

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

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

Organisation submission details

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Date	January 25 th 2021
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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

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

Love Geography Collective

The Love Geography Collective consists of educators different settings and phases of education. They also are part of a range of organisations, including: the Geographical Society of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy, the Geographical Association and the Geography Champions Ireland Network

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

Overview

We welcome the efforts to renew the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (PSC) and the recognition that curriculum frameworks need to adapt and change over time. We welcome how the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (DPCF) makes essential and relevant points about children, their lives and education. It also alludes to the expertise of teachers in making decisions about learning for the children in their care. We recognise that our highly qualified teachers can make choices about the learning processes and content in their schools and classrooms where they are supported to do so. We feel that teacher autonomy is a very positive aspect of teaching in Ireland.

We also have serious concerns about the process of curriculum change, with the incremental introduction of new curriculum prioritising certain subjects over others. We are also concerned over balance of subjects and areas of curriculum in the document, and feel this mix will result in exacerbating curriculum overload, as well as marginalising Geography in an era when the subject offers unlimited potential to offer unique solutions to societal pressures of growing population, limiting resources and climate change.

We would like to highlight why Geography should have a central part of any primary school curriculum, referring to the descriptions of their work members of our group made to the NCCA at our meeting in November 2020. We believe the appreciation and use of Geography by non-geographers need to be fostered, so that the capacity to make use of the discipline's perspectives, knowledge, and techniques grows along with the capacity of the discipline to supply them.

Firstly we would like to outline the nature, value and place of geography

Geography

The term Geography in both English and Irish indicates its meaning. In English Geography means 'earth writing' and in Irish Tíreolaíocht means the 'science of the land'. To quote geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1991, p.99), "Geography is the study of earth as the home of people". It considers both human and non-human processes and how they affect each other. For example how and why floods occur and how they impact landforms, human settlements and industries.

Geography and geographic approaches to problem solving provide the intellectual foundations to understand contemporary societal challenges, such as the climate emergency, food insecurity, or energy choices. These simply cannot be understood without a geographical perspective as Geography provides the learning to ensure people can 'follow and participate in debates on significant local, national and global issues' (Maude, 2016, p.75). As Michael Palin states "Geography is the subject which holds the key to our future" (quoted in GA, 2015). It is the only subject with such a strong focus on looking to possible and preferable futures (Hicks, 2014).

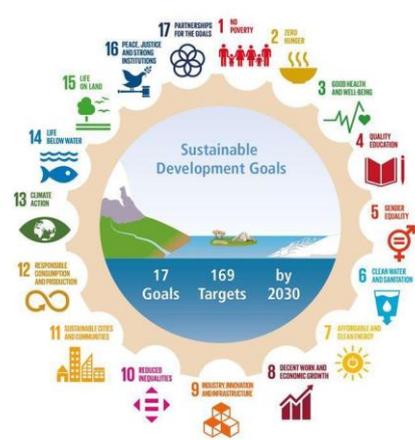
Geography emerged as a discipline in the 19th century because European nations needed to keep track of their empires. Just as international economics and politics engendered the new discipline then, something similar can be said for geography's resurgence over the past couple of decades. Globalization, environmental change and technology have given new life to a field some thought irrelevant. Its comeback is the result of its inherent interdisciplinarity and its intimate connection with increasingly ubiquitous technology, most notably geographic information systems. It appears under new guises: environmental sciences, earth sciences, spatial economics, geo-statistics. Its rise, fall and recovery, the permutations of a discipline, illustrate the interaction of the contours of knowledge, academic trends and the pace of technological innovation.
(Source: Stanford University, 2006)

Rooted in the science of geography, geographic information system (GIS) frameworks integrate and organise layers of data with spatial location into visualizations using maps. With this unique capability, GIS reveals deeper insights into data, such as patterns, relationships, and situations—helping end users in industry and sectors to make smarter decisions. These include local and national government, healthcare, retailer/distributors, fleet managers, property developers, emergency response, transport, military, waste management, healthcare, telecommunications, utilities and all types of environmental research (agriculture, forestry, coasts, marine, rivers, peatlands, and uplands). The rapid growth in applications of Geography and tools such as GIS by the research and decision making communities should translate into a clear pathway in geographic training from primary school to secondary and third level institutes.

