



Consultation on proposals for an Updated Aistear

Submission

November 2023

Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with 4,000 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings. Early Childhood Ireland advocates for an effective and Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

Early Childhood Ireland has a strong track record that spans over five decades, and we are currently delivering our Strategic Plan 2021 to 2026.

What are your take-away points from the Key Messages of the proposals?

We acknowledge that there was a need to review Aistear and the proposals are welcomed. The proposal suggests a focus on the centrality of family, languages, meitheal and cultures in all the age ranges of children's lives. It creates awareness of gender, family status, disability, ethnicity, religion, worldview and membership of the traveller community. We acknowledge and celebrate the use of the terms 'babies', 'toddlers' and 'young children'. Continuing research shows the importance of each distinct stage in children's learning and development. The proposal also emphasises a wider acknowledgement of the rights of babies, toddlers and young children, being seen as citizens and more of an emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion. We also acknowledge and celebrate the stronger influence on relationships and the introduction of a slow, relational pedagogy. This is important as it recognises the individuality of each child and their right to learn at an unhurried pace as each child is unique, and their development is complex and holistic. We welcome the focus on the cultural and linguistic history and story of the Irish culture, as this is critical to children's developing sense of identity and belonging. We support the use of the term educator over practitioner. This shows a stronger commitment to inclusivity and a child centred approach. We welcome the consideration of how to, and by what means, educators can be supported.

The decrease in the number of principles and learning goals are appreciated as it allows the curriculum framework to be now more concise and clearer for the educator to use in a practical manner. Aistear does not impose an outcomes-driven curriculum within the Early Years profession. As a framework, it supports educators in implementing a local curriculum, which a strong focus on dispositions. When educators see children as 'confident and competent,' as suggested at the centre of Aistear, their dispositions thread through everything they do. We believe this needs to be made clearer in the proposal.

What are your views on the proposed Vision and Purpose of Aistear?

The proposed Vision and Purpose of Aistear is child focused, drawing on the concepts of children's rights and diversity. We support the emphasis on building

positive relationships, responding to individual children's needs, and involving families and communities in the learning process. This will ultimately support the holistic development of children through play, learning, and nurturing relationships.

However, Global Citizenship could be stronger within the review. The focus on the 'group and group learning' is not only important within contemporary understanding of child development and learning, but also in relation to global citizenship. Group learning environments help children develop essential social and emotional skills. These include empathy, respect for diversity, and the ability to work collaboratively key competencies for global citizens. In a group setting, children are exposed to diverse perspectives and cultures. This exposure is crucial in developing an understanding and appreciation of global diversity, fostering inclusive attitudes from a young age. I think this is ever more important and we see an increased risk to democracy. Through group interactions, children learn empathy and compassion by understanding and responding to the emotions and needs of others. These qualities are fundamental for global citizenship, as they lead to a greater sense of responsibility towards others, regardless of cultural or geographical boundaries. It is really important in the context of environmental sustainability, but also in the increased diversity within our country and communities.

In regard to the proposed vision, we support the emphasis on children and educators being seen as agentic global citizens, as it reflects the unique rights and responsibilities of everyone. We welcome the vision of both the child and the educator being separated and made clear. The vision of Aistear, as a tool of empowerment, rather than directive, resonates with the capability and competence of each educator. However, the vision for the image of the educator describes predominantly what they will do, meaning it is limited. We would recommend the image of the educator is further developed, considering the rich history, life experience and skills they bring with them, all of which would promote the unique role of educators. In regard to the proposed purpose of Aistear, it offers clear guidance to educators, families, children and others of how Aistear can be utilised.

[What are your views on proposed updated Principles and Themes of Aistear?](#)

The reduction of the number of principles and learning outcomes is welcomed, as it offers a more manageable yet focused framework. The way they are presented demonstrates how educators can enact and advocate for them in practice. The themes and principles appear to be well thought out, covering a wide range of aspects of early childhood education and providing a pathway for enacting the vision. It is evident there has been consideration in future-focusing the principles for the modern learning environment. In particular, the themes set an aspiration for this curriculum framework, putting agentic competent and confident learners at the centre of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum in ways which the educators can reflect in their planning.

We would suggest considering the promotion of the Irish language within the principles also, as it supports Irish children to feel bród (pride) in their home language. We also support the removal of the numbers on the learning outcomes. This encourages the learning outcomes to be explored more deeply and less likely to be a 'tick box' exercise.

We would likely to specifically address the emphasis on rights, which is referenced through the Principles of Agentic Global Citizens/Agentic Educators. The increased emphasis on meaningful participation, including influencing decisions, is clear and welcomed. However, there are missed opportunities to emphasise children's rights beyond participation rights, throughout the proposals. Rights are not mentioned in the Vision, Purpose, or the visual that presents the Themes and Principles. The language of rights is rarely used in the themes, aims and goals. Although a rights-based approach is defined and mentioned several times, the definition is quite narrow (focus on participation) and children's rights are not as visible as it could be. Suggestions for strengthening a rights-based approach include:

- The definition of rights-based could be broadened, for example: An understanding of babies, toddlers and young children as rights holders who are provided with meaningful opportunities to learn about, through and for rights, and influence decisions about their lives.
- The image of the baby, toddler and young child, could recognise children as rights-holders, similar to the reference under 'agentic global citizens'.
- Under this principle (Agentic Global Citizens), although respect for children is importantly included, together with the rights to be heard and protected, recognition of the indivisibility of rights of all rights could be strengthened here.

