

# 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](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### *Individual submission details*

|               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| <b>Name</b>   | Dr. Paddy Madden |
| <b>Date</b>   | 27/03/2020       |
| <b>E-mail</b> |                  |

### *Organisation submission details*

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| <b>Name</b>         | Dr. Paddy Madden |
| <b>Position</b>     | Director         |
| <b>Organisation</b> | Dúlra Éireann    |
| <b>Date</b>         | 27/03/2020       |
| <b>E-mail</b>       |                  |

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  Yes      No

Please email your submission to [PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

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

Dúlra Éireann which incorporates the website, [www.engagewithnature.ie](http://www.engagewithnature.ie) was founded by Dr. Des Murtagh and Dr. Paddy Madden in 2019 to promote nature awareness, appreciation and education mainly among the primary school community but also to a broader community in Ireland. After Dr. Paddy Madden completed a doctoral thesis in 2019 entitled, *“Exploring the state and status of nature awareness, appreciation and education in the Irish primary system”* he decided that the provision of an online resource was urgently required to provide educators and the general public easy access to a free storehouse of documents, videos and images on the Irish natural environment. He envisaged that these resources would be linked to each month of the year to make them more relevant.

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.

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# Section 1

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

**Positives:**

1. Integrated curriculum for the early years of primary and subject orientated for later years of primary.
2. Educational transitions supported from preschool to post-primary.
3. Detailed examination of time allocations for implementation of curriculum and flexibility given to schools in allocating time schedules.
4. Curriculum overload addressed through elimination of repetitive practices and meaningful integration.
5. Assessment, relationships with parents, children's agency addressed.
6. Supports for curriculum change such as ITE, CPD addressed.

**Negatives:**

1. Limited and in some instances outdated storehouse of research reports on website and all are sponsored by NCCA. For example, the reports on science in the primary school were conducted in 2008. Should also be a list of recent theses and reports which critique the primary school curriculum and are relevant to it. My own thesis, which researches the state and status of nature awareness, appreciation and education in the Irish primary system is available on [www.rian.ie](http://www.rian.ie)
2. Limited or no references made to outdoor education, engagement with the natural environment and school gardening.
3. No input on the redeveloped new curriculum from "elders" in the primary sector community i.e. retired teachers.



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## 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.**

**The messages conveyed in the Draft Framework are admirable and I agree totally with them.**

## **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.**

**The messages conveyed in the Draft Framework are admirable and I agree totally with them.**

## 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. A few questions, however, regarding this section:**

- 1. Generally well-thought out. Should developing children’s life-skills such as cooking and gardening be a key competency or will these skills be embedded in the key competency, Fostering Wellbeing?**
- 2. Will the competency, Being an Active Citizen, involve children in developing a sense of place through engaging with the local natural, physical and historical environment?**
- 3. There is a huge corpus of research that demonstrates that connection to and engagement with the natural environment develops children’s mental and physical health, their caring capacity, their social skills (e.g. Gardening), their linguistic skills, their aesthetic and spiritual awareness and their cognitive abilities. In an age threatened with environmental degradation it is vitally important that children be immersed in learning about the natural environment such as plants and animals so that they will (a) develop a love of it and (b)**

strive to protect it. It is my opinion that Natural Environment should stand with History and Geography in the Curriculum area, Social and Environmental Education. If this very important subject continues to be a bit-player in the Science Curriculum Area children will continue to be disconnected and disengaged from their natural environment. I fear, however, that my pleading for granting it centrality within the overall curriculum will remain unheeded and it will continue to play a subservient role in science education. Textbooks in science will continue to treat nature education as an add-on instead of providing deep, immersive seasonal material that thoroughly explores all aspects of the natural environment.