Secondly, we would like to outline the value of Geographers.

Geographers

Geographers have contributed significantly to the scientific and decision making communities in Ireland and worldwide. Geographers provide us with an understanding of the world at all different scales, and of each other, as president Barack Obama noted “Geography is about more than just memorising places on a map. It's about understanding the complexity of our world, appreciating the diversity of cultures that exists across continents... using all that knowledge to help bridge divides and bring people together.” Geographers in Ireland make substantial contributions to society professionally through contributions in planning, development practice, environmental consultancy and the green economy.



Geographers are valued for their disciplinary thinking as well as the power of the subject to connect multi-disciplinary approaches for problem solving. Their transdisciplinary understandings make them ideally suited to contribute across a variety of sectors from business to administration and non-governmental organizations. Increasing Geography is part of advanced training programmes in fields such as development practice, smart and sustainable cities, spatial data analysis and challenge-based education for sustainability. Geographers address critical questions for science and society at large and remain relevant as these questions and societies change over time.

Finally, we would like to outline some of the value of Geography in schools.

Geography in education

Fundamentally, just as it is necessary to know the alphabet for reading, or multiplication tables for math, it is also necessary to learn Geography to know where places are, and also some facts about those places so you can tell why they are different. Studying Geography provides children with knowledge about different places on earth and how they relate with each other (GA, 2009: Pike, 2015). Geography contributes to a balanced education for all children from birth and teaches children vital skills that help them understand their world. It also provides the opportunity for children to bring their own geographies, their spatial experiences into their learning (Martin, 2008). Geography fascinates and inspires: the beauty and diversity of the earth, near and far. Geography provides a bridging space in the curriculum to bring together the creativity of the arts, the insights of social science and humanities as well as the important principles of natural science methods and practices (GA, 2009). Geography gives children the tools to gain an understanding of international matters, multicultural concerns, and environmental matters. As a discipline, Geography takes children beyond their everyday experience and provides them with specialised

knowledge of the world and how processes shape it, all children have entitlement to such learning through curriculum is vital (Young and Muller, 2016).

Geographical investigation both satisfies and nourishes curiosity about the immediate and more distant world (Roberts, 2013). Geography provides the lived context to connect understanding of physical properties such as why settlements have developed over time and how they may change in the future. It helps people to understand their place in the world and comprehend current and historical social, cultural, economic, environmental and political events. We know that children's understanding of Geography is always enhanced through real life experiences, through fieldwork.

Overall, Geography serves vital educational goals: thinking and decision making with Geography helps us to live our lives as knowledgeable citizens, aware of our own local communities in a global setting (GA, 2009; Pike, 2021). We feel the current PGC is a model of good practice in curriculum design, and it is respected internationally for being so. It presents a clear rationale (the what) as well as balances the content (the what) and the methodologies (the how) of geography. The key principles of the curriculum are admired internationally, due to the importance placed on children's worlds, their thinking and their capacity for learning geographically about their locality and the wider world. Evidence from research reveals children are also positive about their Geographical learning in school, they value the learning that occurs in Geography and the opportunities that Geography provides to develop a range of skills (Pike, 2016).

We know that the discipline of Geography has a distinct advantage in developing a more holistic understanding of global environmental challenges in that it reaches across all the sciences (including social sciences and humanities). Geographical education therefore represents an important vehicle for citizens of all ages to help them understand the complexity of the sustainability goal and what can (and should) be done to achieve a more sustainable future, aligning with the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (DES, 2014). As 'the science for sustainability', Geography has an increasingly important role to play in developing the knowledge and the skills to equip future generations with the tools to adapt to and mitigate potentially catastrophic global environmental change. (Meadows, 2020, p.88. Geography Education for Sustainable Development)

Agency and flexibility in schools

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to agency and flexibility in schools.

