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

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Yvonne Broderick
Position	
Organisation	Clare County Childcare Committee
Date	
E-mail	

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

Yes | Y | No | |

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

City/County Childcare Committees support and assist families and early learning and care and school age childcare providers with childcare matters at local county level. They are a Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth-funded support and are located nationwide.

The 30 CCCs were established in 2001 and coordinate the implementation of the national childcare policy and programmes at a local level on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth.

A key role of the CCCs is to facilitate and support the development of quality, accessible early learning and care and school age childcare services for the overall benefit of children

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and their parents by taking a child-centered and partnership approach.

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

After over a decade since Aistear was published, there are numerous strengths to having a national framework:

- All providers can utilise a single framework to develop their curriculum
- There is now widespred awareness and various levels of understanding of Aistear and the four themes
- The majority of educators have a foundational awareness and understanding of Aistear
- Many educators have an in-depth understanding of Aistear and of implementing an 'emergent and Inquiry based' curriculum to a high degree
- The themes have helped some educators to focus more specifically on childrens needs; there is greater emphasis on meeting childrens needs and the individuality of the child

A review of Aistear is an opportunity for the sector to engage in and develop a discourse about the purpose of curriculum, the nature of the framework and guidance needed to achieve this purpose.

Aistear is an interpretative document that relies on the professional knowledge, skills and competencies of those who implement it. One difficulty with this is the vast array of training programmes that educators can complete in order to attain a level 5 or 6 qualification to work in ELC. Those educators then come to work with young children, with many different understandings and level of knowledge which can impact on the quality of childrens experiences, and of the consistency in implementation across the country.

Aistear review, re-development and implementation can offer educators across the country an opportunity to develop their practice to ensure children have access to a high quality ELC experience, and with consistency.

Recommendations include:

- Ensuring the most recent and current policy documents, practice resources and legislation are incorporated into the framework and that the framework can adapt to incorporate further changes over time. Some of these important policy documents provide a rich basis for educators to consider and understand best

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practice. They include:

> *First Five (2018) - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*
> *Laura Lundy - (2007) model of participation*
> *Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings (2019)*
> *Early years regulations 2016*
> *Children First Act 2015*
> *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines 2016*
> *Code of Professional Responsibilities and Code of Ethics For Early Years Educators*

Since Aistear has been published in 2009, there have been several changes in the sector including:

- ECCE (free preschool) Scheme
- Aistear Siolta Practice Guide published in 2015
- Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016
- Quality Regulatory Framework was published in 2018 by TUSLA
- Early Years Education Inspections carried out by the DES (2016)
- The creation of the Better Start Quality Development Service (2015) and Access and Inclusion Model (2016)
- LINC Programme

All of these developments have brought new understandings for service providers and should be considered in the new curriculum framework.

- To look to other reviews of ELC curricula worldwide and incorpate the lessons that may be relevant to the Irish context. For example, New Zealands review of *Te Whāriki* offers many lessons for the review in the Irish context. For more specific developments in research and literature look at Claire McLachlans work: https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/en/early-childhood-curriculum/story-of-te-whariki/

- Throughout Aistear, ensure 'continuity and consistency in use of language', that is underpinned by current and recent, updated research in the field

- Incorportate plans for the long term implementation of Aistear, ensuring:
  > Continuity and connection between other relevant training programmes
  > Clear links between the Tusla and DES inspection models
  > A model of 'paid' CPD for all staff at all levels

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> ➢ consistency and continuity of delivery across agencies delivering training
>
> ➢ Changes in CPD to be updated and integrated organically into Aistear
>
> ➢ Take the lessons from previous training rollout- for example the EDI training seen by educators as something separate as opposed to integrated and deepinging the curriculum approach in practice.

