

Primary Curriculum Review and Redevelopment

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

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

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Nóirín Hayes
Position	Convenor
Organisation	Researching Early Childhood Education Collaborative [RECEC]
Date	January 27 th 2021
E-mail	

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Yes No

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

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

The Researching Early Childhood Education Collaborative [RECEC] was formed to fill a vacuum in early childhood education research, which arose as a consequence of the closure of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] in 2008. The CECDE was a partnership between the Dublin Institute of Technology and St Patrick's College of Education and was funded by the DES in response to the White Paper – *Ready To Learn* [1999]. Given the extensive policy, practice and curricular activity across the span of early childhood education [birth-6 years] since 2008 the absence of an influential academic-led movement was becoming evident and RECEC was formed as a loose collaborative of academics committed to enhancing and disseminating quality early childhood research. It is located within the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin and in association with Marino Institute of 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.

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

Section 1

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

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*. The following brief submission is a summary of points discussed more thoroughly in our consultation meeting on November 30th 2020.

The *Framework* documents presents a new and exciting vision for primary education and presents a rich opportunity for reflecting on how we can provide the best education for young children. The unexpected arrival of Covid 19 has presented an unexpected opportunity to the wider education sector to reconsider pedagogy and assessment and respond in new ways to the challenges presented. We have no doubt that the *Framework* will be enhanced by the learning that has occurred, particularly in relation to the engagement between schools and homes.

The *Framework* proposes a move away from the ‘detailed content objectives’ approach of the existing Primary School Curriculum towards a ‘learning outcome based curriculum’ [p 2]. While recognising the value of learning outcomes as an organising framework it would be helpful to acknowledge that, in everyday practice teachers are engaged in a dynamic educational process where a focus on learning opportunities could prove more valuable (Hayes and Filipovic, 2017).

The principles underpinning the *Framework* are clearly explained and interconnected. Perhaps the interconnections could be strengthened or more explicitly drawn? For instance, the principles of Relationships and Partnerships are closely connected and related and in both cases refer to the worlds of the child. The principle of Transitions and continuity is an important one and could perhaps be strengthened by explicit reference to pedagogical and curricular continuity.

This submission focuses on the early childhood education period from junior infants to second class and will address, inter alia, topics including:

- The possibilities and challenges of *Aistear*
- Transitions
- The active/agentive child
- Engagement with parents
- Wellbeing
- Play
- The pedagogy of play

As the *Framework* is elaborating a curriculum for primary schools it is not unexpected that it focuses on the school environment and immediate communities around it. However, some consideration might be given to noting the requirements for change at Initial Teacher Education and for CPD across external systems such as the Inspectorate so that the implementation of the changes will be well supported by the wider primary education system.

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.

It is heartening to see the explicit recognition of the central role of the teacher as the architect of classroom practice. It is a strong endorsement of the importance of the ecology of the classroom as a relational and agentic space.

Within this vision of the classroom it is important to also acknowledge the active and agentic nature of the child. Their learning experiences from the home and early childhood education settings contribute to the classroom setting and inform their learning style. The reciprocal relationships between the teacher and children and between children and children creates the context within which teaching and learning happens.

School leadership that is responsive and flexible cultivates an atmosphere that encourages innovation. It is important to explicitly recognise and support the flexibility of each teacher to be responsive to the learning opportunities that present each day – and the effects of this can be seen in high quality teaching practice. Such responsiveness can integrate environmental learning opportunities into the day and thus create a shared sense of ownership and belonging within the classroom and enrich the experience for all. It also provides a mechanism for animating the admirable but challenging ambition of 'Creating greater opportunities for flexibility and choice for children's learning'.

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 connectivity between the various microsystems of a child’s life are crucial contributors to a child’s wellbeing and learning. Research is clear that managing the larger transitions from home through preschool into school has an impact on all children and can have a profound impact on some. Recognising the importance of transitions in the learning lives of children requires that all settings show respect for each other. Since the establishment of the free preschool entitlement – one that has been taken up by over 90% of Irish families, this issue of respect has become particularly important. Research is clear that mutual understanding between these two levels of education needs to be supported and the *Framework* has the potential to contribute to this by giving more space to explaining the unique nature of the educational environment of preschool and making the role and potential of *Aistear* within early childhood education more clear cut.

