

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

| | |
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Organisation submission details

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

Burrenbeo Trust is an independent not for profit membership organisation dedicated to connecting all of us to our places and our role in caring for them. Coordinating and delivering a range of programmes related to education, active conservation, information provision, research and advocacy, Burrenbeo Trust's vision is sustainable heritage cared for by thriving and informed communities.

Since 2008, the organisation has worked with over 26,000 people including over 3,000 students in the primary school setting, facilitating engagement with local places, culture, heritage, environment, community and active citizenship. Place-based learning is the guiding principle for the work of Burrenbeo Trust.

Place-based learning is learning about place, through place, for place.

Within formal education settings, this approach uses the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in geography, history, science, language, maths and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasising hands-on, real-world learning experiences; place-based learning improves community vitality and environmental health. The active engagement of local citizens, community organisations, and environmental resources in the life of the school is fundamental to the model. Based on the theories of active, enquiry led learning that underly the Primary School Curriculum (1999), students increase their sense of place and knowledge about their local landscape, biodiversity, built heritage, stories, cultures and land use practises. This approach develops not only a strong sense of place in the student but also contributes to a child becoming an *active agent in his or her own learning*.

A fundamental aspect of a place- based learning approach is the fostering of active citizenship behaviours. A 2007 report completed by the Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative involving over 100 schools and 2,750 surveys of teachers and students, found that place-based education fosters students' connection to place, creates vibrant partnerships between schools and communities, boosts student achievement, and improves environmental, social, and economic vitality. It epitomises local to global context, is learner centred, encourages student agency, is inquiry-based, follows design thinking principles, views the school as part of the community and requires an interdisciplinary approach.

As place-based learning is a pedagogy rather than content-specific – the approaches applied can be integrated across students learning and skills developed can be transferred by pupils and teachers irrespective of their location. It is also worth mentioning that there are various other approaches to learning around place with many similarities such as environmental education, outdoor education, community based learning and education for sustainable development. However, the strength of place-based learning is that it incorporates all these disparate approaches, effectively if all of these approaches are considered as 'eggs in a basket', place-based learning is the basket.

In addition to our offering of place-based education programmes at primary and secondary level, the Burrenbeo Trust also delivers a Department of Education approved Summer Course every year based on our place-based approach. The course aims to provide primary school teachers and other educators with the resources and strategies needed to integrate local learning resources into their classroom. This work is further complemented by a suite of lifelong learning

programmes which are available to both educators and the wider community including the annual Learning Landscape Symposium, heritage walks and talks, community festivals and family events.

More information on the place-based learning programmes delivered by the Burrenbeo Trust can be found on our website www.burrenbeo.com. Research around place-based learning, including a study referenced in this document conducted with Irish primary school teachers, can be viewed at www.burrenbeo.com/our-work/research/place-based-learning/

Concise Bibliography

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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.

Section 1

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

Burrenbeo Trust welcomes the review of the primary curriculum. The review offers an opportunity for us all to generate a shared vision for primary education and to shape a curriculum and educational experience that meets the needs of all learners for years to come. Over 10 years' experience as education practitioners in a variety of settings informs this response, complemented by ongoing academic research on related fields. The outlined response is focused primarily on the potential for a more explicitly place-based learning approach in the Irish primary setting as this is where the organisation's expertise and interests lie.

The role of schools and education is a broad and varying one. This sentiment is reflected in one of the opening questions of this draft framework; namely: *what is the purpose of a primary education for tomorrow's children?* While specific content learning is a key and necessary component of any education, schools also have the opportunity to develop values, skills and attitudes in the future custodians of our world. In the current era of climate catastrophe, biodiversity and environmental crises and community degradation our future depends on engaged, informed and active citizens. It is promising to see that this Draft Primary Curriculum Framework seems to emphasize both types of learning. There are also many elements of a place-based learning approach evidenced throughout the framework. This is particularly evident on page 22, where the elements necessary for a pedagogical approach/strategy are considered; these are essentially spelling out a place-based pedagogy.

