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

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

Yes | x | No | |

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

PLÉ is a voluntary body committed to the advancement of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland. PLÉ is the association of lecturers in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) degree courses at Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Ireland. Based on an organisational membership structure, all academics involved in ECEC degree courses within affiliated organisations, are recognised as members.

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Section 1

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

Aistear is a critical resource for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland and has much to be commended. However, as with any educational framework, regular reviews are necessary and provide important opportunities to reflect, reconsider and refresh. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this process. The members of PLÉ who developed this submission are of the view that there is scope to expand and update Aistear to more accurately reflect the lived experiences of children in Ireland today, and to better resource and enable Early Childhood Educators and others involved in childen's early learning experiences.

This submission provides general comments in support of updating the framework and linked documents/resources, as well as focused commentary related to three specific areas:
- Integrating and expanding content underpinning Diversity, Equality and Inclusion from a children's rights and social justice perspective
- Consideration for "Education for Sustainable Development" based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Strengthening pedagogical practices, particularly with consideration for the central role of the Educator in supporting children's early learning and development.

To begin, we recommended that Aistear include a vision for Early Childhood Education and Care with clear aims linked to the vision. The pedagogical role of the educator needs to be clearly outlined and include a focus on critical pedagogy and the educator's professional role in advancing diversity, equality, inclusion and justice as well as promoting sustainability, in ECEC and beyond.

The development and incremental implementation of Aistear has had an incredibly positive influence on the landscape of ECEC in Ireland. It has created a language of young children's learning and development that has positioned children as competent, active contributors to their learning and indeed a language around the learning that occurs in play. Notwithstanding it is timely to consider how the language in Aistear might further influence positive developments in early childhood pedagogical practice in Ireland. The role of the adult is a dilute term that does not evidence the important, complex, dynamic work of ECEC

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educators. It refers to adults in passing and thus does not express the full extent of the intentionality behind excellence in pedagogical practices.

Throughout Aistear language such as 'I need' from children's perspective should be changed to 'I have the right to': the language needs to change from children's needs to children's rights. Similarly in many instances language such as *support* should be changed to *empower* and similar stronger language suggesting social justice.

Further to the matter of language and inclusion, we recommend the discontinued use of he/she or his/her in favour of they and their. These terms not only indidcate a broader understanding of identity but are more streamlined for the reader.

It is strongly recommended that for each theme, in between the theme's aims and goals and the sample learning opportunities, 2 brief sections taking up one page are added:
   o A description of things to consider in the learning environment
   o A box with 3-5 points for critical reflection by the educator prior to planning the learning environment and sample learning opportunities

Sample learning opportunities across all themes that refer to play in homes or with particular family members should be changed to reflect ONLY early childhood settings. Such examples would never be found in a primary school curriculum (ie. what parents should teach their children at home) and so should not be included in a curriculum framework for early childhood. Separate guidelines can be issued regarding the use of Aistear at home; these would provide recognition of families as primary educators of young children and would be welcomed. However, they would clarify and recognise the very different learning that occurs in these different contexts (ie the home, the ECEC setting). References to parents/families need to be more inclusive across the framework and refer to parents/guardians. Many children don't live with parents and/or live in extended family contexts.

Within this consultation process, the Aistear user guide was supplied. This document was not familiar to some of the respondents of the consultation. Nonetheless, it is an important component in the suite of Aistear documents and perhaps should be within or as an introduction to the guidelines for good practice. This point serves to highlight the proliferation of documents relating to Aistear. If an educator wished to develop their understandings of Aistear, it might seem like an insurmountable task. Streamlining the documents and considering how they are presented would be an important aspect of the development of Aistear.

Pedagogical Practices In and Beyond ECEC:
Aistear was designed to offer sample experiences and learning opportunities. However, it has the potential to have a much richer, deeper influence on the developing practices in ECEC. It has the potential to become a framework for a pedagogy guiding the holistic development of babies, toddlers and young children.

Since *Aistear* has been developed there has been a greater awareness of how it can be used to develop good practice. In the intervening period, there has been a recognition that there is less of an emphasis and understanding on the learning and development of babies. Concepts of babies learning through consistency, routine care giving and responsiveness could be brought to the fore in the guidelines for good practice.

Aistear has the potential to positively influence educational practices in other educational settings – emphasis on internal motivation, problem solving, creativity of both children and educators, supporting the development of dispositions, interest led, process orientated, playful and joyful, active involvement of children and educators (collaboration focused) provide excellent pedagogical guidance. There is scope for many of the good practices in ECEC to be carried into the primary school and methods for communication and collaboration between these professionals strengthened.

When Aistear was first rolled out there was a lot of emphasis on ECEC settings and very little training support for teachers working in junior and senior infant classes. This updating process (and its outcome) provides a great opportunity to include supports for teachers. There is a need to emphsise that Aistear is a pedagogical approach that incorporates all of the new primary curriculum and not just a small section of each day (Aistear Time).