The *Framework* is very weak in its references to *Aistear*. While it is mentioned in passing it is not discussed or elaborated on to any extent. For instance when introducing the curriculum areas the following point is made: “They support younger children’s learning and development in stages 1 and 2 (junior infants to second class) by building on and extending their earlier learning experiences in preschool through *Aistear* (p.11). There is no explanation as to how this done and an assumption – evident throughout the *Framework* that this will be simply understood.

Aistear is an excellent conceptual framework for early childhood education and early primary education has a lot to learn from it. However, it is has proved challenging to implement *Aistear* in practice and it has not been fully or sufficiently exploited in either preschools or primary schools to date. If it is to be built upon within the primary curriculum framework there is a need to interrogate the elements of *Aistear* more thoroughly and clearly explain the potential curricular and pedagogical continuities.

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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.

To continue from the previous section – when the seven competencies are being introduced it is noted that ‘they link closely with *Aistear*’s four themes’ (p.7). The four themes are nowhere mentioned in the *Framework* although they are identified and linking to the competencies and are seen, later in the document, as the context from which the curriculum ‘areas’ emerge. To make these various references meaningful we would recommend a more extensive consideration of *Aistear* within the overall document.

We discussed some tensions that arise between learning outcomes and learning opportunities. There is an inherent difficulty in combining a child-led and student centred approach to teaching and learning and a focus on very specific child learning outcomes. Children come to school with very different strengths, needs and abilities. When children’s abilities are so diverse, how can the same outcomes be expected for each? Thus it is recommended that the curriculum be more explicit about its focus on the learning opportunities to be provided and the skills and dispositions to be developed as opposed to more objectifiable scores and achievements.

Agentic teachers and agentic children require a system around them that allows for and support such agency. The prevailing culture must be considered as part of such a ‘system’ in relation to interaction with children, and teachers, and how agency may be supported through parenting and early childhood education. While agency and children’s competence is at the core of *Aistear* we also know from experience that this has been one of the most challenging aspects of *Aistear* when it has come to implementation in early childhood settings. Even good quality practice in many instances still has a way to go in terms of genuinely supporting children’s agency. If children are not supported in developing such agency, agentic teaching requires a core focus in infant

classrooms on fostering agentic learners. This cannot be addressed solely through a curriculum framework but requires extensive continuous professional development.

In relation to the competencies we felt there was room for significant change. In the first instance we recommend that a common style be used to identify each competence. For example we found it difficult to visualise the competence of Learning to be a Learner when we know that children are always learning.

We also felt that some of the the competencies identified were problematic. This was particularly the case in respect of the 'Fostering Wellbeing' competency. We question whether you can curricularise wellbeing. We argue that it is more akin to a school ethos embodied in overall school practices than it is a subject. Wellbeing is cultivated in environments of respect and mutual understanding, in inclusive environment where everyone can feel they belong. We recommend that the important discussion about wellbeing be removed from the Competencies and curriculum areas/subject and reconsidered in this wider frame. We draw your attention to the work of Thorburn (2014) who noted that '*...the policy prominence for well-being in Scotland may not be matched by improved and sustained changes in practice in schools unless educational ambitions are better supported. Greater philosophical clarity, model-based explanations about how well-being might be planned and pedagogically enacted and the development of more appropriate support materials are required*'. ^[1]_[SEP]

We also felt that some missed the opportunity to be more far-reaching and suggest some changes to address this as follows:

Being Mathematical to become Being Mathematical and Scientific

Learning to be Learner to become Being an Active Learner

Fostering wellbeing to become Being Physically and Mentally Health

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.

We welcome the restructuring of the curriculum to capture the continuum from themes, through curriculum areas and on into more formal subjects from third class.

The move from a tight structure to a framework based on agency and flexibility is a radical shift and will be challenging for many. The emphasis on broad, balanced and holistic development is welcomed and the specific reference to *Aistear* is noted. We believe that important lessons can be learned from the challenges in the implementation of *Aistear* in early childhood and primary school settings over the last decade. Translating a conceptual framework into daily educational practice is not easy and requires a changed understanding of teaching role. These difficulties should be named and addressed.

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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.

The ambitions under this key message are welcome and a strengthening of much that already existed in the previous Primary School Curriculum. IN relation to early childhood education [junior infants through to second class] we felt there was insufficient focus on play, its role in learning and the significance of play as the central process in early childhood.

