

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

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

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

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Department of Learning, Society, and Religious Education
Position	
Organisation	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
Date	21 st September 2020
E-mail	

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Yes

No

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

The Department of Learning, Society, and Religious Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick is an innovative and dynamic team representing ten different disciplines within the Faculty of Education. We consider that our individual and shared viewpoints have much to contribute to the consultation process on the draft curriculum framework.

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*.

We welcome the publication of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) and the opportunity to respond to same. This framework takes cognisance of the significant changes to Irish society since the publication of the 1999 curriculum and recognises the importance of grounding educational policy change in research.

The onset of COVID-19 has impacted upon Irish education in an acute and unexpected manner and we recognise that this framework predates the unprecedented events of 2020. Consequently future iterations of the framework will need to place more emphasis on the needs of pupils and their teachers in their engagement with online learning. Being a digital learner is recognised as a key competency in the current document, however, recognition that the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) may be a key learning site for children needs to be included. We consider that the VLE, while addressing the academic needs of the child, has significant shortcomings in addressing the social and affective areas of learning.

We query the separate reviews of both the language curriculum and Relationships and Sexuality Education. We are particularly concerned that the separate review of the latter may result in SPHE/Wellbeing and RSE having parallel trajectories, as happened in the case of the 1999 curriculum. This resulted in confusing and limited implementation, the effects of which are ongoing. We are concerned that the omission of the language curriculum from this particular process may also result in confusion. The rationale for this decision needs to be outlined in a clearer manner to the reader.

As our department represents the foundation areas of education – philosophy, sociology and history – we are concerned that there are no explicit links with these areas. The synthesis between theory and practice needs to be facilitated in this document.

The increased focus on Wellbeing through its inclusion as a core area is applauded. This area of the curriculum has been overlooked over the past two decades. As the Wellbeing of the individual and the community is key to a functioning society, we are very pleased that the balance is being redressed with increased time being given to the promotion of Wellbeing both formally and informally. We also welcome the recognition of the spiritual dimension of Wellbeing.

For connection and consistency, the document should include a section on the purpose of education, acknowledging a commitment to holistic education, and expand on the contribution of Religious Education to the overall development of the child in the context of this vision. The role of Education about Religion, Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE) is somewhat unclear and we consider that Christian Religious Education and Multi-Denominational Religious Education should feature in the document. This would serve to highlight the links between current provision in the ITE colleges and curriculum developments. It would also acknowledge, or at least refer to, the different approaches and understandings that exist in relation to Religious Education, and how the proposed area of ERBE contributes to, or can be integrated with, current approaches to RE.

While we welcome the principle of "inclusive education and diversity", we are concerned about these two important areas becoming synonymous. Inclusive education usually refers to education in relation to students with SEN and not in relation to intercultural education which is implied by 'diversity'. Intercultural Education and SEN, while having a similar focus on inclusion and equality, necessitate vastly different approaches in the classroom and throughout the curriculum. We are concerned that by joining them, the approach to both will be diluted.

We consider that recognition of the benefits of individual and group planning time should be foregrounded in the document and recommend more designated time for same, possibly through an extension of the Croke Park hour. More time for planning has been identified as a means of reducing stress in teaching (Morgan and Nic Craith 2015).

We recommend a concurrent rather than a consecutive implementation process for the revised curriculum as we are concerned that the latter approach may imply a hierarchy of subjects.

The next sections explore some of these observations in more detail.

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 draft PCF highlights the importance of the 'agentic' teacher. This transformative role is key to the identity of an effective teacher and is, without doubt, one of the essential messages of education. As a department in which the foundation areas of education are located, we welcome the strong message of agency. However, we are concerned about the lack of exploration of how a teacher undertakes this 'agentic' role and the omission of any reference to the roles of sociology, philosophy, and history of education in the development of both the curriculum and the teacher. The importance of critical thinking is acknowledged, however, we recommend that the document link this skill to the foundation areas, thus demonstrating to the reader the synthesis between theory and practice. For example, the statement regarding the school as a site of response to diversity (p. 3), could include reference to the role of sociology of education. In addition, active global citizenship links very closely with both philosophy and sociology of education and provides an opportunity to remind the reader of these important aspects of their own education.

