

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	05/02/2021
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Institute of Education, DCU
Position	Associate Professor in Philosophy and Education
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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

No

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

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

The Institute of Education is the largest education faculty in the Republic of Ireland, covering both primary and post-primary education.

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

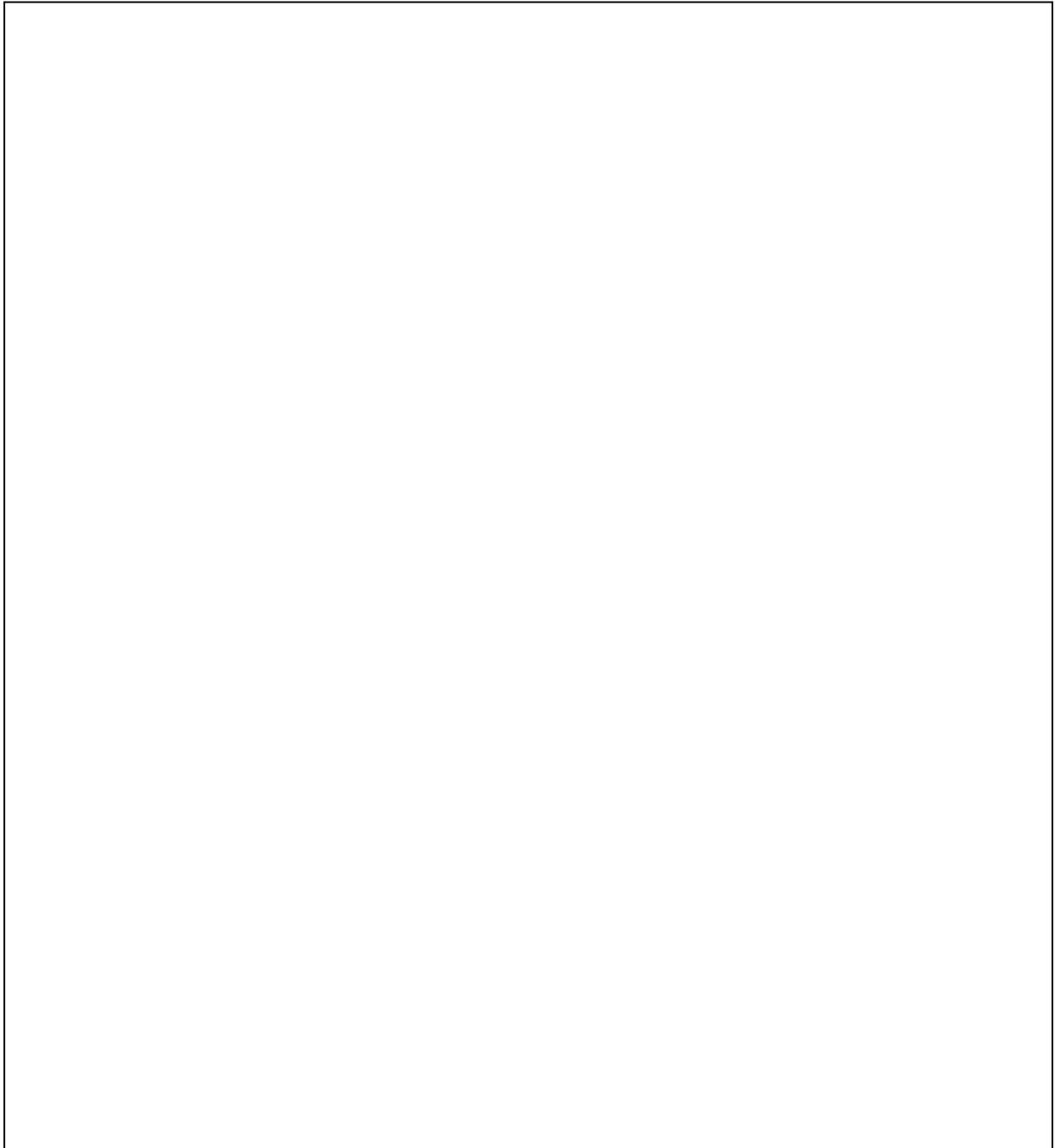
Section 1

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

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework is in my view, overall, a very positive development with regard to the future of Primary Education in Ireland. Most especially, it is very significant to see the importance of values education noted in the 'Social, Personal and Values' space when for far too long the question of values pedagogy has been outsourced to private and church providers in the Republic. This latter is wholly unsuitable with regard to schools which effectively are state schools. Moreover, especially under Covid, we have seen the great need to rebalance the prioritisation of teaching and learning over social and personal development of children and their fundamental well-being. The new curriculum area of 'Well-Being' (also connecting to SPV) is similarly a very welcome development and an acknowledgement that we are re-envisioning our education system and our most fundamental priorities. As Hargreaves has noted, this seems to represent a move from the 'Age of Assessment' to the 'Age of Well-Being' and it is thoroughly needed at the present time. It is crucial that this renewed emphasis on personal and inter-personal flourishing is also seen as applying to the teachers themselves who far too often have been seen as mere vehicles for the application of such approaches to children.

This latter point highlights the need for the curriculum implementation process to involve genuinely the participation of teachers on the ground as much as is possible, with local co-construction of curriculum where possible and as much agency and autonomy given to schools as is feasible in a national curriculum process. To date, the NCCA process of curriculum development has been excellent in this respect but it is important as it reaches the latter stages that this participation and agency is maintained. This is surely a challenge at the present time especially, with the consultation process hampered by the pandemic situation.

Some of the more specific recommendations in the framework are discussed below but the central change of a proposal to move from subject based learning in the earlier years of school to a more curriculum area or thematic approach also seems a very positive development. Too often subjects are taught in relative isolation where the child should rather be placed at the heart of learning and the connection across subjects and integration of child understanding is far more important. Nonetheless, this proposal of relatively significant change needs to be thought through in terms of communication with Initial Teacher Education institutions where currently a more subject centred approach is more dominant. Communication between the curriculum development process and other partners in primary education is essential for the new framework to be successful, but this also needs to go beyond simple rhetorical communication. There is a responsibility on ITE to engage this process more directly than is currently the case.



