfE 2013) has maintained the focus on ‘core’ (English, Maths and Science) and ‘other foundation’³ subjects across four key stages. The final framework document will be published by the end of 2013.

America

Similar experiences are in evidence in America in recent years regarding standardised testing and values attached to specific subjects at the expense of others. With the publication of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB 2002), the ground shifted in

American educational practice, redefining the federal role in education (Smith 2003). NCLB requires accountability for all children including student groups based on poverty, race, ethnicity and disability (NCLB 2002). These may be constructive aims, but it seems that in the years since the passing of the Act, standardised approaches to testing and measurement have served only to stymie educational progress – similar to the British experience.

According to Hursch (2007), the evidence regarding the process and outcome of high-stakes testing raises doubts about how much test scores tell us about student learning. Hursch (2007) equally found that, because of pressure to raise test scores, teachers often neglected more complex aspects of tested subjects and some non-tested subjects were neglected altogether. This indicates that even in the case where time allocation may not be officially altered, non-tested subjects can be impacted upon negatively (see also Boyle and Bragg (2006) regarding similar outcomes in the British context). Further research examining the impact of NCLB on non-assessed subjects (Velde Pederson 2007) also confirmed the old adage that 'what is measured is treasured', finding a reduction of both resources and time for non-tested subjects and an increase in the integration of non-tested subjects into tested subjects.

In fact, according to O'Donnell (2010), standardised testing may have led to a situation where teachers in the US are, at best, teaching only what they know is likely to appear on tests, limiting the scope and objectives of a democratic education, and at worst cheating on tests, particularly in circumstances where their pay, or perhaps even their employment, is linked to results. O'Donnell (2010) also maintains that the emphasis placed by NCLB on standardised testing has led to exclusionary practices, because schools do not want to include students with disabilities who might bring down their score averages. This is precisely the opposite outcome to what the Act aimed to achieve, with its commendable emphasis on inclusion for all and a vision of an America where 'no child was left behind'.

The most recent outcome of the 'accountability movement' in the US has been the introduction in 2010 of 'Common Core Standards' for English language arts and mathematics, aiming to provide 'consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn' (Common Core State Standards Initiative Mission Statement, online), in some senses creating a de facto 'national curriculum' (Porter et al. 2011). At time of writing, 45 of the 50 states had adopted the standards, and according to Porter et al. (2011), this represents considerable change from what States currently call for in their standards and in what they assess. As such, the ramifications may be wide-ranging, impacting on textbooks and other curriculum materials, development of assessment materials and pre-service and in-service teacher education (Porter et al. 2011), and while Porter et al. (2011) offer tentative support for the potential of the standards to improve educational standards in the US, not everyone agrees. Mathis (2010) summarises concerns thus:

The level of input from school-based practitioners appears to be minimal, the standards themselves have not been field tested, and it is unclear whether the tests used to measure the academic out-comes of common standards will have sufficient validity to justify the high-stakes consequences that will likely arise around their use. Accordingly, it seems improbable that the common core standards will have the positive effects on educational quality or equality being sought by proponents, particularly in light of the lack of essential capacity at the local, state and federal levels. (Mathis 2010, 3)

Formal assessment of adherence to the standards is due to be implemented in 2014/2015. As such, the impact and possible implications of the standards for US education remains to be seen. In general, however, it is true to say that the predominant model of educational change in America is now one driven by the ‘marketisation’ of education, accountability through high-stakes testing, and the delivery of ‘educational services’, similar to the business models of education employed by the Tories in England in the 1980s (Goodson 2004; Lynch, Grumell, and Devine 2012).

Political and economic versus pedagogical rationales for action

The spectre of standardised testing looms large in Ireland at present, with the value placed on international standardised tests and the increase of points of testing in primary schools from two to three based on the recommendations of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. As Goodson (2004) points out, if we fail to learn from the experiences of our international colleagues in education, we fall victim to the ‘amnesia’ associated with politically motivated educational and curriculum reform. In this case, if we are to learn from the examples particularly of Britain and America, we can see that reliance on narrow curricula and standardised testing to address perceived deficiencies in the performance of our children may lead teachers in Ireland to ‘teach to the test’ or even ‘cheat to the test’. Such approaches can impact upon children’s perceptions of what constitutes good teaching. A longitudinal study in the Irish context (Smyth and Banks 2012) found that secondary school students’ perceptions of good teaching included a preference for active learning methods and debate, but these perceptions changed as students moved into the exam years, whereby many felt that ‘teaching to the test’ was the signal of a ‘good lesson’.

We suggest that rather than looking to empirical research about how best to improve children’s attainment, the main drivers behind the publication of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy were political, with the need of the new government to be seen to respond to the PISA results. There may also have been economic motivators, with the notion of a need to manage the perceived risk of globalisation (Wyse and Opfer 2010). These authors (Wyse and Opfer 2010) suggest that, if policymakers believe in the threat of globalisation, a logical next step is to identify new practices to meet the demands of this new competitive context. The literacy and numeracy strategy could be seen as a response to this perceived threat of globalisation whereby it intends to raise:

standards to the levels achieved in the highest performing countries in order to continue to grow our indigenous knowledge economy and continue to attract high-value jobs through inward investment. (DES 2011b, 8)

The drive to increase literacy and numeracy standards is explained in terms of affording children the opportunity to access learning in a range of other areas, to increase their life chances and as a way of ensuring a more equitable society. However, numerous references to economic growth and global competitiveness in an educational document alter the overall tone:

...indications of falling standards demanded immediate and decisive action by the Government. Representatives of business, industry and enterprise pointed to the increasing demands for high levels of literacy and numeracy in all sectors of employment. (DES 2011b, 8)

This reflects an ongoing trend in educational circles in Ireland. The narrowing of curriculum to enable us to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of ‘the children and young people in our care’ through a ‘national prioritisation on the improvement of basic skills’ (DES 2011b) is often justified in the light of a belief that, not to do so would lead to Ireland falling behind in a globalised economy. Recent decades have seen increasing links in Irish educational policy between education and the economy (Gleeson 2004). As far back as the early 1990s, commentators such as O’Sullivan (1992, 464) were noting that social and educational discourse in Ireland had become increasingly ‘coterminous with the theme of education and the economy’ with the result that ‘cultural identity, language, civic competence and moral development were excluded as themes’ (see also Lynch, Grumell, and Devine 2012). Since the 1980s, strong economic interest groups such as Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and the Confederation of Irish Industry have become more influential in curriculum development (Gleeson 2004). Such economically based focus has redefined what constitutes ‘worthwhile knowledge’ (Lynch 1989; Lynch, Grumell, and Devine 2012). According to Gleeson (2004), the education system, through curriculum, can sometimes transmit the dominant cultural emphasis of the present time as if it were unproblematic, resulting in support solely for a small number of high achievers who will create employment for themselves and others.

In the current economic climate in Ireland, calls to more closely align our educational practices to the needs of businesses and employers may on the surface appear to be justified.

For example, according to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy:

making sure that our children and young people have world-class literacy and numeracy skills will be essential for the rebuilding of our economic prosperity and ensuring the well-being of our society. (DES 2011b, 15)

The problem with such approaches is that job markets change. If, for example, the curriculum had been redeveloped in the height of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period to cater solely to the construction sector which was dominant at the time, there would now be many children in Ireland totally unprepared for either academic life or for employment.

In this context, perhaps the greatest concern about PISA ought not to be the reliability of the data as an indicator of the quality of education systems, but far more fundamental questions about the values underpinning the programme. A study examining the reporting of international educational rankings across four countries revealed much negative reporting of rankings but the study:

found relatively few articles ... expressing criticism of the PISA or PIRLS studies themselves, their methodology, their theoretical underpinning, or their ability to measure educational performance accurately in a wide variety of countries. If anything, the best performing country expressed the most criticism of the study (Finland, 20 per cent of articles). (Dixon et al. 2013, 489)

Eivers (2010) reminds us that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as its name suggests is dedicated to *economic* (not educational or developmental) growth. She (Eivers 2010) highlights how PISA measures efficiency in educational systems with emphasis on value for money and with the explicit aim of influencing educational policy in this way. The selection of ‘reading’, ‘mathematics’ and ‘science’ as the areas in which the key skills and competencies for future life can be

tested indicates a lesser value placed on skills developed through studying ‘social science’, ‘foreign languages’ and ‘the arts’ (Eivers 2010). It further indicates that there is a value on that which is ‘practical’ and ‘useful’ in the utilitarian sense. As an economic endeavour, PISA necessarily values competitiveness, and this is evidenced by the publication of test results in the form of league tables with countries being ranked from highest performing to lowest performing. Kohn (2011) highlights that ‘competitiveness’ is often confused with ‘excellence’ and media interpretations of PISA results certainly evidence this confusion. A final value underpinning PISA is standardisation – an endeavour to get all fifteen year olds irrespective of experience, background or culture to a predetermined fixed point. Those who get to this point are applauded, while those who do not are, through a functionalist lens (MacRuairc 2009), seen to have failed and as not ready ‘for full participation in society’ (OECD 2010b, online)

Conclusion

The central point of this paper is to highlight the fundamental shift in ethos from the primary school curriculum to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, which the authors feel has gone largely unchallenged. Teachers tend to be instinctively uneasy with such business and politically motivated approaches (Lynch, Grumell, and Devine 2012) and the majority have a more holistic view of their role as primary teachers (Downes 2003). The consultative nature of Irish policy-making bodies such as the NCCA means that teachers in Ireland do have the power to influence the direction of change. We contend that it is time to learn from the lessons learned internationally and recognise that the interests and working models of business and politics, and those of education are often incompatible. As such, we call for resistance to the increasing move towards such approaches in the Irish context.

While promoting literacy and numeracy is an important aim for Irish educational policy, it should not be at the expense of the very principles and ideals for which the Irish education system is admired worldwide. We call, at the very least, for a removal of the blinders of political expediency and educational amnesia, in favour of informed debate on the topic as opposed to what Kelly (2009) calls ‘unplanned curriculum drift’. Political and market-driven policies whereby parcels of knowledge are seen as fluctuating in value are incompatible with the idea of fostering the holistic development of children. We call for a more considered, research-informed education system in Ireland, which values a holistic approach to educational experience for children, and moves away from the prioritisation of certain skills as ‘core’ or ‘central’.

Notes

1. DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School – Irish initiative to combat educational disadvantage.
2. This figure refers to children with language difficulties. According to Coldwell et al. (2011), agreement with suitability of the test was highest (84%) for pupils with strong phonics skills, but less than half of respondents agreed that the Check accurately assessed the decoding ability of pupils with EAL (46%), with speech difficulties (35%), with SEN (33%) and with language difficulties (28%).
3. Art and design, citizenship, computing, design and technologies, foreign languages, geography, history, music, P.E.

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