### **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

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- 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.**

**I agree with all of the above except the fact that it is not envisaged that Natural History or the Natural Environment be included in the curriculum area, Social and Environmental Education. In my opinion, this is a grave omission. In the revised curriculum learning about the natural world was incorporated in the science curriculum and it was emphatically stated that a “scientific approach” should be adopted in teaching this area of learning. Some aspects of the natural world have to be studied utilising a scientific approach. Aspects such as pollination, the function of roots, stems, leaves and flowers of a plant, adaptation, food chains etc. In sum, how life works. (‘Biology studies how life works; natural history is that life’. Mary Colwell, *BBC Wildlife*, March 2019, p.31). Science doesn’t embrace the ‘moreness’ of nature. This ‘moreness’ embraces a holistic approach to engagement with nature and seeks to develop children’s mental and physical health, enrich their spiritual, aesthetic and cultural appreciation and awareness, develop**

mindfulness and observation skills, support their creativity, increase their STEM skills\* and generate in them a sense of place, caring qualities and a love of nature which will motivate them to preserve and conserve it in the future. \*(Mary Colwell, in an article in *BBC Wildlife*, March 2019, sums up natural history's contribution to developing STEM skills as follows: Studying nature outdoors develops key aspects of STEM skills, as it requires creativity, adaptability and resilience, as well as the ability to deal with "messy data" that doesn't fit the expected patterns studied in a laboratory. There are constantly changing parameters in the natural world, such as seasons, tides, weather patterns and behaviour of species. To be an accomplished student of the natural world is to be a quick-thinking problem solver, intellectually curious, practical and flexible'). The recent coronavirus experience has taught us that creativity, adaptability and resilience are key skills that children must learn when they have to cope with a similar pandemic in the future.

With stories and conjectures of extinction and annihilation of nature constantly hitting the headlines never before was a period in history demanding more meaningful input from educators to their students on nature awareness, appreciation and education. (In 2018, for instance, WWF reported in its Living Planet Report that findings from 69 scientists world-wide outlined that the world has lost 60% of its invertebrates in recent decades. "Our day-to-day life, health and livelihoods depend on a healthy planet. There cannot be a healthy, happy and prosperous future for people on a planet with a destabilized climate, depleted oceans and rivers, degraded land and empty forests, all stripped of biodiversity, the web of life that sustains us all"-Marco Lambertini, Director General WWF International). There is in fact a danger that these stories of doom and gloom will cause students to feel so overwhelmed by gloomy prognostications that they will lose hope for the future of the earth and feeling completely disempowered, do nothing. This condition known as 'ecophobia' is defined in Collin's English dictionary as 'a fear of one's home surroundings'. The word was coined by the American

environmentalist, David Sobel, who suggested that the antidote to this fear was the cultivation of an emotional bond with nature which would inspire learners to protect it. 'What's important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds' (Sobel, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, 1995).

As far back as 2005, Richard Louv wrote his seminal book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* which examined American children's alienation and distancing from the natural world. As a result of this examination, Louv coined the phrase "nature-deficit disorder". Questions arising from this study are these: Would this condition have been ameliorated if there was a subject called "Natural History" on the curriculum? How many Irish children currently suffer from this disorder? My own recent research exploring the state and status of nature awareness, appreciation and education in Irish primary schools would suggest that engagement with nature in Irish primary and secondary schools leaves a lot to be desired. See [www.rian.ie](http://www.rian.ie)

Engagement with the natural environment should be a stand-alone subject within the curriculum not only because of its importance for human development but also for the future of the planet.

In the priority area, Wellbeing, it is hoped that engagement with nature will be at its core. School gardening for example promotes connects children to the seasons, to plants, to animals, to soil and of course, wellbeing. The gardening organisation, Grow it Yourself (GIY) has outlined ten reasons why gardening contributes to a person's wellbeing. Their horticultural therapist, Caitríona Kelly, has outlined these as: physical exercise (increased serotonin), meaningful activity (creating by sowing), learning new things (new gardening knowledge leads to happiness), mindfulness (focussing on the gardening task), hope (growing all about hope), giving

(sharing produce), social (communion with other growers), achievement (growth of self-esteem from success with seeds), fresh air and sunlight (emotional wellbeing), contact with soil (inhalation of microbes boost serotonin levels). The recent coronavirus has taught us the value of food security so it's important that all children learn how to grow and care for the common vegetables which we eat. Walking in natural environments promotes wellbeing too so it is hoped that the redeveloped curriculum will place a major emphasis on outdoor learning. Finally, on this issue, it's a matter of great concern to this writer that there is surprisingly no mention of the importance of nature engagement or school gardening in the recently published DES document, *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*, October 2019.

