

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

Please see www.erc.ie.

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*.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment. We welcome these specifications and see them as a very positive development. The drafting of this submission was led by Rachel Cunningham and Emer Delaney, and incorporates the views of ERC research staff.

The full references for the research cited in various parts of the submission can be provided to the NCCA on request.

The key points below are described in more detail in the various sections of this submission.

We suggest prioritising resources such as Toolkits and CPD for each curricular area, seeking strategies to combine and streamline Toolkits and CPD as appropriate. Given the shift away from prescriptive curricula these resources could include a focus on what this shift means in planning, teaching, learning and assessment, particularly the role of teachers in progression continua. At the same time, the resources would usefully recognise, and provide guidance on, the range of contexts and constraints in which teachers work.

We suggest the inclusion of a child-focused statement within the Learning Outcomes of new subject specifications to strengthen its existing continuity between this framework and Aistear. The inclusion of additional appropriate references to play in the specifications could also help to strengthen this link.

With respect to continuity to post-primary, we strongly welcome the focus on transitions. We note some minor structural discrepancies or differences (concerning the level – system, individual etc.) between the current specification and the Junior Cycle framework. However, we acknowledge that the current draft framework is more consistent, in that the Principles relate to structural aspects of teaching and learning, whereas the Competencies are concerned with individual-level attributes. We recognise that fully eliminating these discrepancies may not currently be workable, but may be worth considering, should the Junior Cycle framework be revised.

We welcome the focus on wellbeing, and suggest a couple of extensions of this concept: (i) linking fostering wellbeing with being an active citizen, and (ii) contextualising wellbeing in broader terms than individual resilience to help-seeking. Also, given the breadth and variety of meaning ascribed to the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ we suggest defining these terms in an inclusive manner in the specifications.

Regarding the key competency of being a digital learner, we believe that the notion of critical engagement would be a useful addition and wondered at the benefits of situating this competency within a broader notion or competency of being a multi-modal learner, building in notions of adaptability.

Regarding the key competency of being creative, we would like to see this broadened, to explicitly acknowledge the value of curiosity and original thought, thereby recognising the value of creativity outside of the 'traditional arts'.

Regarding the competency learning to be a learner, we felt that an enhanced focus on this competency to enable individual agency or empowerment in learning, would be helpful. We note that the competency being mathematical is termed as being numerate in the Junior Cycle framework and suggest that feedback be sought from teachers and stakeholders to determine the most appropriate terminology here to cover the relevant aspects of the framework. Acknowledgement of the relevance of mathematics to the environment, its inherent usefulness and beauty, is worth considering here. Similar to our suggestion on the digital learner competency we suggest the addition of critical thinking to the final attribute, as in information and data should be interpreted, processed and *critically evaluated*.

While we welcome the use of curriculum areas in stages 1 and 2, we are concerned at the high number of subjects relative to curriculum areas at stages 3 and 4. One way to address this could be through the postponement or de-emphasis on modern foreign languages. A specific area that we believes merits further consideration is that of Science and Technology and we would like to see the learning of both science and digital technologies protected in terms of teaching and learning time. Furthermore, we suggest that mathematics may also merit particular attention, given the consistent findings from international assessments at both primary and post-primary levels that, while Irish performance is relatively strong at the lower end of achievement, there is evidence of under-performance at the upper end. Possibly, the fluid approach to learning outcomes will help to address this and allow more children to realise their potential, but we feel that a high focus on differentiated learning would also assist with this issue. Also, we would welcome clarity on the term 'Values' in Social, Personal and Values Education and suggest the consideration of 'Ethical' instead of 'Values'.

We strongly welcome the central focus on assessment and note that agencies such as the NCCA and ERC might usefully collaborate to enhance teachers' and parents' understanding of the specific role of standardised tests in the broader area of assessment.

Finally, we would welcome a schematic representation of the principles, competencies and curriculum areas and subjects that would be intuitive and memorable.

