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

Name	
Date	
E-mail	

Organisation submission details

Name	Dr Colette Murray
Position	
Organisation	Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network EDeNn
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).

EDeNn is a voluntary organisation committed to Diversity, Equality, Inclusion and Social Justice in Early Childhood Education and Care. Our vision is to promote respect and support the right of every child and adult to participate as equal and active citizens in early childhood education and care in order to be assured of their rights and to be free from all forms of individual and structural discrimination including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, ableism, classism.

This submission was developed by members of EDeNn

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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.

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Section 1

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

Aistear is an important and critical resource for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland and has much to be commended. Having had the privilege of contributing to the original Aistear, from a equality perspective, EDeNn recognise the necessity for updating Aistear. It is an opportune time for the sector to reflect, build on and expand Aistear for Irish society. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute. The EDeNn submission will focus mainly on the areas of Diversity, Equality, Inclusion (DEI) and Social Justice with some additional general comments. Our focus will be both on children and ECEC educators.

EDeNn recommends that Aistear include a vision for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with clear aims linked to that vision.

The language of 'adult' needs to be replaced and the pedagogical role of the educator outlined with a focus on critical pedagogy as well as their role of advancing DEI and social justice in ECEC and in society

The language in general requires amending moving beyond children's need to their rights, the language of empowerment should be used throughout the revised framework, pronouns should also be amended throughout.

Most recent and current policy documents, practice resources and legislation will need to be incorporated into the framework. There should be a means to adapt the framework to incorporate further changes over time. Some of these important policy documents provide a rich basis for educators to consider and understand and reflect on best practice.

They include:

- o Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016)
- o Laura Lundy (2007) Model of Participation
- o First Five (DCYA, 2018) A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families

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- o Participation Framework National Framework for Children and Young People's Particaption in Decision Making (DCEDIY, 2021)
- o Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings (2019)
- o Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016
- o Children First Act 2015
- o Code of Professional Responsibilities and Code of Ethics For Early Years Educators (DCYA, 2020)
- o Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) UN 2015
- o UNCRC
- o UNCERD
- o UNCRPD
- Consider how clear links can be made through the Aistear Framework to key policy documents for example DEI Charter and Guidelines and SDGs.
- Incorporate and integrate the language of, and the implementation of, the 'Anti-bias approach/education' within Aistear so educators can further develop understanding, knowledge and skills within a holistic, rather than a fragmented approach in ECEC.
- Update the vocabulary list to include bias, anti-bias approach, anti-racist, social justice, linguistic diversity, prejudice, ECEC educators.
- Traveller children's status needs also to be update and Traveller examples need to be included within the exemplars.
- The principles of the Anti-bias approach/education, together with the goals for children and goals for adults, to be embedded in every Theme within Aistear and into any subsequent training and workshops for educators. While the EDI training is currently a standalone training, it would support the implementation if it was integrated as part of a suit of essential CPD training for ECEC educators.
- Ensure consistency and continuity in language between Aistear, Síolta, the Anti-bias approach and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. There are many terms not included in Aistear, for example; 'emergent and inquiry based curriculum', and 'anti bias approach'.
- While one of the principles is 'equality and diversity' and a theme dedicated to 'Identity and belonging- there is no reference to the Anti bias approach throughout Aistear. Within the bibliography for the Guidelines for Good Practice, there are 3 references to works on Anti bias, however throughout the guidelines itself, the 'Anti-bias approach' is not

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referred to or mentioned in any capacity. In addition, within the Aistear 'Principles and Themes' there is no mention of the Anti-Bias approach. The three references are:

- o *Derman-Sparks, L. and the ABC Taskforce (1989), Anti-bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children. Washington DC: NAEYC.*
- o *Derman-Sparks, L. and Ramsey, P.G. (2006), What if all the kids are white?: Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families. New York: Teachers College Press.*
- o *Wolpert, E. (2005), Start Seeing Diversity: The basic guide to an anti-bias classroom. Minnesota: Redleaf Press.*

Updated references are also needed and might include:

- o Derman-Sparks, L., & Olsen Edwards with Catherine M. Goins, J. 2nd Edition. (2020). *Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
- o Derman-Sparks, L., Leekeenan, D., & Nimmo, K. (Eds.) (2015). *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- o Murray and Urban, (2012) Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood an Irish Perspective.
- o Murray C. (2012). Why Working with Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Education and Care Matters. In Mhic Mhathúna, M., & Taylor, M. (Eds.) (277-290). *Early Childhood Education and Care: An Introduction for Students in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan
- o Murray, C. (2017). Conscious Noticing: Anti-Bias from Policy to Practice. *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal, 6*(1), 22-37.
- In ensuring an integrated and robust curriculum framework it is essential that the language of the Anti-bias approach is embraced, to include the principles of the Anti-bias approach and the goals for adults and children.
- The DEI Charter and Guidelines should be named in the introduction, principles and throughout the Aistear document, linked with any reference to 'Publications' and 'Guidelines'.

To ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children and an integrated and robust curriculum framework 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

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reflection on their own values, attitudes and biases and include a focus on the educators understanding of their own cultural and personal beliefs.

It will be important that the introduction acknowledges the need for appropriate supports for all children and their families, social justice work and how the role and understanding of the ECEC educator is critical in working with an inclusive anti-bias approach.

