

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

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Organisation submission details

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**Irish Forest
School Association**

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The Irish Forest School Association (IFSA) was founded in 2016 and is engaged in the promotion and development of the Forest School (FS) movement in Ireland. We bring Forest School practitioners together to inspire inclusive, playful learning for all, in nature. We want to build resilience and relationships, through our connection with each other, and the natural world, while inspiring creativity and supporting wellbeing. More information can be found on our website www.irishforestschoollassociation.ie.

Six core principles govern FS:

1. FS is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
2. FS takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
3. FS uses a range of learner centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
4. FS aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
5. FS offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
6. FS is run by qualified FS practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

It is the unique combination of these six principles which sets FS apart from other outdoor learning experiences. In practice, in the primary school context, FS is about the same group of learners and leaders spending a sustained period outdoors, in a natural, wooded environment, once a week, ideally year-round during the school day. FS is situated within a progressive, experiential paradigm (Dewey, 1938/1975) that prioritises collaboration, experiential learning and child-led practice. Observation and reflection are key assessment tools.

FS was first introduced as an approach in the Republic of Ireland in a Dublin primary school in 2012 (Irish Forest School Association, 2017). Around the same time, FS training began to be provided in Ireland and a number of early years' initiatives and FS programmes in the informal education sector began. In the Republic of Ireland, in 2020, there are about 150 trained practitioners, not all of whom are practicing, across the formal and informal

education sectors. Exemplars of FS in action in Ireland can be found on our website at <https://irishforestschoolassociation.ie/stories-from-forest-schools/>

While this submission is primarily concerned with the place FS can play in the Irish primary school curriculum, we welcome all opportunities for children to engage with local natural places in myriad ways during their primary school years.

We have consulted with our members in putting together this response to the Draft curriculum guidelines. We thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this important consultation process.

Section 1

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

IFSA welcome the overall direction of the proposed curriculum, in particular the emphasis on blocks of time, local flexibility and consideration of curriculum overload.

IFSA echoes the Draft Curriculum Framework's vision to 'provide a strong foundation for every child to thrive and flourish, supporting them in realising their full potential as individuals and as members of communities and society' (p.2).

IFSA acknowledge the reference to indoor and outdoor learning environments in the Principles of the Framework, but feel greater emphasis should be given to the role outdoor environments can offer children as they develop.

The emphasis on evidence-based research to inform the Framework is an important one and IFSA highlights the theoretical underpinning of Forest School pedagogy within the progress, experiential paradigm.

Broad curriculum areas rather than subject-specific areas is vital to an holistic, well-rounded curriculum. We want to see these broad areas continued into Stages 3 and 4.

The provision of a Toolkit for the recent Primary Language Curriculum has been beneficial for teachers in supporting the attainment of the Learning Outcomes. It is assuring to see these will be developed for the next iteration of the curriculum. IFSA would hope to see the inclusion of a substantial element of outdoor learning environments in these resources, to fit with the emphasis on the Framework's 'indoor and outdoor learning environments'.

The importance of integration and a holistic approach to pedagogy cannot be underestimated. FS naturally enables this as learners experience various integrated curriculum opportunities with real-life contexts and develop critical thinking skills, problem solving abilities and other transferable skills.

Section 2

Agency and flexibility in schools

Feedback in relation to this key message.

While we welcome the principle behind this, not all schools may be in a position to enact that agency to the degree that we see it should be enacted in the context of opportunities for children to engage in outdoor learning and in particular learning in local natural places. So we think that that flexibility should be exercised within parameters. In Scotland, for example this curriculum statement is an overarching one re outdoor learning:

Our vision for outdoor learning in Scotland is that:

- all children and young people are participating in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences which are clearly part of the curriculum
- schools and centres are providing regular, frequent, enjoyable and challenging opportunities for all children and young people to learn outdoors throughout their school career and beyond
- teachers and educators embed outdoor learning in the curriculum so that learning in the outdoor environment becomes a reality for all children and young people.

We think Scotland is a good example of supporting outdoor learning more generally
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/a-summary-of-outdoor-learning-resources/>

2010 Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning

<https://education.gov.scot/media/gnufmnmq/hwb24-cfe-through-outdoor-learning.pdf>

That level of detail is required.

Grey and Martin (2012) recommended in the Australian context for example that: *The National curriculum could provide a mandate for every child to experience the natural world based not on a scientific or sociological study, but on direct, visceral and personal engagement with nature.*

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) in exploring inclusive pedagogy note the idea of ‘seeing difficulties in learning as a professional challenge rather than deficit in learners’ (p.819). If the curriculum is ‘to be for every child’, it is vital to acknowledge the various learning and development styles of children. We must be cognisant of those with additional

educational needs, those with English as an additional language etc. and work to ensure our schools can facilitate their development and learning as effectively as possible.