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 framework underscores the necessity of a respectful and trusting view of teachers and principals as agentic professionals, which is very much to be welcomed. The framework's emphasis on children's agency as learners is also important and positive, and we particularly welcome the inclusion of the key competency of learning to be a learner (see more detailed comments on this under 'Emerging Priorities for Children's Learning', below).

It will be important, when finalising the framework and developing the curriculum area specifications, to strike a careful balance between honouring the agency and freedom of individuals to make decisions that work within their own contexts, and providing sufficient structure and detail to ensure that all teachers feel supported to explore and embed the new curriculum. Reflecting on some responses to the Primary Language Curriculum and the draft Primary Mathematics Curriculum, we believe that the early development of extensive Toolkits for each curriculum area, along with the availability of CPD, may be key to achieving this balance.

Previous curriculum specifications have been quite prescriptive and we have some concerns about how the level of agency and flexibility relating to the content of subject specifications will be received by schools, given the feedback in the consultations on the language and mathematics

curricula. In the consultation on the draft mathematics curriculum, respondents to the questionnaire were not confident that they could use the Learning Outcomes to teach the strands. A majority did not feel that it was clear what learning was expected from the Learning Outcomes. They did not feel that the Elements were clearly explained or that their relationship with the Learning Outcomes was clear. In terms of the Progression Continua, about three-quarters of respondents disagreed to some extent that they provided enough detail to deliver rich learning to all learners across strands. There was also significant variation among respondents in terms of the milestone at which the majority of children at the end of Senior Infants were placed.

There may be further uncertainty for teachers and schools for subject specifications consisting of only Learning Outcomes and Elements i.e. without Progression Continua.

Appropriate Teacher Professional Learning will play a key role in preparing teachers for these changes from the previous, more prescriptive specifications. Teachers and schools will need to be fully supported in their new role as 'curriculum makers'.

While individuals' agency can enable them to adapt a specification to work in their particular context, it may be also useful to acknowledge explicitly that contextual and systemic factors can also limit the agency of individuals. That is, the range of choices available to a principal, teacher or child who is experiencing unusually difficult circumstances may be more limited than the range of choices available to their counterpart who is in more 'usual', or privileged, circumstances.

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 transitions and continuity in the framework, with its inclusion as one of the eight Principles.

The landscape of early childhood education has changed in recent years with the introduction of two years of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. Links between the revised Primary Curriculum Framework and Aistear will be important and we acknowledge the effort that has been made to create continuity between the Themes of Aistear and the Key Competencies in the current document. We note the importance given to *Wellbeing* as a Theme in Aistear and the inclusion of *Fostering Wellbeing* as a Key Competency in the draft of the current Framework. We also note, and appreciate, the alignment of the Aistear Theme of *Identity and Belonging* and Principle of *Children as citizens* with the Competency of *Being an active citizen*.

One of Aistear's strengths is its child-focused nature and the intended collaboration between child and adult evidenced by the statements of the Learning Goals i.e. "In partnership with the adult, children will...". We feel it would be beneficial to provide a similarly child-focused statement of the Learning Outcomes in the new subject specifications. We also consider the Aistear Principle of *Play and hands-on experience* to be particularly important for the early years of primary education. The draft specification for mathematics for Junior Infants to Second Class made an effort to address this for Stage 1, with the text to introduce each set of Learning Outcomes i.e. "Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to...".

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we welcome the aim to make links between the current specification and the Junior Cycle Framework. However, we notice some discrepancies between the two specifications in terms of the structural level to which they relate. For example, the Principles of the JC Framework refer to both system-level (e.g. Inclusive education) and individual-level aspects (e.g. Learning to learn), while the Principles in the current document refer to the higher-level values of teaching and learning that underpin the framework. Having said this, there are some quite clear commonalities between the Key Skills of the JC Framework and the Competencies of the current document e.g. *Communicating* (JC) and *Communication and using language*; *Being numerate* (JC) and *Being mathematical* and *Being creative* (both specifications).