The vision for the curriculum indicates that children should be viewed as members of communities and that learning should build on their previous experiences. These are core elements of place-based learning. One approach to achieving this vision would be to engage more with the concept of place-based learning and include a direct reference in the curriculum. Our experience both as practitioners and through research projects indicates that unless there is explicit reference and mandating for a place-based approach it will not happen. Without explicit inclusion of place-based learning, teachers will view this approach as additional rather than as a method of fulfilling the curriculum requirements.

The existing curriculum has significant scope for place-based pedagogy, particularly in terms of Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE). SESE strands promote humanistic approaches to the environment and allow for and make specific reference to local learning inside and outside the classroom. The Science SESE Teacher Guidelines provide instructions for teachers to utilise their local environment to begin children's engagement with their natural environment. Similarly, the History and Geography SESE curriculum have many references to local studies. Over 400 activities included across all areas of the existing curriculum have potential from a place-based perspective. This accounts for approximately 20% of the overall curriculum activities. The SESE History (61 out of 197 strands) and SESE Geography (73 out of 282 strands) curriculum are particularly connected to local place. Science, PE and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) also have strong potential for local connections. While this is all very positive, the reality in relation to the application of place-based approaches on the ground is unknown and anecdotal evidence would suggest that overreliance on textbooks means that children are not engaging in learning at local levels. In the

average classroom, do children know their local built heritage, plants, animals, landscape features, stories, songs, music?

In light of this the following comments and recommendations arise;

- While researching teachers' engagement with place-based learning at NUI Galway, the teachers reported the potential for a place-based learning approach to mitigate some of the curriculum overloading so often reported. The cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach allows for addressing a more extensive breadth. This should be further researched before drafting of the new curriculum.
- Consideration should be given to a reframing of 'Social and Environmental education' for stages 1 and 2 and 'History and Geography' for stages 3 and 4 to 'Place-based Learning'. This explicitly mandates for the local flexibility which is mentioned throughout the framework, before progressing to more global contexts and is more interdisciplinary and integrated in approach.
- If the 'History & Geography' strands are to remain as indicated for stages 3 & 4, the question of where investigation of nature and the environment fit is extremely pressing?
- Should the suggestions and approach outlined be adopted, Burrenbeo Trust would be willing to offer expertise in assisting the development of the toolkit for each curriculum specification.

Now, more than ever, there is a need for a new approach. Place-based learning has the potential to impact positively on our children, communities and wider world. In the words of Jane Goodall, *'Only if we understand, can we care. Only if we care, we will help. Only if we help, we shall be saved.'* As we look to the uncertainty in relation to our climate and biodiversity we owe it to our children to give them the opportunity to learn about and positively impact their places for their future.

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.

Agency, flexibility and recognition of individual schools contexts are principle tenets of a place-based approach. From experience of 10 years working in primary schools of various sizes and settings, lack of flexibility has impacted on the opportunities available to students and teachers. Unfortunately, time pressures often result in an over-reliance on textbooks and generic learning materials which are not specific to schools and their settings. For example, why do children in Munster learn about Newgrange as a Neolithic monument when there are examples of monuments in their own area? Why can a young person in Galway more readily identify the carnivorous plant the venus fly trap than the native Irish carnivore plant the butterwort? Following a place-based approach, students learn about locally relevant, relatable topics. Teachers are empowered to follow and share their interests and passions once more – whether that be nature, history, art, music, sport or something else.

The above statement, '*Be for every child*' is interesting in relation to the growing diversity seen in primary school classes. We have found that place-based learning provides a platform for newcomer students, and their families, to engage with their local area, while also considering the places they have come from through a similar lens. Equally, research indicates that active learning methodologies, as utilised in a place-based approach, can be more successful in meeting the needs of all the children in a class.

A place-based approach also allows for differing interests among children. For some, it is the biodiversity element that appeals, for others it is the consideration of local built heritage. Engaging with these concepts on a structured basis, however, allows each child to see the interconnectedness. And, crucially, their role in caring for their places into the future. It is very positive to see '*Being an Active Citizen*' is one of the competencies included in this framework. Adopting a place-based approach to the curriculum would address this in a truly meaningful way. Our primary school programmes have resulted in some fantastic active citizenship projects

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including development of local heritage trails, 'adoption' of areas, creation of information guides and more. Children have the opportunity to identify and address local issues through meaningful and democratic processes.

