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	Dr. John O'Reilly, Lecturer in Education Dr. Emmanuel O'Grady, Lecturer in practitioner research and educational inquiry
Date	22/12/20
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	
Position	
Organisation	
Date	
E-mail	

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?

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Yes | x | No

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

| |
| |

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. Section 2 is structured to align with the six key messages related to the framework. Each message is summarised as a support for you in working on the submission.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Section 1

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

The direction and focus of the draft primary curriculum framework is to be commended and draws on contemporary discourse to inform its evolution. This is driven by two core questions:

• What is the **purpose** of a primary education for tomorrow's children?
• What **priorities**, **structure** and **components** within a curriculum can support this?

These questions indicate a futures orientation to make a curriculum that can be responsive to a continuously and rapidly changing society which is very much in keeping with curriculum change in lower secondary school through the Junior Cycle Framework (JCF). There are significant developments in the positioning of teachers as "curriculum makers" (p.4), emphasising professional agency in the Vision for the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF). We believe it would be important and appropriate to make explicit reference to analogous student agency within the Vision for the PCF. This is reflected in the "Engagement" Principle (p.8) i.e. "Children are active and demonstrate agency as the capacity to act independently and to make choices about and in their learning. Curriculum experiences provide them with opportunities for decision-making, creativity and collaboration."

To realise professional and student agency it will be necessary to ground these aspirations in practical structures to enable operationalisation. There is a danger otherwise that the "…strategies to foster engagement, ownership and challenge while connecting with children's life experiences and their interests" described in the Pedagogy Principle (p.8) will involve mere lip-service to "relevant" material. These flexible, agentic structures are equally important to realise the welcome focus on partnership with families and communities and the recognition of the individuality and increased diversity of the student body. The Transitions and continuity Principle highlights the need to support the move to post-primary schools with some useful detail focused on connecting with key skills, principles and the "Education Passport" noting "What they learn and how they learn in primary school provides a strong foundation for their junior cycle experience" (p.19). While it seems to us that the concept of "Student Voice" is implicit in much of the PCF, we believe that explicit reference to this is necessary within the document as it highlights and integrates the ownership, agency and engagement aspired to within the Framework. This would perhaps represent the strongest connection with the JCF, emphasising the need to develop high expectations for students as capable actors and decision-makers.

To complement the stated approach in this consultation process, this response will develop on the "Negotiated Integrated Curriculum" (NIC) project and how it might contribute to the curriculum framework.

The need, and challenge, to promote curricular agency for learners and educators is well articulated (Lodge and Lynch 2000; Gleeson 2010; O'Grady et al. 2014). This is often set in the context of a democratic curriculum that seeks to enhance student and teacher ownership through active citizenship (Michel 2015) with the ultimate goal of schools acting as knowledge-building organisations from the earliest years of schooling (Chen and Hong 2016). Building on the work of many initiatives that have been undertaken to progress this, the "Negotiated Integrated Curriculum" (NIC) initiative detailed in this response attempts to illustrate a practical example of

how these were achieved in an Irish primary school setting and can hopefully contribute to its promotion in the curriculum framework. This work has been supported over numerous years by the NCCA.

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.

Teacher agency is a necessary condition to support the aspirations of the PCF. The focus on "Teachers' decisions about what to teach, when to teach it, how to sequence and pace learning, as well as decisions about the specific experiences to use are shaped by the strengths, needs, interests and individuality of the children with whom they work" (p.20) is very welcome. This expression of professional agency however does not seem sufficient to us to fully realise the aspirations of student ownership and engagement described above. We recommend that the PCF expand upon the concept of student Agentic Engagement which is "…manifest when students actively express their thoughts, opinions, and interests during activity, when they direct their own learning, when they engage communally, collectively, and critically with others and when they use culturally relevant tools and technologies" (Lawson and Lawson, 2013, p.X). While the teacher remains the ultimate arbiter of classroom work, there is a need to expand the concept of (age-appropriate) agency as a pervasive curriculum feature. In the absence of this explicit treatment there is a danger that the aspiration to incorporate Student Voice will not be realised.