The focus on transitions here is particularly welcome, given findings from Growing Up in Ireland that have shown that positive experiences at primary level are key to a successful transition to post-primary, with attitudes to mathematics emerging as particularly important. The 2017 report (Report 5) focusing on transition to post-primary states that: *“The study findings indicate the importance of providing an engaging primary-school experience for all as a basis for later engagement. Early experience of Maths emerges as particularly important, and the findings point to the potential value in rethinking approaches to Maths teaching at primary level in order to enhance interest and skills. The importance of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy in the transition process and engagement with second-level subjects reinforces the case for the current policy emphasis on the acquisition of these skills through the national literacy and numeracy strategy.”*

These findings support the focus on literacy and numeracy in recent years, and also the redevelopment of the mathematics curriculum that is underway.

Further, findings from TIMSS 2015 indicate that differences between boys and girls in terms of their attitudes towards school and learning mathematics and science are emerging at primary level in Ireland. In particular, Fourth class boys in Ireland were found to have a significantly lower sense of belonging to school than girls had. A large body of research indicates that boys are more likely to be less close with their teachers and to experience more conflict with them (Smyth, 2018) and also are at greater risk of disengaging from school than girls are, both during the transition from primary to post-primary school (Symonds & Galton, 2014) and thereafter. On the other hand, Fourth class boys were found to be more confident in mathematics than girls were, even though no significant differences were found between their mean mathematics scores on the TIMSS test. These findings indicate that attention needs to be given to the different experiences of boys and girls in school during primary school but also during the transition to post-primary level.

Overall, we appreciate the goal of creating continuity across children and young people’s journey through the school system from preschool to post-primary.

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.

Key Competency of *Fostering wellbeing*:

We welcome the emphasis placed on this, particularly through the inclusion of Wellbeing as a curriculum area. We also think that the label of *Fostering wellbeing* is more inclusive than that used for the JC Key Skill of *Staying well*.

Alongside the promotion of children’s sense of themselves as capable and resourceful, which helps them ‘to deal with the normal challenges of life’ (p. 8), we suggest that an acknowledgement is necessary that individual resourcefulness is not always enough to overcome some of life’s less ‘normal’ challenges: part of wellbeing is learning how to seek help and support. In other words, it is important to retain a strong awareness of the systemic and societal power structures that restrict the potential of some people to be well, fulfilled, or free. An explicit link could perhaps be drawn between the competencies of *Fostering wellbeing* and *Being an active citizen*; the wider lens of learning to question, critique, and indeed challenge unjust power structures may be a vital complement to the more intra- and interpersonal lens of developing healthy practices and outlooks.

We suggest that, if the terms 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are used in the description of this Competency, an explicit definition is needed that can clarify how spirituality may be constituted across theist, atheist and agnostic worldviews. For example, a reference to the possibility of understanding spirituality within the terms of interdependence with others, and interconnectedness with the world, might be helpful. We also suggest that the statement that 'the spiritual dimension of living [...] enables children to [...] **know** that life has a meaning' (p. 9; emphasis ours) excludes some philosophical approaches to the challenges of living, and could be perceived as approaching the didactic.

Key competency of *Being a digital learner*:

We welcome the inclusion of 'interacting ethically and responsibly with digital technology' in the attributes associated with this Competency (p. 10), and suggest that interacting *critically* with the technology be included here also.

Looking at this Competency as a whole, we wonder whether a reference to the ability to move fluidly and adaptably *between* the different modes through which information can be conveyed (digital and print, each in their many forms) may be useful here. Perhaps *being a digital learner* might ultimately sit within a broader competency of *being a multi-modal learner*?

Key competency of *Being creative*:

It is positive to see the assertion that creativity can be expressed in many ways, and that children can produce creative work across the curriculum. Creativity is not limited to the arts and can be found in many areas where curiosity and original thought are applied e.g. science and mathematics. Also, for creativity that does, and does not, relate to the arts, children should have the opportunity to learn and develop a range of ways to express themselves. Perhaps it would be worth mentioning in the attributes that there is value in recognising opportunities for creativity across and outside the curriculum.