Teacher choice

A subject based curriculum provides teachers with the opportunities to make decisions about how to integrate subjects, in this way the framework takes these decisions from teachers. We therefore question the statements made in the framework about children views of subject vs. theme-based learning. Children imagine they are all types of people, animals and characters as soon as they can speak! In primary school, children are aware of their learning in cases where teachers make that explicit (Catling, 2003). In Geography, children know they are ‘working as geographers’ if told so (Pike, 2015). As Geographers use skills to help them understand and know more about the world, children are Geographers from the moment they look, roll or crawl across a school. When this sort of statement is made, children become aware of the different ways they can think. This is a powerful tool in the classroom, where it is used appropriately.

Children’s choice

The 1999 Curriculum recognised the child as an active agent in their learning (1999a; 1999b; 1999c). The child and their local environment were the starting point of curiosity and enquiry about the world (Roberts, 2013). This has resulted in some truly inspirational learning and teaching in our primary schools (Pike, 2016; Kavanagh, at al., 2021). We are concerned the DPCF loses some of these important foundations of the curriculum as it prioritises what children need to learn over how they learn, with increased requirements both across and within subjects. As Geography educators we are concerned children will have the opportunity to take time over their Geographical learning as they can now though an enquiry-based curriculum. Whilst enquiry encompasses a wide range of pedagogies and possible content, it provides opportunities for children’s rights to be recognised through their engagement in the learning process (Catling, 2003; Pike, 2016). We know that the aspect of enquiry that enables children to ask questions about the world is essential in any primary curriculum, and we hope this is the basis of Geography in the revised curriculum. However, we hope this type of requirement is well supported by the NCCA in terms of exemplification of children’s learning.

Curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools.

We welcome the focus on transitions by the NCCA and specifically in this framework, and hope this will support teachers in making connections between different phases in education. Even where curricular to link up there are differences in implementation and the mutual understanding of each other’s phases. Currently, this a weakness of the education system, and something that could be worked on now teachers are more likely to use technology to link up.

We note that despite statements in the DPCF document, decisions have already been made about the connections between early years, primary and secondary with the movement of primary Geography content to:

- A. Junior Certificate Geography: Trade, aid and development have been moved
- B. The Mathematics curriculum: Many aspects of mapping are on the Mathematics curriculum.

The new curriculum must also recognise, there will be no progression of learning in Geography through to secondary school where the subjects is optional. Just 30 minutes a week for all children have a good grounding in the subjects that ensure they understand the world is not sufficient.



Images: primary and secondary school children in field classes (Salthill, Galway) (source: Dr Kevin Lynch, NUIG Geography).

Emerging priorities for children’s learning

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework outlines important messages in relation to emerging priorities for children’s learning.

We question the agenda of the NCCA in relation to the position of subjects on the curriculum. If all subjects are to be valued, then all must be researched and exemplified by your organisation. In 20 years the support for primary Geography has been one day of CPD in a hotel with fieldwork in a car park for teachers. In contrast, for other subjects and area of learning that are not even on the curriculum, such as coding or well being, there has been thousands of hours of research, hundreds of pages of findings and support.

We do welcome the proposal for a broad curriculum at primary level, and value a range of experiences for children in schools, but within this all subjects should be equally investigated. At the same time we question why the proposals present both a subject and areas based curriculum. This involves more curriculum areas for teachers to become overwhelmed in. And this comes with a greatly increased requirements for language curriculum and plans to do the same with Mathematics. These have had the impact of reducing the time for all other subjects, especially Geography and History as these were the suggested subjects for time cuts by the DES (2011). Overall, the DPCF proposes more subjects, which completely at odds with the NCCA’s own ongoing concerns there is curriculum overload. As outlined earlier, many schools manage the curriculum well. The issue is where certain subjects dominate or when schools struggle to manage the amount of resources and programmes directed at them (Mitchel, 2019).