ECEC and Education for Sustainable Development:
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and are a call to action to protect people and the planet. The 17 SDGs aim to transform the world and bring equity, peace and freedom from oppression through citizens and nations taking positive action in areas of poverty, education, climate and the ethical use of resources. The SDGs require a universal shift in action, attitudes and values to ensure they are realised and everyone has a part to play in this endeavour. The Goals have relevance for everyone including young children in early childhood settings.

Young children develop attitudes early in life and the emergence of these values and beliefs is situated within their social and cultural context (e.g., MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham, & Morris, 2014;). This suggests that early childhood settings potentially play a

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critical role in developing and mediating those attitudes and values (Thornberg, 2016). Bruner (1960) reminds us that children can understand complex information provided it is shared or taught in ways that are relevant and meaningful. Thus, we are making a compelling argument that early childhood settings have a responsibility to support children as active citizens and to integrate the SDGs within their curriculum and pedagogy. Consequently, Aistear should embody the broad scope of the SDGs threaded through its Principles, Themes and Guidelines. Below is a focus on Goal No. 4 and its relevance to Aistear, which can be understood as a key Goal relating to education and the processes of teaching/learning.

From an Irish context, in order to create awareness of the critical global issues central to the SDG goals for this generation and future generations, ensuring a safe and secure childhood for every child; it is vital to embed Goal No. 4 - Quality Education within the National Curriculum Framework- Aistear.

Embedding the SDGs in Aistear would strengthen the rights-based approach providing a more robust and holistic ECEC practice. (SDG Goal No.4: Quality Education). It would promote awareness of children with disabilities, indigenous children and children in vulnerable situations. (SDG. 4.5).
Some of the many benefits of addressing these issues during the early years would be:
- To support children to become aware of the critical global issues central to the SDG goals.
- To create a sense of responsibility from an early age.
- To provide opportunities for children to feel empowered by a sense of citizenship.
- In addressing the global SDG goals of hunger, poverty and gender inequality, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and equity are introduced by the Early Childhood Educator within the ECEC setting.
- To support children (and educators) to recognise their interdepdence through relationships with each other and our world

Goal No. 4 of the SDGs highlight that the quality of teaching (pedagogy)and the role of the educator is central to young childrens' learning and development.

We have become global citizens and it is important that children are exposed to relevant contemporary discussions and activities that can empower them now and in the future., e.g., Covid 19, climate change. Aistear can be the mechanism by which childrens' emotional intelligence is supported and their sense of social justice and cultural awareness is developed.

Strengthening the Concepts and Practices Underpinning Diversity, Equality and Inclusion:

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To ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children clear links should be made throughout Aistear to the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016) and the Anti-bias Approach. In keeping with the DEI Charter and Guidelines it will be important for educators to engage with principles that support reflection on their own values, attitudes and biases and include a focus on the educator's understanding of their own cultural and personal beliefs. We know that children begin to learn and absorb positive and negative views about difference at a very early age. Biases are explicit and implicit and educators bring biases into the ECEC setting hence it is important to have principles that empower educators to unpack their own attitudes, values and biases to enable then to recognise, question and challenge biases and ensure an equitable environment for all children.

In the introduction it is important to name the structural nature and levels of inequality and discrimination (including racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism) and their impact making reference to the UNCRC, UNICERD UNCRPD. There is a need to acknowledge that children have a wide range of experience as do their families in society and have a right to equitable learning experiences which pro-actively acknowledge diversity as a strength.

The challenges of diversity (discrimination, poverty, trauma, ability) for some families should not be positioned as a deficit of parents' ability to participate in their children's learning but be recognised as inequitable societal issues. Biases are both individual and institutional and both need to be acknowledged and addressed. All children and families should be positioned as valued members of our society despite the uneven distribution of privilege, advantage, and power.

The intersectionality of diversity needs to be recognised within the framework from the introduction, through the themes, aims and goals as well as the exemplars. Children and adults have multiple identities some of those identities mean that children are left disadvantaged in our society. These realities need to be acknowledged in both the introduction and across the curriculum framework.

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion should permeate all the principles and themes. In Aistear the adult is used to encompass parents too, however, there is a need to have clear emphasis on the principles for the ECEC educator. (See section 2 for suggestions for principles.)

Aistear needs to be updated in light of current research and theory on:

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- providing inclusive education for children who are English language learners (that considers all the phases of language development that English language learners normally go through)
- providing inclusive education for children who have or currently experiences grief or trauma with guidance on how pedagogy, learning environments and opportunities need to be adapted to be trauma-informed. Once this is included, CPD must be offered specifically on trauma informed care and education in line with Aistear.