Key competency of *Learning to be a learner*:

The inclusion of this Competency is very worthwhile, but there could be more of a focus here on the different ways in which individuals learn and on understanding the approaches that work best for each child. Learning about the processes and methods that suit oneself can be an important stepping-stone and foundation for later, more self-directed learning. In the Attributes, this

Competency seems to centre on working with others. While this is important, there is only one mention of reflecting on one's own learning. As an example that fits well with the ethos of this draft framework, the International Baccalaureate document on *What is an IB Education* states that: "Our focus on approaches to learning is grounded in the belief that learning how to learn is fundamental to a student's education. The five categories of interrelated skills aim to empower IB students of all ages to become self-regulated learners who know how to ask good questions, set effective goals, pursue their aspirations and have the determination to achieve them. These skills also help to support students' sense of agency, encouraging them to see their learning as an active and dynamic process" (p.7).

Key competency of *Being mathematical*:

It is interesting that the Competency label of *Being mathematical* is included here, rather than *Being numerate*, as in the Key Skills of the Junior Cycle Framework, even though the description of the latter is similar to the one here. Given the lack of clarity on the scope of each of these terms, we wonder whether it might be worthwhile seeking the views of teachers and other stakeholders on the most appropriate terminology for this framework. It is important that links to other curricular areas, as well as the larger world, are mentioned. Children should understand the usefulness of mathematics, as well as its inherent beauty. This feeds into the Productive disposition strand of Mathematical proficiency, which is the overall aim of the new draft specification for mathematics. Perhaps the Attributes should mention the recognition of mathematics in the environment and/or the usefulness and beauty of mathematics. We also suggest that the final attribute for this Competency states that information and data should be interpreted, processed and *critically evaluated*.

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 areas and subjects

We consider that the use of curriculum areas helps to provide a clear and manageable curriculum structure for Stages 1 to 2.

We also think it will help to promote cross-curricular learning at Stages 3 – 4. However, we are concerned that, while the number of curriculum areas is small, the number of subjects at Stages 3

– 4 is even higher, at 13+ subjects, than that in the 1999 curriculum. The feedback of teachers will be very important in determining the extent to which this structure poses a risk of curriculum overload.

One specific area of concern relates to Science. We wonder whether the ‘bundling’ of Science with Technology, given the prominence of *Being a digital learner* among the Key Competencies, may result in a reduction of the instruction time and perceived importance accorded to at least some aspects of scientific learning (as the subject area of *Science and Technology* is expected to have a monthly allocation of 2 – 4 hours at Stages 1 and 2, and 5 – 6 hours at Stages 3 and 4).

In principle, we welcome the inclusion of Modern Foreign Languages within the integrated Language curriculum. However, in light of the concern around curriculum overload (as described above), we wonder whether it might make sense to include this in the framework as a future possibility rather than a certainty, with a view to revisiting its feasibility after the other curriculum areas (along with the existing Language curriculum) had been embedded and reviewed?

Within the Wellbeing area, we have a query around the subject label of *Social, Personal and Values Education*. We are not convinced that it will be clear to all target readers what ‘Values’ refers to in this context. If it is intended as akin to ‘Ethics’, we suggest that *Social, Personal and Ethical Education* would have greater communicative power, and perhaps greater longevity. (Separately, we note a linguistic overlap, also present in the 1999 curriculum, whereby the term ‘Social... Education’ appears in two subject/area names: in the case of the draft framework, it appears once in ***Social, Personal and Values Education*** within the Wellbeing area, and once in the area of ***Social and Environmental Education***).

Use of broad learning outcomes

As with the emphasis on agency and flexibility (discussed above), a balance will be needed between the broad sweep of the learning outcomes and the support, detail, and exemplars that some teachers are likely to seek as they work to embed the curriculum. We believe that early and thorough development of the Toolkits for each area/subject specification will be key to this, along with the provision of the requisite CPD.

