

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

Name	PDST Primary Literacy Team
Position	
Organisation	PDST
Date	
E-mail	

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 PDST Literacy Team (including Reading Recovery) consists of 24 advisors. We provide professional development for teachers in Ireland, in a variety of formats, across all areas of literacy, supporting teachers to implement the Primary Language Curriculum.

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.

Please email your submission to aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie

Section 1

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

The Literacy team welcomes the opportunity to offer feedback on the updating of the Aistear framework. The very existence of the Aistear Curriculum Framework gives a clear message to all within education of the importance of play on a child's social, emotional and educational development. It also underlines the value of play as a methodology for all practitioners. We are delighted that the role of 'play' continues to be promoted and supported for all those in a child's early life. We feel that an updated Aistear should acknowledge the progress that has been made in this area.

A large amount of our team's interactions with schools involve supporting teachers' implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum, which states that the curriculum for stage 1 (junior and senior infants) builds upon the principles of Aistear. Both Aistear and the Primary Language Curriculum are constructivist in nature and their core principles align quite well. This is evident in the learning outcome stem, 'Through appropriately playful learning experiences...'. This alignment between the Primary Language Curriculum & the principles of the Aistear framework is important as both curricula 'overlap' within the system in the infant classes. We feel that every effort should be made to ensure continuity of language across the curricula where possible.

In order to ensure consistency of messaging across the education sector we feel an important aspect of any updating of the Aistear framework would be to bring the language of the framework closer in alignment to that of the Primary Language Curriculum. Consideration should be given during the updating process as to how and where terms such as 'learning outcomes' & 'learning experiences' are used in the framework.

The team also feels that the updating of the Aistear framework can support the implementation of the language curriculum. It may be an opportunity to highlight for teachers the potential opportunities and links to the primary language curriculum that the Aistear framework encourages. The creation of a 'support material' style document may be very helpful here. Similarly, a FAQ document for infant teachers, or a document in the style of 'what to consider/what to avoid' would be a valuable support. In particular, this

could be a very useful way to challenge misconceptions which have arisen around the existing Aistear framework.

A key factor in the successful implementation of any policy/framework within the system is ensuring cohesiveness with wider policy. The recently published 'Guidance on Preparation for Teaching and Learning' should be given consideration during the redrafting process. The team felt that the framework supports and encourages teachers' autonomy to teach to the needs of the children in their classrooms. The key pillars of preparation, the knowledge of the child(ren), the knowledge of curriculum and the knowledge of pedagogy are key to the successful implementation of Aistear in the primary classroom. Similarly, acknowledgement of the invisible, visible and recorded elements of teacher's preparation may support teachers to focus their attention on the provision of aistear and avoid becoming overwhelmed with how it may be documented on paper. It would be worthwhile to give explicit mention of these points within the updated framework.

Developing the importance of cohesiveness within the system further, as a curriculum framework, Aistear must be in alignment with not just the Primary Language Curriculum, but with all aspects of the wider curriculum. There needs to be explicit links between the Aistear framework and the development of the new Primary Curriculum Framework. This will be particularly important where the model of themes or broad curricular areas is being considered. As mentioned regarding the existing Primary Language Curriculum, teachers will be more supported if there is strong alignment in the language & terminology used in both the Aistear framework and the revised Primary Curriculum.

There was also concern expressed that the Aistear framework may present an additional set of learning goals and aims for teachers to engage with in addition to those for curricular areas. We feel that a more valuable approach for the primary sector would be to highlight how the Aistear framework supports the attainment of existing curricular outcomes rather than creating additional outcomes.

The updating of the Aistear framework presents an opportunity to consider the professional development needs of teachers in this area. Not all teachers are familiar with key principles of the existing Aistear framework, nor can it be assumed that all schools are implementing Aistear. A small-scale 2016 study (Ring et. al) found that out of 114 schools surveyed, only 47% of educators were using the framework. There is a need for some form of whole-school professional development model exploring an updated aistear framework & demonstrating in practical terms how it 'fits' with the wider

curriculum, the Primary Language Curriculum, Assessment Guidelines & the Guidance for Preparation for Teaching and Learning.

The Literacy team would caution against the use of any cascade type model in support of aistear, as in our experience of working with schools this increases the chance of diluting the core messages of the aistear framework. The updating of the aistear framework also presents an opportunity to address common existing misconceptions around aistear. Most notably, in some situations it has become the 'aistear hour', and is seen as an additional timetabled part of the school day, rather than as a set of principles to underpin every aspect of the school day. We have found, the introduction of Aistear in a school can become overly focused on the Aistear hour, the personnel and resources required, which can obscure the deeper conceptual engagement. An effective programme of professional development accompanying the updating of aistear would allow teachers to move from an activity focused mindset, to a deeper understanding of the rationale underpinning aistear and the creation of playful learning experiences across the entire curriculum. We would like teachers to talk about 'being a playful classroom' rather than 'doing Aistear'.

