

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals responding to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*

This template is intended to support you (and your colleagues/organisation) in developing a written submission in response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Please e-mail your completed submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	
Position	
Organisation	INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group
Date	14 th November 2020
E-mail	

The NCCA will publish written submissions received during the consultation. The submissions will include the author's/contributor's name/organisation. Do you consent to this submission being posted online?

Yes X

No

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).

The INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group is a voluntary subgroup of the wider INTO union. The group is made up of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary primary school teachers and it works towards making the Irish primary school system a more LGBT+ inclusive place for all those connected with it.

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Section 2 is structured to align with the six key messages related to the framework. Each message is summarised as a support for you in working on the submission.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Section 1

Please outline your overall response to the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

*While, as practising teachers, we have opinions on many aspects of the new curriculum draft framework, for the purposes of this submission, we are focusing on how the document relates to LGBT+ inclusion in our primary schools.

On the whole, we welcome the principles behind the draft curriculum framework. It is very positive and timely that the document recognises the rich diversity of modern Irish society and consequently the necessity that this diversity be respected and valued in our classrooms. While it is not explicitly stated, we would very much hope that the references to varying family structures, sexual and gender identities are ones that are meant in the broadest way and therefore include same-sex headed families, families with transgender and non-binary members, non-heterosexual sexual identities and the spectrum of gender identities including transgender and non-binary gender identities.

Going forward however, we think that it would be necessary to be more explicit about these (especially when it comes to writing learning outcomes/objectives for the different curricular areas) as to leave them vague might mean that teachers with limited experience of inclusive practice might interpret them in narrow ways, contrary to the spirit of the learning outcome/objective e.g. if the learning outcome was ‘to identify a variety of family structures’, an inexperienced teacher might simply look at single parent families, blended families and mother/father families but forget to include same-sex headed families, adoptive families, grandparent led families etc. Explicitly mentioning a non-exhaustive list of family structures (as is done in the current curriculum through the italicised text) would ensure that teachers are encouraged to adopt the broadest interpretations of the words being used.

Similarly, within the principle of ‘Inclusive Education’ it will be necessary to be more explicit so that teachers again interpret this in broad terms. Within the educational sphere, teachers can often interpret inclusive education as solely related to children with Special Educational Needs and there may need to be clearer prompts to ensure that this principle is clearly seen to also incorporate gender non-conforming children, children from LGBT+ headed families etc and in the later years of primary children who themselves identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Within the Key Competences section, we would have three suggestions.

1. Within the attributes of ‘Being an active citizen’, include ‘Learn about, respect and celebrate the diversity of our society’ as a precursor to recognising injustice and inequality. It is important that the first exposure that children have to diverse identities be one that is focused on the positive so that the ‘different group’ don’t automatically become just victims of discrimination in the minds of the children and so create a negative connotation. For example, if the first time children hear about LGBT+ people in society is in the context of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, this means that their first experience of learning about LGBT+ people in school is one where they are positioned as victims of discrimination rather than learning about them firstly as full and equal citizens. It is of course vital that pupils learn about the various inequalities and injustices that exist in our society but it is far better if this comes after they have learned about the identities

in question in positive terms first e.g. by having seen families with same sex headed parents in their stories and displays and having learned about famous LGBT+ people in history, science, art etc so that they have prior knowledge about LGBT+ people before they encounter them as victims of discrimination. This same principle would apply to Travellers/ethnic minorities/refugees and asylum seekers etc.

2. Under 'Fostering wellbeing', it would be important to have something that explicitly mentions self-acceptance rather than just self-aware. Being able to accept yourself (including whatever ways in which you are different from others) is a key skill to positive mental health. This is relevant to LGBT+ children and young people but also across a range of 'differences'.
3. Under 'Learning to be a learner', it might be more appropriate to position 'Learning about others' prior to 'Caring for and showing empathy towards others' as how can one be really empathetic to a person without really knowing them? Additionally, it would be good to have some explicit mentioning of 'difference' as part of these e.g. 'Learning about others, including those who have different experiences, identities and belief systems to themselves' and something similar for the 'Caring for and showing empathy towards others'. It's easy to 'care for' people who are like us but requires more scaffolding and development to show the same levels of empathy to people who have very different experiences to ours which may, in some instances, be contrary to our own family values etc.

Within the various subject areas, it is welcome to see 'Wellbeing' encompassing 'acquiring an understanding of human sexuality'. It is vital that this understanding extends beyond heterosexual sexuality and also includes reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual/pansexual and asexual sexual orientations. While the words that people use to describe their sexual orientation are extensive and perhaps would be unwieldy to include all, it is easy to include the basic premise that some people may feel an attraction to members of the opposite sex, some people may feel an attraction to members of the same sex, some people may feel an attraction to any person regardless of sex or gender and some may not feel strong attraction to anyone at all and that all of these ways of being are 'normal'.