Across all themes, references to celebration of birthday parties and Santa need to be carefully considered. These are very culturally specific celebrations and anecdotally lead to a host of complex issues that prevent genuinely inclusive education. While for some children birthdays and Santa might increase a sense of belonging, for many children it is a source of pain or difficult experiences and the educational value of celebrating them (at least from a curriculum framework perspective) is limited. *While it can be done well when managed sensitively it is not something that is so essential as needing reference in a curriculum framework*. Instead where references to celebrations (ie. Christmas, Santa, etc.) are made, it needs to be very clearly framed in Aistear that culturally appropriate celebrations may strengthen culturally responsive pedagogy in some circumstances but should not be taken for granted as inclusive practice.

This submission recommends that the vocabulary list should be updated to include the following terms: Bias; Anti-bias education; Social justice; Citizenship; Democratic education; Values education; Culturally responsive pedagogy; Linguistic diversity; Prejudice; Spirituality; Sustainability/Education for Sustainability. In addition, the status of Travellers needs updating and the term 'new communities' should be taken out, as it is now inappropriate and suggests a segregation of ethnic groups. Parents should be extended to guardians. Educator should be added. The reference to culture needs to include an explanation of intersectionality.

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Section 2

Principles of *Aistear*

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

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

The principles of Aistear do not always have a central role in practice. There is a tendency by educators to go straight to the themes, aims and goals. This submission recommends that the principles require updating and strengthening, using more empowering language for both children and educators. Examples below

- o Participation and Empowerment
- o Fairness and Justice
- o Reciprocal relationships with parents, families and communities
- o Unique value and dignity of each child
- o Inter-connectedness

The principles need to demonstrate a proactive stance from the educator's perspective. The principles of Aistear are a good guide. The focus is clearly on the child which is right and important and includes the educator's role in support of the child. However the principles would benefit from more detail and more visibility on the role of the educator.

Example: Equality and Diversity
Nurturing equality and diversity is important in early childhood. Promoting equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Diversity is about welcoming and valuing individual and group differences, and understanding and celebrating difference as part of life.

- o New Title: Respecting Equality, Diversity and Inclusion or
- o New Title: Fairness and Justice
  The principle can be more about what the educator understands and can engage with. Such as: Respecting diversity in the ECEC setting is about valuing and respecting the beliefs, experiences and backgrounds of families. It is about improving our own knowledge base, understanding and recognising societal challenges for some diverse families. Being committed to equality means believing in all children's capacities to achieve regardless of their backgrounds, culture, abilities, languages. High expectations from educators are an important ingredient for the success of children.

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- An additional Principle might focus on the ECEC educator's understanding of professional knowledge as constantly changing

John Dewey characterised learning not as the experience itself, but as thinking about experience (James, 1980): We need to provide tools for thinking about experiences. Therefore along with the principle there should be critical reflective questions throughout Aistear to engage the educator in critical thinking.

Suggested new Principle Title: *Co-construction of knowledge and critical reflective practice.*
- This is about educators cultivating their own position about what they believe and what influences them. Cultivating their own knowledge base, and seeking information from the families they work with about their social and cultural beliefs. Drawing on new theories and questioning old beliefs.

McNaughton (2003) developed the questions below which could be used in the creation of a new principle:
- o How have I come to do this this way?
- o How have I come to understand things this way?
- o Who benefits from how I do and understand this?
- o How many other ways are their to do and understand this?
- o Which of those ways might lead to more equitable and fair ways of doing things and understanding things?

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion should permeate all the principles because of the intersectionality of identities and the nature of Irish society. While Ireland has always been diverse (Traveller, Black Irish, Religious Diversity, Class, sexual orientation, gender) the demographics of Irish society has changed considerably and needs to be acknowledged from the outset.

To ensure an integrated and robust curriculum framework it is essential that the language of the Anti-bias education is embraced, to include the principles of the anti-bias approach and the goals for adults and children. Within the theme of Identity and belonging; include the principles of the anti-bias approach to embed the anti-bias goals for children and specifically for the adults working with children.

Issues of sustainability linked to concepts of citizenship, participation, can be woven through Aistear, particularly under the headings of Principle 1 and 2:
Principles
The core Principles of Aistear hold true from their development in 2009 (NCCA, 2009). However, we recommend that the principles be strengthened with more explicit naming and actions attributable to children (active rather than passive).

