Updating *Aistear*

Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals

This template is intended to help you (and your colleagues) develop a written submission in relation to Updating *Aistear*. Please e-mail your completed submission to aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie

Organisation submission details

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Do you consent to this submission being posted online including your name and organisation*?

Yes   [x]   No   [ ]

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

Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), is the representative management body for Catholic primary schools in Ireland and this submission seeks to represent the perspective of those tasked with the governance of Catholic primary and special schools. We also have a number of associate members, comprised of other school patronages. As a management body which facilitates training , support and advice on a wide range of areas to over 2,800 schools, we are in a unique position of being able to understand and react to the needs of a large number of primary and special schools.

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Section 2 is structured according to the Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice. Each section is briefly summarised as a support for working on the submission.

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Section 1

Please outline your overall comments and observations on updating *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

There is much for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to be proud of with regard to *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). French (2013) outlines the elements of highly regarded early education systems, namely; respect for the child, an open framework approach, a rich environment, a process of representation, communication, interaction and dialogue, and finally, observation and monitoring. The design of the *Aistear* framework includes all these components.

Not only that, but a framework that was designed in 2009 is still very relevant today, 13 years after its launch. In fact, CPSMA do not advocate radical change in any proposed update of the framework. The difficult work of convincing all those involved in using *Aistear* about its value has been achieved. We do not represent the voices of the early years sector and can only speak to the experiences of the primary and special schools. CPSMA believe that in these schools, teachers, parents and, most importantly, children themselves "get" the rationale behind *Aistear* and its aim to facilitate enriching, challenging and fun learning experiences for children in their early years at primary level. For this the *Aistear* is deserving of praise.

The child-centred focus of *Aistear*, with children leading their own learning, based on a pedagogy of play, has been fundamental to its success. In addition, opportunities to foster and promote wellbeing, inclusion and pupil voice have been noteworthy. *Aistear* is considered a natural, meaningful and enjoyable environment and framework in which to learn and its support for the holistic development of children aligns with the Schedule of Catholic Schools.

However, this is not to state that CPSMA believe that every aspect relating to *Aistear* is perfect. In fact, if we may use the analogy of a vehicle in relation to the framework, we argue that *Aistear*, in its present form, is a very well designed car, at best, only travelling in third gear.

Due to the compartmentalised nature of individual subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) (NCCA, 1999), there is confusion in primary and special schools in relation to the integration of the *Aistear* framework within it. In practice, in many cases, it

appears to be acting as another subject within that PSC that already contains eleven other detailed subjects. This is further complicated by conflicting messages in school inspections as what constitutes very good practice in terms of *Aistear* use.

CPSMA recognise that the review of the *Aistear* framework is being considered in tandem with the roll out of a new curriculum (NCCA, 2020), which proposes a more integrated approach to learning with flexible time allocations, both of which are welcome. The grouping of Stages 1 and 2 from junior infants to second class also allows for the extension of a play based framework beyond the traditional "infant" classes. CPSMA note however, that play is not explicitly stated as part of pedagogical approaches to learning in the document. Implementing curriculum change amounts to not only changing text, but also winning the hearts and minds of teachers (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). As a result, efforts to "re-vitalise and re-invigorate interest in, appreciation for and use of the framework" (NCCA, 2021 p.3), will be fundamental to the broader endeavour of implementing a new curriculum.

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Section 2

Principles of *Aistear*

Aistear is based on 12 Principles of early learning and development. Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the Principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development. The Principles can be accessed here.

Please give your feedback in relation to updating the Principles of *Aistear*. Please indicate what is working well with the principles and what might need to be enhanced or updated.

The principles of *Aistear*, based under the three headings of Children and their lives in early childhood (the child's uniqueness, equality and diversity and children as citizens), Children's connections with others (relationships, parents, family and community and the adult's role) and How children learn and develop (holistic learning and development, active learning, play and hands-on experiences, relevant and meaningful experiences, communication and language and the learning environment), still remain as relevant today as they were in 2009.