One caveat on this however would be that it would be a gross oversight to only have any reference to LGBT+ identities within the framework of Wellbeing, or even worse, only within RSE (or the new iteration thereof). LGBT+ people are part of all elements of our society and are not simply categorised by their relationships and/or sexuality. LGBT+ identities must also be present in other curriculum areas to reflect this within our school system. Just like every other person, the sexual orientation or gender identity of an LGBT+ person is only a small part of their identity and to reduce their representation to only this would be inaccurate and unethical.

Finally, one area which will need to be considered very carefully is the idea that 'The specifications will describe children's learning through broad learning outcomes which teachers can interpret locally and allow for variations in children's learning needs' (page 21). For teachers who are inexperienced in inclusive education, they could easily misjudge what is 'age-appropriate' for the children to learn about regarding LGBT+ inclusion. This is particularly true in the current context where anti-LGBT+ campaigns are targeting parents (and teachers) with misinformation. There is a tendency in some quarters for LGBT+ identities to be conflated with LGBT+ sexual practices and so design the whole area as 'inappropriate' for children to learn about. There will need to be clear

guidance from the NCCA via the curriculum objectives signalling that learning that families with two mothers exist is indeed appropriate for infant level etc and is expected to be taught. Otherwise, teachers may feel that they are 'putting their heads above the parapet' and leaving themselves exposed to complaints from disgruntled parent(s)/guardian(s). A truly inclusive education system shouldn't require people to be brave in order to fulfil its objectives.

Similarly, under 'Aspects of pedagogy' it states that pedagogical strategy should 'reflect the culture(s) of the school and community'. This would require significant deep reflection and self-knowledge on behalf of the teacher to ensure that the cultures of the children and families in the community inform this as opposed to the culture of just the teacher themselves. This is particularly true if the teacher's own experience is that of being white, middle-class, settled, heterosexual, cisgender and Catholic.

Section 2

Agency and flexibility in schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be for every child.
- Recognise teachers' and principals' agency and professionalism to enact the curriculum in their individual school context.
- Give more flexibility to schools in terms of planning and timetabling to identify and respond to priorities and opportunities.
- Connect with different school contexts in the education system.
- Give greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to agency and flexibility in schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

As stated above the idea that the curriculum be for every child is very welcome. This means that it should be inclusive of children in same-sex headed families, those with LGBT+ family members and those who identify as LGBT+ themselves. In practice, this should mean that all of these children see themselves and their families' experiences reflected in their learning at school just as much as those who belong to more 'traditional' family structures or those who are heterosexual and cisgender. This would really be welcome and necessary for the positive mental health of these children.

However, the issue around flexibility for schools to make decisions with regard to their 'school context' is one that will need to be considered carefully to ensure that this doesn't result in certain teachers/schools deciding that the curriculum is 'for all children except LGBT+ children/families'. As proactive LGBT+ inclusion may be a new area for some schools and educators, it could be appear daunting and so more likely to be erased or deemed 'not relevant to our context'.

Curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Provide a clear vision for children’s learning across the eight years of primary school.
- Link with learning experiences provided through the themes of the *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and connect with the subjects, key skills and statements of learning in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.
- Support educational transitions by connecting with what and how children learn at home, in preschool and post-primary school.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

It seems logical and in keeping with the spiral approach to learning that consideration is given to education transitions between preschool, primary and post-primary school. In the context of this submission, this will mean the LGBT+ inclusive education will not just be a ‘once-off’ but something that is returned to and explored in greater depth as the child/young person develops and matures.

Emerging priorities for children’s learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Embed seven key competencies across children’s learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class.
- Focus on developing children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes. The Learning Outcomes and the Key Competencies are broad in nature to describe this wider understanding of learning.
- Have increased emphasis on some existing areas such as PE and SPHE (Wellbeing) and digital learning, and have new aspects such as Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and a broader Arts Education.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to emerging priorities for children’s learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Please see the initial section of this submission for specific feedback on the principles and competences outlined in the draft framework.



Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Be broad and balanced in purpose and content.
- Be structured in five broad curriculum areas;
 - Language
 - Mathematics, Science and Technology Education
 - Wellbeing
 - Social and Environmental Education
 - Arts Education.

(In addition to the five areas above, the Patron's Programme is developed by a school's patron with the aim of contributing to the child's holistic development particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective and in the process, underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school. These areas connect to the themes of *Aistear* and to the subject-based work in Junior Cycle.)

- Provide for an integrated learning experience, with curriculum areas in Stages 1 and 2 (junior Infants – second Class) and more subject-based learning in Stages 3 and 4 (third class – sixth class).
- Use broad learning outcomes to describe the expected learning and development for children.
- Incorporate the new *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*.