Children begin to learn and absorb positive and negative views about difference at a very early age. ECEC setting play a role in supporting, developing and mediating children's attitudes and values. Biases can be explicit and implicit and educators also bring biases into the ECEC setting, hence it is important to have Aistear principles that empower educators to unpack their own attitudes, values and biases and to enable then to recognise, question and challenge their own and the biases of others. This will support equitable environments for all children.

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

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. 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) .

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion should permeate all the principles and themes. This will strengthen the rights-based approach in Aistear.

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

Anti-racism, inclusive education for English language learners, multiple identities and their intersectionality, children who experience discrimination, bullying, grief, trauma.

Worksheets have been added to NCCA website for staff CPD and more recently through the website- Aistearsiolta.ie.

As ECEC tutors, managers, and staff teams will work through these worksheets it would be important to develop the content which reflects a critical DEI approach including an Anti-bias approach in keeping with the DEI Guidelines. There is an opportunity here to link the key documents through a reflective process.

- CPD tasks that are uploaded on the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide webpage requires additional 'worksheet guidance' documents to support appropriate facilitation of critical reflection.

- Add worksheets that specifically encourage discussion and peer reflection to break down an understanding of the principles of Aistear, rather than listing key points of these. ECEC educators need facilitation and guidance on how to recognise, embrace and appropriately address issues of diversity, equality and inclusion as well as celebrate all children and their families.

- Revisit the short video clip regarding the theme 'Identity and Belonging' to elaborate further with input on anti-bias goals for adults and children. Using the video to support a move beyond just describing what Identity and Belonging is and naming the aims and learning goals, to promoting critical self-reflection, educator awareness of stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and engaging with anti-bias goals in action.

- PDFs with challenging scenarios for staff teams to work through might include some scenarios from the DEI training (Pavee Point, 2004-2010) for example 'consequences of ignoring diversity issues' and the use of 'teachable moment' .

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals have relevance for everyone including young children in early childhood settings. Goals 1, 4 , 5 and 10 are specifically relevant to our work within ECEC.

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. We recommend that the principles require updating and strengthening, using more empowering language for both children and educators. Examples below
>
> - Participation and Empowerment
> - Fairness and Justice
> - Reciprocal relationships with parents, families and communities
> - Unique value and dignity of each child
> - 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.*

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- 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.
    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

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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/education to embed the Anti-bias goals for children and specifically for the adults in partnership working with children.

All principles should be supported with clear examples of what they might look like in practice? Principles for adults should be explicit.

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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. It is strongly recommended that for each theme there should be a critically reflection section for the educator to explore the specific area of consideration.

Within the theme of Identity and belonging; include the principles of the anti-bias approach and embed the anti-bias goals for children and specifically for the adults working with children.

The introduction to Identity and belonging needs to be strengthened. Identity is about citizenship and children's active engagement in the world. It is also about social justice and transformative practice for example challenging traditional sex-role stereotypes which leads to non-sexist material in the environment and all children engaging in caring roles, in physical challenges. It is about the opening of possibilities for all children, enabling, empowering them to explore new ways of thinking about the world. Both adults and children require opportunities to analyse critically their ways of doing things and look at how they contribute to or experience fairness in their world. This supports children's engagement with broader societal issues. Some say that engaging with such explorations are too adult for children however Goldstein, 2002; Segura-Mora, 2002, argue that children are well able to engage with and understand issues that impact on their identity especially if they are on the receiving end of oppressive practices.

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This section should also include a focus on the 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 negative attitudes 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 and embracing children's funds of knowledge 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 gives 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 sometimes 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 it is 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

(please Section 3, p. 35, DEI Charter and Guidelines, 2016)

Sample learning opportunities for Identity and Belonging will require updating linked to Anti-bias goals and SDGs. The core principles of community, empathy, compassion, activism, challenging inequality including stereotyping and unfairness should be embedded in the sample learning opportunities. All age groups should be supported in their diversity from babies to young children. The environment should proactively expose all diversities: language, including multilingualism, skin tones, gender, family backgrounds including cultural backgrounds, family types, religion,

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abilities and disabilities. Addressing the diversity in the cohort of children in the environment first and then more broadly in society.

Anti-bias means taking a active stance in relation to challenging injustice in the world and also changing how we look at the world pro-actively. This also involves looking at the power relationships that interfere with true diversity. It will be important to acknowledge our power relationship with children. Anti-bias and SDG principle and goals will support children's agency by supporting their understanding of each other and our collective responsibility to each other as citizens. DEI should be included more visibly across all Aistear themes.

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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. DEI should be explicit and imbedded across the four main areas. Alternatively a separate DEI section should be considered. The DEI inclusion should align with the DEI Charter and Guidelines.

A reflective stance on observation and assessment within the Guidelines for Good Practice is required. Observations are inherently biases and can be skewed by the particular lens through which the educator views a child or children. Paired observations and discussions could assist this process. Through a biased lens (conscious or unconscious) we can silence and misread or misrepresent a child's position. Addressing observations and assessment through a critical pedagogical position enables exploration of equality issues for a particular child or group of children, and enables seeing multiple possibilities for change and engagement. Individual engagements can also be noticed between genders, cultural groups, abilities. A rights based approach to observations should also be outlined including asking children's permission to be observed.

As addressed earlier ECEC educators can and should be supported to critically reflect on their own perceptions, prejudices and biases. Educators who embrace a critical anti-bias, social justice position which includes critical self-reflection on DEI issues beyond celebration are well placed to implement inclusive education.

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