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 focus here on assessment as central to teaching and learning. As providers of assessments for Irish schools, we feel the ERC has a role to play here in creating assessments of a high quality that are reliable and useful for school staff, for parents and guardians, and ultimately, for children. In relation to standardised tests in particular, it is key that users understand how to interpret their results, while also recognising the limitations of such assessments. Standardised tests provide useful information about young people’s achievement, but should always be interpreted alongside, and complemented by, other forms of assessment. The current document recognises this, and outlines assessment as a continuum from Intuitive Assessment through to Assessment Events.

In terms of standardised tests, a 2019 report by CARPE and INTO indicated that there was significant variation in how standardised tests were used for teaching and learning. The study also identified a need, reported by teachers, for Professional Learning in this area. Recently, the ERC provided a

workshop on standardised tests to the Professional Development Service for Teachers. We are keen to continue to work with stakeholders and colleagues to improve understanding in this area.

With the release of the ERC's new Drumcondra Primary Tests in 2019, we provided additional documentation for the new Level 1 (First Class) tests in an effort to support teachers in interpreting the results. The manuals include a Pupil Profile for both reading and mathematics, which summarises results by key curricular areas. For mathematics, there is also a Concepts and Skills Report, which displays item-by-item results alongside a description of the mathematical task. We welcome the key role of assessment in the draft framework and we will continue to work to provide meaningful assessments that are beneficial for teachers, parents/guardians and children.

Since 2016, the ERC has also provided online standardised assessments that are now available at both primary and post-primary level. The advent of online assessment brings with it new opportunities for teachers, pupils and parents/guardians. Having a variety of online item types, with the possibility of interactive formats, creates the potential for greater accessibility and a more differentiated testing experience.

We welcome ongoing collaboration with the NCCA in supporting teachers and parents to enhance their understanding about the role and use of standardised tests in the broader landscape of 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:

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- 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.

As described under ‘Changing how the curriculum is structured and presented’, we welcome the ambition to address curriculum overload. However, we are concerned that the use of curriculum areas to do this may, at Stages 3 and 4, be perceived by some as more cosmetic than substantive, as the number of subjects has increased to 13+.

We think the Key Competencies provide a good framework within which to establish priorities for learning. The importance afforded to learning to be a learner, wellbeing, active citizenship, and digital learning, in particular, resonates well with current needs. In light of the prevalence of STEM in today’s workplaces and world, and while recognising that technology is integrated throughout the draft framework, we wonder whether scientific curiosity and enquiry can be valued explicitly within the framework of the key competencies. In practical terms, we have already described a possible concern about the instruction time afforded to Science within the subject of Science and Technology (and the curriculum area of Mathematics, Science and Technology).

In the 2005 review of the Primary Curriculum, teachers highlighted issues in the implementation of the mathematics curriculum, such as limits on time and catering to all ability levels. We would hope that the more fluid approach to Learning Outcomes, rather than the previous detailed specification by class level, will allow for more differentiated learning in the future. In particular, international studies such as TIMSS, have shown that while Ireland has (proportionally) fewer lower achievers than other countries with similar average performance, we also have fewer high achievers. Any aims to support differentiated learning are to be welcomed and appreciated.

The importance of accessible and memorable structures in curriculum specifications was highlighted in the 2005 review of the 1999 curriculum, especially in relation to the English curriculum, in which the strands and strand units were ultimately ‘swapped’ in response to feedback. Bearing this in mind, we wonder whether the framework could include, near the start, an infographic that would incorporate the Principles, the Competencies, the curriculum areas and the subjects? This might help users to internalise the overall structure of the framework (although we can imagine that creating such an infographic might prove difficult.)

Our response to the linkage between Aistear, the draft framework and the Junior Cycle specification has been described under ‘Curriculum connections’ above.

In responding to the emerging characteristics of primary classrooms, we acknowledge the recognition of the diversity of, among others, cultures, home languages, family structures and sexual identities. However, we suggest that gender identities and gender presentations be added to this list (on Pg.3 of the framework).

Data Protection

The NCCA fully respects your right to privacy. Any personal information which you volunteer to the NCCA will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts. If you require further information related to data protection please visit www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at dpo@ncca.ie.

Thank you for your submission.

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