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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.

This latter emphasis is to be welcomed and highlights the need for the curriculum implementation process to involve genuinely the participation of teachers on the ground as much as is possible, with local co-construction of curriculum where possible and as much agency and autonomy given to schools as is feasible in a national curriculum process. To date, the NCCA process of curriculum development has been excellent in this respect but it is important as it reaches the latter stages that this participation and agency is maintained. This is surely a challenge at the present time especially, with the consultation process hampered by the pandemic situation. Moreover, it is important to develop a theoretical and practical model which will work in this respect and which is evidence based. The process curriculum models of theorists such as Laurence Stenhouse and Ivor Goodson have been shown to work extremely well in UK and international contexts and to reduce teacher alienation and lack of ownership of the new curriculum development. With a national curriculum, there is huge pressure to make the rhetoric of agency and flexibility of schools a reality.

It should also be noted that there are tensions with regard to the value of flexibility and local autonomy versus the need for more centralised coherence and prescription in the curriculum. To take one contentious example, if there is a great deal of local and school autonomy in relation to the teaching of content for example in an area such as Relationships and Sexuality Education this may lead to specific schools avoiding having to deal with controversial issues but also with content which may be very enabling for children as they develop their own worldviews.

Therefore, this question of flexibility and agency needs to be thought through carefully and may require different answers when it comes to areas which the DES/NCCA considers to be indispensable parts of child development.

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.

Seeing education as a continuum and a life long learning process is a key insight of the last twenty years of educational research and once again, this emphasis on the continuum is to be welcomed. In an Irish context, two prime examples of such discontinuity have been in the first case the connect between pre-school and early years primary school and second, the specificity of the Leaving Cert process which appears at odds with earlier approaches to teaching and learning.

In both instances, the new proposals are very constructive and enabling in terms of developing more organic as well as structural links between early years and primary as well as connecting the primary and post-primary school contexts more properly. This is certainly a big challenge, perhaps more in the latter case than in the former, and more work needs to be done to make the education continuum a genuine reality, but the current proposals do move the discussion on significantly.

Emerging priorities for children's learning

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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.