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.

Initially, it would appear to be very positive that the eight principles outlined in the draft framework build on those in *Aistear* and connect with the eight principles of the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. However, having experience in both primary and secondary settings, it is essential to point out that the degree of cross-curricular work which is carried out at primary school is a real strength. To date, this has not been possible to any great extent in the secondary school setting, although it is hoped that the new junior certificate framework will allow for this. The cross-curricular approach allows for a more real-world approach – considering how topics and concepts are interrelated and impact on each other. Again, addressing topics such as history and geography from a place-based approach allows for consideration of 'real world' contexts providing more profound and more meaningful engagement. Key to a place-based approach is each child's own lived experience. They learn about the place around them at a level that is appropriate to their stage.

We note that the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) introduced last year, pays increasing attention to the notions of *Critical Literacy*, as well as *Interdisciplinary Literacy*, and in couching those approaches to literacy across the curriculum. Place-based education has a basis in both these genres of language: students consider scientific language when discussing their local biodiversity, landscape, archaeology while critical literacy is developed through activities designed to encourage children to consider all viewpoints when considering a problem, supported through various activities such as *Moving Debates* and *Landopoly*. Developing these skills, particularly in the 3rd and 4th stages of the curriculum, will ensure more significant continuity between primary and secondary cycles.

Separately, Burrenbeo Trust are engaged in developing a short course for the post-primary junior cycle.

Emerging priorities for children's learning

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

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- 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.

The introduction to this framework outlines an intention ‘*to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences*’. Our experience working with schools on place-based learning programmes is that they provide exactly this. Equally, as outlined above adopting a place-based approach allows development of children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes.

In relation to the key competencies, the framework states:

‘Children also need to be able to interact and engage with the natural world around them and come to an appreciation of its value and their responsibilities as custodians of it’.

This could not be more explicit in terms of requiring a local place-based approach. An additional finding from the research conducted at NUI Galway indicated that teachers were keen to engage with place-based learning activities but often lacked the confidence or knowledge to do so. If this objective is to be met, a place-based approach must be mandated for, and appropriate supports provided for teachers. If this is not the case, the situation will remain as it is today – where teachers acknowledge that this type of education is beneficial but do not carry it out.

Considering the ‘*Learning to be a learner*’ competency; there is also a role for a place-based approach. Ideally, place-based programmes allow students to follow their own area of interest, research and assess local knowledge, engage in peer learning, individual and group work and produce creative outputs. The higher-order and critical thinking skills required by future generations must be fostered during their education. Addressing local issues, sourcing and evaluating local knowledge, understanding the interconnectedness of our built, natural and cultural heritage are just some of the ways that a place-based approach could enhance this.

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.

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- 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*.

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.

There are several observations relating to this topic.

As before, there is a clear role for a specified place-based approach. Under the principles, the *‘Transitions & Continuity’* section refers to prior learning and identity. The prior learning element as already discussed, is addressed by following a local learning model where children learn their history, geography, science and other subjects based on local examples. The question of identity is critical when considered in terms of children’s sense of place. This was another finding from the NUI Galway research project, where teachers reported that engaging in place-based activities developed the student’s sense of place and community. Interestingly, the teachers also saw this as part of their role. It is positive to see this included in what schools can play a role in.

When discussing competencies the framework states, *‘the emphasis is on locating, critiquing and using knowledge as well as appreciating knowledge for its own sake. In this way, the competencies enable and foster deep learning while also contributing to the holistic development of the child’*. Locating, critiquing and using knowledge in and about locally familiar concepts is at the core of the place-based approach. In terms of the child’s holistic development – as previously outlined,

development of sense of place and identity is just one of the benefits of engaging with place-based learning.

Under the pedagogy section – obviously, we would advocate for more specific mention of the potential for schools to adopt a place-based pedagogy. In practice, this would mean that each class group would be engaged in local place-based learning and active citizenship projects. There is also potential for whole school approaches and projects.