The approach to using Learning Outcomes will play a significant role in this, providing a flexible structure for teachers and schools to plan in a manner that is responsive to their contexts. The

---

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

PCF provides some detail on this throughout the document but perhaps a succinct section could synthesise the relevant material in a manner that makes clear connections with curriculum making, the connections with approaches used in the JCF, the affordances in relation to flexibility, responsiveness to local context and the futures orientation.

Whilst aiming to achieve greater agency within the framework, the NIC initiative provides a practical path to achieve this. Drawing on the doctoral work of Fitzpatrick (2016) and a recent publication in Irish Educational Studies "Promoting student agentic engagement through curriculum: Exploring the Negotiated Integrated Curriculum initiative" will outline how to respond to this key message. Indeed this article is the only study with the term "agentic" in its title in the Journal "Irish Educational Studies" and has been viewed almost 1200 times to highlight its significance for promoting greater student agency. This approach considers 'curriculum as praxis' (Grundy 1987) in an attempt to redress power imbalance within curricula where often an underlying power relationship is inherent between those that design the curriculum and those who implement it (as well as the learners themselves). Indeed, Young (2010, 4 cited in Beck 2013, 179) describes the learning that takes place, decided by those far removed from those that learn, as ' "knowledge of the powerful"…[that] refers to the knowledge authorised by those in power – and leads to questions about who has the power? Is it legitimate and on what basis?'.
For learners within a 'curriculum as praxis', agency can be viewed as a conscious decision to shape the curriculum 'in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently' (Giddens 1984, 9). This agency 'depends upon the capability of the individual to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to "make a difference", that is, to exercise some sort of power' (Giddens 1984, 14). The NIC initiative enquires into students' concerns about life and constructs a curriculum to address these concerns as a mechanism that can be shaped to make learning more meaningful through agentic engagement. By further consultation, developments within the NIC initiative can inform the framework by highlighting how student voice, particularly around the decision making of pedagogical activities, can be practically implemented to enhance the perceived relevance of a curriculum; and secondly the process of negotiation between teachers and students to achieve this.

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.**

The NIC initiative was a longitudinal study over a number of years where this was adopted with students at the end of their primary school experience and onto their second level experience to promote greater coherence with the new developments at the junior cycle. To highlight the significance of student voice, perhaps the greatest testament to NIC as easing the transition into secondary school was demonstrated through the case of a student, Donal. Donal arrived to the secondary school 8 weeks into term and the principal made the decision to assign him to the 1 Basil class because of their participation in NIC:

1 Basil [pseudonym] have settled into secondary school quicker than any other 1st year group and this transition process has been accelerated by NIC. This is why I decided to place Donal [pseudonym] into 1 Basil [pseudonym]. All the group work and opportunities NIC provides for students to get to know each other and work together in a social environment will help him settle in as I know he is a bit anxious about making friends. (Luke, Principal).

The need for students to feel a coherent process in the approach to curriculum implementation between these historically different curricula would mitigate against the challenges students face during transition between primary and post-primary schools.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

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.

The PCF adopts an integrated view of student learning through the key competencies that should permeate the curriculum. Links with the key skills of the JCF are noted although it is highlighted that the competencies "…extend beyond skills and knowledge" (PCF, p.7). The reader may initially wonder if "competencies" also includes dispositions, values and attitudes (explicitly referred to in bullet 2 above)? Language in this section is perhaps a bit confused as there is also reference to "capabilities". The detail on pp.8 and 9 and Table 2 provides useful clarifications.

Certain competencies such as "Being creative", "Being mathematical" and "Being a digital learner" have clear analogues with the key skills in the JCF. The "Attributes" in Table 2 show some common language between the two Frameworks to make these connections explicit even when the titles of the competencies/skills differ. This is a welcome approach to developing shared understanding and practices. If these attributes are to be enacted and be used as a basis for planning in some ways

