

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

Organisation submission details

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Yes

No

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

The DCU Institute of Education represents the largest body of expertise in education in Ireland. The institute delivers programmes in education and training, early childhood education and teacher education, providing graduates with the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to excel in a variety of educational contexts such as preschools, schools, vocational, adult and community settings.

Joe Usher, Dr. Benjamin Mallon and Dr Susan Pike are Assistant Professors in Geography Education within the Institute of Education, and are all teaching and researching in the area of primary geography 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.

Section 1

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

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the proposed draft primary curriculum framework. While the comments made in this written response are related to general education, this response predominantly focuses on the Draft from a geography education perspective. In this opening section, we provide the context for this proposal in light of existing research into Primary Geography Education in Ireland, education in the context of climate breakdown, and key responses to the principles and competencies underpinning the Draft framework. We then address each of the following sections, further elaborating on these initial responses, with reference to existing research and educational practice.

It should be noted that we would very much welcome an opportunity to discuss the details and developments of the primary geography curriculum within the new primary curriculum at the subsequent stages of this curriculum development.

Current Practice in Primary Geography Education in Ireland

The Draft refers to how the current 1999 curriculum “has been the focus of research, review and evaluation” and that “this activity has provided insights into both strengths of and challenges with the curriculum”. It is important to note that geography remains one of the few primary subjects which has not been reviewed since the 1999 curriculum was introduced. No large-scale research into teachers’ practices pertaining to geography in primary school has been carried out to date. This is extremely concerning, given the fact that a new curriculum is being devised with no large-scale quantitative data or research into the strengths and challenges specifically relating to geography in primary schools.

From the research that does exist in an Irish context, it appears that the teaching methods employed in geography lessons are somewhat dominated by traditional, didactic textbook-based methods involving rote-learning, emphasising the learning about non-local places and physical features. Pike (2006) found that limited pedagogical approaches including rote-learning and textbook-based teaching dominated pupils’ learning experiences pertaining to the current 1999 primary geography curriculum. This is despite the fact that the 1999 primary geography curriculum advocates strongly against rote-learning and states that “mere rote memorisation ... contributes little to the learning process” (NCCA 1999: 10). Additionally, the 1999 curriculum warns that: “textbooks, of their very nature, cannot adequately cover geography and should therefore be regarded as one source among many for the teaching of geography” (NCCA 1999, 44). Despite this, a 2005 INTO survey of 717 primary teachers found that 88% of respondents used textbooks as the core component in the delivery of the SESE element of the primary curriculum (i.e. history, geography and science). The content of textbooks, and order of this content, was found to be the major determining factor in the planning and teaching of SESE related lessons (INTO 2005).

There is also evidence that certain aspects of the existing curriculum are not reflected in classroom practice. For example, the emphasis which the current 1999 primary geography curriculum places on the local area is largely neglected (Cummins, 2010; Pike, 2011).

However, it should also be acknowledged that classroom practice varies and there is evidence of exceptional practices where the current geography curriculum is delivered as envisaged. For instance, both Pike (2015) and Dolan (2020) refer to small-scale case study examples of teachers using experiential child-centred enquiry approaches as advocated by the 1999 curriculum. Therefore, any newly developed curriculum is only as effective as the professional learning and supports provided to aid its implementation.

Geography education and the current climate

The 1999 curriculum makes explicit reference to engagement with 'climate' as a feature of both the natural environment and environmental awareness and care. Faced by accelerating climate change, there is an imperative to ensure that children and young people are provided with the opportunities to engage with transformative Climate Change Education, and coordinated governmental policy is essential to frame classroom practice in this area (Waldron, Mallon, Barry and Martinez-Sainz, 2020). As an issue requiring a multi-disciplinary response, there is a need to ensure the infusion of climate change education across educational policy (e.g. Cantell, Topplanen, Aarnio-Linnanvuori & Lehtonen, 2019). Research has identified that Geography Education is an important site for teaching and learning about climate change within Irish primary classrooms (Waldron, Oberman, Ruane & Morris, 2016). Within existing practice, Geography Education offers the opportunity to develop important understandings of climate science, but also the potential to discuss, develop and implement actions for addressing climate change.

Principles of the Draft curriculum

We welcome the eight overarching principles of teaching and learning that underpin the draft framework in that they are broad, holistic and wide-ranging enough to reflect the diverse contexts of schools throughout Ireland as well as each individual child's unique personal experiences, abilities and circumstances. Moreover, they align with fundamental principles for best-practice teaching and learning in geography.