We are unsure about the representation of flexibility in the curriculum. The concept appears to be linked specifically with time management. We consider flexibility to be a much bigger concept, requiring the teacher to adapt their expectations of the children, of the curriculum and of themselves when addressing the challenges and complexities of current society. While flexibility is implicit in relation to the patron's programme, it could be referred to more explicitly. In relation to time management, we recommend that at least some of the flexible time be used to increase collective planning time within the school, rather than simply being added to some areas when needed. In addition, over-dependence on textbooks may compromise flexibility and this is another issue which merits consideration in the framework. As per the Education Act, the curriculum is what teachers are required to teach and this curriculum must be detailed enough to ensure that pupils at all stages of primary school are experiencing learning as directed by the curriculum and not from textbooks, initiatives and programmes.

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.

We consider that transitions are addressed effectively in the draft PCF and welcome the specific references both to *Aistear* and the Junior Cycle Framework. We recommend that the draft PCF emphasise the importance of the primary school teacher having a good knowledge of both *Aistear* and the JCF and that this is articulated clearly in the document rather than being assumed.

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.

While there are many references to learning outcomes in the document, these references are unspecific and thus we are unable to comment on them at this juncture.

While the broad nature of the key competencies recognises their potential for development within each of the key curricular areas and subjects, it could also result in a vagueness in relation to implementation and thus we suggest that there is a requirement for specificity in relation to these competencies in curriculum planning. For example, we are delighted to see "being an active citizen" included as one of the key competencies. However, it is very unclear how this competency would be woven into the curriculum and explicitly and implicitly taught in the classroom. Furthermore, we feel strongly that a focus on active global citizenship would be more appropriate. This reflects international trends in education and research in best practice in citizenship education. Additionally, a focus on global citizenship rather than simply citizenship necessitates a focus on global structures and systems which affect our lives and the lives of others around the world. A focus on citizenship can often bypass or ignore larger structures at play, resulting in the spread of misinformation or limited information. This leads to a lack of understanding and ultimately inappropriate action which does not impact the root causes of inequality but addresses only symptoms seen at a local level.

We are concerned about the lack of specificity in relation to Wellbeing in the Junior Classes. While this may provide a seamless transition from ECE, we consider that the complex and sensitive nature of Wellbeing merits more signposting, particularly in relation to the Stay Safe programme and the RSE curriculum. We welcome the link between Wellbeing and the spiritual dimension of living “which enables children to experience a sense of awe and wonder and know that life has a meaning” (NCCA 2020, p. 9). Of note here also is the growing amount of research pointing to a direct

correlation between belonging to a religious tradition and wellbeing (see for example Koenig et al 2012; Spencer et al 2016).

The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in an even greater recognition of the importance of Wellbeing throughout society. This will need to be referenced in future iterations of the framework. The VLE will need to be foregrounded as an alternative to the physical environment of the school and the importance of digital learning skills for both pupils and teachers needed more exploration in the document.

Similarly, while modern foreign languages are referenced, there is little detail as to how these will be developed and incorporated into the curriculum.

We commend the NCCA for acknowledging the contribution of religion to the child's overall education and attempting to address the needs of all children in developing ERBE and continuing Religious Education under the heading of the Patron's programme. Yet is a vagueness here in relation to structure and implementation. This needs to be addressed. It is also unclear as to whether ERBE is to be introduced as an addition to RE or whether it is provided for children who are not participating in RE. This needs clarification. In addition we are concerned that the proposed new nomenclature for SPHE (SPVE) will pose confusion and will impact on the profile of both ERBE and SPHE. For many years, SPHE has struggled for recognition in the curriculum. Its profile has gained considerable momentum in recent years due to the increased focus on Wellbeing. We consider that the change in nomenclature will have a negative effect. Undoubtedly, there is a values dimension to SPHE but this does not require a change of title. Underpinning all of the work explored with pupils is the development of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills. We are querying whether the change in nomenclature means that content that currently is aligned with one subject area becomes part of another.