1. **Principle - Children and their lives in early childhood:**
   Children are empowered to bring about change in the context of knowing they are respected, have a voice and believe they can make a difference.
   Recommendation:
   The section on children as citizens could be strengthened by the inclusion of more pro-active criteria, e.g.,
   Children as citizens
   - Help me assume responsibility and contribute to my classroom, community and society

- Enable me to actively respect others, showing solidarity, empathy and compassion
- Harness my willingness to help others
- Help me express my thoughts and opinions so that I can develop as a critical and ethical thinker who can bring about change and make a difference

2. **Principle - Children's connections with others**
   Childrens' connections with others are complex and as Aistear suggests, are predicated on the basis of a web of relationships. The current text 'My community is important to me too. Show through your interactions with me that you respect my family and where I come from' suggests that community here is related to the child's identity. While valid, this point does not recognise the relationship between the child/community and community/child.

   We believe that the section on Parents, family and community should be separated out to enable a focus on the community/societal level.
   Recommendations:
   - Support my active participation in civic life and sustainable development
   - Enable me to make ethical choices for the benefit of everyone and our world
   - Help me make a difference to my community

Further to the specific points set out in the preceding section, this submission also suggests that the principles need to be emphasised with clear examples. These should link back to how we understanding children as citizens with rights and examples provided of what these principles in practice might look like. These may include examples of a child friendly environment, of engaging children in their own learning, what do sustained shared moments of teaching look like?

Area/Pillars -

Children's Well-being – Motivation Concentration Independence. Understanding involvement and engagement to include theoretical/evidence based example (Leuven Scale).

Children as citizens - Needs to be specific in relation to 'rights holders'. For example the use of vocabulary like 'Ensure' I have choices rather than *let me* (language of power with the adults rather than shared) Change words "let me" to *support me* and "Give me" to *ensure I have* – connotations of adult as superior.

Community - Children as contributors and part of their community and woder world. Bring me into the community and engage in community events. Contributor to community. Learning in context and through the community, recognising and supporting biodiversity and sustainability.

Holistic learning and development – as well as developmental areas list the learning areas, dispositions, etc. Add in about processes of learning and how children learn.

Leadership - The adults role: leadership of pedagogical practices and supporting/mentoring other educators.

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Section 3

Themes of *Aistear*

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

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

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

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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.

Flexible routines and the inherent learning that occurs therein needs to be considered more carefully within *Aistear.* In the Danish early childhood curriculum, the routine is considered so important to the educators construction of their role that it is one of the five core principles of the ECEC curriculum. (See article on Identity and belonging- more critical, reflective, theoretical understanding; Tillet and Wong, 2018; Sumsion and Wong, 2011).

Restructuring the Learning Goals to have more explicit links to dispositions, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding and skills to enable links to these to be made more readily by educators. Having these made more explicit will support the inclusion of this language and aid educators in seeing each of these as equally important.

More of a focus on processes of learning could be included – role of adult in recognising and supporting this. Equally, there needs to be a shift in practice from Developmentally Appropriate Practice to Culturally Appropriate Practice.

Theme 2: Identity and belonging

The introduction to this section needs to strengthen the view of children as active protagonists within their ECEC settings, wider community and our world. The point of childrens' identity as citizens needs to be incorporated/strengthened within this section. It is not just about childrens' identities being formed with and through others but that they too have agency which shapes their own self-perceptions. In short, identity is impacted and shaped by the child's 'doing' or acting on the community and their wider world. The introduction must portray children as active citizens,

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participating in the life of the community and wider world, at all levels, which links with the concept of rights, responsibilities and social justice.

Further, this section should be extended to include social identities of children and their families. All people have multiple social identities as well as personal identities which contribute to their sense of self. It is important to move beyond the focus on personal identities in ECEC to the social identity and the intersectionality of identities. Supporting the individual and group identity captures the social identity. Group identity reflects the extended communities/backgrounds children and families come from and should be more explicit or direct in the Theme

Social identities refer to the group categories that are created and defined by the society and include gender, culture, economic class, family structure, gender, language religion ethnicity, 'race', disability, ability, sexual orientation and how people look. Because some identities are diminished in society and we all carry prejudice, it will be important to specifically name multiple identities and their intersectionality in the *Identity and Belonging Theme* and suggest some personal reflection to support educators' engagement with these issues. Stereotypes or attitude can affect how educators work with or view children. In some cases it will also affect how educators view themselves. Social identities matter because they hold status and can affect the life chances and experiences of individuals and groups. Beliefs about a persons' or groups' capacities or limitation are informed by attitudes to a particular group in society hence naming the need for high expectation from all children here will be important.

It is important to support children and families to have a sense of pride and strength about their social identity. Many children and families try or do hide their identity to 'fit in' for example Traveller children, multilingual children hide their home language, children hide their family traditions or backgrounds. The role of the educator is paramount here and begins at a very early age creating a sense of belonging in the ECEC setting. We have to acknowledge the challenges in developing a positive sense of identity for some children in our society.

