

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 email your completed submission to aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Paula Prendeville
Position	
Organisation	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Date	
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Do you consent to this submission being posted online including your name and organisation*?

Yes

No

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

The NCSE aspires to a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them to achieve their potential. We promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive, and provides an appropriate education for children and adults with special educational needs. We also provide supports to schools; advice to educators, parents and guardians; research into

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special education; and provide policy advice to the Minister for Education to improve education services for students with special educational needs.

Research advises that students with additional needs are well supported with approximately 1% in special classes and 1% in special schools. 25% of the education budget is now invested in supporting special education.

- 1 in every 4/5 teacher posts supports special education.
- Over 19,000 special needs assistants are in place.
- Assistive technology, specialist furniture/equipment and adapted school buildings are provided.
- A special school transport system is in place.
- A school inclusion model is being piloted which provides the following supports to build schools' capacity to meet the needs of students:
 - In-school therapy (occupational and speech & language and behaviour) service to improve school capacity
 - A national nursing scheme in schools
 - A national SNA training course
 - Enhanced NCSE support teams
 - Enhanced NEPS provision.

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.

Section 1

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

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework provides a structure to support practitioners from early years' settings in developing appropriately challenging, motivating, and enjoyable learning experiences within loving relationships which allow children to develop

in a nurturing and supportive environment. It outlines how children learn and the experiences which support their learning.

Aistear is underpinned by 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in the form of a statement in three groups:

- Children and their lives in early childhood
- Children's connections with others
- How children learn and develop

These groups are aligned with children's developmental stages. The support statements are phrased in a positive way which reflects the child's voice in their learning journey and how they can be supported in this learning.

The *Aistear* Framework emphasises the importance of learning through playful experiences and provides a structured approach through the themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. The emphasis on learning through play links with the emphasis on language learning through playful and engaging learning experiences in the *Primary Language Curriculum*.

Much has changed in both the landscape and lexicon of Teaching and Learning since the publication of *Aistear* in 2009. In line with this, listed below are recommendations for general consideration, followed by specific recommendations for consideration under the headings of Principles, Themes and Guidelines.

General Considerations:

- In primary and special school settings, teachers of infant classes are expected to fully implement the new *Primary Language Curriculum* and the *1999 Primary Curriculum* while also adhering to the principles and themes of *Aistear* in their workload. Indeed when rolling out the revised PLC, the inspectorate noted that teachers need time and support to embed this new style of curriculum (PLC interagency video).
- Circular 45/2019 states that the PLC curriculum reflects the principles and pedagogies of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and it supports continuity between children's learning and development in early childhood settings and in infant classes. This level of alignment at principles level may be challenging for teachers on the ground. The PLC (p.6) states that in its Strands, Elements and Learning Outcomes, the PLC is aligned with the Junior Cycle specifications for English and Irish. This provides for continuity of experience and progression as children make the transition from primary to post primary. However, consideration needs to be given to progression from early years to primary school settings.

- The exemplars are very inclusive and represent a wide variety of settings. However, as they were created prior to the publication of the *Primary Language Curriculum*, consideration should be given to creating exemplars set in infant classes where the *Primary Language Curriculum* is being implemented side by side with *Aistear*.
- The Primary Language Curriculum is a learning outcome-based curriculum, and all new Primary curricula will be learning outcomes based. However, *Aistear* is not clearly defined by explicit learning outcomes. Consideration might be given to creating specific outcomes linked to dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understanding to accompany the statements of children's learning.
- A review of *Aistear* would benefit from a more inclusive perspective and to further consider children with special educational needs within its Framework and support materials. The Inclusion of the Additional Support Pathways from the Primary Language Curriculum in the *Aistear Framework* would allow teachers of pupils with SEN to celebrate all learning, and provide a common language for collaboration, monitoring progress and reporting across early years and primary settings.
- Play may not come naturally to some pupils with special educational needs, in particular imaginative play. Play may need to be modelled and taught explicitly for these children. Outcomes for learning through play may need to be linked specifically with skills for life including communication, problem solving, etc. and enhancing daily living for children with SEN.
- Information for Teachers of pupils with SEN is limited, i.e. the reader is directed to the NCSE website. The NCSE website references *Aistear* under Assessment with a link to the *Aistear* Assessment Guidelines and the *Aistear* Assessment Glossary. This requires further development in light of the fact that *Aistear* emphasises learning through play, which is a feature of early years in special classes and special schools.
- Guidance and advice should be provided for teachers in Early Intervention classes established for children with additional needs, in terms of the alignment of the Principles of *Aistear* with the *Primary Language Curriculum*.
- The new Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning (DE, 2021) for primary schools and special schools acknowledges teachers 'visible' and 'invisible' preparation for teaching and learning. This acknowledges the work undertaken by teachers in addition to recorded documentation. Perhaps this could be considered in relation to *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, in addition to changing the term *planning* to *preparation for teaching and learning*.
- Following the development of the Primary Language Curriculum Toolkit, an *Aistear* toolkit should be considered to include:
 - Specific resources for primary and special school teachers
 - Guiding schools to support Universal Design for Learning and inclusive practices
 - SEN in the classroom

- Use of SEN terminology that is inclusive of all based on children's needs
- Resources and supports for Early Intervention settings
- Supporting practice that focus on equality, diversity and acceptance of all.
- Practical strategies for linking *Aistear* and the *Primary Curriculum* e.g. Guide/Resources/Suggestions/Exemplars
- Digital resources
- CLIL / Immersion
- Linguistic diversity / second language learning and supporting the needs of ISL users
- Cross curricular and interdisciplinary approaches.

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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.

What's working well:

- The principles of *Aistear* are child-centred and broad in nature.
- The principles, and supporting statements, are expressed using clear and concise language.
- Explanation of the principles from a child's perspective highlights the importance of listening to and including the child's voice in teaching and learning.
- The principle of *Equality and Diversity* promotes a positive definition of diversity as 'welcoming and valuing individual and group differences and understanding and celebrating difference as part of life'.
- It is evident that the principles of *Aistear* have informed and underpinned the development of the *Primary Language Curriculum*.

What may need to be enhanced/updated:

- When considering the child's perspective in explaining the principles, this should be representative of the voice and perspective of all children in all school contexts.
- The principle of *Equality and Diversity* states that equality promotes a society where everyone can participate equally. This definition could be broadened to include providing 'equal opportunities for all children to participate in society', rather than equal participation.
- Under the principle of *Relationships*, the diversity of all types of relationships in family life should be represented and included.
- The principle of *Parents, Family and Community* states that 'parents are the most important people in children's lives'. This statement may not reflect the experience

of all children, including those in care, and should be broadened to include 'guardians, extended family, significant adults, carers and others' etc.

- The principle of *Holistic Learning and Development* states that children's learning is 'connected to where, how and with whom they learn'. Consideration should be given to including reference to the developmental stage of the child and the pace at which the child learns.

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.

What’s working well:

- The emphasis on skills, concepts and dispositions in the PLC is built on the emphasis on dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understanding in *Aistear*. This allows for continuity in the development of these important characteristics throughout the child’s learning journey.
- The theme of ‘Identity and Belonging’ is important for all children and especially for diverse learners.
- There is a close connection between the promotion of a ‘warm and supportive relationship’ in the *Aistear* environment and the implementation of the PLC. The close connection of such principles makes it an easy transition for children with SEN from one learning stage to another.
- An acknowledgment to use non-verbal means of communication to give, receive and make sense of information provides an excellent approach for children with SEN. Focusing on communication modes in addition to verbal including facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds, and Assistive Technology makes for an inclusive diverse curriculum where every child is recognised.