Additionally, this presents an opportunity to address misconceptions which arise through the use of language around aistear. In some cases, Aistear has become synonymous with 'station teaching' and/or 'team teaching'. We would suggest that the updated framework and/or CPD emphasises the idea of 'play areas' as opposed to 'stations', explores the terminology of 'themes' and 'topics' in relation to aistear and the idea of aistear as a 'pedagogy' as opposed to a 'methodology' or as a stand-alone area to be completed.

It has been acknowledged by the team that the existing Aistear framework can result in teachers feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of adopting Aistear into their practice. We strongly feel that any update of the aistear framework should result in a framework which is more refined, concise, and user-friendly in order for it to be practical and useful for teachers. We would suggest that the Aistear framework employs the model of the 'Support Materials' from the Primary Language Curriculum. Short, practical, research-informed support materials, accompanied by video examples of children's learning and development would be highly beneficial for teachers.

Consideration also needs to be given to all adult stakeholders involved in a child's early development. Parents need to be supported and informed on the value and purpose of play and playfulness in all contexts. Concern was also expressed that the conditions of employment for those working in the early childhood sector is resulting in a loss of

expertise in the area, which can in turn impact the quality of aistear implementation in early childhood settings.

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 Literacy team is very supportive of the principles of Aistear as laid out in the current framework. By articulating the principles from the point-of-view of a child, the child-centred message underpinning all the principles is reinforced in a very effective manner. It is felt that the principles outlined align very well with the existing principles of the Primary School Curriculum. It was noted that the following principles of Aistear: children as citizens, the adult's role, play, and the learning environment are not represented in the principles as laid out in the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum (1999). In updating Aistear, consideration should be given to how the principles can align as closely as possible with the principles of the new Primary Curriculum Framework. Many of the principles already dovetail very well with those of the 1999 curriculum & the literacy team were pleased to note the overlap that exists between all the principles of aistear and the Primary Language Curriculum. It may be beneficial to include a visual representation of how the principles of Aistear are connected with areas other across the primary school curriculum. This would support teachers to view aistear as a pedagogy embedded into classroom practice, rather than an activity to be done.

The focus throughout the principles on motivation is most welcome. Underpinned by the principles, the framework recognises the value of play and hands-on experiences and uses these highly active and motivational activities as a platform for the development of a variety of skills and dispositions. The principles support the understanding that if an experience is relevant and meaningful to the needs of the child the learning will be much more powerful.

In line with the draft Primary Curriculum Framework, Primary Language Curriculum & Preparation for Teaching and Learning Guidance, the principles of Aistear support and

encourage teacher autonomy and professionalism. Phrases such as “watch how I play” emphasise the importance of observing and learning from the play. Teachers are supported by the principles to use careful observation and their own professional judgement to design learning experiences that build upon the strengths and interests of the child.

The strong focus on meaningful interactions is also a positive aspect which the team was pleased to see evident in many of the principles. The recognition that children learn “with and from adults and other children” is crucial. Similarly, when teachers are asked to “talk to me, listen to me, respond to me, interpret what I say...” the principles are placing value on meaningful conversations, going beyond hearing, but listening and responding to the child.

Most importantly, the emphasis on care and positive relationships are present across all of the principles. Positive relationships are at the core of effective teaching and learning. The existing principles very effectively support the building of relationships between child and parent/guardian, child and teacher, child and peers and teacher and parent/guardian. Embedded within all the principles is the principle of care, making the child feel cared for and valued as an individual and member of a community. While relationships and care often cannot be quantifiably measured, they are essential in supporting a child’s development and are clear to see in the existing principles of 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.

Overall, the Literacy team is very supportive of the existing themes included in the *Aistear* framework. A number of positive aspects were identified during the team's review of the existing framework. The use of these broad themes fosters the ability of the children to experience learning opportunities in a holistic way which stretches across and beyond the classroom experience independent of specific time slots. The existing themes present excellent opportunities for meaningful integration across areas of the existing primary school curriculum. The themes of ‘Well-being’ and ‘Identity and belonging’ in particular represent significant crossover with the SPHE curriculum. Well-being in particular is critical and precursor to all learning.

The theme of communication represents the most overt link with the Primary Language Curriculum, and therefore there is great potential for this theme to be aligned seamlessly with the aims & rationale of the Primary Language Curriculum. By bringing the awareness of the alignment between this approach and the outcomes & progression continua of the Primary Language Curriculum, teachers may feel that instead of being overwhelmed that they have a strategic approach to the development of the child(ren).

We are pleased that the theme of communication represents further opportunity to bring teachers awareness to the importance of oral language in a child’s development.

It validates teachers' decision to devote time to playful oral language experiences. The framework supports teachers to believe that oral language is not just an enjoyable process for the children, but a strategic undertaking which the teacher understands needs to be scaffolded and integrated with the learning journey.