We would also like the NCCA to be aware that well-being is a wide ranging area of learning that is already enhanced across subjects. It is not a subject, nor is it early years SPHE. The scope of wellbeing could be across subjects, with Geography contributing. This would especially be so in terms of connections, taking notice and to keep learning. For example, any fieldwork in the locality provides opportunities for children to develop their learning as well as their sense of self and their well-being, through real connections with people and places. Such activities also provide

opportunities for children to think and act for the future, a dimension of learning that is central to Geography (NEF, 2020).

We recognise that the grouping of Geography is always going to be problematic because it is a vast interdisciplinary field that sprawls across the social and natural sciences and has nebulous boundaries. Geography is a STEM subject so could be grouped with STEM. But it is also a humanities subject, so perhaps it should be grouped with History but also ERB and ethics, creating a meaningful grouping of subjects, with scope for different disciplinary lenses on people and place.

Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to changing how the curriculum is structured and presented.

Subjects in the curriculum

The 1999 Curriculum was extremely well researched throughout the 1990s (DoE, 1990), and carefully constructed under the stewardship of a team of named experts (Hislop, 2016). This resulted in a clear rationale for the whole curriculum as well as each subject and subject grouping. The curriculum was coherent in form and content enabling teachers to make choices about what to teach and how to teach it. The curriculum provided some good examples of how subjects could be taught alone, as well as possible ways integration could occur. However there was not enough explicit guidance of how the curriculum requirements could be implemented, which even today results in uncertainty about key aspects of planning for Geography in schools. This is especially so in relation to the content and approaches of the subject. For example, there remains uncertainty about what geographical enquiry looks like at different levels as well as progression of key content such as physical Geography topics such as People and other Lands. As outlined below, it is important this support is provided for the new curriculum.

The DPCF presents both subjects and cross-curricular areas, with little rationale for this apart from the references to new requirements for learning. In relation to Geography, we question the naming of Geography and History in the younger classes:

Environmental Education

Whilst we note that without the space, place and time dimensions of learning in Geography and History environmental education means little. We do question the rationale of placing it in the Geography / History column. Environmental education in the time of the climate emergency should be feature in all subjects, through education for sustainability. Without the lenses of other subjects when considering the environment, then sustainability will be lost in the curriculum. Overall, the climate emergency, as well as associated issues around future water, food and resource supplies are geographical in nature and are best understood through Geography connections with other subjects.

Social Education

We are unclear exactly what social education is, as it is not defined fully in the document, nor is there an understanding of it in an Irish context.

We would suggest a curriculum that is subject based, with cross-curricular themes, to provide choice for teachers and quality learning for children. A mix of both subjects and themes presented as subjects makes little sense to teachers or children.

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

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.

We support the statements in the DPCF supporting a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies of curriculum integration, inclusive practice, inquiry based-learning and playful pedagogy, with assessment. One of the many strengths of the PSC in Geography and across SESE are the enquiry based pedagogies. These have ensured, where planned and practised well Geography is engaging, playful, inclusive and meaningful for children. Where such pedagogies are used, children are positive and engaged in Geographical learning (Pike, 2015). However, this is an area of the curriculum that teachers still need support in, and we hope this is planned carefully by the NCCA.

Teachers need time to plan how geographical concepts, including enquiry, and skills can be built on through the primary years. Through such time teacher can develop their expertise in understanding how children progress in the many aspects of their Geographical learning. We support Christodoulou's (2017) conviction that 'curriculum planning and its formative assessment should be structured around mastery of building blocks, not "retrofitted" to the test structure and requirements'. So it is absolutely essential that curriculum planning works with assessment, teachers need to be supported to ensure that the taught curriculum prepares children for future content (Healy, 2020). This ensures learning has both a *proximal function* to make the next stage possible and an *ultimate function* to ensure learning is holistic and effective (Counsell, 2018). Despite later support for teachers as well as work in ITE, there was no support for teachers in terms of assessment in Geography. There were no statements of progression in subjects, meaning apart from support in some ITE programmes, teachers had little sense of how children's learning moves in Geography. We hope the curriculum will offer clear guidance not just for assessment but also for progression of learning in Geography.

