

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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Organisation submission details

Name	
Position	
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Date	
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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 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*.

I welcome many developments in the areas of pedagogy, transitions, principles and I support many initiatives that are detailed throughout this framework document. I read the framework with particular concern for how arts education and music education are supported in curriculum development and reform.

In the sections to follow, I have responded to this draft document with brief points around rationale, curriculum structure and presentation, the construct of creativity, principles, terminology and time allocations.

Points to follow:

- Recognition of teacher expertise and flexibility
- Language of children's' uniqueness and development in all spheres
- Definition of Arts Education
- Arts Education and the language of experience/participation
- Rationale for changes to the Arts Education curriculum
- The construct of creativity
- Time allocations

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 consultation document outlines how this new curriculum is underpinned by the concept of teachers and school leaders as 'curriculum makers', and cites research by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015). This sets a welcome trajectory which recognises teacher agency and flexibility in meeting broad learning objectives in ways that reflect their expertise and situational factors of their work, like their unique school community and locality. This idea of teacher as curriculum writer, premised upon a clear assertion of teacher professionalism, as featured in the Finnish system and widely celebrated (Sahlberg, 2011), should also be asserted as one of the principles of the new curriculum. 'Pedagogy' is named as a principle but I believe that asserting 'teacher as curriculum designer' as a principle would demonstrate a commitment to this concept as a foundational premise.

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.

I welcome and support the messages here.

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.

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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.

In addition to earlier comments on the inclusion of ‘teacher as curriculum designer’ as a principle of the new curriculum, another principle that I believe should be foregrounded is that of the child’s uniqueness and potentiality for development across multiple spheres. The 1999 curriculum placed considerable emphasis on a spectrum of areas for development and asserted priorities for child development and learning that resisted a narrow focus on, for example, only the development of numeracy and literacy. On page 3 of the consultation document, there is a question of “whether or not there should be a more extended statement within the redeveloped curriculum about the religious, spiritual and ethical domain”. I believe this is linked to the question of whether development across a range of spheres should be embraced as a curriculum principle. I would support extended curriculum statements about these domains.

I believe that the construct of creativity as a competency is problematic. With the exception of one statement - “providing children with opportunities to be creative through language fosters a sense of enjoyment in their language learning” - the only other references to creativity appear to be in relation to arts education. If creativity is under theorised, a danger here is that it is loosely associated with arts education. The possibilities for creativity and for arts education would become diminished. The arts may implicitly be constructed and responsibilised as the site within which this under-theorised competency is developed, and this would relegate the subjects within the arts to an unstable and weak position.

This opens the question of what theory or conceptualisation of creativity informs the curriculum. The cross-discipline appropriation of creativity in the new draft is not explicitly related to any curriculum theory or ideology (Apple, 2001; Giroux, 2007; Welle-Strand & Tjeldvoll, 2003). To position creativity as a competency and as something can be mandated across the curriculum assumes a generic and individual-oriented construct of the concept. This would challenge other ideas of creativity where it is seen as deeply embedded with discrete fields of study (Baer, 2010), where it is associated with processes or products rather than the individual’s dispositions or skills, or where it is seen as a phenomenon that emerges within transactions and partnerships with others (Thomas, 2010).

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;

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- 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.

‘Arts Education’ as a curricular area does not appear to be fully defined. Visual arts, music and drama are located firmly within the area but there is also mention of ‘other aspects of arts education such as dance, film and digital media, and enabling schools to engage with local, national and international initiatives and opportunities’. To engage with outcomes and to recognise the discrete knowledge and skillset pertaining to each of these areas of study, it is important to provide NCCA’s definition and demarcation of ‘arts education’. The inclusion of curriculum subjects presented as ‘*such as*’ possibilities, and decontextualized ‘initiatives and opportunities’ lacks clarity. There is a danger that the ‘arts’ becomes a catch-all for knowledge, skills, priorities and initiatives that aren’t defined elsewhere. This would undermine the three main core subjects referenced, in that they would compete for curriculum time and space alongside somewhat undefined content. It also undermines and weakens the importance of those ‘other aspects’ since they are not cast as subjects in their own right but as ‘*such as*’ possibilities. I feel that clearer justification and rationale is necessary for how Arts education is conceptualised. This should be led foremost by protecting the distinctive body of knowledge and skills with each subject/domain.

Related to the point above on recognising each arts education subject as a discrete subject area and occupying its own place in the curriculum in the same way as maths or language education, I am concerned that arts education is somewhat associated with ‘experiences’ and ‘participation’. While these have a role in arts education areas as they do in all others, overemphasis within the arts education domain would have the effect of ignoring specific skills and subject knowledge that is unique to music, visual art or drama. To take music education as an example: learning to sing, to play and instrument, to build up increasingly sophisticated understandings of musical concepts, to move through continua of music literacy and notation is not something that can be reduced to experiences and participation. Just as the development of language and literacy or mathematical reasoning would not be couched in the language of experience and participation, music requires immersion in that subject with the first-principle recognition among curriculum writers and school personnel that it revolves around its own knowledge and skill base. While there is recognition in Stage 3 and 4 of the separate knowledge, concepts and skills of each subject area throughout the consultation document, there is also a push here for a ‘common creative process’ and a ‘set of broader outcomes overarching the subjects’. The rationale and knowledge base for this shared process and for broader outcomes should be offered. It is very difficult to reconcile the idea of arts education in stage 3 and 4 encapsulating several subject, and the claim that the discrete subjects will be recognised and taught within a very limited time, with the push for processes and outcomes common across all areas.

In Stage 1 and 2, there is mention of broad outcomes that will support learning. It is said that “while subjects are not specifically defined in the (arts education) curriculum areas... the learning outcomes will provide important foundations towards more subject-based learning”. There is a disjuncture here in that it is assumed that the programme of work underway in a somewhat undefined arts education for four years will be compatible with, fully supportive of, and a foundation for learning in stage 3 and 4 when the subjects are then “specifically defined”. By stage 3, again focusing on the example of music education, there is a risk that little of the generalised arts education subject content will complement music, now taken up as a specific subject. The previous 1999 curriculum provided subject specific outcomes from the beginning of a child’s time at school. This 1999 curriculum was premised upon revisiting the same curricular strands and concepts from infant to final year at primary, and of deepening the learning using prior knowledge as a foundation (Bruner, 1960). Subjects were named and recognised as discrete areas in and of themselves. This deference to discrete curricular subjects, rather than to areas that encompass numerous subjects, would more effectively achieve the goal of work in the early years supporting learning in later years, and of deepened and broadened learning from infants to final year in primary school.

I am concerned about the amount of time made available for arts education. Considering that arts education includes at least three core areas, with references to other potential aspects and initiatives/experience, there seems to be an imbalance in the time allocations. Under both time allocation options presented in the document, ‘wellbeing’ is afforded more time per week, even though it appears that this area only incorporates two subject areas. One cannot expect that areas within arts education can be taught comprehensively

and meaningfully when they are given such a limited time within the allocation. Earlier comments addressed the dual expectation that the discrete subjects are taught but also that overarching outcomes can be addressed. Within option one for Stage 3 and 4, sixteen hours per month are allocated to mathematics, twelve hours to wellbeing, and eight hours to all of the arts subjects. This does not even equate with 3 hours per month for one subject like music. In fact, given that so many possibilities for arts education are included, this three-hour block for music could be dramatically reduced. A sixteen-hour block for one area of the curriculum contrasts very notably with the final figure at which one arrives for music. Given the timeframes for art education to exist in the curriculum, the lack of definition on the area, and the dual messages about specific subjects and generalisable outcomes, it is very difficult to envisage how a robust curriculum for each subject and stage can be designed and delivered.

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.

I welcome and support the key messages here.

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.

It is noteworthy that the rationale for a new curriculum and for the remodelling of the 1999 curriculum appears to engage with all of the other subject areas except Arts education. This opens the question as to why the approach to arts education is to be changed – for example, why more curriculum subjects are now added and why there is an emphasis on transferability and generalisation in terms of outcomes. If these changes were further contextualised within the studies or government action plans cited, I feel that stakeholders would better see changes here in a continuum with changes across the entire curriculum.

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Thank you for your submission.

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