Creating a positive, open ECEC environment where children are actively visible in the setting is necessary because children learn from both explicit and implicit messages. Being visible is important because it give affirmation, tells us who is important and who belongs. When children and families are not visible they can and do get the opposite message. Some children develop a sense of shame about their families this is where children begin to hide their identity. They learn very early who is and what is viewed as important in the setting and society. ECEC can't solve this completely because it is a societal issue but they can prioritise the visibility of all children. We have to move beyond tokenistic representation. This needs to be made explicit for the educator.

Empowering educators to have a deeper understanding of how young children develop their personal and social identities and how stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination damage their developing sense of self can be transforming. Connecting to the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* (DCYA, 2016) will be important here. By expanding and being more explicit in the last paragraph of the *Identity and Belonging Themes* on how the ECEC educators can look at their own attitudes and values will be important. If you have not had an opportunity to look at how stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination work in society it is hard to recognise it in the ECEC setting. Gender is a case in point as we are all socialised into gender roles and we can find it hard to see it and then sometime reinforce these roles. To engage with bias or discriminatory issues we need to recognise that first they exist and then work towards actively engaging to unpack and

challenge them. For example how do your own implicit and explicit biases contribute to your interactions and messaging to children?

To ensure an inclusive environment it is important to know the cohort of children in the room, the languages and then think about who might be left out of the curriculum or environment. Working with parents/guardians to support the curriculum is essential here. Looking at how you use material in the setting to support the diversity of individual needs but also strengthen children's social identities. When creating an DEI Anti-bias environment important to avoid:
  o A curriculum or environment which is 'touristic' and all about celebration
  o Tokenistic materials
  o Giving misinformation about celebrations or backgrounds

It is important that diversity is something to explore with children, regardless of whether the group of children in the room 'appears' diverse. Thus the learning environment and sample learning opportunities must actively foster conversations and critical engagement with equality, diversity and inclusion. Thus children should be challenged to engage with and critically consider different family types, children's home situations, cultures, religions, languages. This can only be achieved if the learning environment is appropriately designed with anti-bias and culturally responsive pedagogy at the very centre of planning and if educators engage in critical reflection on key concepts such as cultural responsiveness, critical pedagogy and social justice.

Each of these terms should be added to the vocabulary and should be teased out in a new proposed section to the *Good Practice Guidelines*, namely a fifth area entitled *Critical Pedagogy*. This should link directly to the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion* guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016) and should incorporate key elements of anti-bias education, culturally responsive education and what democratic, socially just early childhood education means in practice.

To strengthen the theme of *Identity and Belonging* in light of significant developments in critical, culturally responsive pedagogy, it is recommended that Aim 4 be made more specific. At present Aim 4 is that children will see themselves as capable learners. However, this could be argued to be the overall aim of Aistear as a curriculum framework and does not necessarily sit very well in *Identity and Belonging*. Rather an aim under such a theme should focus on children seeing themselves as compassionate and socially just citizens who show empathy and compassion for all people and the world, are curious about all ways of living.

Thus Aim 4 could read something like: *Children will be compassionate and socially just and responsible citizens*
Goals:
  1) Children will develop empathy for all people and the world
  2) Children will learn to live and learn compassionately with others
  3) Children will show curiosity about other ways of living, speaking, believing, eating, behaving and being
  4) Children will be empowered to recognise their own strengths and contributions
  5) Children are empowered to identify and support their peers' unique strengths, abilities, contributions and learning styles and will want to learn from these
  6) Experience learning opportunities that are based on their own and peers' personal interests, and link to their own and peers' home, community and culture
  7) Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, responsibility, being a good listener, being accepting of others and of differences and being considerate

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Under the same theme,
- Aim 1, Goal 2 should have birthday replaced with skin colour and languages and Goal 4 needs a stronger conceptualisation or framing of identity to push it beyond background and ability/strength.
- Aims 1 Children will have strong self and **group (social and cultural) identity:** Children's social identity should be included here and in the goals

- Aim 1: Goal 4: too high expectation that children will describe their backgrounds. People generally find it hard to describe their culture or background but children may also feel uncomfortable with that expectation.
  Example: Empowered to demonstrate family pride and their social identities

- Aim 2: Separate out this aim into families/cultures and community/society
- This aim has been interpreted as children being part of the ECEC group rather than the group identity of the child themselves. The goals need to focus on the group identity and intersectionality of childrens identities more explicitely

- Aim 2: Goal 1. Feel that they are acknowledged, respected and have a right to belong to the group

- Goal 2. Are positively recognised, acknowledged and welcomed; Understand and respect that families have different ways of living and doing things

- Aim 3: Empowered to use appropriate and accurate language for social difference; Children will understand that unfairness hurts; Children will learn the importance of supporting others and learn skill to act against unfairness.