As stated above in the general comments, there is much to commend the new proposals in terms of overall educational and pedagogical vision. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework is in my view overall a very positive development with regard to the future of Primary Education in Ireland. Most especially, it is very significant to see the importance of values education noted in the ‘Social, Personal and Values’ space when for far too long the question of values pedagogy has been outsourced to private and church providers in the Republic. This latter is wholly unsuitable with regard to schools which effectively are state schools.

Nonetheless, there is quite a lot of work to be done on the exact nature of this type of new approach connecting SPHE to Values Education. In the sense that both of these have been seen as separate in the past, what will bringing them together look like in practice? The pedagogy employed here (not as much clarity on this in the document) is obviously a key issue. When will directive pedagogies be used for example? The question of patron discretion with regard to the teaching of certain controversial contents (such as for example LGBT rights or the rights of minorities more generally) needs to be addressed. Moreover, especially under Covid, we have seen the great need to rebalance the prioritisation of teaching and learning over social and personal development of children and their fundamental well-being. The new curriculum area of ‘Well-Being’ (also connecting to SPV) is similarly a very welcome development and an acknowledgement that we are re-envisioning our education system and our Hargreaves has noted, this most fundamental priorities. This is thoroughly needed at the present time. It is crucial that this renewed emphasis on personal and inter-personal flourishing is also seen as applying to

the teachers themselves who far too often have been seen as mere vehicles for the application of such approaches to children.

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.)

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- 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.

See above for the specific new areas introduced but as an overall point, the key challenge of moving from the subject centred to a more curriculum or thematic area approach will be communication with the ITE sector and a clear plan of development for creating a coherence between the new curriculum and how student teachers are prepared in ITE to teach the latter. Of course, this also links to the challenge of developing a CPD approach for the new curriculum with existing teachers which is successful. Again, a stress of local differentiation and school context is important here.

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.

Pedagogy is one of the most interesting areas of education and also one of the most commonly misunderstood and the new document framework is very well informed and subtle in terms of its delineation of the different pedagogies which will be employed. Most especially the flexibility of more arts based pedagogies will be crucial in exploring new ways of teaching children.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the new proposals from a pedagogical perspective will be the tension between a more subject based approach that is currently embedded and a move to more curriculum or thematic area emphasis. Notwithstanding that this form of integration is already often present on the ground, we can underestimate the difficulties of trying to balance depth and breadth in teaching content and themes. More work needs to be done on connecting new curriculum understanding of pedagogy and ITE practice. The latter arguably continues to over-rely on a narrow version of constructivist theory for its understanding of pedagogy, which is at odds with renewed versions of multi-disciplinary pedagogies. This also raises the issue of the theoretical foundations of pedagogy which are often left unclear. While one can overemphasise the need for teachers to be ‘well-read’ in theory, nonetheless the foundation for all good pedagogy is a teacher who has capably self-reflected on how theory relates to their pedagogical practice in an often very diverse and challenging classroom environment (from issues of social class to SEN to multi-culturalism etc). This is a task which ITE and curriculum development needs to work together on and in tandem.



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.

The 1999 curriculum is in many respects a wonderful document and vision and has inspired a whole generation of teachers. Nonetheless, new realities in classrooms have emerged in the last twenty years in a way that creates a need for renewal and reform. The current proposals in my view are to be commended on adopting a strong connect back to existing frameworks whilst also encouraging change where needed. Moreover, in the twenty years past, many teachers on the ground have developed innovative practices which anticipate many of the current reforms.

Nonetheless, the challenges of developing a relatively new approach in certain areas will be still problematic, most especially in areas of contention (such as values and religion). My own abiding sense of having worked in curriculum development is the extraordinary dedication and intelligence of teachers in schools. We should trust in teachers' own efficacy to evolve the current proposals in their own contexts for the most part whilst also acknowledging the state responsibility in certain areas to lead and to ensure the development of every child in school and sensitivity to their own particular needs, beliefs and backgrounds. Sometimes this requires a certain prescriptiveness from the DES/NCCA vis-à-vis church and private patrons. I would hope that there is sufficient realisation of a changing Ireland for this responsibility to be taken up and followed through.

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Thank you for your submission.

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