---

Please email your submission to

though there are some notable omissions (which may be intended) and some aspects that could be clarified. There is a welcome focus on student decision-making which would support the "Agentic Engagement" described in section 1, again emphasising the need for student agency to be considered a Principle of the PCF. It is interesting that, while numeracy has a particular focus in "Being mathematical", "being literate" (JCF) is encompassed in "Communicating and using Language" (PCF). While the detail provided regarding the latter makes clear that this involves engaging with text, the majority of what is written focuses on student communication. Given the significance of parsing text in the modern world, should "Being Literate" feature as a separate competency? Initially one might consider "Fostering Wellbeing" more as a Principle than a competency but the text provides useful clarification in the attributes involved than again emphasise student agency. Given the continued growth of non-denominational schools in Ireland, would a reference to "ethics" be more appropriate and inclusive than "spirituality"? There is sometimes a disconnect between the Attributes listed in Table 2 and the associated text on the page above. For example, the Attributes listed in Table 2 for "Learning to be a learner" are largely affective while the text offers a stronger cognitive focus. An explicit focus on metacognition here would strengthen the stated focus on the student as an "agentic learner", especially with respect to students planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning in an age-appropriate manner. This would also help to develop the competencies associated with the "Managing Myself" key skill of the JCF, especially in relation to organisation and goal setting, a critical capability to develop in fostering student self-regulation.

The explicit focus on "Being an active citizen" is very welcome, especially in relation to taking action and experiencing democratic processes, in giving students a significant voice through the curriculum. The NIC process naturally and organically lends itself to practical realisation of this competency (along with all others) and we would encourage associated professional development to consider training in this approach for all teachers, without which (or equivalent practical structures) there is a danger that mere lip-service will be paid to this competency.

It is of concern that there is a disconnect between Table 2 and the preceding text as it is stated that the attributes (Table 2) "…will be embedded through learning outcomes in the new specifications…" (p.9). If planning is only going to focus on the attributes it is likely that significant features included only in the accompanying text will be omitted. Overall then we would recommend that a careful mapping exercise be conducted to ensure that Table 2 has a complete list of attributes coherent

with the accompanying text and that the clear focus on student agency in these competencies be reflected as an explicit principle (along with teacher agency).

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.

A Negotiated Integrated Curriculum (NIC) is a form of thematically linked curriculum. Its central and distinctive features are a theme based on students' expressed concerns in relation to themselves and global issues; continuous negotiation with students about their questions, learning activities and their appropriate assessment methods to address these concerns; and the integration of traditionally discrete subject

---

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

boundaries.

The first of these components develops a theme through a democratic process to organise and integrate the content of multiple curricular subjects. The process follows the Beane (2005) NIC model, offering a clear methodology to operationalise the aspirations of Boomer's negotiated model and Beane's (1993) integrative model in a structured way. This model is structured into 10 steps, initiating a complex process to negotiate a new curriculum with students in a manageable way. The evolution of this process begins with Beane's (1993) assertion that the sources of curriculum ought to be problems, issues, and concerns posed by life itself and such concerns fall into two categories; personal and world concerns. To begin with, students are introduced to the concept of engaging in learning focused on issues of concern to them, in relation to their own lives and the world around them. The primacy of student concerns about themselves and society in this curriculum (Beane 1993) reflects the hope that this will enhance meaningful, agentic engagement by facilitating an authentic inquiry into complex issues that are likely difficult to address independently.

Interestingly, in a review of the successful transformative change in extremely diverse settings, Wrigley, Thomson, and Lingard (2011) note that a focus on addressing student concerns seems one of the few commonalities in the cases they examined.

It is also likely that a focus on student concerns can support student investment in the work that follows as Lawson and Lawson (2013) indicate that this is driven by intrinsic and utilitarian value, namely, students may find the work inherently meaningful and worthwhile and/or it will help them to address significant issues in terms of increasing understanding or taking action.

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.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

- 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.

It is stated that "The vision and principles guiding the redevelopment of the primary curriculum place high-quality teaching and learning at the heart of that curriculum." (p.20). This reflects the ultimate goal of any curriculum document, in providing sufficient clarity to avoid curricular drift while simultaneously not being overly prescriptive (especially in the context of professional agency) and lengthy. At the heart of this issue is the development of a shared understanding of what is meant by "high-quality". While relationships, pedagogical approaches and teacher agency are alluded to in the introduction to this section (Teaching and Learning), there is no explicit reference to student competencies/attributes/agency which should be added.

