

# 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)

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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  Yes      No

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

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

Mary Immaculate College is a long and well established college of education based in Limerick. MIC offers a suite of programmes including the Bachelor in Education, Bachelor in Education & Psychology, Bachelor in Early Childcare and Education, Post Graduate Masters in Education, Doctorate in Educational, Child & Adolescent Psychology.

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

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

I would like to congratulate the NCCA on the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework. The Framework proposes a progressive and forward-thinking vision for primary education in Ireland and compliments existing strategic educational policies. The collaborative and consultative process which underpinned the development of the framework was informed by researchers, school networks and education partners and therefore embodies the shared expectations from the ground-up of key stakeholders and those charged with the responsibility of embracing and leading the way forward.

While plans for the review and re-development of the primary curriculum have been afoot for some time, the viability of a framework to equip learners for the future, received sharp focus in the context of the pandemic. The very questions that prompted a curricular rethink and detailed on page 3 i.e. 'What is the purpose of a primary education for tomorrow's children? / What priorities, structure and components within a curriculum can support this?' are the very questions that have arisen as a consequence of COVID-19. The pandemic undeniably caught education systems and learners off guard and in a short space of time exposed gaps, inequalities and limitations in developing preparedness among learners for times of emergencies. Teacher-led learning became obsolete overnight and key questions were asked about the 'what', 'how' and 'where' of learning. The prescribed curricula by educators across the world were questioned. Must all students follow a predetermined curriculum about which they have no voice? Can students be provided with opportunities to pursue their own interests and needs? Can students be allowed to design their own learning? The traditional way of teaching, where students are the recipients of what teachers teach, exposed vulnerable, ill-equipped learners in an online world where teachers were not always available to teach. Key attributes in learning were missing for students including learner agency, learner autonomy, self-regulation, responsibility and ownership of learning. COVID-19 has focussed attention on the new framework with an immediate sense of urgency. In my review, I feel the framework for the most part delivers an ambitious and promising vision with the capacity to meet the needs of future learners in an uncertain world. However, I have a number of observations which relate to the underlying principles within the framework, the identification of Wellbeing as a discrete curricular area and the definitions offered with regard to assessment, core competencies and learning to be a learner. My observations are detailed below and are intended as constructive contributions to the consultative response forum.

## **1. Principles**

I would like to suggest that 'Engagement' is extended to 'Engagement and Empowerment' or that 'Empowerment' alone is used here. Engagement is already implied under Pedagogy and the definition offered on pg. 6 moves beyond engagement to empowerment which aligns with the vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and competency based models in education i.e. *'Children are active and demonstrate agency as the capacity to act independently and to make choices about and in their learning. Curriculum experiences provide them with opportunities for decision-making, creativity and collaboration.'*

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## 2. Wellbeing

I am concerned that 'Wellbeing' is identified as a curricular subject in the re-developed curriculum. There is a real risk that in the absence of conceptual clarity about what is meant by 'Wellbeing' that this is vulnerable to misunderstanding. I am of the view that wellbeing in schools should be manifested in the ethos of the school, in the ecology of the school, in the everyday - not just in the 2 hrs 30 mins per week. Wellbeing needs to be framed in an overarching concept of positive school ecology which manifests responses and approaches to wellbeing in education at all levels in all matters. Wellbeing cannot be reduced to PE and SPHE (p.15 line 23). It is all encompassing in terms of the educational experience and is multifaceted in its manifestation in school systems. Educators, school leaders and teachers have responsibility for the systems-level factors that influence wellbeing. By reducing Wellbeing to time per week, there is a potential risk that teachers, school leaders and school communities tick that box and miss the bigger picture. If Wellbeing is situated within school with defined time per week it would be really helpful to provide greater conceptual clarification about what is intended as representing or delivering 'Wellbeing' in classrooms. As a psychologist, I am concerned about the quality of 'quasi' interventions that are neither validated nor accredited (and with no mandate for such) that are regularly introduced to schools as 'wellbeing' initiatives. Without doubt and certainly without intent, many of these 'wellbeing' initiatives achieve the opposite as has been noted in several research studies e.g. mindlessness being reported as preferable for some students than mindfulness who report the latter intervention in several studies as overwhelming. Within the context of education, it is also important to highlight *learner* wellbeing. With the ever increasing move towards the therapeutization of education we must be realistic about the competencies of teachers. Nurturing *learner* wellbeing is within the competency of all teachers. I would like to propose that *learner* wellbeing requires deconstruction and inclusion within this broader umbrella term of 'Wellbeing'.