More broadly, it also need to be built into Aistear that educators should support children to develop metalinguistic awareness, knowing that different languages exist and that not all people speak the same language. This should happen regardless of whether there are bilingual children or English/Irish language learners amongst the group of children. Similarly, educators should, upon their own critical reflection and engagement with 'culture' facilitate and extend critical conversations with children about what culture is and how it makes people live in different ways. *Again, this needs to take place regardless of the composition of the group of children and their respective backgrounds and 'identities'.*

In light of the significant changes in quality practice as well as understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion, it would be appropriate to design an entirely new set of sample learning opportunities for the theme *Identity and Belonging*. In redesigning these sample learning opportunities, the following should be addressed:
Across age groups
> Provide sample learning opportunities that are reflective of the child as citizen, taking responsibility, making choices for the greater good, e.g., within the setting, very young children learn about community at a micro level through sharing, tidying up; being kind, helping friends. They can also progress SDGs through initiatives and activities such as recycling waste; being mindful of managing resources (turning off lights); minimising food waste; sharing resources with others (e.g., Pyjama day or other charities); building community (developing relationships with local nursing homes) and so on.

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- Compassion and empathy for others and our world should be core to the theme of *Identity and Belonging*. This is essentially where children can form a strong sense of identity and thus belonging.
- There should be a strong focus on developing children's curiosity and wonder in relation to different ways of living. In other words, children should not only be taught to respect other cultures and lifestyles but to actively be curious about them and thus actively advocate for diversity.
- Gender needs to be much more strongly conceptualised throughout Aistear and in particular in the theme of *Identity and Belonging*. Children should not simply be encouraged to play across all play areas and with all play equipment but should be empowered to challenge gender stereotypical play and should with the educators' encouragement be brought outside their comfort zone in relation to play experiences and opportunities. Posters challenging gender stereotypes is a step in the right direction but educators also need to more actively challenge gender stereotyping in play and learning.
- Lunch time, especially when children bring in their own lunches, can be a difficult experience for children whose lunches differ from others and learning opportunities should be proactively planned to nurture mealtimes where children are curious about each other's foods and use these moments for intercultural learning.
- A stronger emphasis should be placed on connecting with the local community such as through:
  o intergenerational initiatives of connecting to local nursing homes and day care centres for elderly or people with intellectual disabilities
  o community projects
  o volunteering in different capacities
  o initiatives such as Tidy Towns
  o exploring local nature areas
- Learning about rights and citizenship is currently not reflected in the sample learning opportunities. This should be incorporated across all age groups in appropriate ways.

Babies
- Babies need exposure to diversity in their environment. Books, music sensory play, visual art equipment and play equipment such as dolls should represent different cultures, skin colours, physical characteristics etc, as also proposed in the current Aistear for toddlers and young children
- Babies' interests should also be addressed. At present only sample learning opportunities for toddlers and young children mention interests but babies have interests too.
- The learning environment needs to represent babies' home environments, including things that represent babies' home cultures, languages and circumstances.
- Wherever references are made to books the word 'diverse', or even better 'linguistically and/or culturally diverse' should be inserted. Consideration should also be given to social class and gender.

Toddlers
- Some of the sample learning opportunities are not quite 'strong' enough to really empower children to form their own identity and sense of belonging. As an example, the fourth sample learning opportunity in the section 'Spends one-to-one time with toddlers to make them feel special and valued' emphasises that toddlers should be given opportunities to be creative, for example by making cards for special occasions. While this is a good learning opportunity it addresses many other areas more so than identity and belonging. Sample learning opportunities for toddlers should perhaps more so focus on

opportunities for developing compassion and empathy for others, for themselves and for our word, so a sense of belonging can develop from the safe space that compassion and empathy gives them.

- There is a good focus on children with disabilities and additional needs in the sample learning opportunities for toddlers, however this should also be replicated for culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse children/families and for diversity of social class and gender.

Young children
- The sample learning opportunity about 'all about me' posters should include aspects of culture such as language(s), music, religion, what they do together as a family
- The sample learning opportunity regarding art materials that reflect different skin tones, focus should also be on hair, eyes etc so it is a holistic approach and not just about skin colour. Learning opportunities involving skin tone/colour should be part of a broader approach of critical conversations with children, for example stimulated through stories, films, things children experience or see in their local environments and communities and should link to the anti bias curriculum promoted in the Inclusion, Equality and Diversity guidelines (DCEDIY, 2016).
- All references to santa or birthday should be removed (See comments in Section 1 on this)
- Celebrations of key cultural/religious events should be done only in consultation with parents and as part of a meaningful and critical approach to intercultural education in the setting so as not to become tokenistic or a 'tourist approach'.
- Suggestions around making books should also be done in partnership with parents so as to draw on parents/families/communities' funds of knowledge and should also include areas issues such as race and povertiy, not 'just' lone parents, people with disabilities, Travellers (which should be ALL ethnic groups)
- Learning opportunities that relate to children looking at their own family histories/backgrounds should clearly acknowledge in Aistear that many children have very difficult circumstances or traumatic memories and this needs to be handled sensitively and peers should be supported to engage with such learning moments very compassionately and with empathy.
- Learning opportunities that discuss actions, feelings, motivations need to consider more difficult experiences for children than are currently the case in Aistear. Experiences such as losing a favourite blanket or being lost should be included but so should difficult situations such as having had to leave a home suddenly, move house frequently or not always having good lunches in the lunchbox. These experiences need to be considered with all children, not just those experiencing migration, homelessness, poverty etc.
- The reference to ICT in the final section of the theme's sample learning opportunities is too vague and tokenistic and needs to be more strongly conceptualised and integrated across all age groups, not just young children.