The shift in focus from ability as a fixed concept to "…variability, competency and opportunity." (p.20) in making learning more relevant and meaningful for each child through responsive pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is to be commended. UDL is referenced however in relation to use in developing the curriculum specifications which is a necessary but not sufficient condition. This seems at odds with the focus on inclusivity which should include the use of UDL as an overarching planning and pedagogical structure in every classroom. Indeed, while the description of pedagogical approaches again highlights the agency of the professional teacher which should encompass all three UDL principles, "Action and Expression" is impossible to achieve without enabling student agency. The significance of context and children's experiences are highlighted as a central aspect of pedagogy but in the absence of concrete, practical structures to realise this, such as NIC, there is a danger that such general statements will remain superficial and

vague in the eyes of busy teachers who are practical people. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015, p.636) highlight this via two quotes from teachers engaging with curriculum reform in Scotland:

"The actual Curriculum for Excellence philosophy, if that is the right use of the word, where it is all about the children, it is all about preparing them for all of these things but then they come up with something that is very airy fairy. (Teacher D)"

"Well it is the theories sound great and then what we are getting on bits of paper just seems like, 'oh we have to change this and do this'. And I do not know, it is overly complicated but then there is a mixture between outlines and then not enough detail. (…) Most people I have spoken to feel the same as I do, that they are fumbling about trying things. (Teacher E)"

"Integration" is noted as a "central tenet" (p.20) of high-quality teaching and learning which is very welcome and can be strongly supported practically through the affordances of the NIC. The fact that children live in an integrated world, requiring individuals to draw on a complex network of knowledge and skills to address challenges and live a fulfilled life is highlighted. Again, there is a danger here that, in the absence of practical structures such as NIC, the exact meaning of Integration and how it is to be achieved will remain vague and unrealised. This is reflected in highlighting the need for professional development. There are a significant variety of approaches described in the literature (Fogarty, 1991 for example) in relation to models of curricular integration and it would be useful for the PCF to draw on this to describe, in more detailed pedagogical terms, what exactly is meant by "Integration" in purpose and practice. See the previous section for detail. The bullet pointed details relating to pedagogical approaches and strategies on p.22 summarise and represent the core features of the PCF well. We would recommend, as per arguments above, that student agency should feature strongly here. In relation to assessment the statement that "The curriculum supports teacher and child agency by prioritising an assessment culture in which insights feed into and influence the nature and direction of teaching and learning in real time." (p.24) is very significant. As per previous comments there is a need to provide some detail as to how students might take increasing responsibility, have more of a voice in assessment approaches. "Assessment as Learning" may have some significant affordances here. For example, the NIC process continuously used the following questions "What do we want to know?; What do we already know about this?; How will we find new information?; How will we show what we have

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

13

learned?". These explicit scaffolds make the aspirations of including student voice, agency and metacognitive reasoning in assessment approaches concrete.

Another product of the NIC initiative was the intention for students to take an active role in decision-making around the content they would learn, how they would learn it, and how they would be assessed. For example, students were involved in making decisions around the appropriate assessment strategies and criteria such as projects, presentations, plays, poems, and raps with one student noting that 'our group decided to put all our research facts into a poem instead of on a test' (Ava, student reflection). However, the impact of such student-led decisions was not without their challenges as they required a high level of scaffolding by teachers to acquire the capacities to design these assessment tasks.

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**

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

challenges and changing needs and priorities. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

The development of the 1999 curriculum framework was commendable for its promotion of professional teacher autonomy and structure as well as the inclusion of teacher voice within its development (Walsh 2018). However, the relatively opaque philosophy of the curriculum and lack of discussion of curricular alignment between its place within early childhood and post-primary curriculum undermined its potential (Ibid.). This combined with the lack of pedagogical guidance around curricular integration lead Walsh (2018, p.10) to conclude that 'the absence of a thorough explication of models of integration and how they might be planned for and enacted in the Introduction reduced the potential for meaningful integration'.

The focus of student agency within NIC would help to develop on the espoused promotion of professional teacher agency within the 1999 curriculum and would provide a practical, evidence based approach to curricular integration that Walsh (2018) identifies as being clearly lacking within it. This would help mitigate against teachers' perceptions of the aspirational nature of curricular integration as described previously in the Scottish context as "something that is very airy fairy" to provide concrete structures to realise its potential.

Data Protection

Thank you for your submission.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie