

# 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](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### *Individual submission details*

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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

### **Please provide some brief background information.**

Colette O'Connor is an experienced occupational therapist with a master's degree in education. She works in child and adolescent mental health. Her book "Success in School" (2012) outlines aspects of child development related to learning. She is a research associate with the Educational Disadvantage Centre, Dublin City University.

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](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)

# Section 1

## **Changes needed in handwriting education: The negative consequences of a curriculum in conflict with child development**

### **Introduction**

There is a significant disconnect between the Irish primary school curriculum and long-established facts on child development in relation to handwriting. Robust research\* over the last few decades demonstrates that approximately 50% of children aged 5½, as well as the majority of younger children, are not ready to learn how to write<sup>1</sup> (based on the criterion outlined in the section on testing below). This is one reason why children in many countries are not taught handwriting until they are much older than in Ireland. Negative effects of the Irish system are outlined below.

### **Child development**

It is clear from the body of knowledge on child development that certain skills are learned at certain ages. Skills develop in a sequential manner, where each new skill builds on previous learning. As long as children acquire each skill at an age within the normal range, there is no cause for concern. For example, there is a range of a few months within which it is normal for children to learn to walk. There is no advantage to children learning to walk a few months before their peers. Research shows that older children who walked earlier are no better coordinated and no more intelligent than their peers<sup>2</sup>.

### *Handwriting from a child development perspective*

Handwriting is a complex skill that requires many prerequisite skills, particularly motor and visual, before it can be successfully learned. There is a range of approximately 2½ years<sup>1</sup> within which children typically develop the visual-motor integration needed for handwriting readiness. While some 4- and 5-year-olds are ready to learn handwriting, the majority are not. There is no evidence to suggest that any children are disadvantaged by delaying handwriting until all of those developing normally are ready. In Finland, for example, children usually start to learn handwriting at the age of seven. Academic achievements in that country are consistently ranked highly in OECD tables<sup>3</sup>.

### **Negative consequences of the Irish system: An occupational therapy perspective**

Problems with handwriting can be caused by requiring children to write before they have the essential foundation skills. Occupational therapists working with children often receive referrals due to issues with handwriting. There are two scenarios that commonly present. In the first, my colleagues and I see children who have not yet developed the necessary underlying skills but are expected to write. This results in maladaptive pencil grasps and poor handwriting techniques. Writing can be physically painful. Remediation is not always possible. Handwriting difficulties that start at a young age can negatively affect young people for the remainder of their educational path. Many of these difficulties could be avoided by waiting for children to be developmentally ready before requiring them to write.

In the second scenario, older children that we assess have the necessary underlying visual and motor skills to enable writing. These children are, however, very reluctant to write. This is understandable when it is considered that they have spent the first two or more years of school failing at a task that they were not developmentally ready to learn. It is normal human behaviour to give up when presented with a task that is far beyond our ability. Due to repeated failure, these children develop very negative beliefs about their ability to learn handwriting (and often about their general ability to learn). These beliefs can persist and block learning, even after the child has developed the foundation skills needed. This is clearly a very negative start to a child's experience of the education system. In my opinion, this scenario starts some children on a path that leads to leaving school early. Being forced to write years too soon can certainly establish a very negative attitude to education.

A combination of both physical and psychological difficulties because of premature handwriting instruction is not unusual. In either of the above situations, or in a combination of both, teachers and parents frequently report attention problems in relation to handwriting. The child may try to avoid the task. This is a natural consequence of the task being too difficult for the child's developmental stage (or being perceived as too difficult based on previous experience). Teachers normally aim for an appropriate level of challenge, neither too easy nor too difficult, to maintain children's interest. Unfortunately neither the curriculum nor teachers' education addresses the appropriate level of challenge in relation to young children and handwriting.

### **Testing handwriting readiness**

Because of the prevailing cultural belief in Ireland that children should be taught handwriting at a very young age, many doubt research to the contrary when presented with the facts. There is a very simple test that demonstrates one aspect of handwriting readiness (visual-motor integration). This involves showing children a drawing of a triangle (without them seeing the triangle being drawn). The adult should not name the shape or trace it with a finger. If the children cannot copy the picture to draw a good quality triangle (on plain paper with no erasing), then they are not ready for handwriting instruction. This is obvious considering that the letter "A" is a modified triangle. Approximately half of children aged 5½ and the majority of younger children cannot produce a good quality copy of a triangle<sup>1</sup>.

### **Proposed changes**

As outlined above, handwriting education in Ireland has negative effects (physical and psychological) on many children. The solution is to wait until children are developmentally ready before requiring them to write, as happens in many countries. To this end, the following actions are proposed:

- Raise the age at which handwriting is taught in schools in Ireland.
- Expand the content on child development in primary teaching undergraduate curricula to include readiness for handwriting.
- Provide continuing professional development for teachers on child development in relation to handwriting readiness.
- Include foundation pre-writing skills in preschools, while avoiding the teaching of handwriting.
- Educate parents and the general public on the reasons why earlier is not best for handwriting instruction.

It is envisaged that these changes would result in fewer young people needing to use assistive technology to replace writing and more children who are well engaged with the school system.

### References

\*The statistics cited in this paper were extracted from the Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration<sup>1</sup>. This assessment has been standardised six times since 1964 with a total of more than 13,000 children. Its results have remained stable over time. It is widely used both in Ireland and internationally.

1. Keith E. Beery and Natasha A. Beery, *Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration, 6th Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Pearson, 2010).
2. Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Foerderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung. (2013, March 28). Child development: Early walker or late walker of little consequence. *Science Daily*. Retrieved February 14, 2020 from [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/03/130328075702.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/03/130328075702.htm)
3. OECD. (2019). PISA 2018 Results: Combined Executive Summaries (Vols. I, II & III). Paris: OECD. Retrieved February 14, 2020 from [https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined\\_Executive\\_Summaries\\_PISA\\_2018.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf).

## 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 proposed curriculum does a disservice to approximately 50% of children who will be required to start learning to write before they are developmentally ready. This will cause all the problems outlined in Section 1.

It also disempowers teachers by obliging them to teach writing to children who are not developmentally ready.

## 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 curriculum should clearly state that it is inappropriate for children to be taught handwriting before they start school. Section 1 outlines the damage that is done by teaching handwriting before children are developmentally ready.

Parents should be educated so that they are aware that well-intentioned efforts to give their children an early start in handwriting are likely to be counter-productive. The benefits of practising pre-writing skills should be emphasised.

## 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.**

Teaching children handwriting before they are developmentally ready can have a negative effect on well-being, self-esteem and attitude to learning (as outlined 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.**

The current placement of handwriting instruction in Stage 1 does not take into account normal child development. This can have adverse effects on children (as outlined in Section 1). In many countries, handwriting instruction starts at age six or seven years.

## **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.**

Requiring handwriting instruction too early sets children and teachers up for failure and frustration (as outlined in Section 1).

**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.**

Waiting until children are developmentally ready to teach handwriting means that the process can be done more quickly and efficiently, with more enjoyment for all concerned.

## **Data Protection**

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**Thank you for your submission.**

Please email your submission to [PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:PCRRsubmissions@ncca.ie)