

# 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](mailto:aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie)



### Organisation submission details

<b>Organisation</b>	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
<b>Date</b>	
<b>E-mail</b>	

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

YES

 Yes

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

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), founded in 1868, is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents approximately 50,000 teachers at primary, post primary and third level, both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The current INTO President (2022-2023) is John Driscoll; John Boyle is the General Secretary and Gerry Murphy is the Northern Secretary. The INTO has long been a strong voice in Education in Ireland is delighted to have the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of Primary Teachers, all of whom are Early Years Educators.

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## Section 1

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

The INTO recognises the integral role that primary school teachers play in the early years' sector in Ireland. Early childhood education developments encompass the infant section of primary schools

Both pre-schools and primary schools care for and educate children. It is argued that the co-dependent relationship that exists between early education and care should be nurtured and respected (Hayes, 2007).

Teachers are committed to providing effective learning experiences for all children in their care. The value of a play-based approach to teaching and learning is widely recognised, not only for children in younger classes but across the primary school curriculum. INTO welcomes the Updating Aistear process and recognise that the framework is being considered within the overall primary curriculum. Teachers are hopeful that this development will address the tension that currently exists for infant teachers juggling the Aistear framework with an overcrowded Primary School Curriculum.

The INTO has consistently expressed the frustration of teachers regarding the absence of state-funded formal professional development for infant teachers despite the fact Aistear is a fundamental part of the infant curriculum. The INTO notes the stem of the learning outcomes which outlines that 'Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to...' but reiterates that a significant number of schools do not currently engage with Aistear and there should not be any assumption that all teachers are aware of the framework or competent in its use. The INTO asserts that comprehensive professional development for teachers on Aistear and play-based pedagogy should form an integral part of the implementation process as part of the introduction of a revised curriculum for all teachers, this CPD should not limited to teachers in infant classes.

INTO is unequivocal in demands regarding funding and investment to ensure that appropriate resources are provided to all schools to support the implementation of a redeveloped curriculum and realise its learning outcomes. INTO highlights in particular, the value of smaller class size on the educational experience of children at primary level. Large class size leads to difficulties in implementing any new curriculum particularly when the focus is on a play-based approach incorporating active methodologies and differentiated learning. While teachers are broadly supportive of Aistear and the play-based approach advocated within the framework, there is also a strong view that using Aistear is challenging in most infant classrooms due to large class size. In acknowledging the reduction in the pupil teacher ratio in recent years, the INTO still calls on the government to continue to progress this issue to meet the European average class size and give our young children an equal chance with their counterparts in other countries across the continent.

The INTO is committed to providing children with special educational needs the best opportunity in an environment that is conducive to their educational development and progress, whether in a special school, special class or mainstream class with additional support.

Education at a Glance 2020 (OECD 2020) shows Ireland as 14th of 23 EU countries in per-pupil spending at the primary school level. This leaves us behind countries such as Austria, the UK, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Slovenia. Total education expenditure per student in 2016 was down on 2010 levels by 18% across primary, secondary and post-secondary nontertiary education. In 2016, expenditure on primary to tertiary education in Ireland as a proportion of gross domestic product, at 3.5%, was one of the lowest rates in the OECD, where the average was 5% (Education Policy Outlook: Ireland OECD 2020).

## 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.**

**(i) Children and their lives in early childhood**

Each child has his/her own set of experiences and a unique life-story. He/she is an active learner growing up as a member of a family and community with particular traditions and ways of life. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influences their overall development. This principle of Aistear acknowledges the important role that the school community must also play. As children interact and engage in the social world of the home, community and school, they need to be able to navigate a wide variety of contexts and situations, not only in childhood but as they mature into adolescence and adulthood.

The INTO recognises the impact of teaching and learning in the formative years as the building blocks for children's future development. Cognisant of the value of early intervention programmes for certain cohorts of children, the INTO has consistently advocated for children at risk of disadvantage to ensure that they are afforded appropriate, targeted supports in early childhood. The INTO has recently engaged in discussion with the Department of Education's Early Years Policy Unit concerning the future of the DEIS Early Start programme and the Rutland Street Pre-school. These intensive, high quality, early-intervention education programmes aim to enhance overall development, promote positive educational outcomes and offset the effects of social and economic disadvantage and should be supported.