- Consider how one set of documents would support a streamlined implementation process for educators, rather than standalone policy and practice documents, such as Aistear, Siolta, DES EYEI framework, Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guielines and charter for ECCE

- Incorporate and integrate the language of, and the implementation of, the 'Anti-bias approach within Aistear so educators can further develop understanding, knowledge and skill in a holistic approach in ELC

- The principles of the anti-bias approach, together with the goals for children and goals for adults, to be embedded in Aistear and into any subsequent training and workshops for educators

- In terms of implementation, give due consideration to the current context, the reality and landscape of ELC educators and services. The current climate offers multiple challenges in developing curricula and best practice. While non-contact time for reflective practice is a vital component in ELC services; many services do not have this 'luxury' due to staff shortages and low pay. The Covid 19 pandemic has compounded many factors that now make the work of an ELC educator more challenging. While team meetings were few before the pandemic, they are even less often in the current climate.

- Consider which aspects of Aistear would be best transferred onto the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide and which aspects remain core to the curriculum framework. For example, the 'Guidelines for Good Practice' might be better served integrated into the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide.

- Ensure continuity in the childs experience between ELC and primary school. Demonstrate within Aistear how the childs experience in ELC connects with the experiences underpinned by the primary school curriculum. The transition to primary school needs particular emphasis. While many educators are aware of the Mó Sceal resouces, they are not compulsory, and therefore significant gaps exist in their use in

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ELC services

- It's important to think of the effectiveness of Aistear. A major drawback to Aistear is the seemingly superficial way some ELC educators are 'implanting' Aistear rather than implementing it with all its potential. A study conducted by Gary and Ryan (2015) demonstrated that the majority of early years educators who participated in the study, did not feel they have sufficient training and knowledge of Aistear in order to implement it successfully. In order to implement a national framework successfully, and over the long term, ELC educators will require robust infrastructure and investment for engagement and reflection, in addition to key support from knowledgeable experts and organisations.

- Aistear encourages a play-based curriculum which is influenced by the children's interests. However, a barrier for educators when implementing a play-based curriculum can be the parent's views and perspectives of the value of play. In partnership with the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide, it is recommended to embark on a national communications campaign to promote the benefits of a play-based learning curriculum in comparison to structured and adult led curricula. A large scale campaign may promote public awareness and understanding of the advantages and the necessity of play for young children. Research indicates the widespread lack of understanding of the importance of play can be a major barrier to children's play experiences and opportunities (Whitebread 2012). https://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/1/david-whitebread---importance-of-play-report.pdf

- Although Aistear is a play-based curriculum, in Ireland we facilitate a diverse range of curricula and philosophy inspired settings. For example, areas of the Montessori approach might seem to be at odds with aspects of Aistear. Anecdotal evidence suggests that as a result, some early years educators who endeavour to provide high quality ELC experiences, find it difficult to implement the two curricula approaches simultaneously, and with success. Aistear is designed to be implemented in a complimentary way to diverse theoretical and philosophical perspectives in ELC; it is recommended that Aistear provide more guidance for educators to develop their curriculum more successfully when encountering these challenges. For example, Montessori preschools must implement a curriculum that is underpinned by the principles of Aistear in order to obtain ECCE funding. As a result, anecdotal evidence suggests there is a fear of losing ECCE funding if educators don't make significant changes to their Montessori curriculum (Mannion, 2019). It is worth considering the implications of both state funding and quality of childrens experiences, on service providers who endeavour to maintain fidelity to philosophical perspective they place a high value on.

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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.

Underpin the principles with key theories

Expand the principles to include the key theories and research that underpin the principles. Ensure there is clear integration of 'theorists' in the field; theoretical and applied perspectives, including for example:

- Beginning with Bronfenbrenners bio - ecological model of development (1979) focusing on the integrated and dynamic nature of learning and development extending beyond the home and Early Learning and Care (ELC) setting. It may not be contemporary, but it is still relevant.

- Socio-cultural theories - Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner - Recent socio-cultural theorising builds on Vygotsky's ideas that learning leads development and occurs in relationships with people, places and things. Play is an important means by which children try out new roles and identities as they interact with others.

- Neuroscientific research is providing evidence for how human development takes place over the course of life; beginning before birth and accelerating rapidly in the early years.