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The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to changing how the curriculum is structured and presented. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Our key feedback in this area regarding LGBT+ inclusion would be that it is vital that LGBT+ identities are visible across all areas of the curriculum, not solely under Wellbeing. For example, the inclusion of examples from picture books featuring LGBT+ families as part of the exemplars for Language; encouraging teachers to include specific reference to the LGBT+ aspects of the identity of famous artists, scientists, authors, historical figures etc; and ensuring the history of the struggle for LGBT+ rights becomes a more explicit part of history curriculum. At the moment, it fits into the 'Changes in Ireland since 1960s' element of the 5th/6th class history curriculum but as it is not explicitly mentioned as an example, few teachers would consider it as a means to fulfil these objectives despite the fact that it is a rich historical experience for the children.

Supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Promote high quality teaching, learning and assessment.
- Conceptualise assessment as an essential and critical part of teaching and learning.
- Highlight the importance of teachers' professional judgement in supporting progression in children's learning.
- Encourage teachers to make meaningful connections with children's interests and experiences.
- Recognise the significance of quality relationships and their impact on children's learning.
- Recognise the role and influence of parents and families in children's education.

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The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies with assessment central to teaching and learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

With regard to LGBT+ inclusion, teachers will need clear supports in recognising the role and influence of parent(s)/guardian(s) and families in children's education. While it is no doubt preferable to have strong parental buy in and support for their child's education, teachers will need specific guidance on how to manage conflicting viewpoints from parent(s)/guardian(s) in their class e.g. some parents may argue for increased LGBT+ inclusive work ahead of what is stated at that curriculum level while others may not be happy that their children learn about the existence of LGBT+ people at all. The NCCA must acknowledge issues like this ahead of time and ensure teachers are supported in dealing with parental disagreements over curriculum content in a way which allows the parents in question to voice their objections but does not result in the entire class/school being prevented from learning about LGBT+ identities and people because of the complaints of a small number of parents.

In short, how to recognise the importance of parental views while continuing to deliver an inclusive education under the principle of 'a curriculum for all pupils'.

Building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to the challenges and changing needs and priorities.

The 1999 curriculum contributed to many successes including:

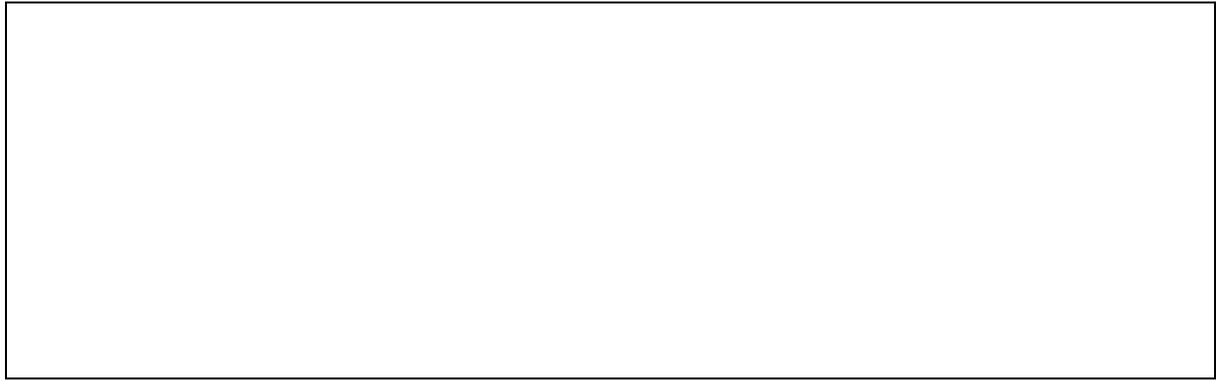
- Enhanced enjoyment of learning for children.
- Increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning.
- Improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments.

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- Address curriculum overload at primary level.
- Take stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes and clarify priorities for children’s learning.
- Link with *Aistear* and *the Framework for Junior Cycle*.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum while recognising and responding to challenges and changing needs and priorities. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

While recognising that curriculum overload is a serious issue impacting upon schools and teachers, it is vital that LGBT+ inclusion is not an ‘optional’ area of the new curriculum. The very negative statistics for mental health outcomes for LGBTI+ youth from the LGBTIreland study in 2016 shows that our current system is not serving the needs of LGBT+ children and young people. This means that we must ensure that whatever format the new curriculum comes in, that LGBT+ inclusion and positive representation be at the heart of it so that all of the pupils attending our primary schools see themselves reflected in their learning and can see themselves and their families as valued and cherished members of our school communities and society.



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Thank you for your submission.

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