



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment



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

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Date	28.2.22
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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?

Yes

No

Please email your submission to PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie

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

While this submission draws on my professional experience, this submission is made in a personal capacity and does not purport to represent the views of my school/faculty/university/employer or my previous employers.

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*.

Overall, this update to the national Primary School Curriculum is timely. For a host of reasons, it is important to redevelop the curriculum so that it better represents the significant changes that have been seen in Irish schools since 1999. It is reassuring to see that NCCA is engaging in significant research and consultation on this Framework. I look forward to seeing the changes that are made to the Draft in light of this process and I wish the NCCA every success in this endeavour.

The overall framework that has been adopted appears to be a logical one; the vision, principles and key competencies are relevant and, importantly, succinctly stated.

There are a number of key items that I hope will be revisited and revised in future iterations of the framework. Specifically, these are:

- **Curriculum areas/subjects and addressing ‘overload’:** I think it is somewhat disingenuous to claim that the Draft Framework addresses concerns around curriculum overload, when, in fact, it proposes *adding* areas of learning in Stages 3 and 4 (e.g. technology; ‘other aspects’ of arts; modern foreign languages). I have no objection to the proposed additions. However, I think it is important that any new curriculum plainly states that there are in fact, *additional* areas of learning included. One of the key messages in the initial roll-out of the Primary Language Curriculum (2015) was that there was a reduced number of learning outcomes (c.f. the ‘Sorcha’ inter-agency video produced by NCCA, the then DES, and PDST). This was presented as a ‘win’ for teachers, but was a facile proposition that had no meaningful import. I think that it is important that such reasoning (or a variation of same) is not employed as the new Primary Curriculum Framework moves towards implementation.
- **Patrons’ Programme – time allocation:** I think that it is important that NCCA and, perhaps more importantly, the Department of Education, use this opportunity to inject some reality into the debate around the time allocation for the Patrons’ Programme. Anecdotally, nearly every primary school teacher I have ever spoken to has taught nowhere near the allocated weekly time for the Patrons’ Programme. Now is the time to address this issue. The reduction to two hours in the Draft Framework does not go far enough. To proceed on the basis that this time will actually be afforded to the Patrons’ Programme, when, in reality, only a small minority of teachers will actually teach this two hours, is to further perpetuate a time allocation that exists solely on paper. Schools should be enabled, at their own local and individual discretion, to supplement the Patron’s Programme with flexible time, but this should not be a national mandate.
- **Learning from the roll-out of the Primary Language Curriculum:** I have used opportunities in other fora to ask if the NCCA (or DE) has plans to review (and publish) the lessons that have been learned from the roll-out of the Primary Language Curriculum. Though there is a tacit understanding of the obstacles and issues that have been experienced since PD commenced in 2015, it would seem to me that a formal review of the roll-out is needed before embarking on a whole-sale review of the broader curriculum.
- **Time allocation for literacy:** My concerns on this front have been signalled in other submissions to which I have contributed, but the points below state my views more

directly. The proposed reduction in time for language/literacy is, in my view, particularly ill-advised, for a number of reasons:

- **Shifting gears *after* implementation of the PLC:** Millions of euro, and more importantly, millions of teacher-hours, have now been invested in the Primary Language Curriculum. This has been predicated on a time allocation of five hours for L1 in senior classes (Circular 56/2011). To pull the rug out from under teachers at this juncture would demonstrate exceptionally poor system-wide planning and extremely mixed messaging.
- **Discontinuity with DE(S) policy and teacher practice:** The proposal to reduce this time allocation is completely at odds with the general thrust of policy from the Department of Education (and Skills) over the past decade. It is also completely at odds with current teacher practice. My own survey research with 256 teachers in senior primary classes found that two thirds exceeded the weekly time allocation for literacy either *most weeks* or *every week*. Only 2.35% *never* exceeded the weekly time allocation. Furthermore, 95% of these teachers believed that the time for literacy should either be maintained (at 5 hours) or *increased*. These findings are in line with the time allocations reported by teachers in the National Assessment of English Reading and Mathematics (2014). Current DE policy and current teacher practice (and opinions) cannot be reconciled with the proposed time allocations in the Draft Framework.
- **Potential and pitfalls of ‘integrated’ literacy:** There is, of course, potential for making up the reduced time allocation for literacy, through integration. The Draft Framework does not explicitly outline if (or how) this might happen. This type of teaching requires incredibly nuanced pedagogy and knowledge as well as significant planning and preparation. The Draft Framework outlines ‘Communicating and Using Language’ as a key competency. The avenue for doing this is signalled in the Primary Language Curriculum (disciplinary literacy), but this is not ‘picked up’ in the Draft Framework. This creates an inexplicably obvious gap between two curriculum documents that were issued by NCCA within a year of each other. Even if disciplinary literacy is to be signalled as a means of attenuating the overall time allocation for literacy, a number of factors will require consideration:
 - My own doctoral research has found that significant pedagogical content knowledge and subject matter knowledge is required by generalist primary school teachers if they are to adequately address both the disciplinary learning found in a content area (e.g. history) while also addressing learning outcomes from the Primary Language Curriculum. To date, professional development on the Primary Language Curriculum has not addressed this issue. Future professional development will be required to bridge this gap.
 - Disciplinary literacy is generally seen to be ‘layered’ on top of more basic literacy skills. This works well for children who have mastered constrained literacy skills by the time they are mid-way through primary school. However, concentrated time for building fluency in these basic skills (e.g. phonics, phonological awareness) cannot be ‘made up’ through teaching in other curriculum areas in the junior classes.