**(ii) Children and their connections with others**

Children learn and develop through nurturing relationships with adults and other children, and the quality of these interactions impacts on their learning and development. Early learning in school/pre-school settings takes place through a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child – sometimes the adult leads the learning and sometimes the child leads. The adult enhances learning through a respectful understanding of the

child's uniqueness and alters the type and amount of support as the child grows in confidence and competence.

Learning with and about others enables children to develop empathy, an important capacity that allows them to tune in, to see and feel what another person is experiencing.

Linking Aistear principles and themes with the key competencies within the Draft Primary Curriculum would provide continuity and consistency for both early years and primary school pupils. It is timely that the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework is being developed as Aistear is being updated, this can allow for dovetailing of both frameworks and a more cohesive experience for learners.

### **(iii) How children learn and develop**

The learning environment (indoor and outdoor) influences what and how children learn. An inviting environment encourages and helps children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure, and challenge. INTO demands that all children are valued in an inclusive education system which provides learning environments with modified design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice to ensure accessibility to all pupils without discrimination. Thought must be given to the physical structure of schools to enable maximum flexibility in the use of indoor space. Priority must also be given to the provision of outdoor learning spaces for all pupils.

Effective models of inclusive education not only benefit students with disabilities, but also create an environment in which every student, including those who do not have disabilities or learning differences, can flourish. The concept of inclusion is not about giving every pupil the same experience, it is about ensuring that each child is enabled bloom and develop in an environment where diversity is the norm and barriers for all pupils are removed.

## 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.**

#### 1. *Well-being*

The INTO recognises the important of the inclusion of wellbeing within the curriculum to meet the needs of children in a modern society. The prevalence of mental health issues, anxiety and behaviours of concern among children is challenging for teachers and it is crucial that well-being is a key focus from the early years.

*Aistear* and the primary school curriculum are concerned with the holistic development of the child. Teachers acknowledge the success of some mental health and wellbeing programmes in teaching pupils how to be mentally healthy as well as supporting and promoting pupils' physical health. However, such programmes should not be added on to a long list of things to do in schools. INTO would agree that in keeping with vision and themes of *Aistear*, wellbeing should be a fundamental principle incorporated into everyday school life and should permeate any framework.

Furthermore, a commitment to mental health promotion and emotional support must not be the sole responsibility of schools but rather a shared responsibility between home, school, community and wider society. Both NEPS and CAMHS are understaffed and should be better resourced and expanded. INTO recommends that schools should have counsellors and therapists available to pupils who require such interventions and supports when they have experienced bullying or have engaged in bullying behaviours. Such supports would go a long way in having a positive impact on mental health and early intervention if provided in early years settings will reap significant benefits in later years.

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INTO passed a motion at Congress 2022 calling for, among other requirements, the development of a mental health framework for Primary Schools.

## *2. Identity and Belonging*

The theme of Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a community. Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or a connection with a particular group of people. Children's sense of belonging within the school setting creates an important foundation for their development and greatly influences their readiness to learn. When children feel a sense of belonging, they can be emotionally strong, self-assured, and able to deal with challenges and difficulties.

By embracing difference and exploring their own attitudes in relation to equality and diversity, and by realising the impact that their attitudes and values influence children, adults can develop the insights, self-awareness and skills that are needed to help children develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. At INTO Congress 2022, a motion was passed calling on the Central Executive Committee (CEC) to ensure the priorities in the ETUCE Action Plan on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are reflected in their negotiations with key stakeholders. Members called for a task force to be set up to actively promote and support inclusivity in Irish classrooms, acknowledging the societal changes that have taken place in Ireland over the last two decades and the diversity within our classrooms. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) places an emphasis on the importance of celebrating diversity. The INTO is proud to represent the many teachers doing incredible work to ensure that every pupil and teacher is safe and included in their school community. Schools should and must be inclusive to all and INTO will remain an unapologetic advocate for equality. While acknowledging that there has been progress in making our schools more inclusive and welcoming places for all staff and pupils, INTO emphasises the importance of cultivating an inclusive school environment and highlights the needs for increased funding, resources and professional development for all teachers to enable the vision of an inclusive school be realised.