However, the myriad of policy developments which have superseded the launch of *Aistear* in 2009, including the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020* (DES, 2011), *Education for Sustainable Development Policy 2014-2020* (DES, 2014) , *Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Policy 2017-2026* (DES, 2017) (a new STEM policy is upcoming), *Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022* (DES, 2016), *Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile* (NCCA), 2019), *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) and, most recently, the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* (DE, 2022) influence the updating of *Aistear* principles.

CPSMA outlines some areas for consideration:-
1. Most pertinently, consideration should be given to reassessing the principles in tandem with those outlined in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (DE, 2020). It is noteworthy that much alignment appears to exist between both frameworks already and CPSMA acknowledge the foresight of NCCA in this regard

2. One of the principles of the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020) relates to transitions and continuity, reflecting the progression of children from home to

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early learning to primary school. Effective communication between both is important to ease of transition for children and schools being able to meet their needs as much as possible. This area has become more formalised in the recent past and transition should be assessed as part of the review as a result. The publication of the *Mó Scéal* reporting templates (NCCA, 2016) have been a valuable resource to this end.

3. Sustainability in education is considered the development of understanding, knowledge, values and skills in students to respond to the damage being done to the natural environment and to create a more just and sustainable future (Corney and Reid, 2007; Evans *et al.*, 2016). These are key objectives of the *Department of Education for Sustainable Development Strategy* (DE, 2014), all the more importantly in the context of current climate breakdown. The *Aistear* framework is specifically referenced in the document to help children to contribute to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and it is recommended that ESD principles are integrated into all primary curriculum areas. While there are links with current *Aistear* principles, including the learning environment and children as citizens, CPSMA note that there are very few direct references to the use of the outdoors as part of the implementation of *Aistear*. Further explicit inclusion of ESD should be a priority in this, and other contexts in the framework.

4. Recent publications in the digital space include the *Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027* (DE, 2022) and the upcoming *Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) Implementation Plan 2022-2026* . The importance of digital literacy has increased with recent developments in technology, to the point where its use in our daily lives is ubiquitous. Attitudes towards technology and STEM are fixed from early ages. Pupils require the opportunity to engage in STEM related curricular experiences from junior infants onwards, both in the classroom and outside it, and require appropriate planning for children to acquire new knowledge and skills and consolidate them. At this time when a review of *Aistear* is being undertaken, its use as part of the framework should be reconsidered.

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Section 3

Themes of *Aistear*

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework presents children's learning and development using four Themes. These are:

1. Well-being
2. Identity and Belonging
3. Communicating
4. Exploring and Thinking.

The themes describe what children learn—the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims. Each aim is divided into six learning goals. Aistear's Themes can be accessed here

Please give your overall feedback in relation to the themes of *Aistear*. Please indicate what is working well with the themes and what might need to be enhanced or updated.

The four themes of *Aistear*; Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking (NCCA, 2009) have stood the test of time. Even with the raft of in a much changed society, which has recently gone through the Covid-19 pandemic, continues to have a homeless crisis and now prepares itself for the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the *Aistear* themes still encapsulate the integrated and holistic learning and development priorities of children in 2022, as well as the requirements for this to be facilitated.

The fact that the themes are based on relationships has been fundamental to their design success, with the child as an active contributor and creative partner with others and the class teachers using democratic practices in the classroom (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) and supported by parents at home.

The thematic approach also supports the academic, affective, spiritual, physical and social development of each child in an integrated fashion. This integrated approach is considered more suitable for children's learning at this early stage, based on the diversity of needs and development of individual children.
In an ideal child-led environment, children's interests and ideas are prioritised and children take control of their development, learning at their own pace (Pound, 2008). As

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stated, the themes of the *Aistear* framework have the potential for this to be realised in a meaningful way. However, the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) appears to be competing with *Aistear*, rather than complimenting it. Play-based learning appears to remain underdeveloped in Irish classrooms at the moment (Gray and Ryan, 2016). Instead, the themes appear to be implemented in a more rigid, teacher-led manner than may have been envisaged. A recent study by Woods, Mannion and Garitty (2021) found that primary school teachers predominantly implement *Aistear* in an hour or set period each day, in some instances in a separate room to the classroom, with the teacher choosing themes for implementation. This in contrast to the use of the framework to facilitate high quality play environments supporting unity between playing, learning and teaching throughout the school day.