Building on children's prior knowledge and experiences, their everyday geographies or 'ethnogeographies' is essential in connecting children to the learning content and developing skills (Martin, 2008). We welcome the acknowledgement of both indoor and outdoor learning environments including the physical environment as fundamental in children's learning across the curriculum. However, on page 20 of the Draft there is reference to teachers and "the children in their classrooms". We suggest this be changed to "their classes" and that curriculum documents contain clear definitions for learning environments and a recognition that these are not limited to the four walls of a classroom. The identification of the importance of engagement with communities and that children be enabled to demonstrate agency and become active citizens with specific reference to decision-making, collaboration and creativity is also very positive and aligns with key principles of geography.

Key Competencies and the Draft Curriculum

We agree with the principles underpinning the seven key competencies which support the curriculum's vision. We welcome the acknowledgement of the need for children to "interact and engage with the natural world around them and come to an appreciation of its value and their responsibilities as custodians of it". However, this need to engage and interact with the world around them must also include reference to the built world around them also – the streets, cities, towns and villages in which they live, and how these places work for the communities that inhabit them.

The Draft document rightly upholds the importance of dispositions and skills including resilience, creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving and decision making. These skills and dispositions are relevant in how we design and plan our environment to tackle the global (and local) challenges outlined in the Draft such as climate change and sustainability.

We recognise the inextricable links between all seven key competencies presented in the Draft. Being an Active Citizen is a much welcomed competency which certainly goes a long way in answering a question posed in the document of 'What is primary education for?'. We maintain that it is essential that our young people develop the skills, attitudes and knowledge that will motivate and empower them to take actions to live justly, sustainably and with regard for the rights of others. We recommend that geography be specifically identified as a subject which is conducive to the attainment of this key competency. Furthermore, in order to place democratic learning at the centre of the learning process (as is advocated for in the Draft), we strongly suggest that specific links be made within the curriculum documentation to the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making and the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child. Lundy's (2007) model for children's participation should be incorporated into the conceptualization of the curriculum. This model already underpins the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making. Specific links should be made with Aistear which operationalises children's rights in early childhood education. Indeed, the UNCRC is affirmed through Aistear which provides for a broad-based, integrated approach to curriculum which involves young children in planning, implementation and review of their learning.

It is important that each of the competencies are not siloed into individual subject areas. For example, Being Mathematical should not be a competency solely related to mathematics education. The role of geography in Being Mathematical should also be identified through links to geographic thinking such as spatial awareness and the identification and uncovering of patterns and trends.

Research has highlighted some of the challenges in implementing a competency-based educational framework, and the importance of a commitment to sustained teacher education opportunities to develop transformative educational practice (Murphy, Smith, Mallon and Wiek, 2020).

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 curriculum we prescribe for schools demonstrates to children what is important for them to learn, and we maintain that there is no greater indicator of the perceived importance of a subject area than the amount of time officially allocated to it. The DES circular (Circular 0056/2011) advised that literacy and numeracy be prioritised “by delaying the introduction of strands and strand units from the history and geography curriculum for the infant classes and first and second classes to later in the primary cycle” (DES 2011, 4, 39). Indeed, such was the influence of this circular and the national literacy and numeracy strategy that the 2005 Primary Review (INTO) found 71% of teachers exceeded the time allocated to teaching literacy and numeracy, with geography, history and science being the subjects to ‘lose out’. There was a failure here to recognise the capacity of geography to raise literacy and numeracy attainment levels.

We welcome the monthly and weekly allocation of time as it supports the balanced and holistic nature of the primary curriculum and gives teachers more flexibility and allows for discretionary time which can be used to teach discrete skills and concepts pertaining to geography, within a thematic space that allows for cross curricular links to be made with other subjects/subject areas. Specific connections between Geography education and other curriculum areas such as SPHE, ethics, PE, literacy, numeracy, etc. could be overtly articulated to scaffold important connections between these disciplines. There is always a

fear that monthly allocation may reduce teaching of explicit geographical concepts and skills, through infrequent engagement with geography or curriculum overload. Protected time for geography within the monthly allocation could somewhat address this. Allocation of time is indicative of importance and not assigning time specifically to subjects such as geography diminishes their importance.

Option 1 is most desirable with more time afforded to Social and Environmental Education but also more flexible time for teachers to pursue meaningful subject integration.

