

Submission on Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

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Curriculum and Assessment

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National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Introduction

We are the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), a registered charity with 1,700 members. We believe literacy is a human right. We are committed to making sure people with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs can fully take part in society, and have access to quality learning opportunities that meet their needs.

Some people have their **literacy needs met**; others do not.

This can be for **many reasons.**



We are pleased to contribute to the development of the Primary Curriculum Specifications, under the new Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education 2023).

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

Literacy, numeracy and digital skills enable people to reach their full potential and be active and critical participants in society. These life skills allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world.



Literacy, numeracy and digital skills:

- are not static and they evolve.
- are not something that you get once in school and you have forever – you must practise these skills or you lose them. This is called “deskilling”.
- can vary depending on the context, for example, dealing with a financial service for a loan involves financial and legal terminology.
- are different for each person – you can be good in one area, for example reading, but weak in another, for example writing.

In this submission, the word “literacy” may refer to all these skills (for ease of reading).

Literacy needs in Ireland

The most recent adult literacy survey (CSO 2013) showed that:

- About one in six (18%) adults (aged 16 to 65) struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or understanding medicine instructions.
- One in four adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, working out a bill or calculating percentages.

Another survey of adult skills (CEDEFOP 2020) showed that in Ireland:

- About 2 in 5 (38%) adults struggle with basic digital tasks. For example, looking up a website or sending an email.

The majority of people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.

There are also literacy needs among many adults where English is their Second or Other Language (ESOL).

Results of the latest PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests in 2022 show that Irish 15-year-olds are performing well in reading and maths compared with other countries. However, Government targets for reducing the share of students scoring below Level 2 – the baseline level of proficiency - have not yet been reached, and the trends are in the wrong direction (ERC 2023, p27). Since 2015, the percentage of students scoring below Level 2 in reading has actually increased slightly to 11% (p78), or around one in ten students. The percentage of students scoring below Level 2 in maths has also increased significantly to 19% (p52), around one in five students.

The 2022 PISA results also show gender and “class” differences. Almost twice as many boys (15%) as girls (8%) are below Level 2 in reading (p79). Higher-ESCS (Economic, Social and Cultural Status) groups score higher than lower-ESCS groups in maths and reading (p56 and p82).

Literacy inequalities begin in childhood - at home and in school. That is why we are making this submission on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications. We want to see fewer and fewer young people leaving school with literacy needs.

Literacy and equality

Literacy is not about individual intelligence. Unmet literacy needs arise because of educational and wider structural inequalities. As education professionals are well aware, equality is not about treating everyone in the same way - individuals' needs are sometimes best met in different ways. Having equal access to suitable learning opportunities is key.

At present, those who need to access education and training the most have the least access. This is the Matthew effect where “without intervention, those who have acquired more education get more and those that have not, get little or nothing” (Kerckhoff & Glennie 1999).

NALA believes that priority should be given to those experiencing the most educational disadvantage – the **furthest behind first** principle in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). For the furthest behind, there must be enhanced and targeted opportunities and supports.

Literacy policy in Ireland

The Government has published a **10-year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy** (Government of Ireland 2021). It aims to: “ensure that everyone has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully participate in society and realise their potential” (p4). The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy commits to a cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to support literacy needs. It means that a whole range of sectors will understand literacy barriers and work together to remove them. This can include early education providers, schools, and government agencies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Family literacy is highlighted in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy as a key adult literacy domain (p21). The strategy commits to “enhancement of family literacy and family learning approaches which have proven to help break down intergenerational disadvantage” (p61). “Enabling parents and communities to support learners’ literacy, numeracy and digital literacy” is the first of five pillars in Ireland’s new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 (Government of Ireland 2024a). These commitments recognise that educational disadvantage often passes on through generations. These commitments also recognise the important role that parents and other adults play in helping children to develop literacy skills.

The NCCA is listed as a key stakeholder for 26 actions in the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 implementation plan (Government of Ireland 2024b). This shows the importance of curriculum and assessment in supporting literacy development.

Comments on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

We would like to make the following comments on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications as a whole:

- It is essential that literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are integrated throughout the whole primary curriculum, in accordance with the Government's literacy strategy. This should be emphasised in the guidance that is provided to teachers and school leaders about the new primary curriculum specifications.
- Teachers and school leaders will need clarity on what literacy, numeracy and digital literacy mean. The definitions in Section 4 of the new literacy strategy should be used for the sake of consistency across the Irish education system. The connection between these definitions and the related competencies in the Primary Curriculum Framework (being a digital learner; being mathematical; being a communicator and using language) should be explained.
- The NCCA is no doubt aware that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is currently developing Broad Award Standards at NFQ Levels 1-4 (QQI 2023). We recommend that the NCCA and QQI work together to ensure that the Primary Curriculum and the Broad Award Standards for Levels 1-4 are aligned.
- Ireland should also adopt international frameworks in its primary curriculum, such as the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (European Commission 2022) and the Common European Numeracy Framework (Hoogland, Díez-Palomar, O'Meara 2020). These frameworks are based on best available evidence and using them would provide opportunities for international benchmarking.
- The draft specifications contain many references to experiential, creative and project-based learning. We are in favour of these kinds of approaches, which can support diverse learning styles.

We would like to make the following comments on the draft specification for Language, including Modern Foreign Languages:

- Through our own work as an educational provider and through feedback from our members, we are aware of the increasing numbers of adults in Ireland who are learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Many of these adults also have literacy needs in their first language. They may struggle to support their children's education in Ireland. Bringing students' home languages into the classroom could help to bridge the divide between home and school, which would benefit students and their parents.
- The draft specification also promotes general awareness of language and communication. This is a clear opportunity to integrate and reinforce literacy learning.
- Any system for exemptions from learning Modern Foreign Languages (like exemptions from learning Irish) should be carefully considered. Some students will benefit from an exemption, allowing them to focus on developing literacy in their first language. However, all students should have the opportunity to learn a modern foreign language and be supported in doing so.

Conclusion

The primary curriculum will have a huge influence on how the next generation develops their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills. The NCCA has a crucial role in turning the government's literacy policies into action in our schools.

We support the integration of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across all specifications through the Key Competencies of the Primary Curriculum Framework – these core literacy skills should be explained in guidance for educators, and their importance should be highlighted.

We also support the inclusion of a wide range of teaching and learning approaches in the draft specifications, and the introduction of Modern Foreign Languages with an emphasis on languages that are spoken in the local community.

The new curriculum will be most effective if it is aligned with national literacy policies, the Broad Award Standards for Levels 1-4 being developed by QQI, and international competency frameworks. A collaborative, joined-up approach is needed to ensure that all young people finish their compulsory education with at least functional literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Contact

We are happy to discuss our comments and recommendations with you further.

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About NALA

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

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