- Attachment (the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and more recent proponents)

Use of Langauge

In the 'Guidelines for Good Practice' which focus on 'Learning and Developing through Interactions', there is no mention of the word 'attachment' at all. However, in the principles and themes document, there is specific reference to 'strong attachments'. See for example:

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*"My early interactions with people lay the foundations for my relationships with others later in my life. Help me **make strong attachments** and give me time and space to be with familiar, loving adults and with other children"* (9).

*"In partnership with the adult, **children will make strong attachments** and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community"* (p.17)

In the context of professionalisation of the sector, the curriculum framework Aistear is well placed to equip caregivers and educators (practitioners, teachers, parents) with accurate langue. In that vein, it would be recommended to introduce the language of relational pedagogy more fully; the language of 'secure' and 'Healthy' attachment rather than 'strong attachment'. Children can form strong insecure attachment patterns with their caregivers. The langue in Aistear can articulate very clearly the intention and need for children to develop not just 'strong attachments; but 'secure attachments' with their caregivers and educators.

In the ethos of incorporating most recent and up to date research, it would be helpful to include the language of both co-regulation and self-regulation. Aistear focuses quite significantly on the childs developing independence and self regulation. While this is necessary, it would also be important that educators understand the importance of children having 'enough *safe* co-regulation' as a pre-requisite to developing 'healthy' self regulation skills. Aistear is the ideal vehicle to carry this information for educators.

In addition, it seems the theme of communication focuses more on the strategies of communication rather than the quality of the attachment relationship between educator and child. It would be important to emphasise the dual process of developing communicative and expressive abilities and skills while also emphasising the importance of the attuned adult.

Research on attachment suggests that when children experience a safe base and a secure haven, they have their emotional cup filled up, enabling them to confidently explore, play and learn. Aistear is an excellent resource to highlight the importance of the 'quality' of the attachment relationship and to illustrate some clear examples.

Ensure consistency and continuity in language between Aistear, Síolta, the Anti-bias approach and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. There are many terms not included in Aistear, for example; 'emergent and inquiry based curriculum'

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Irish Heritage

In the vein of the Anti-bias approach, celebrate all childrens diversity by Integrating more fully the values of culture and heritage associated with Ireland: this place, this land, Irish language, Traditional music- keeping heritage alive.

Dispositions

Te Whāriki focuses on motivational aspects of learning rather than disjointed skills and knowledge or 'will be's'. All the Aims in Aistear, begin with "Children will..." Te Whariki seems to encourage teachers to support children's ongoing learning dispositions. It would be worth considering how Aistear presents the skills and knowledge, particularly in the 'Sample learning opportunities'. One question to consider might be: Does Aistear present an image of the child as a 'human being' or a 'human doing'. While Aistear is an interpretative framework, will it be important that it is prescriptive or descriptive

Leadership

Increasing the focus on professional / pedagogical leadership - how is each services curriculum being reviewed or evaluated and how is this embedded into Aistear?

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 Questionnaire asks what would be added to each theme and provides some examples. The main recommended additions to the themes would be:

Wellbeing:
To emphasise the importance of attunement in meeting childrens needs. Recommending that the emphasis be on the adults (parents/educator) capacity to be attuned to identify the childs needs and to meet the childs needs

The theme of wellbing has two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being. However, it seems that Aistear gives less weight to psychological wellbeing. Throughout Aistear and in particular the theme of Well-being the topics of mental health, emotional wellbeing, attachment relationships, and mindfulness within ELC do not have sufficient weight. COVID 19 and the global pandemic has had a significant impact on children's learning and development; the importance of resilience, mental health and wellbeing, and an awareness of the impact of this time on children are more important now than ever. It is recommended to incorporate approaches that support children to develop in all areas of wellbeing; one such approach is mindfulness; for both the well-being of the children and early year's educator- refer to Barnardos Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care:
https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/0d80ac9221b8eec1.pdf

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Identity and belonging:

To include the principles of the anti-bias approach and to embed the anti-bias goals for children and specifically for the adults working with children.