## 3. Assessment

Overall, there are conflicting messages within the section on assessment. While assessment is clearly intended to be collaborative in nature with the child identified as a key stakeholder, a continuum is presented in Fig. 4 pg. 23 which is linear, singular in dimension and recording only teacher assessment activities to be completed 'upon' children. In my view, this should be replaced with a circular model or a quadrant representing the multi-dimensional nature of assessment in action and with no implied hierarchy from left to right and with the participation of the child in assessment practices very clearly articulated. This would be a more accurate conceptual model of assessment and compliment the message regarding key stakeholders in Fig.5, pg. 25. Disappointingly, there is an absence of discussion about the function of assessment equipping children to be learners for life. This is inconsistent with more contemporary understandings of the use and function of assessment in education generally and does not align with the definition of assessment in the Junior Cycle reform or indeed within the Aistear programme which emphasises the importance of assessment as a collaborative activity, the importance of process over product in assessment functions and assessment serving a 'double' function i.e. not just generating data about learners but also moving learners on in their learning. A final observation, relates to the absence of learner voice within the draft document. While implied in places, learner voice is not noted anywhere. Its centrality could be noted under the Principles of Teaching & Learning on pg. 6

but would also seem highly relevant to the section on Assessment.

#### **4. Core Competencies**

To facilitate the realisation of 21<sup>st</sup> century goals in learning, the re-developed primary curriculum proposes a shift towards a competency based model in education. This is most welcome but represents a very different vision for primary education. I think the rationale and move to a competency model would benefit from greater explanation. A core or key competency is a broad concept and encompasses skills, dispositions, attitudes and values, as well as knowledge about the context in which the competency is learned and demonstrated. A core competency is a learner's capacity to act in response to the demands of a more complex situation or task. To do so successfully, the learner needs to be appropriately informed about the task, have prior knowledge and to deploy cognitive and social skills, dispositions and values to meet the demands of the task. The concept of competency, therefore, implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It also involves the utilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Such a model places learner autonomy at its centre and is motivated by three interrelated imperatives: education for democratic citizenship, education for life, and education for lifelong learning.

#### **5. Learning to be a learner**

The inclusion of 'Learning to be a learner' as one of seven key competencies in the proposed redevelopment of the curriculum is most welcome. I think it is particularly noteworthy that the broader terminology of 'Learning to be a learner' has been selected over 'Learning to learn' (L2L), the latter which is identified as a key competency for the Junior Cycle framework. L2L has evolved from a narrow definition of skills and strategies to a broader, dynamic understanding of not just 'how' students learn but an acknowledgement of the centrality of the 'who' of the learner. L2L defined narrowly, refers to the development of specific skills and strategies to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in traditional learning engagements. This would involve, for example, exploration of rehearsal, elaboration, and organisational cognitive strategies, as well as the planning, managing, and monitoring metacognitive strategies, through an embedded teaching approach. Emerging research suggests (Thoutenhoofd & Pirrie, 2015) that a revised definition should transcend the narrow 'how' of learning, to concurrently embrace the 'who' of the learner. Within this broader sense of L2L, the individual continuously engages, recognises and embraces the process of becoming and being a learner through interrogating their experiences of and orientation towards learning. This dynamic component of a revised definition of L2L reflects a more multifaceted, multidisciplinary understanding on L2L and acknowledges the role of motivation, affect, self-regulation, reflectiveness, creativity, sociocultural experiences, the community of learners, and the learning context itself in realising the promise of L2L. It is argued (Waeylens & colleagues, 2002) this all-encompassing and dynamic conceptualisation of L2L offers a positive and meaningful sense of learner identity, potentiating a reflective, democratic and creative citizenry of lifelong learners.