Inclusion, equality and diversity needs to be more strongly incorporated into the other themes. Thus under the theme *Wellbeing*, a brief paragraph needs to be added to the introductory section that specifically addresses the issue of equality and diversity and how it applies to wellbeing, considering things such as how culture influences ideas of psychological and physical wellbeing, recognising trauma and difficult childhoods, addressing the need to also consider parental wellbeing when supporting child wellbeing and put a greater emphasis not just on understanding that others may have different beliefs and values but that they must also respect other children's

different ways of expressing themselves. Aim 1 needs to have more language that recognises the influence of culture on how we understand 'being strong psychologically'. There also needs to be a stronger recognition of trauma and difficult experiences. Aim 4 has a tokenistic reference to active citizenship. This needs to be strengthened by also referring to and articulating a particular aim in relation to social justice, children as activists for their peers and beliefs and compassion/empathy.

It is important that ALL sample learning opportunities across all themes are revised in light of culturally responsive pedagogy and linguistically inclusive education for English/Irish language learners. Thus, wherever there are references to books, music, nursery rhymes such should always be referred to as linguistic and culturally diverse. Furthermore, 'free play scenarios' and play environments created by educators should be included throughout the themes and specifically frame the role of the educator as modelling language for English/Irish language learners as the free play with peers opportunities are where English language learners can practise their language safely.

In relation to the theme *Communicating*, English as an additional language and multilingualism needs to be of much stronger focus. There also needs to be an increased focus on supporting multilingual children through the 'silent' phase that is well documented in research on multilingualism and which often happens during a child's time in ECE. Educators need to be well equipped to support this phase and thus a stronger conceptualisation of silence (as difference from shyness or being quiet) in relation to communicating needs to be part of Aistear.

Finally, across all themes that include references to the development of mathematical concepts and language, research and theory in the field of culturally responsive mathematics education should be considered. Multilingualism and culture influences children's engagement with mathematical concepts and language and multilingual children should be supported in the development of their mathematical concepts/language through a strong engagement with their home language and culture.

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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.

Inclusion, Diversity and Equality can be enhanced through the Guidelines for Good Practice:
The use of the term "pedagogy" in relation to the four main areas are informative for the Early Childhood Educator in terms of how they apply their pedagogical approaches within the ECEC settings. However, another segment could be added to get educators to think about how they practice diversity and inclusion by adding the a fifth set of guidelines for good practice, namely *Inclusion, Diversity and Equality*. This should align with the DCEDIY 2016 guidelines and should equip educators to take an anti bias education approach to ECEC through a critical intercultural lens. An important aspect herein is also the focus on cultural awareness of educators, cultural being understood in its broadest sense. This set of guidelines should support educators in critically reflecting on their own perceptions, prejudices and biases, informed by the recommendations outlined in relation to inclusion, diversity and equality in this submission. Educators can only implement inclusive education if they are themselves reflective inclusive beings.

Please see the recommendation below.
Supporting Cultural Awareness within the ECEC setting
Cultural awareness can be described as a process of understanding the core of human existence and the way it is expressed by the individuals who belong within those systems; the very act of practise that involves comprehensive verbal and non-verbal communications and the ability to interact harmoniously with the individuals who belong within those cultures.

Displaying cultural awareness within the ECEC setting would involve:
1. Practicing Emotional Intelligence within ECEC settings (Goleman, 2005)

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2. Appropriate and effective communication strategies when addressing cultural issues (verbal and non-verbal)
3. Seeking to understand the belief systems of others within the setting without preconceived ideas about who they are
4. Identifying the similarities among people that unites them and yet understanding the uniqueness that sets them apart
5. Involving all other members of staff, children and all other stake holders when addressing issues of differences in a very sensitive and empathetic manner without being tokenistic.

Issues of sustainability linked to concepts of citizenship, participation, can be woven through Aistear:

Guidelines for good practice outlines the pedagogy of early childhood or the way in which we work with young children (intentional teaching). The Introduction to this section should expand on these intentional pedagogies, which weave together, like waves overlapping.