## *3. Communicating*

Being a good communicator is crucial to children's development. The Aistear framework emphasises the importance of modelling good communication encourage children to communicate by listening to them, interpreting what they are saying and responding to them. The teacher/early years practitioner is tasked with creating a stimulating environment which motivates children to interact with each other, the adults and with the objects and places within that environment. By capturing children's interest and curiosity and challenging them to explore and to share their adventures and discoveries with others, the environment can fuel their thinking, imagination and creativity, thereby enriching communication. These positive, engaging experiences in early years support children in becoming confident and competent communicators, but as referenced earlier in this document, the INTO emphasises the need for smaller classes and enhanced provision of resources to allow for the provision of these learning environments within all schools.

INTO is committed to ensuring that our pupils are afforded high-quality learning opportunities at the foundation stages so that they can build upon the skills and attitudes developed in early education and continue to grow and flourish. Communication is a key pillar in supporting a child's learning and development and the Draft Primary Curriculum identifies 'Communicating and using language' as one of seven key competencies which is concerned with empowering children to share their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings in a variety of ways as well as enabling them to observe, listen to, interpret and show respect for the perspectives of others. The aims of the 'Communicating' theme in Aistear and the sample learning opportunities within the framework document provide guidance to teachers and early years educators to effectively promote good communication which augurs well for a child's transition to primary level. In the context of a revised curriculum and informed by teachers' experiences of implementing the Primary Language Curriculum, further and continued professional development for teachers in this area will be crucial.

#### *4. Exploring and Thinking*

In early childhood, most children develop physically and cognitively through exploring their environment. As mentioned in the previous section, the adult can foster learning through preparation of activities that are motivating and reflective of children's interests. To this end, in planning for teaching and learning, early years practitioners and teachers must ensure that the child's voice is considered, and activities/topics covered reflect children's interests. Teachers use their professional judgement, knowledge of the child and knowledge of pedagogy to create learning opportunities that are suited to children's individual needs and connect with their experiences and interests while at the same time challenging them to extend their knowledge, refine their skills and work cooperatively to solve problems.

The Draft Primary Curriculum recognises children as "unique, caring and competent" individuals and this individuality must be respected and valued in teachers' preparation for teaching and learning. To ensure that the needs and interests of all children are addressed, schools must be provided with the funding, resources and personnel required to create suitable learning environments which need the needs of all learners, regardless of age and ability.



## 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.**

*1. Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*

Teachers are supportive of the need for more linkage between pre-schools and primary schools to ensure continuity of learning and experience. Teachers would welcome more opportunities to share information with the pre-school sector in relation to transitions although they have cautioned that it must not put an unreasonable administrative or time burden on teachers, schools or early years settings.

The INTO, in collaboration with Early Childhood Ireland, is currently conducting research to gain information on children's transition (and the processes employed) from Early Years settings to primary school. The research explores junior infant teachers' and early years educators' experiences of the early years transition process, particularly in relation to the exchange of information and how this takes place within the context of this transition process. Dockett and Perry (2020) conceptualise the transition from ECEC to primary school as a process and Fabian and Dunlop (2002, pp.3) define this educational transition as "the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another". It is essential that the process of transition actively involves all those directly affected by the transition including the children, their families, educators and the social environment in order to be a high-quality transition. The INTO acknowledges the work of NCCA in developing the 'Mo Scéal' template and accompanying documentation. As the *Aistear* framework is updated it is timely to consider how these materials for supporting children's transitions from early years settings to primary school can be promoted among school communities and be more widely used in building partnerships between parents, practitioners and primary teachers.