As noted above we are concerned about the integration focus of the document. Whilst we recognise the strength of integration, this has to emerge from a deep understanding of subjects, pedagogy and curriculum (Greenwood, 2013). We are concerned that even where there is great expertise in integration and curriculum that outlines themes or topics will take choice from teachers. We would promote a subject based curriculum, with CPD to support schools and teachers in making their own choices on what and how to integrate (Murphy, et al., 2020). We appreciate this would involve support for teachers, through high quality professional development and time in schools for teacher to plan effectively.

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

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.

Building on success

We recognise there has been continued development of the use of active and engaging methodologies and a related increase in children's enjoyment of learning in schools over the past 20 years. Specifically, research shows that Geography is a subject enjoyed by children, where it is

engaging and challenging (GA, 2009; Catling, 2015; Pike, 2016). Whilst the DPCF makes statements about the need to challenge children, we would welcome clearer details on this as it remains unclear what specifically they need to be challenged on. We would argue that the disciplinary thinking of the 1999 PSC (DES/NCCA, 1999a; 1999b) is a key example of how primary children can be challenged (Morgan and Lambert, 2011). However, the framework makes little of how all subject based thinking can enhance children's learning in multiple ways. For example, the impact of improving children's geographical learning has a positive impact on children's literacy levels (Hinde, et al., 2007). Such challenge has positive impacts on both cognitive and formative aspects of learning. For example, children are highly motivated to be curious and learn through quality Geographical experiences (Pike, 2016).

The Framework or supporting material do not recognise reference to the differing implementation of the 1999 curriculum and the varied impacts other initiatives have had on practices in schools. For example, many schools have embraced the challenge of the enquiry based 1999 curriculum in Geography, designing innovative learning for children. In many schools these are grounded in enquiry based methodologies, with teachers scaffolding Geographical content for children. These have enhanced the learning in core subjects of Irish, English and Mathematics, by effectively integrating the subjects. Although such activity has increased over the lifetime of the PSC, there are still too many examples of very limited learning experiences in Geography (Pike, 2015; Usher, 2019). There are also many schools where Geography is seldomly taught.

Research

Geography in Irish school operates in a research vacuum, although there is some research in Geography Education spread across the full-time lecturers in DCU and MIC and the part time lecturers in MIE. There are now no full time lecturers in secondary Geography teacher education in the state. The NCCA has not researched and exemplified good practices in Geography to share with teachers. There is no evidence of research or support for Geography on the NCCA website, the only items relating to Geography on the NCCA website are the curriculum frameworks and advice for children with learning disabilities. In fact, the only published research on the enactment of the Geographical learning at any level in the past 30 years by any government agency is 'Looking at Geography' (DES, 2006). This contained no empirical data, only drawing on existing DES WSE reports (DES, 2006).

All seminars and publications in relation to the DPCF to date have promoted either general scholarship in education or invited those who promote holistic and integrated views of the curriculum to present. Even on the NCCA social media accounts and the accounts of NCCA personnel, there has never been any reference to Geographical learning. Both the NCCA events and digital presence reveal the ongoing determination to cut the opportunity for children to think and learn through subjects in primary schools. This reveals a lack of support or scholarship from the NCCA on the importance of subject teaching, including Geography in primary schools (NCCA, 2020). We do question how decisions about Geography can be made in such a vacuum with no state supported research.

Required research and support

There is a need for the NCCA to carry out research into Geography to make up for the historical shortfall in this area. This is likely to reveal quality learning in Geography, issues of curriculum development and implementation and future directions for the subject. It could explore why in some schools Geography has and others it has not been taught in line with the 1999 curriculum (Austin, et al., 2020). In fact, it may uncover why some schools are may teaching Geography in ways reminiscent of the 'payment by results' teaching of past eras. We recommend the NCCA addresses these ongoing issues head on in creating research based support for teachers. There is also a need to carry out research to collate and share exemplary practices in relation to

Geography. We would also recommend the NCCA share such research and practices on its website and social media channels, as it does for other subjects and areas of learning. We would welcome the opportunity to support the NCCA with such activity.

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