We also have many concerns about the profile of RE as it is presented in the draft framework as there seems to be a shift of perspective regarding the anthropology of the child. In the 1999 curriculum, the holistic nature of the child took into consideration the spiritual, moral and religious identity. It stated that 'For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience' (NCCA 1999, p.27). This language is much reduced in the draft curriculum as is evidenced by the removal of much of the vocabulary referring to the 'spiritual', 'religious' and 'moral'. We acknowledge that the current document demonstrates an openness to a more extended statement on these issues (NCCA 2020, p.3).

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

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- 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.

We view the new structure as a positive development and applaud the very evident links with *Aistear* and the JCF which seek to provide a seamless learning experience for the child. We suggest more specific references to the content of both *Aistear* and the JCF with examples of how the PCF aligns with these documents. For example, it is stated on page 19 that the eight principles of the framework “extend children’s learning through *Aistear* and connect with the eight principles of the JCF”. A visual, incorporating a flow chart, could be included here. The recognition of Wellbeing as a core area of a child’s learning demonstrates how attitudes towards this area have progressed. The increased allocation of time provides the reader with concrete evidence that this is not a supplementary aspect of a child’s education. The movement of Science from the previous SESE curricular area to STEM is of benefit both to the status of Science and also to History and Geography.

There is significant thought and space accorded to time allocation using the evidence provided from the previous consultation process. This demonstrates that the concerns of teachers about curriculum overload and lack of time (NCCA 2008; DES 2009) have been taken on board.

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

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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.

The draft PCF recognises the challenges of climate change, human migration and geopolitical shifts. Children are currently affected by climate change, albeit in differing ways depending on geographical, social and economic factors. As interested citizens, they have a right to a comprehensive and robust climate change education, to ensure they become responsible decision makers in the future (Dolan, forthcoming). There is a vagueness in relation to pedagogical approaches and strategies and we are concerned that the role and importance of critical pedagogy is omitted. Giroux (2009) outlines the political nature of agency and observes that if education is going to respond to societal problems, pedagogical conditions must be put in place to promote criticality and transformation.

While it is laudable and appropriate that the principle of 'Partnerships' is named as one of the eight overarching principles (Figure 1 and Table 1), this is not described, defined or operationalised in any part of the document, nor is current educational policy in this regard given any consideration. This is a very disappointing lacuna in the overall approach. Creating partnerships should be a priority for every school community and not "an optional extra" (INTO, 1997, p.12). Parents are recognised as the primary educators of the child (DES 1999), thus partnership should involve parents and teachers sharing responsibility and power, setting out aims, committing to work together while having a degree of compromise (O' Toole et al. 2019). We suggest that Figure 5 (p.25) is flawed in terms of its representation of the central role that parents play in their children's lives and learning, in particular as advocates for their child throughout the child's entire time in school. Figure 5 should indicate that parents act on behalf of their child and in their child's interests in relation to assessment. Parents' commitment and engagement - as teachers in the home - positively impact on their child's success in their learning. For example, in relation to reading achievement, studies have shown that children who were regularly read to by their parents before they began primary school were better, more competent readers – with results still observable up to sixth class (Eivers et al. 2004). This highlights the importance of parental involvement and, more specifically, parents as teachers - particularly in

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the early years but also throughout a child's education. Their role has become even more visible since the onset of Covid-19.

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.

It is evident that the draft framework reflects societal change nationally and globally and is predicated upon a strong evidence base provided by the GUI study, a resource that was not available for the 1999 curriculum. The presentation of assessment as an integral part of learning rather than solely a summative event is clear and the visual support is effective here.

We consider that the reconceptualised curriculum areas and the revised time allocations will serve to avoid a perceived hierarchy of subjects. We cannot comment on curriculum overload at this stage as much will depend upon what will be contained within each curriculum area. The potential for an additive model needs to be avoided as this is what causes a sense of overload. At macro level the perception that all societal issues can be addressed through the inclusion of new policies, projects and programmes in education needs to be challenged. Education programmes alone, while

endeavouring to respond to societal problems, are often of limited benefit in the absence of inter-departmental support.

We wish to thank those involved in the development of this draft framework for their work and we look forward to the next stage in the process.

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