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## *2. Learning and developing through interactions*

Interactions at all levels (whether they are between children themselves, children and adults or between adults) intersect all areas of child development – social, physical, emotional, intellectual and linguistic. The role of the teachers and/or early years practitioner in terms of ensuring constructive interactions with, and between, children is critical. The educator must be responsive to children's needs, and this demands knowledge of each pupil – their interests, dispositions and attitudes. Effective interactions rely on flexibility and creativity of educators and are varied, essential and dynamic. The quality of interactions may be enhanced through reflection and self-challenge.

Discussions with peers have the potential to greatly support teachers in this regard. As noted previously, the absence of formal training to complement the implementation of the Aistear has been a significant obstacle in enabling teachers in primary schools to fully engage with the framework. The benefits which could accrue from teachers being afforded time and space to engaging in professional development and network with other teachers to share and discuss their experiences cannot be underestimated. Peer-reviewing and reflection with other teachers would greatly enhance teachers' practice. INTO welcomes the positive messages within the recently published Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning and acknowledge the time and space that this allows for teachers to collaborate and make decisions based on their expertise and knowledge of the children in their own school contexts. INTO recognises that this reviewed approach to planning will necessitate a change of mindset for many teachers but will encourage individuals to confidently articulate the professional decisions they make in relation to the children in their care.

## *3. Learning and developing through play*

Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these experiences children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. The Aistear framework provides guidelines for teachers on supporting children's learning through play. These experiences help children to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, creatively and imaginatively. Play also lays the foundation for effective communication and learning.

Building on the good practices within the Aistear framework, a revised primary curriculum must continue to serve the learning needs and interests of children in a modern, diverse society supporting teachers to provide relevant and meaningful experiences and make learning more enjoyable and positive. The INTO recommends that professional development for teachers on play-based pedagogy should take place prior to the introduction of a revised curriculum and as an integral part of the implementation process. Such professional development must be available to all teachers and not limited to those in junior classes.

#### 4. Supporting learning and development through assessment

On-going assessment of what children do, say and make, and reflection on these experiences helps practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This also enables them to improve their practice. Assessment is about building a picture of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development. The value of all assessment methods must be reflected in any framework.

##### **Mar fhocal scoir:**

The updating of Aistear is timely in that it coincides with the consultation on and development of the Primary Curriculum Framework. This provides a unique opportunity for both processes to inform each other, to ensure continuity of thought and philosophy, continuity of process and pedagogy and continuity of experience for early years pupils.

The consultation is also taking place in a crowded policy space. We are engaged in discussions and consultations on STEM, on the place of modern foreign languages in primary schools, the Wellbeing Framework, a new Digital Strategy for schools, Senior Cycle Reform and Junior Cycle review, to name but a few. We have just experienced the most challenging two years in our society and in our education system in living memory. The updated Aistear framework, as the basis for early years education and the foundation on which our children's learning will be based, will need to take account, in some way, of all the above.

INTO maintains its stance that large class size is a key barrier to successful implementation of any curriculum structure. A reduced pupil teacher ratio is a pre-requisite to any play-based, thematic approach to curriculum such as that presented in the Aistear Framework.

The INTO has had a longstanding campaign for smaller class size and as the Aistear framework is being reviewed and updated, it is important to highlight the need for smaller class sizes for children in junior classes.

The INTO also asserts that consideration should be given to the provision of classroom assistants in infant classes to facilitate a more active and play-based approach to teaching and learning as advocated in Aistear's Guidelines for Good Practice. In addition, the provision of more support teachers would facilitate collaborative teaching and active learning opportunities.

Aistear has been welcomed and commended by teachers for providing a framework for continuity of learning for children from birth to six years of age. However, as noted on several occasions, teacher engagement with Aistear has been on a voluntary basis due to the lack of state funding.

The absence of a fully resourced implementation plan including comprehensive professional development on a national basis, has resulted in many challenges for schools and teachers. The INTO anticipates that the associated issues will be addressed in the NCCA updating of Aistear and the ongoing review of the primary school curriculum, However, the INTO reiterates that any revised curriculum for the infant classes must be accompanied by a comprehensive professional development programme, increased and sustained resourcing and investment in an inclusive approach to education underpinned by a Universal Design for Learning.

## Data Protection

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