

June 2024

NWC Submission on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications



nwc
National Women's Council

NWC Submission on the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

Participant details

1. I am responding:

- a) as an individual
- b) on behalf of an organisation or body

2. Organisation or body name: National Women's Council

3. Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation?

- a) Yes
- b) No

4. Are you willing to have your submission published?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Section 1: Alignment with the *Primary Curriculum Framework*

5. The Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications work together, as set out in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* to:

- Build on the strengths of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and respond to changing priorities.
- Promote agency and flexibility to schools in enacting the curriculum.
- Connect with learning experiences provided through *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle*
- Embed the seven key competencies in learning outcomes from junior infants to sixth class.
- Focus on developing children's skills, knowledge, dispositions, values, and attitudes.
- Position assessment as a central part of learning and teaching.
- Promote an integrated approach to learning, teaching, and assessment.
- Be for all children in primary and special schools.

Please outline your response on the extent to which the Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications address the key messages, making reference to one or more of the draft curriculum specifications.

NWC notes that the Wellbeing curriculum encompasses two important subjects: Physical Education (PE) and Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and focuses its responses on SPHE.

Draft Primary Curriculum Specification for Wellbeing (PE and SPHE):

- The curriculum builds upon its predecessor from 1999, but positively incorporates many of the evolving priorities of modern Ireland. However, there are areas to strengthen particularly with respect to addressing gender equality, tackling harmful gender stereotypes, sexual and reproductive health, and using education to combat gender-based violence. Additionally, there is a lack of reference to LGBTQ+ inclusion, which is crucial for a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum.
- The proposed assessment process appears rigorous, but it's crucial to consider support for students who may feel uncomfortable to participate openly, such as allowing anonymous questions and sharing. Additionally, ensuring that the assessment process is culturally sensitive and inclusive is paramount, to meet the needs of marginalised groups of children, including disabled children, migrant children, Traveller, and Roma children, among others.
- While the Wellbeing curriculum is intended for all children in primary and special schools, it lacks specific guidance for children in special schools. This aspect requires attention and inclusion in the curriculum framework.

Section 2: Individual Draft Primary Curriculum Specifications

6. You are invited to provide your response on one or more draft curriculum specification:

- Arts Education (Art, Music and Drama)
- *Primary Language Curriculum* including Modern Foreign Languages
- Social and Environmental Education (Geography and History)
- Science, Technology and Engineering Education
- Wellbeing (Physical Education and Social, Personal and Health Education)

Please include the page number(s) relevant to your comments.

Section 2(a): draft Arts Education Curriculum

7. Please outline your response on the draft Arts Education Curriculum specification, with reference to specific chapters and page numbers, where relevant.

NA

Section 2(b): the *Primary Language Curriculum* including Modern Foreign Languages

8. Please outline your response on the draft updates to the *Primary Language Curriculum* to include Modern Foreign Languages, with reference to specific chapters and page numbers, where relevant.

NA

Section 2(c): draft Social and Environmental Education Curriculum

9. Please outline your response on the draft Social and Environmental Education Curriculum specification, with reference to specific chapters and page numbers, where relevant.

NA

Section 2(d): draft Science, Technology and Engineering Education Curriculum

10. Please outline your response on the draft Science, Technology and Engineering Education Curriculum specification, with reference to specific chapters and page numbers, where relevant.

NA

Section 2(e) draft wellbeing curriculum

- 11. Please outline your response on the draft Wellbeing Curriculum specification, with reference to specific chapters and page numbers, where relevant.**

NWC provided an intersectional feminist analysis for both the Junior cycle and Senior Cycle SPHE consultation process. For the Primary school, the following is the overall feedback on the curriculum specification:

- **Whole-school Approach**
Internationally, whole-school approaches to health promotion and RSE integration have resulted in increased engagement in education, improved social and emotional well-being, and reductions in risk-taking behaviours. To ensure the effective implementation these approaches, it is crucial to couple them with training and capacity building for educators, and schools, alongside the provision of appropriate teaching tools and resources.
- **Advancing gender equality**
It is essential that all stakeholders within the educational system, including parents, guardians, and caregivers, understand the significance of a curriculum which is firmly rooted in gender equality for the well-being of young people. This involves tackling harmful gender stereotypes, promoting positive and healthy relationships, and addressing issues of consent. Additionally, awareness of reproductive justice is important to help children make informed decisions about their bodies and reproductive health as they grow up. Incorporating these in the curriculum will ensure students understand respectful interactions and personal boundaries from an early age.
- **Positive sexuality and reproductive rights**
Recognition of positive sexuality and reproductive rights as an essential element of the curriculum is of fundamental importance. Presenting sexuality in a positive light and providing students with age-appropriate sexual health

information is essential to establish a foundation of knowledge before students enter their teenage years.

- **Provision of evidence-based and objective information**
There is a need to ensure access to accurate, evidence based, age appropriate, non-judgemental and Relationship Sexuality Education (RSE) and information for all primary and special school children, as well as children out of school.

Specific feedback with page numbers:

Page 4- Table 1: Principles of learning, teaching, and assessment in the Wellbeing Curriculum

The phrase 'celebrating the diversity' of ethnicity in the Wellbeing curriculum may superficially acknowledge diversity. It's crucial to ensure genuine integration and respect by addressing complexities and promoting inclusivity.

Page 7-Aim

An additional aim on inculcating values of gender equality should be included within the curriculum.

The UNESCO international technical guidance on sexual education provides clear recommendations that should be considered in the development of the curriculum.