The references to play, where they exist, are very general and at times somewhat confusing. A clear distinction needs to be made between creating and the atmosphere and opportunity for play and exploration in the context of "child-led play, inquiry-based learning' [p.15] and a pedagogy of play, something that is not referenced in the *Framework*. A pedagogy of play introduces a new approach to teaching which is embedded within a different understanding of learning to that articulated in current curricular documents. The *Framework* is vague about the implications of acknowledging play as a process in primary school classrooms, a lack of a unified conceptual base of a pedagogy of play. How might the move from a child-led free play approach towards an adult-led playful pedagogy (and variations in between) manifest at the various ages between 0-8 years? There is a need to be cognisant of the playful pedagogical experiences of children in their two free preschool years within the *Aistear* framework, and how these might be build up effectively, utilising *Aistear*, throughout the day in the junior infants infant –second class classrooms. This will require a more coherent understanding and shared recognition of the process of learning, the role of the teacher in supporting children's playful learning, the teacher skills required to navigate more and less structured play experiences with a view to developing a coherent conceptualisation of curriculum and learning.

The reference to recognising the role and influence and potential of the home and family is welcome. Engagement with parents is an important aspect of curriculum although more implicit. Inclusive education is founded on close partnerships with parents and drawing on children's funds of knowledge from home. It is important to draw this into the curriculum. The new focus on curriculum areas within the *Framework* lends itself well to the idea of an emergent curriculum, based on children's interests and pre-existing knowledge, dispositions and skills. These can only be incorporated within the classroom through meaningful relationships with parents. Engagement with parents in relation to curriculum and in relation to homework has changed fundamentally during the Covid-19 pandemic and both the challenges and the lesson learned should inform a new curriculum.

Homework also requires consideration. What we have seen from recent research (O'Toole et al, 2019) is that the high student numbers in classes result in teachers not having sufficient time for individual children and therefore require parents to take on an active role in listening to children read, as an example. A curriculum should be fulfilled within the schoolday and homework, if used, should only be to reinforce learning from the classroom, not for parents to act as co-teachers. Teachers will need support and training in reimagining their approach to homework when the approach to and content of curriculum changes.

A related point identified within the *Framework* involves a greater focus on project work and cross curricular integration and this is a welcome move. The proposals within the *Framework* to recognise the teacher as more agentic with flexibility bedded into the concept of curriculum areas affords an opportunity to achieve this.

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.

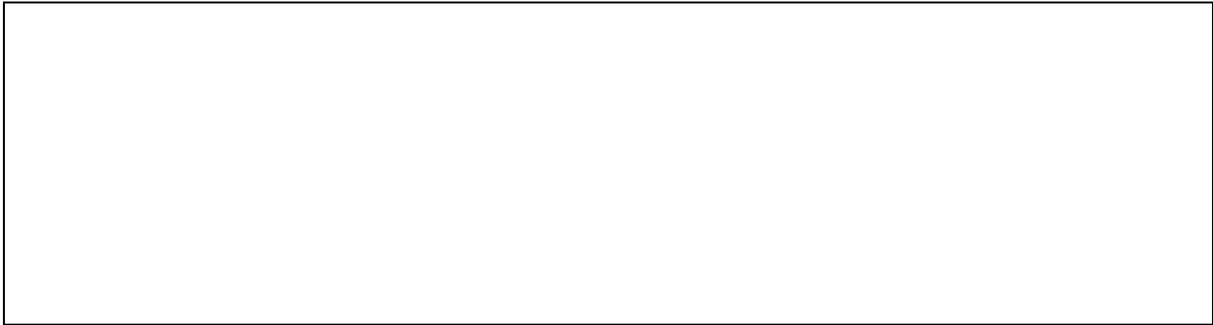
The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework proposes that the redeveloped curriculum will:

- 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 welcome the shifts in focus towards a more holistic and integrated approach to curriculum at primary level and particularly welcome the ambition to strengthen curriculum and pedagogical continuity from early childhood settings working within the *Aistear* themes towards a the curriculum area approach in the early years of the primary school.

We recommend that there be a more robust discussion and elaboration of the *Aistear* framework and the challenges and opportunities it presents in relation to the new curriculum.



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Thank you for your submission.

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