The importance of parent and child and community voice must be highlighted if the curriculum is to promote agency. We also feel that other education staff, such as support staff, care staff and special education needs assistants, as well as other providers who work with schools are sometime silent in official documents and yet they are often most directly involved in implementation of initiatives in the school setting. The more voices that are heard, the richer the initiative and the more likely that implementation will be successful.

Curriculum connections between preschool, primary and post-primary schools

Feedback in relation to this key message.

Connection and balance are core components of Forest School and other nature-based approaches to learning. Forest School pedagogy can help to promote a deeper understanding of human nature and of the relationship between the human world and the natural world, a theoretical thread that can be traced back to Rousseau, who regarded a connection to nature as fundamental to optimal human functioning.

In order to connect with the purpose set out in the document of living a good life, connection to real world settings through place-based approaches such as Forest School is equally important, particularly in the context of caring for our world and promoting sustainability.

Connection in different ways within settings must also be promoted. Forest School facilitates connection to peers in a different setting, the natural one, during formal schooling. Interactions between each other are different between the two settings (classroom /FS) and school staff can also learn more about individual children in the different environments. This in turn promotes optimal learning opportunities and engagement

The benefits of play-based learning have been evidenced from the Aistear framework within the early years. We feel this approach can be utilised throughout the primary years with research highlighting the benefits of play based learning for all age groups, not just early-years. Being outdoors in local natural places seems to facilitate this to a greater degree than the regular classroom setting. We would like to see more emphasis on playful learning - fun and autonomy, which are closely aligned to engagement.

Nature connection is a core part of forest School. The literature suggests that FS pedagogy, through its emphasis on co-constructed, learner-led approaches in the natural environment can help ensure that relationship, between adults and children, between children and their peers and between the human and the natural world is at the core of the teaching and learning process in the primary school. Orr (1992) reminds us that 'educational institutions are potential leverage points for the transition to sustainability' (p. 84).

Emerging priorities for children’s learning

Feedback in relation to this key message.

We think that pedagogical approaches such as Forest School can provide for the development of skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes across multiple curricular areas and so this curriculum needs to highlight that interconnectedness of all learning activity. This is key to managing curriculum overload.

We feel that more thought needs to be given to moving towards ‘subjects’ in the final four years of primary – we feel this is a step backwards. While subject-specific knowledge is important to a degree, the benefits of integrated learning is central in developing an understanding of the interconnected and interdependent nature of the world (physical, natural, social, economic etc.) and is critical to developing holistic individuals - a key aim of the curriculum.

Learning spaces and places – we think this needs to be articulated more fully – the classroom, the school grounds, the local environment, local natural places – need to be specifically articulated

The seven key competencies outlined on page 7 of the Draft Framework are relevant and important ones. The recognition of and inclusion of Forest School as a suitable learning environment and pedagogic approach in the new curriculum can serve as a realistic medium through which these competencies can be elucidated in the child. FS embraces each of these competencies and their related attributes. Outdoor learning can enlighten us to the diversity yet interconnectedness of the world around us whilst progressing social, emotional and physical wellbeing (Murphy, 2018).

Furthermore, given the priority afforded to observation and reflection, to the co-creation of learning and to placing the person, not the curriculum, as the pivot around which learning occurs, it is suggested that FS can offer a potentially transformative pedagogical approach that responds to the developmental importance of children’s early engagement with the natural environment for the development of their understanding of the ways to ensure an ecologically sustainable future for all.

Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented

Feedback in relation to this key message.

Include nature-based learning as one of the curriculum areas and/or name nature-based learning explicitly as part of “social and environmental education”

We think lots of support for school staff to ensure that as children move through the system, ‘subjects’ do not take priority over holistic project-based approaches to learning.

We understand the priority that the draft document gives to wellbeing and we welcome this; however, we question whether this should be organised as a curricular area – surely it is a foundational aspect of all curricular areas?

We would like to see lots of images of learning in non-classroom settings – we think this can be a powerful way for school communities to consider alternative ways to deliver the curriculum.

We would like to see greater mention in the curriculum documents regarding potential collaborations between schools and organisations like IFSA, The Heritage Council, Coillte Nature for example that want to collaborate with schools.