Nature-friendly and nature-rich school grounds incorporating wild-life areas and cultivation and contemplation zones are essential for regular, inexpensive immersion of children in nature and are also necessary for promoting wellbeing so it is hoped that before the curriculum is launched that the DES will prioritise these in every new and existing schools. At present there is no compulsion on architects, builders or boards of management to provide these. This is surprising in the light of much research that demonstrates that children (and adults) who learn, work and live in green surroundings are healthier both mentally and physically and perform better both at learning and in work-related activities.

**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.

**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.**

**I agree that all of the strategies outlined are significant to children's learning and development. I am always concerned, however, that learning outcomes that can be assessed have been emphatically promoted heretofore. Not enough emphasis has been placed on the fact that some learning outcomes such as a caring attitude for plants and living things cannot be assessed.**

**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:*

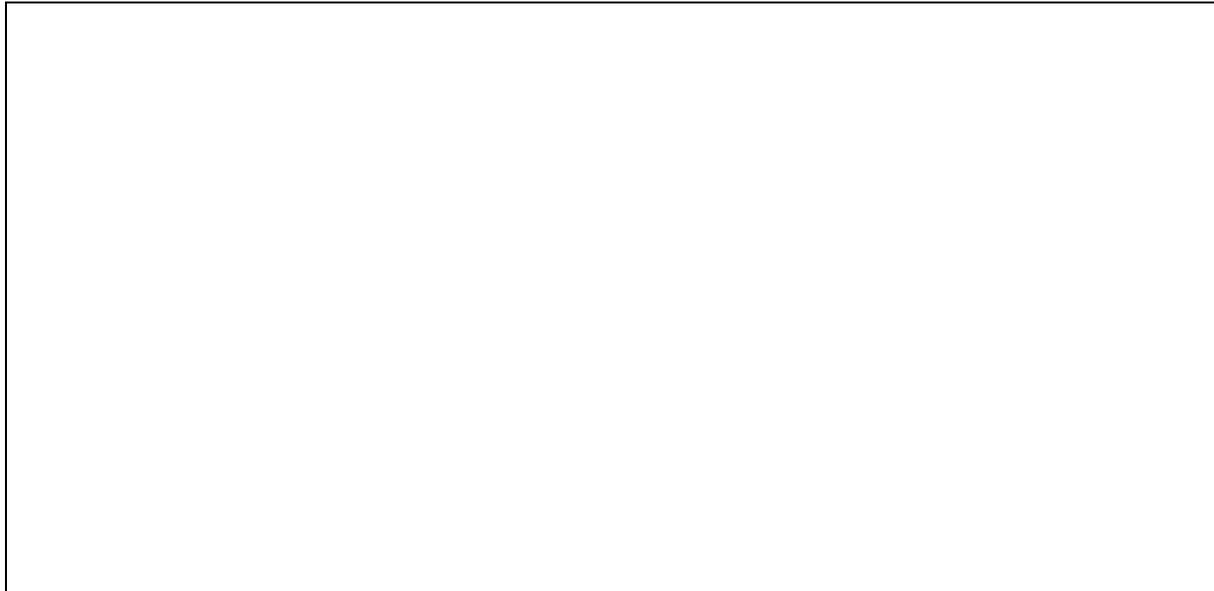
- Enhanced enjoyment of learning for children.
- Increased use of active methodologies for teaching and learning.
- Improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments.

*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.**

**As an educator with constant access to teachers' opinions on the revised curriculum I can unequivocally state that curriculum overload is their number one concern. If this is meaningfully addressed in the redeveloped new curriculum it will greatly enhance their motivation to teach, allow them more time to plan and contribute to more in-depth teaching and learning.**



### **Data Protection**

The NCCA fully respects your right to privacy. Any personal information which you volunteer to the NCCA will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts. If you require further information related to data protection please visit [www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement](http://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement) or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at [dpo@ncca.ie](mailto:dpo@ncca.ie).

**Thank you for your submission.**

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