CPSMA believe however, that primary schools and their teachers are committed to implementing an integrated play based curriculum across the day but that they have not been adequately supported to do so. The concern is that without specific professional development to understand how play and learning are related, teachers tend to revert to more traditional or 'teachy' approaches to learning (Gray and Ryan, 2016 p.191).

Unfortunately there does not appear to have been a strategic plan to implement *Aistear*. Returning to the analogy of *Aistear* as a well-designed car, it appears that the main driver is navigating the vehicle on a new route and is at least partially blindfolded. Possible solutions in this regard are discussed in Section 4.

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Section 4

Guidelines for Good Practice

Aistear has four sets of guidelines, focusing on different aspects of practice:

1. Building partnerships between parents and practitioners
2. Learning and developing through interactions
3. Learning and developing through play
4. Supporting learning and development through assessment

These describe how the adult can support children's learning and development across *Aistear's* principles and themes. *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice can be accessed [here](#)

Please give your overall feedback in relation to updating *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice. Please indicate what is working well with the guidelines and what might need to be enhanced or updated.

     The *Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2009a), which include four sets of user-friendly guidelines on parents, play, interactions and assessment contain relevant exemplars to support quality implementation of the framework. The description of good practice and inclusion of children's experiences highlight a picture of best use of *Aistear* and have been a welcome support for teachers down through the years.

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (NCCA, 2022) also provides a very comprehensive suite of supports for use in early childhood settings for this purpose. It has been updated regularly to assist schools to develop curricular quality and support children's learning. Many of the supports in this guide are suitable for primary schools but it the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide Introduction* does not mention primary school teachers among the list of those who may find the guide useful. In addition, the inclusion of Síolta in the title may hint that it is not for use in primary schools.

Finally, while CPSMA recognise that the NCCA does not have a remit for curricular implementation, it surely has a vested interest in how schools make sense of policy in this area in primary and special schools. While the resources mentioned above have been of benefit, they do not substitute for the lack of a strategic plan and funding required for implementation of the framework (Gray and Ryan, 2016).

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When the *Aistear* framework was first published, teachers had to attend professional development events in their own time and at their own expense. In addition, boards of management received no funding to resource its implementation and schools were left to depend on parental donations and fundraising to resource *Aistear*. This has continued until the present day. The result has been inconsistencies in how schools have implemented the *Aistear* framework and, as been alluded to in Section 3, they often do not fully understanding the best use of the framework throughout the school day. This was highlighted recently by teachers who reported that they would welcome mentoring, in-service training and continuing professional development opportunities related to engagement and application of *Aistear* within their schools (Woods, Mannion and Garitty, 2021).

CPSMA recommends the following:

1. That the *Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice* are updated to reflect a more diverse classroom context in 2022, and recent updates in research in this area
2. That the suite of resources to support the implementation of Aistear (*Guidelines for Good Practice*, *Aistear Síolta Practice Guides* etc.) are sourced in one single location for ease of access
3. That resources for primary school and special school settings are designed in the manner provided for in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*
4. That a grant for the proper resourcing of *Aistear* in primary schools is provided by the Department of Education in a manner similar to that of the recently announced school library book grant
5. That in tandem with the publication of the revised *Aistear* guidelines, a formal introduction and associated continuous professional development is provided for primary schools, to support its effective implementation. An opportunity for primary school teachers to access inservice jointly with early childhood practitioners would be welcome
6. Initiatives should be considered to foster the collaboration between universities /research institutions and schools to facilitate the flow of knowledge between the two in relation to best practice in the implementation of the *Aistear* framework
7. Consideration should also be given to a programme to assist schools in highlighting the value of *Aistear* for parents, to promote play in the home. Learning opportunities exist in normal day to day activities. The role of the family should not be underestimated in this regard, particularly where a focus on academic performance is present.
8. Finally, the facilitation of the dissemination of best practice currently evident in schools through the use of school clusters, communities of practice and inter school *Aistear* projects would be an innovative and proactive measure. The provision of online spaces, in conjunction with the publication of a future *Aistear*

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> review where teachers can collaborate with others on this area would be welcome.

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