This section needs to broaden out and incorporate two or three new divisions that guide educators:

1. Communicating Values
2. Activating rights and advocacy
3. Pedagogical practices

The Sustainable Develop Goals should be explicitly incorporated within the exemplars under these proposed headings.

Pedagogical Practices can also be strengthened: :

In the ECEC sector, Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, provides the curricular context for young children's learning and development. While Aistear doesn't set specific expectations for digital learning, it does suggest possible opportunities for practitioners to integrate digital technologies into the learning experiences of children. Build on this further from a STE(A)M based learning perspective.

Environment: Reviewing the Environmental Audits

To include looking *at the importance of affordances / what materials offer and how we visually perceive our environment (Affordances Theory).*

Include UDL/Universal Design for Learning

Learning and Developing through Assessment:

Assessing children's learning; Observations

Examples of how to   support researching with Children - Mosaic Approach; Collaborative Intrepretation and Reflection.

- Progression - Learning Trajectories
- STE(A)M Based learning approach
- Ethics around these approaches.

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- Assent for photos and videos; Learned and Lived Stories
- Building Partnerships between families & practitioner – it is all about relationships – linked to *Code of Professional Responsibility and Code of Ethics for Early Years*

Enhanced:
Make specific reference to continuity between ECEC and primary school and the positive impacts that ECEC approaches can have in junior classes in schools in each of these sections.

Childrens rights in assessment practices – right to information, presented in way to understand – link this to ethical section. Reports – *Mo Sceal*, share with children from a respectful, rights based position.

Participant and non participant observations, language of '**target**' child – does this fit with children as participants in their learning and children's inclusion in their assessment.

Building Partnership with parents

Learning and Developing through Partnerships with Parents (note earlier comments to change to 'Parents/Guardians'):
Consider mentioning Meitheal as partnership approach, to support parents/guardinas/families, as Children First is mentioned. Exemplars provided should demonstrate mutual regard between primary school teachers and early childhood educators. Broaden view of family from parents, to parents/guardians/extended family. Children have other important supports.

Learning and Developing through Interactions:
- Role of the Educator, Pedagogical Leadership; Intentionality /Co-Construction /Socially constructed meaning.
- Educator learns from the children's feedback (doesn't just give but also receives); partnership with the child and respecting the view of the child and the input of the child
- Interactions: Slow Pedagogy - acknowledging the informal opportunities in childrens lives; for example, meal times, nappy changing.

Making links to key framework documents

Need to add in the strategies that have been included in the Descriptors by QQI… philosophising, de-constructing, etc. and pedagogical strategies. Reconsider the child lead to adult lead continuum for the strategies

- The enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum requires a pedagogy that is flexible in the use of both didactic and interactive teaching styles and can develop along a continuum that is framed by the principles of Aistear which include a child-centred, rights-based focus. It would be very helpful if there could be a stronger coherence and clear guidelines of how the two documents are linked. Would there be a benefit in making links to primary school

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goals in examples of play based thematic approaches? Could this support knowledge of how this could be done?

- Time for free play should be added: Play as a child's right, not always essentialised as a learning opportunity; experiences as well as activities, include a focus on outdoors.
- "Offers prompts" where the intentionality comes in; Role of the adult can also include introducing new concepts and ideas, providing new stimulus for questioning and exploring.

Learning and Developing through Play:

The role of the adult, as mentioned above has been referred to in passing. While there have been significant strides made in the field of ECEC in understandings of play and its essential role in young children's learning, there remains a lack of clarity on educator-led-pedagogical-play child-led-ludic-play 'continuum'. This needs to be further illuminated and supported.

Is definition and theory of play sufficient is it across all? Play wouldn't have instructions/directions - does the definition of play allow for experiences that are not play being presented as such?

- Characteristics only way of understanding?
- Could processes of learning be more prominent?
- Physical play and then broken down?
- Play continuum to be included?
- Aduls role in play – being a play partner with children
- Children creating and interpreting culture in their play - Producers of play culture
- Right to Play – Right to voice, Best Intersets – Link to specific rights in places throughout the document
- Risk in Play?

Consider context in Aistear's implementation

Make explicit links to the new curriculum to support Primary Teachers here.

Add in building partnerships between educators and other professionals (interdisciplinary working mentioned once in principles and themes) as well as with parents/guardians/families to support the continuity. Greater details needed here.

The new primary language curriculum suggests that learning is co-constructed between the teacher and child through joint attention, mutual interest and enjoyment. Additionally, Aistear promotes the rights of children to guide their own learning and provides an important opportunity for teachers to engage in active participation with the children. There is a need to take into account the contexts within which teachers teach. It would be helpful if the revised version set out clear examples of how children can be engaged in co-constructed learning.

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