The idea of partnerships, where the local community is viewed as a resource and the school as part of the wider community is another reference to a place-based approach. For example, local farmers, food producers, scientists, musicians, storytellers *etc.* (perhaps through the Heritage in School scheme), are asked to share their knowledge with the school. Community knowledge is valued and acknowledgement is made of the different types of knowledge i.e. not all knowledge coming from formal education. This also allows for intergenerational work which is known to have benefits for all involved.

One area where there has been considerable research conducted is about the power of learning outdoors. This is briefly, but probably not adequately, addressed in the discussions of learning environments. While not without obstacles, the benefits of outdoor learning for students (and teachers one could argue) is undeniable. Unless there is definite inclusion of the need for outdoor and experiential learning opportunities, they are unlikely to be made available. Feedback from over 10 years of working in schools, indicates that the outdoor elements are invariably the students favourite and most memorable. Very often this is merely going outside into the playground – it doesn't have to involve bus journeys *etc.* However, ideally with a place-based learning approach, learning about a local habitat or monument in class would then be complemented by a visit to the site.

The flexible time element proposed in the framework has significant potential for further development of local action projects. Again, dependent on the teachers or schools interests and knowledge this could be something worked on with the school staff or could draw on the resources of the wider community and organisations such as Burrenbeo Trust.

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.

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- 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.

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.

From our experience, in most incidences, teachers are already employing the tactics outlined above, and it would be positive that these were enhanced and acknowledged.

It is apparent from the considerations for pedagogical choice, included on page 22 of this document that place-based learning should be proposed as an approach which schools and teachers can adopt. To clarify, each of the considerations in terms of pedagogical approach or strategy quoted from the framework below are met by a place-based approach. In fact, it is striking how aligned to a place-based approach these considerations are. By being more explicit and including a direct reference to place-based pedagogy, teachers would have a greater understanding of the concept more broadly and access to the myriad resources available on this approach.

- *Emphasises environmental sustainability in the classroom and school context and supports children’s responsibility for each other’s wellbeing when learning together.*
- *Provides for a balance between meaningful exploration, critical thinking and problem-solving in open-ended learning experiences and direct instruction by the teacher where appropriate.*
- *Promotes positive learning dispositions, such as curiosity, imagination, creativity and innovation.*
- *Includes opportunities for feeding back and supporting the children to reflect on what and how they learn.*
- *Balances collaborative and individual learning opportunities for children.*
- *Promotes wellbeing through engagement, motivation, choice and agency in the learning experience.*
- *Offers integrated learning opportunities across the curriculum, including opportunities that address literacy and numeracy competencies.*
- *Reflects the culture(s) of the school and community.*
- *Allows for integration – real world application*

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:

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- 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.

As mentioned in the introduction, ‘*As well as the need to respond to curriculum challenges and to take account of new and emerging research findings, there have also been calls for the primary curriculum to do more! Schools and the curriculum, together, are often viewed as a critical site for responding to national priorities or needs and addressing societal problems*’. One of the key strengths of a place-based approach is that it provides a pedagogical option for curriculum delivery rather than adding another element to the curriculum. When asked about the potential for this approach as part of the NUIG research project, teachers reported that this might reduce the degree of overloading as they were addressing a variety of areas with the same activities. So, while the possibility of a reduced curriculum is welcomed, place-based pedagogy might be a way of ensuring that the breadth of knowledge is not reduced.

For us, priority should be placed on providing children with the opportunity to learn about and engage with their local built, natural and cultural heritage. The skills acquired in this pursuit – team work, creative learning, problem solving, awareness of place etc - can be transferred to any future setting, will encourage active citizenship behaviours throughout their lives and ultimately will benefit their communities, environment and heritage.

A recent past participant on *Áitbheo*, our primary school place-based learning programme, put it very clearly when they describe their feelings about their local place;

Before the Áitbheo programme at my school I thought my place was pretty boring, I didn't know a lot about nature but now I think differently. I think my place is amazing and I'm lucky to live here. I wonder if people in my place know enough about it and how to protect it. The Áitbheo programme has changed my view of our place dramatically. I wonder if other people in other places of the world care about their place.

Data Protection

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Thank you for your submission.

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