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.

My experience of working with teachers in professional development in the roll-out of the Primary Language Curriculum, as well as my experience in researching the PD needed for successful implementation of parts of this curriculum (disciplinary literacy), causes me to think that a ***significant*** step-change is needed if 'agency and flexibility' is to produce meaningful change for either teachers or children.

The reality is that many teachers require far more support, both in terms of professional development, and *instructional materials*, than any model of national PD has offered to date. Pointing the responsibility back at busy teachers for curriculum development, under the guise of agency, is unlikely to be successful without a paradigm shift in how the Department of Education offers PD for curriculum change. It is crucial that the instructional materials to support new ways of teaching and learning are provided and not left solely to teachers for creation, invariably in their own time. In the absence of appropriate instructional materials from NCCA (or support services), this gap will be filled by textbook publishers. We have seen this issue repeat itself with the Primary Language Curriculum.

There is significant flexibility and choice already on offer within the 1999 curriculum and the Primary Language Curriculum; this is not a new departure. Some of the ‘flexibilities’ offered in the Draft Framework were already embedded in the documentation of the 1999 curriculum, but were poorly implemented in practice, e.g. “It is the goal of the curriculum to provide a comprehensive and coherent learning experience for the child. It is important that teachers use ***the suggested framework on time allocation in the most flexible way***, in order to make the mediation of the curriculum as effective and efficient as possible. In addition to weekly planning, ***this will entail planning over extended periods such as a month, a term, and a year***. For example, over a four-week period the framework might suggest an allocation of twelve hours for social, environmental and scientific education.” (PSC Introduction, p.68). In my experience of working with teachers, they are extremely concerned by how they account for time allocations and timetables, often to the detriment of integrated or more novel approaches to teaching over extended time periods. Changes in curriculum documentation won’t necessarily effect any change on this front.

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.

Recent research that I have conducted with primary and post-primary teachers revealed that the teachers in one sector had an extremely limited understanding of the alternate sector. Changes in curriculum documentation, alone, will not make any meaningful impact on this. Joint PD (for example including both primary and post-primary teachers) may go some way in knowledge sharing.

Emerging priorities for children’s learning

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

- Embed seven key competencies across children’s learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class.
- Focus on developing children’s skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes. The Learning Outcomes and the Key Competencies are broad in nature to describe this wider understanding of learning.
- Have increased emphasis on some existing areas such as PE and SPHE (Wellbeing) and digital learning, and have new aspects such as Modern Foreign Languages, Technology, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and a broader Arts Education.

The *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* outlines important messages in relation to emerging priorities for children’s learning. Please give your overall feedback in relation to this key message.

Please see my comments in section 1.

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.

Broadly speaking, I think that the move to have general curriculum areas in Stages 1 and 2, followed by subject-based learning in Stages 3 and 4 is a good one.

As noted above, I would hope that a review of successes and challenges in implementing the Primary Language Curriculum would precede any move to final publication and roll-out of a new

Primary School Curriculum. The notion of ‘broad learning outcomes’ has proven to be very difficult to implement in practice; it would be difficult to understand how any further step in this direction could be taken without first reviewing the experiences of the first seven years of *actual* implementation in primary schools.

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.

All of the aims above are excellent. Of course, it must be stated that they do not extend the aims of the 1999 curriculum, currently in use, in any particularly notable way.

In my opinion, the ‘Toolkit’ approach to offering pedagogical support, as seen in the Primary Language Curriculum, has had mixed success at best. It is important that any future ‘Toolkit’ development avoids a scattergun approach. For example, the current PLC toolkit provides very little information on how a school might undertake a coherent approach to literacy development; every practice guide is at the level of an individual approach, without reference to the ‘bigger picture’. Greater consideration is needed to ensure that this is not replicated across the curriculum.

Greater clarity is also needed on what constitutes the 'statutory' curriculum and what exists merely as recommendations for practice.

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.

As noted in box 1, I am sceptical as to how the curriculum will actually address overload in real terms in primary classrooms, senior primary classrooms in particular.

Improvements in reading and mathematics are better tied with aims and actions arising from the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy rather than the 1999 curriculum.

The aims above indicate that the redeveloped curriculum will 'take stock of strategies, initiatives and programmes' that have been implemented. The Draft Framework appears to completely jettison the aims and actions of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (which is not explicitly named). If it is the case that literacy (or numeracy) is no longer deemed a key priority, this should be explicitly stated.

Covid-19

Since the publication of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, Covid-19 has presented a big challenge for schools. Please give your views on the implications of schools' experience of the pandemic for the finalisation of the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.

Data Protection

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Thank you for your submission.

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