As part of the implementation process, we would support the development of ‘exemplar’ Forest School sites on publicly owned land/Universities and Colleges of Education that work in partnership with local schools. The Natural Connections Demonstration Project in England is one such example:

https://www.ltl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/necr215_edition_1.pdf

There is significant potential for ‘informal’ education to be incorporated into the curriculum (e.g. Forest School, outdoor learning activities, community outreach activities etc.). These can offer scope for learning beyond the traditional model of classroom-based, teacher-led interactions and work towards achieving child-centred, holistic learning experiences. Through engagements with other stakeholders in the broader education field, children are exposed to learning across a variety of settings and styles and are more inclined to become proactive, engaged and independent learners.

We would like specific and detailed mention of the Sustainability goals throughout the curriculum documents.

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

Feedback in relation to this key message.

It is acknowledged assessment is a crucial component to effective teaching and learning.

We would like to see the inclusion of self-assessment in the revised Continuum of Assessment presented in the Framework. Since the curriculum espouses a child-centred approach, the promotion of self and peer assessment techniques are fundamental in enabling the child to take responsibility for their own learning. FS achieves this by encouraging the child to be an active agent in their own journey/learning thus, building resilience and independence.

We want to highlight the importance of informal observations from a variety of settings as key to a quality portfolio of continuous assessment.

Progressive pedagogical approaches are not possible without a reduction in the pupil teacher ratio or at least opportunities for children and adults to engage with each other in smaller groups on a regular basis.

Support for senior leaders innovation/ importance of schools articulating purpose, why they become involved in particular initiatives such as FS, so that they do not become another programme, but can be ‘transformational’ .

While equality of opportunity is advocated, we believe a modern, progressive curriculum in Ireland must aim for equity in education. This goes further to advocate ‘equality of condition’ which involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals (Lynch and Baker, 2005). While assessment is important in teaching and learning, the model of assessment must be flexible and offer equity to all learners. Teachers must be empowered to be context-sensitive and to utilise appropriate strategies of teaching and learning, and assessment, to work towards equality of condition for all learners. In our view, the FS approach enables

this. It is critical the new curriculum embraces diversity of learners, promotes inclusion of all learners and challenges inequalities.

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

Feedback in relation to this key message.

We would like to see recognition of recognise School Gardens and Forest School as successful initiatives that should be included in school curriculum

Forest School pedagogy can help to promote a deeper understanding of human nature and of the relationship between the human world and the natural world, a theoretical thread that can be traced back to Rousseau, who regarded a connection to nature as fundamental to optimal human functioning.

We think curriculum development must be approached within a theory of change perspective, in other words, the importance of school communities articulating a vision for their pedagogical approach, based on their educational purpose, is non-negotiable. We think this needs to be kept at the forefront of this endeavour, otherwise we are on a rudderless journey.

While the 1999 curriculum made significant advances in promoting active learning methodologies in the classroom, it brought with it challenges for teachers and school leaders to effectively address all curriculum areas sufficiently to achieve the aim of the holistic development of the child. We feel the inclusion of FS as a new pedagogic approach in schools can serve to enable greater and more effective integration of curriculum areas. FS is inherently focused on the child and their holistic development. Through its six core principles, all 5 broad curriculum areas of the Draft Curriculum, can readily be addressed in a modern, innovative way. 'Education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process' (Dewey, 2009). Forest School is effective in engaging children more naturally in learning activities whilst developing resilience and coping strategies and promoting their social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing.

The 1999 curriculum espouses a child-centred approach to teaching and learning. The actualisation of this in reality is disputed due to many reasons and limitations. However, IFSA would like to emphasise the enormous benefits yielded from true child-led activity and learning. The core principles of the FS approach enable this as the teacher/leader becomes a

facilitator of learning, enabling the child to understand, process and combine the various environmental, cognitive and behavioural elements.

We finish with some comments from a teacher and a child who participated in Forest school recently:

Emmett age 9

I think Forest school should be in other schools because it puts you in a good mood.

Forest school is special to me because it is relaxing and fun. I also get to see my friends that are not in my pod.

I love Forest school because of the freedom we have to play.

And from a teacher:

For children who find the classroom dynamic difficult at times it allowed them some space and freedom to use their energy in a different capacity which helped them focus back at school in a more formal setting. Being in nature had a calming effect and we often use this as a calming technique back in the classroom. They learnt to work better as a team and to respect and care for the environment. This is something we have also continued in the classroom and which now has relevance to them. It was particularly brilliant to see some of the quieter children using tools, climbing trees, and generally getting their time to shine! The children are also much so confident and comfortable when it comes to wrapping up and getting outdoors whatever the weather.

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Thank you for your submission.

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