With regard to the theme of exploring and thinking, the team expressed the opinion that the overall aistear framework provides significant opportunity for the children to engage in creative and numerical thinking. It was felt that the crucial factor in bringing this theme to life in the classroom is supporting teachers to become the neutral observer/facilitator during truly child-led learning experiences. Allowing and facilitating children to be active participants in their learning journeys is powerful and any support provided for the updated aistear framework would benefit from an exploration of the concept of 'active learning', which needs to go beyond simply 'being active'.

The team felt that each theme is comprehensive and well explained through detailed examples. However, as mentioned in section 1, the existence of additional aims and learning goals can be seen as 'an extra thing' for teachers to do. Every effort should be made to align these with, or make explicit links to, the aims and outcomes in the Primary School Curriculum.

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 literacy team acknowledges the need for practical support for teachers and early childhood practitioners in implementing the pedagogy of *Aistear* in their practice. The 'Thinking about my practice' sections of the guidelines were seen as being particularly useful and users may benefit if these sections received increased prominence. However, it is also felt that the volume and detail in the current guidelines has the potential to be overwhelming for the busy practitioner and therefore negate their value. The updated *Aistear* framework would benefit from consideration being given how the current guidelines could be made more accessible and concise.

It would be worth considering a variety of different formats for presenting updated guidelines. As we have referenced in section 1, we would recommend using a similar format to the support materials created in support of the Primary Language Curriculum, along with appropriate video footage of children's learning experiences. With regard to navigation, it might be better to organise the guidelines by age so that an infant teacher can quickly glance at examples without having to sift through age groups which are not necessarily relevant to their caseload. Similarly, examples aimed towards parents could be separated out.

The team was pleased to see parents acknowledged in the guidelines as the most important people in a child's life. When updating *Aistear*, we would recommend updating the learning experiences presented to further reflect modern Irish society & the many

different family types and backgrounds children experience.

It was observed that many of the learning experiences/examples presented focus on incidental learning & interactions. It would be valuable to include support in helping early childhood practitioners to foster meaningful interactions and quality dialogue. For example, strategies around role play, question & answering and creating a dialogic environment would be particularly helpful.

The guidelines on 'Play' in particular have very positive links to the Primary Language Curriculum. As mentioned in previous sections, the updating of the Aistear framework represents an opportunity to further align curricular frameworks which teachers are putting into practice simultaneously. It would support teachers if the language of the framework and curricula aligned as closely as possible. For example, when 'planning for play', considerations of learning outcomes may be relevant here. Similarly, the Primary Language Curriculum support materials on the topic of play would complement these guidelines very well. Making reference to these support materials can support teachers' understanding of how Aistear is embedded within the Primary Curriculum rather than an additional curriculum or programme to be done.

A key factor with the success of any curriculum framework is the school culture. Therefore, emphasising the importance of a school culture of play is important, whereby all members of the school community see the value of play and playful learning experiences. Playful learning can only be truly inclusive within a supportive school culture. As mentioned earlier, this is an opportunity to support whole school professional development in this area. It would also be worthwhile acknowledging in the framework that play does not cease to be a valuable pedagogical approach after the age of six/senior infants. Playful approaches are valued and effective well beyond a child's early years.

Page 56 of the guidelines explores the adult's role in play and is a welcome and useful inclusion. A playful mindset and playful learning experiences are fundamental to contextualised, contemporary 21st century pedagogy in primary school. The team feels the Aistear Framework could be an opportunity to explore the importance of the playful professional/playful teacher in the context of a playful classroom further in the Aistear Framework. Learning through play in a mindset with playfulness as the active ingredient. Becoming a playful professional is possible by simply adopting and developing a set of habits such as:

- Modelling and encouraging risk-taking - the 'trial and error' approach without risk of 'failure'.
- Using open-ended questions and welcoming and encouraging critical thinking
- Appropriate use of humour
- Embodying playfulness in one's physicality
- Using a light-hearted tone
- Embracing unexpected turns
- Fostering warm, secure and trusting relationships with children

In the interest of supporting a child-centred framework, an exploration of the child's role in play may also be worth including.

We welcome the focus the guidelines give to supporting learning and development through assessment, particularly for purposes of providing ongoing feedback to children. An emphasis on having a clear focus of assessment supports the ongoing introduction of learning outcomes to the primary school curriculum. Again in terms of system cohesion, it would be beneficial when updating advice on assessment practices for Aistear to align as closely as possible with primary curricular framework and wider assessment guidelines in both messaging and language.

When updating the Aistear framework, it may also be worthwhile to give explicit guidance on supporting inclusion for all children. The framework would benefit from the inclusion of guidance around universal design for learning in the provision of playful learning experiences. While the current framework and guidance does make reference to supporting children with special educational needs, parts may need to be updated to align with current policy (for example referencing support plans rather than specifically IEPs).

Data Protection

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