'Learning to be a learner' in the redeveloped curriculum offers the promise of realising this broader definition of L2L. However, as it is currently described or defined, it lacks conceptual clarity and is altogether too vague. If as suggested on pg. 19, understanding 'What children learn and how they learn provides a strong foundation for their junior cycle experience...' there is, in my

view, a need to provide more tangible signposts as to what is intended by 'Learning to be a learner'. To support children becoming and being learners, children should be introduced to the explicit language and teaching of skills to learn 'how to learn' effectively. They should be offered the opportunity to customise their preferred ways of learning and there should be a determined effort to embed these ways of learning across teaching and learning moments in the classroom. The 'Who' of the learner – learner narrative - must also be nurtured and recorded across the school years. Learning to be a learner is insufficiently represented in the attributes list on page 10 as detailed below:

- Playing, learning and working with others
- Caring for and showing empathy towards others
- Being able to reflect on learning
- Fostering and managing positive relationships
- Dealing with conflict
- Respecting difference
- Learning about others

Learning the language, skills and strategies for learning to be a learner requires inclusion in this list. There is also a need to extend what is meant by 'learning to be a learner' and include an understanding of sociality, collaboration, resilience, curiosity, imagination, creativity, learning behaviours, attention, memory, mindset, metacognition and organisation. Learning to be a learner must also record the voice of the learner about becoming and being a learner. This affords learners the opportunity to become self-aware about their experience as learners – their understanding and response to the school experience, an acknowledgment of their strengths and challenges in learning etc. The competency 'Learning to be a learner' is inherently embedded within the broader construct of learner identity. While learner identity is mentioned within the draft framework no definition is offered. As a relevant, new and emergent construct within education, learner identity requires a definition. I note the New Zealand Ministry of Education posted a definition of learner identity earlier this year and explained it simply using the analogy of a river. More academic definitions are offered by others and include Coll and Falsafi (2010) who define it as: *'the conceptual artefact that contains, connects and enables reflection over the emotional and cognitive processes of the experience of becoming and being a learner, in the past as well as in the present and the future (p. 219)'*

## 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 increase in teacher-led autonomy and the recognition of agency and professionalism in teachers and school leaders alongside the flexibility proposed for planning and timetabling offers new opportunities for educators to lead and steer learning with genuine regard to individual school context. The traditional one-size fits all approach constrained possibilities for leaders, teachers and learners. The proposed changes offer a new era for learners, teachers and school leaders promoting professionalism, autonomy, self-determination and flexibility to respond to organic, diverse and dynamic school contexts.

## 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 framework outlines the continuum of the educational experience – preschool through to primary and on to secondary. In my view, much more is needed however, to achieve seamless and natural transitions. Mandatory and recognised professional standards at preschool level with rates of pay which boast equity across all levels in education should be a starting point. The need for holistic, standardised tracking of learner records across all levels is needed. Careful attention to the biases in some learner narrative records with the use of ‘video’ and ‘photographs’ should be balanced with more nuanced, reliable and valid assessment data. Transition records from primary to secondary school should include a record over the years of students preferred learning ways – their personalised and customised skills and strategies for learning to be a learner. There is continuity in broad terms in the conceptual framework in terms of skills, knowledge, dispositions, values and attitudes and this indeed is welcome.



## **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.**

As per response on page 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.**

As per response on pg. 1

## **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.**

As per response on pg. 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.**

As per response page 1.

## **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](http://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement) or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at [dpo@ncca.ie](mailto:dpo@ncca.ie).

**Thank you for your submission.**

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