Specifically, it recommends that students (5- 8 years) should be able to understand that:

- It is important to understand the difference between biological sex and gender.
- Families, individuals, peers, and communities are sources of information about sex and gender.
- All persons are equally valuable, regardless of their gender.
- Understanding what Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is and knowing where to seek help are crucial.

UNESCO recommends that the following issues are explored with students (9- 12 years):

- Social and cultural norms and religious beliefs are some of the factors which influence gender roles.
- The way that individuals think of themselves or describe themselves to others in terms of their gender, is unique to them and should be respected.
- Gender inequalities and differences in power exist in families, friendships, relationships, communities, and society.
- Stereotypes about gender can lead to bias and inequality.
- All forms of GBV are wrong and a violation of human rights.
- Gender stereotypes can be the cause of violence and discrimination.

Page – 17 Health Education – SPHE

There is scope for further elaboration on sexual and reproductive health in the curriculum. The UNESCO international technical guidance on sexual education (2019) includes recommendations for sexual and reproductive health for different age categories, for the primary school, the relevant age category suggests the following:

5-8 years:

Educate children about the natural process of pregnancy and emphasise the importance of providing love, care, and support to everyone. Along with promotion of culture of inclusivity and respect for all individuals' health needs.

Page – 26 Health Education – SPHE

Sexual and reproductive health can be further elaborated in the curriculum. The UNESCO international technical guidance on sexual education (2019) has recommendations for sexual and reproductive health for different age categories, for the primary school, the relevant age category suggests the following:

9-12 years:

Recognise the significance of comprehensively addressing pregnancy, contraception, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). By fostering an open and supportive environment it will empower students to understand the complexities of sexual health, navigate gender roles and peer influences, and advocate for safe practices, respectful dialogue, and reproductive justice.

Page 15 (Emotional and Relational Education - Stage 1 & 2), page 25 (Emotional and Relational Education - Stage 3 & 4), and page 48 (Glossary)

There is no mention of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in content regarding bullying. It's crucial to include references to homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying in learning outcomes, the glossary, and to provide support in the Wellbeing Online Toolkit.

Section 3: Implementing the Curriculum

12. In your view, what curriculum supports will teachers and school leaders require in implementing the curriculum?

To ensure the curriculum's successful implementation, teachers and school leaders will require training and access to education tools/resources. This includes:

- **Mandatory delivery of the curriculum:** To ensure equitable delivery of learning and support, SPHE should be mandatory for all students. The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) baseline evaluation report for Ireland also recommends including topics such as gender stereotypes, gender equality, and the various forms of violence against women in the mandatory SPHE school curriculum.

- **Continuous teacher training and Professional Development:** Offering thorough training sessions and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers is crucial. The lack of confidence and competence among teachers in teaching Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) emphasises the need for proper training and guidance. Workshops and seminars should cover the theoretical foundations of SPHE, effective teaching methodologies, and practical strategies for classroom implementation. Additionally, providing resources for continuous learning, such as online courses or peer mentoring programmes, can support teachers in refining their SPHE instruction skills.
- **Teaching Resources and Materials:** Accessible and diverse teaching resources and materials are essential for facilitating engaging SPHE lessons. This includes textbooks, worksheets, multimedia materials, and interactive online resources covering various SPHE topics. These resources should also be available in Irish to support students attending Gaelscoils. Additionally, materials should be designed with the diversity of Irish society in mind, ensuring there is culturally appropriate references and depictions of marginalised communities – including Travellers, migrants, Roma, etc. This supports all young people to feel they are represented and valued in the classroom.
- **Parent and Community Involvement:** Engaging parents and the wider community in supporting SPHE education is vital for reinforcing learning beyond the classroom. Schools can organise information sessions, workshops, and family events to educate parents about the SPHE curriculum and encourage collaboration in promoting students' social, personal, and health development. Partnering with local organisations and health professionals can also provide valuable resources and expertise to enrich SPHE initiatives.

13. Are there any general comments in relation to implementing the curriculum in schools that you wish to make?

- **Inclusive and Intersectional Approach:** It is imperative that the implementation of the new SPHE curriculum adopts an inclusive and intersectional approach, addressing the diverse needs and experiences of all students. This includes considerations of gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, disability, and other intersecting identities. By ensuring inclusivity from the outset, the curriculum can better serve the needs of all children, promoting equality and respect for diversity.
- **Comprehensive Teacher Training:** Effective implementation hinges on comprehensive teacher training and professional development. Teachers require adequate support and resources to confidently deliver SPHE lessons that are engaging, relevant, and culturally sensitive. Investing in ongoing

training programmes will empower educators to navigate sensitive topics, facilitate open dialogue, and create a safe and supportive learning environment for students.

- **Integration with Whole-School Approach:** The successful implementation of the SPHE curriculum necessitates a whole-school approach that fosters collaboration among teachers, parents, and the wider school community. Schools should prioritise the integration of SPHE principles across the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school policies. By embedding SPHE into the fabric of school life, it can maximise the curriculum's impact on young peoples' personal and social development.
- **Evaluation and Continuous Improvement:** Regular evaluation and feedback mechanisms should be built into the implementation process to assess the effectiveness of the new SPHE curriculum and identify areas for improvement. By soliciting feedback from teachers, young people, parents, and other stakeholders, policymakers can ensure that the curriculum remains responsive to evolving societal needs and educational priorities. Any evaluations should include targeted approaches to garner the perspectives of marginalised groups, including young people who are from the Traveller community, Roma community, and migrant community. This would ensure the curriculum is inclusive and culturally sensitive to the experiences and perspectives of these ethnic and other minority groups in Irish society.

*The National Women's Council consulted its members for this submission and would like to acknowledge *Belong To* and *Irish National Teacher's Organisation* for their inputs.*