What may need to be updated/enhanced:

- Since the publication of *Aistear*, the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* has been published by the Department of Education. This is an important document for schools and should inform any changes in relation to the Theme of wellbeing in the *Aistear Framework*.
- The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* identify Risk and Protective factors specific to school/educational settings; considering a preventative wellbeing promotion process that has a focus on strengthening the appropriate protective factors and minimising the risk factors is recommended (p. 12)
- In the theme, *Identity and belonging*, the content could further recognise the increasingly diverse country we live in and acknowledge the variety of cultural backgrounds that children can come from.
- The principles of UDL should be embedded into practice to ensure that **all** children are considered from the outset when planning for *Aistear*, and that there is no retrofitting for pupils with SEN.
- Communicating can look very different for different children. Consideration should be given to augmented and alternative communication LAMH, ISL, AAC users.
- The theme of Communication could be expanded to include Communication and Expression, in recognition of the definition of language and communication in *Aistear* to include “art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories. While most children eventually master spoken and written language as their key means of communicating, they continue to speak through their gestures, body movements and expressions to a greater or lesser extent.” (p.34)
- The theme of Exploring and Thinking states that “in early childhood, most children develop physically and cognitively through exploring their environment, though some have disabilities that make this more difficult to achieve”. Emphasis should be placed on the role of the educator in adapting the learning environment and learning experiences to ensure that they are accessible for all children, regardless of disability. Therefore, *Aistear* should promote the social model of disability, which examines the relationship between the child and his/her environment, rather than the medical model of disability, which focuses on impairment.
- The theme of Communicating states, “the adult...models good use of language while providing children with lots of opportunities for speaking and listening (especially important for children learning English or Irish as a second language)” (p.39). Our society is increasingly culturally diverse, and language is a huge part of this. The Primary Language Curriculum states that “It is important to acknowledge

the presence of a variety of languages in a classroom and to foster increased learning and awareness about language for all children” (p.45). It is important to recognise this within the theme of communicating.

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.

What's working well:

- There are good examples including children with special educational needs in the Learning Experiences exemplars of the Guidelines for Good Practice.
- The figures and tables in the document are very helpful and concise.
- The Guidelines for Good Practice acknowledge the key role that parents/guardians have and the importance of working together.
- The reflective questions under the heading of 'Thinking About My Practice' are clearly written and will provide key information for parents and practitioners.
- The Guidelines emphasise the importance of developing interactions between children and others. The strategies for interaction include both child-led and adult-led learning and acknowledge the importance of promoting a balance between both methods.
- Excellent guidance is provided in relation to 'Learning through Play', including the types of play, the challenges that some children may experience in accessing play, and the adult's changing role in preparing for play. It is evident that play can be incorporated across all four themes of *Aistear*.
- The Guidelines for Learning and Assessment promote a range of assessment methods suited to all children early, including a storytelling approach, self-assessment, observations, conversations, setting tasks and explains the strengths and challenges of each method.

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What may need to be enhanced/updated:

- Young children with Autism may be at the pre-play stage and that means that their needs necessitates a greater focus on attention and engagement.
- Those children with autism who do engage in play activities may approach play differently compared to other children e.g. a day for the emergency services theme, this child might engage in lining up the helmets.
- In the context of a child who is blind or vision impaired, the play area needs to be safe in the context of the child's orientation and mobility.
- In the context of the child who is deaf or hard of hearing, the acoustic environment needs to be considered and the best use of Assistive Listening Devices.
- More resources/guidelines in relation to including children with special educational needs would enhance *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice.
- Consideration could be given to digital technology and its role in learning and developing through play.
- Consider acknowledging how important it is to be aware of children's strengths and needs when planning learning experiences. Practitioners might benefit from considering a pathway for learning new skills, such as those included in the Primary Language Curriculum support material and the Junior Cycle Level 1 Learning Programmes. This would also be helpful in recognising and celebrating small steps in learning and goals that reflect a developmental approach to skills for life.
- In the section of the Guidelines for *Supporting learning and development through assessment*, information, and examples on how to use digital technology for assessment, would be useful. Consideration would need to be given to GDPR in relation to this.
- While the Guidelines for *Learning and Assessment* refer to the IEP as a working document setting out the priority learning needs, goals and strategies, this will need to be expanded to include the Student Support Plan and NEPS Continuum of Support, where relevant. The link to the NCSE website, the Guidelines for Primary Schools; Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools (DES, 2017), and updated information can be found at <https://ncse.ie/> .

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