Communicating:

The Theme and Aims of the theme communication are very much focused on the 'how' of communicating. For example, see the aims:

- *Aim 1 Children will use non-verbal communication skills*
- *Aim 2 Children will use language*
- *Aim 3 Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language*
- *Aim 4 Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively*

The element of relationships and the quality of relationships, more specifically the quality of the attachment relationship does not come through this theme in a meaningful way. While the principles may encapsulate the significance of the relationships for children, it would be important that the theme also encourages the adult to reflect on how 'communication' by its nature is relational and interactive. Effective and healthy communication involves an 'attuned', caring and loving adult. The emphasis might also include how the adult can develop skills in attunement to the child.

Language and literacy are significant aspects of children's developing communication. Although language is mentioned throughout Aistear, there is insufficient focus on the area of literacy. Literacy is mentioned once in the theme of Communication, as a standalone learning goal. It is recommended to place more emphasis on (pre) literacy, designating it a full aim, similar to language. It would be important to create linkages between Aistear and the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: 'The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020' . Interconncting frameworks, could support continuity in the childs experiences across ELC and primary chool.
https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/f4b76380-9c0c-4543-aa6b-f4e7074597e2/HMP7_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Strategy_English.pdf

Exploring and Thinking:

Incorporate recent research on the systems that interact, for example the attachment system and the exploratory behavioural system. In order to support children s healthy

exploration and learning, the relationship foundation and secure attachment with a caregiver/educator/parent is necessary.

Adult Capacity and Competency

Include a section to encourage the adult to reflect within themselves, to identify their own capacity, skills, and abilities to support the aims and learning goals for the children. For example the sample learning opportunities for the theme 'Communication', emaphise that the adults role to *"interact non verbally…, create rich print environment…, foster listening skills using voice tone",* etc. (p.36). To cultivate the capacity to do this, the adult may need to reflect on their own experience, skill, confidence in communicating non verbally and listening first, so as to be available to the children in these areas.

Consider how the use of language emphasises the '**quality of the childs experience'** within the aims. For example, in *"Aim 1 - Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them"*(p.44) might be reframed to emphasise enjoyment, for example: 'Children will be supported to 'enjoy' learning about and making sense of the world'.

For each theme, the 'Aim' begins with "Children will…".

> *AIM 1 Children **will be** strong psychologically and socially.*
> *Aim 2 Children **will be** as healthy and fit as they can be.*
> *Aim 3 Children **will be** creative and spiritual.*
> *Aim 4 Children **will have** positive outlooks on learning and on life*

Language: To reduce the value statements such as 'good' and substitute value statements for 'effective' or 'successful'. For example (on page 34) "Being a 'good' communicator is crucial to children's development.

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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 Siolta practice guide is very well placed to be the main source of practice guidance for implementation of a curriculum in ELC services. The 'Guidelines for Good Practice' would be best placed as integrated in the online practice guide resource rather than within the Aistear manual itself. That way, the guidelines can be updated as regularly as needed with new resources without affecting the integrity of the curriculum framework.

In the Aistear review questionnaire there are suggestions for inclusion. All six additions are represented in the online practice guide and so yes that resource could be added to ensuring adequate resources for educators at many levels of their own learning journey. The additions suggested in the questionnaire, are:

1. *Intentional teaching e.g. purposefully responding to, and building on, children's interests to extend their learning.*
2. *Emergent curriculum e.g. planning learning experiences around what children are interested in.*
3. *Inquiry-based learning e.g. asking children open-ended questions and encouraging them to investigate possible answers.*
4. *Planning and assessing e.g. planning for, and reflecting on, learning experiences that interest children.*
5. *Pedagogy e.g how children's early childhood practitioner supports learning and development.*

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> 6. *Supporting progression of children's learning e.g. planning learning experiences and supporting children to challenge themselves.*
>
> Support for the implementation of Aistear, principles and themes would be a very welcome approach. The sharing of many examples of planning and documentation is often welcome by educators.

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 https://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at dpo@ncca.ie.

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