Furthermore, care must be taken in affording agency and flexibility in school pertaining to the delivery of the curriculum. As is evidenced from the Northern Ireland curriculum and our own current 1999 primary curriculum, aspects of curricula can become under taught or even outright neglected. This happened in the World Around Us in Northern Ireland and is also evidenced in Irish teachers' focus on distant places and physical features in geography to the detriment of teaching geography in and about the local area and using fieldwork and other child-centred experiential approaches. Therefore, in order to assuage these concerns, support must be provided through professional learning opportunities and numerous clear exemplars within curriculum documents.

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 welcome the focus on linking learning experiences from Aistear through to the Junior Cycle. In this regard, it is important to note the need for specific mention to be given to geo-literacy, particularly in the structural context of continuity and transitioning into Junior Cycle Geography. The ultimate goal of geo-literacy is to facilitate children's participation in decision making through the use of geographic understanding and reasoning. Geo-literacy integrates literacy and numeracy into geographical investigations, which by default improves learning outcomes in reading and mathematics (Dolan, 2019).

Linking with Aistear in terms of carrying forward a rights-based and UNCRC informed curriculum which provides children with a curricular entitlement for children's rights education is very positive.

However, we do have some concerns in "linking 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 Cycles". While there is a value in looking at different ways of conceptualising areas of learning, conflating that with a thematic or topic based curriculum risks losing what is most valuable in the current 1999 curriculum i.e. the way in which it enables children to bring different lenses to bear on how they understand the world. Enabling children to develop their emerging capacities to think historically, geographically, scientifically, mathematically etc. about the world provides children with both rich experiences of learning and diverse ways of understanding the world. While play pedagogy is wholly appropriate in the context of early childhood and, indeed, throughout primary education, it should be noted that this is not the only way in which children can and should learn from early years onward. Furthermore, there is a danger that in a topic-based approach, classroom practice will devolve into superficial content-oriented teaching with little focus on the development and attainment of skills and conceptual development.

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.

Please see Section 1 in relation to our comments on the principles and key competencies underpinning the redeveloped curriculum. Further to this, while increased emphasis on digital learning and the identification of Being a Digital Learner as a key competency within the Draft is appropriate, it should be acknowledged that digital learning transcends all curriculum areas. It is a pedagogical approach rather than a curricular area in itself.

Geography’s intrinsic connections with the Wellbeing curriculum area, particularly SPHE and also Ethics should be recognised and explicitly acknowledged in the redeveloped curriculum. Geography’s role and capacity in developing children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions and values is widely accepted and lauded (Jones and Lambert, 2018; Catling, 2015).

Additionally, the Draft emphasises curriculum overload and the need for autonomy and flexibility for teachers in how they deliver the redeveloped curriculum. Contrastingly, the Draft and current document are also placing greater emphasis on areas above such as PE, SPHE, modern foreign languages, ERB and Arts Education. We challenge the justification for this emphasis. The very rationale for redeveloping the primary curriculum, as outlined in the Draft, specifically identifies global challenges “such as climate change, sustainability, human migration and geopolitical shifts” which “illustrate the importance of dispositions and skills such as resilience, creativity, innovation and critical thinking in the young and future generations”. It is without question that these challenges cannot be understood nor addressed by children or adults without geography education. This needs to be acknowledged and reflected in emerging priorities for children’s learning.

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.)

§ 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.

Curriculum integration in development stages 1 and 2 which builds on and extends children's earlier experiences through *Aistear* is to be welcomed with caution. The Draft maintains that integration affords the teacher "greater choice in planning for, and facilitating coherent and relevant rich learning experiences". This requires profound levels of support for teachers in the way of pedagogical content knowledge for curriculum areas and subjects. On reflection, the current 1999 curriculum is a menu curriculum with a significant focus on the development of skills and concepts, and on children as constructors of knowledge about the world. It presents teachers and schools with opportunities to create a curriculum that suits the needs of their own unique local context. While the issue of curriculum overload is keenly felt by teachers and needs to be addressed (NCCA, 2010), there are other factors at play which a redeveloped curriculum

will not address, namely the role accorded to textbooks and workbooks in the determination of what counts as curriculum (Waldron, 2013) .

While the research informing this Draft document maintains that an integrated approach eliminates duplication across subject areas, there are no studies referenced where duplication has emerged as a problem in an Irish primary education context.