Learning from a relatively large body of research in the field of children's human rights, the linkage between rights and responsibilities (e.g. they learn that as well as having rights they also have emerging responsibilities) could create tensions and challenges in practice. Firstly, there is a danger of suggesting (and teaching children) that rights are conditional. Secondly, research and experience show there is confusion about the relationship between rights and responsibilities, and there is a tendency for teachers/educators to emphasise responsibilities over rights. For Aistear to be innovative and genuinely rights-based, it would be helpful to clarify this relationship e.g. stating that rights are unconditional. Children should (and do) learn to respect the rights of others but are not responsible for realising their own or others' rights. Acknowledging that children have 'emerging responsibilities' is appropriate, but it would be helpful to separate this as much as possible from children's rights.

Most early childhood curricular/frameworks do not fully incorporate Article 29 (the aims of education), which means that most babies, toddlers and young children do not learn about, through or for rights.

Overall, the Aistear proposals lay a foundation for embedding children's human rights education (Article 29), but the potential to create an innovative, rights-based framework is not fully harnessed. Creating a rights-based framework that

contributes to building the capacities of children as rights holders and adults as duty-bearers could be strengthened by including references to specific or relevant articles and the four core principles of the UNCRC: non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development and respect for the views of the child.

For example, participation rights are emphasised in 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion', however this principle also correlates with Article 2 and the overarching non-discrimination principle of the UNCRC. These linkages with rights are currently not visible. Also, the statement, 'Help me to learn to recognise and challenge injustice and to stand up for myself and others', could include 'my rights and the rights of others'. Whilst, 'agentic educators' could include reference to duty-bearers

The Guidance for Good Practice expands on some of the important ideas introduced in the Principles and Themes. It is proposed that these will be extended and supplemented through resources developed for the online Aistear Toolkit. What are your observations on this?

We support the idea of additional resources for the online Aistear Toolkit. Through these resources, educators can be supported to develop a deeper understanding with practical guidance. We would recommend the resources are made available as soon as possible after the revised framework is launched, to ensure it is implemented effectively and thoroughly. Drawing on the examples of resources provided in Appendix 1, we note that *Example 1: Documenting the learning* is overly detailed and can seem complicated overwhelming. Educators time constraints, knowledge and skills should be considered carefully when designing such resources. The Examples 2, 3 and 4 are a helpful addition and educators may use these as a reference on the 'how to' piece.

This consultation is an opportunity to gather information to the nature of supports required to support early childhood educators in working with the curriculum framework. What are your observations on how early childhood educators can be supported in work with the curriculum framework?

Key Supports

- **Policy support:** recognition and support from policy makers to increase overall State investment in Early Years, which in turn will allow adequate resources, time, and professional development opportunities for educators on Aistear.
- **Funding required:** fully funded national rollout with seminars and workshops to support educators and service providers. If supports are designed around *empowering* educators to use Aistear, it may be more sustainable. Regional

meetings could be offered where educators can discuss and plan to implement updates to their curriculum framework. These meetings could be supplemented with online resources of webinars, both recorded and live, so there is opportunity for discussion and sharing of ideas between early years professionals.

- **eLearning:** educators can be supported may include access to resource materials, video footage of other services in the Irish context, eLearning, self-paced eLearning, peer-to-peer learning, local community of practice networks, practitioner research, and ongoing coaching and mentoring.
- **Ongoing Reflection:** regular consultation and feedback sessions may also be valuable for educators to voice their challenges, suggestions, and needs and this could be through an online platform or face-to-face community of practices. This would also create opportunities for educators to provide feedback and input on the effectiveness of the supports.
- **Glossary:** the glossary of terms may be more beneficial at the beginning of the document as it supports the interpretation of new terms as you read through the framework. For example, some concepts in the proposal that may be new for educators and would recommend individual resources for the development of a '*slow relational pedagogy*' and '*Agentic Global Citizens*'. Resources that explore "what does this look like and how can I implement it?".
- **Documentation:** learning stories provide a narrative approach to understanding and assessing children's learning and development and connecting it to the principles and themes of Aistear. Expanding the online Aistear Toolkit to include samples of learning stories could be beneficial. These samples can serve as examples and inspiration, allowing educators to see how learning stories can be effectively written and utilised. When regulatory bodies are familiar with learning stories, it enables educators to use them effectively as a tool to demonstrate best practices. Learning stories showcase the unique learning experiences and progress of individual children and provide evidence of how educators are meeting the key principles and goals.
- **Resource design:** supports should be easy to navigate, user friendly and updated frequently to reflect changes in regulation, legislation or any educational reforms. Any online resources need to be mobile friendly as this reflects the way many educators explore resources.
- **Consistency:** all academic institutions who deliver early years training include Aistear from the beginning of the course and it is integrated into each year to enable educators to be knowledgeable and confident in their implementation of Aistear.

With these supports, we can ensure educators have the tools and resources to implement a local curriculum effectively, leveraging the framework to enhance children's learning and development within settings and spaces.

Additional Comments:

This is the perfect opportunity to ensure the principles for engaging with the Arts are embedded within the national curriculum framework, Aistear. As Aistear is currently under review, the timing of the draft principles is particularly advantageous. We already have a fit-for-purpose framework with which the draft principles work in synergy. Aistear is a robust framework for engaging with the Arts in Early Years and fostering creativity and divergent thinking. **Please see [Early Childhood Ireland's Submission](#)**

Conclusion

Our feedback on the proposed updates to Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework recognises the important and valued editions and additions that have been made, reflecting research and best practice. We have also highlighted areas that can be further strengthened, and suggestions for key supports to aid all educators providing high quality care and education. We have an opportunity to create an innovative and progressive curriculum framework to support every child to feel valued, loved and capable.

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Does your organisation wish to be listed as a contributor to this consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes
Does your organisation wish to have this written submission published on the NCCA website?	Yes