From a geography perspective, the subject is often lauded as a subject that lends itself well to thematic cross-curricular integration (Greenwood, Richardson, and Gracie 2017). Indeed, Catling (2010) maintains that geography is the ultimate integrator subject because of geography's real-life, everyday nature. Geography has been found to increase children's literacy and language development (Lewis 2010), their numeracy skills (Pound and Lee 2011; Whittle 2013) and digital technology skills (Russell 2010). This should be acknowledged and reflected in the curriculum documents and with particular reference to the key competencies.

There are challenges to implementing an integrated approach. Greenwood (2017; 2013) highlights issues in the integrated approach in the Northern Ireland primary education system. Care must be taken to ensure that links between subjects are tangible rather than forced, weak or superficial, leading to a 'dumbing down' of content and skill development (Alexander 2009; Rowley and Cooper 2009). Moreover, integrated approaches demand a deep level of subject understanding and a great level of skill and 'pedagogical repertoire' on the part of the teacher (Burgess 2004; Wood 2011, 39). Therefore, were such an approach to be promoted in the new primary curriculum, higher standards of professional learning at ITE and in-service levels needs to be provided.

While the Draft makes it clear that this consultation is specifically on the structure of the new curriculum and the actual subject content and skills will be discussed and debated in forthcoming consultations, it is important to note the need for specific mention to be given to geo-literacy, particularly in the structural context of continuity and transitioning into Junior Cycle Geography. The ultimate goal of geo-literacy is to facilitate children's participation in decision making through the use of geographic understanding and reasoning. Geo-literacy integrates literacy and numeracy into geographical investigations, which by default improves learning outcomes in reading and mathematics (Dolan, 2019).

There are also different forms of integration presented in the Draft. There is integration between Geography and History within the curriculum area Social and Environmental Education. There is also integration between this area and other curriculum areas such as science, literacy, numeracy, ethics, SPHE, PE etc. Clear exemplars of tangible links and meaningful integration should be provided. We have concerns over the indication that the redeveloped curriculum will be presented in five documents -one per curriculum area. We question how the document for Social and Environmental Education will be structured i.e. with separate geography and history sections or as one whole area in itself. The strength of the current 1999 curriculum in integrating science and geography through the shared strength of Environmental Awareness and Care should not be lost in the redevelopment of the curriculum.

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.

We welcome the pedagogical approaches espoused in the Draft document. Both the current 1999 primary geography curriculum and geography education research more broadly advocate for experiential, child-centred methods in which pupils are empowered to work as geographers, actively involved in the creation and development of their own knowledge, skill development and learning. Here, the learning should be linked to pupils' previous experiences and understandings and the relevance of the topic to authentic situations and the real-world should be at the forefront of the teaching. As such there is a strong emphasis on learning in and about the local area in geography, building upon pupils' everyday experiences and prior knowledge. Powerful primary geography education prioritises outdoor learning in terms of fieldwork, using the locality for enquiry-based learning and experiential learning. These pedagogical approaches must be explicitly outlined and identified in any curriculum documents.

Again, it should be noted that we would welcome an opportunity to discuss the details and developments of the primary geography curriculum within the new primary curriculum at the subsequent stages of this curriculum development.

See below section for commentary pertaining to assessment

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.

We would like to reiterate our concerns in relation to “building on the successes and strengths of the 1999 curriculum” where geography has not been reviewed or undergone any detailed large-scale research and evaluation by the NCCA since the introduction of the 1999 curriculum. There is no existing documentation or publication by the NCCA outlining what it perceives the strengths and successes of the current 1999 primary geography curriculum are.

We are also extremely concerned with the celebrated “success” of the 1999 curriculum in “improved attainment levels in reading, mathematics and science as evidenced in national and international assessments”.

Firstly, this reference of national and international assessments contradicts the broad aims of the new curriculum as outlined in this document and within the Draft: For instance, the aims for Agency and Flexibility include: “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”.

Secondly, emphasising success in international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS is extremely worrying given the negative impact that the literacy and numeracy strategy and the DES circular (Circular0056/2011) (which were in response to PISA results) had on the teaching and delivery of geography and the broad nature of the curriculum in general. This has been heavily criticised from a geography perspective (Usher, 2019) and more broadly where increased emphasis on standardised testing on ‘priority areas’ can lead to didactic, ‘teach-to-test’ teaching methods dominating schools, less pedagogical innovation, and a shift away from arts and social science-based subjects (Anagnostopoulos 2005; MacRuairc 2009; McNeil 2000; O’Donnell 2010; Velde Pederson 2007).

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Thank you for your submission.