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	Primary STEM Team
Position	
Organisation	Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)
Date	
E-mail	

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).

The PDST is the country's largest single support service offering professional learning opportunities to teachers and school leaders in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas.

The PDST was established in September 2010 as a generic, integrated and cross-sectoral support service for schools. The establishment of the organisation was synonymous with the amalgamation and restructuring of a number of stand-alone services which now operate under the PDST providing their services to schools in the context of PDST's overall vision and mission.

The work of the PDST contributes to school improvement by fostering reflective practice through the school self-evaluation process and through the ongoing development of teachers and school leaders through a range of CPD models.

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

The PDST can only comment on the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum Framework and the impact it has had on primary education, in particular, junior and senior infants.

Professional Development

The publication of Aistear in 2009 and the accompanying research documents have paved the way for professional development across the PDST in curricular areas as prioritised by the Department of Education. Most recently the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) has highlighted the importance of Aistear in the infant classrooms. The Primary STEM Team endeavour to promote Aistear in our work with teachers and through our Play-Based Maths workshops and Play-Based Maths and Science webinar. Outside of the PDST, teachers have engaged in professional development solely in Aistear through local Education Centres and summer courses. This participation in professional development both indirectly through PDST and directly with NCCA/Education centres has been responsible for marked changes in early childhood education in the primary school context. Although the PDST strives to promote Aistear, opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development in Aistear are limited. Those teaching beyond the infant classes may not have engaged with Aistear previously and it is very important that all primary teachers value and understand Aistear. In addition to the absence of professional development for teachers, online support in the form of the Aistear Toolkit is not currently available.

It would be beneficial to gather evidence as part of this consultation to highlight the impact professional development has made and the role it will play in any future changes proposed. Professional development via a sustained support and collaborative model would be a valuable tool to support the implementation of a new curriculum and any updates for Aistear and should be included in any proposed curriculum changes (see https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/A3%20TO%20A4%20LEAFLET%202.pdf).

Play, interactions and assessment

Play, interactions and formative assessment could all be considered pedagogical approaches to implementing Aistear and should perhaps be represented separately from building partnerships with parents. Professional development in these pedagogical

approaches is necessary when updating Aistear. Play has played a central role in primary education where it has been planned for and implemented across the curriculum as a methodology. From interactions with teachers, it is apparent that there is confusion around Aistear terminology e.g., "the Aistear hour." There are misconceptions for teachers in using Aistear as an hour of play and the use of it as a methodology. In the infant classes, opportunities to be playful extend beyond a daily hour of child-initiated play. Children's entire school experience can be playful, i.e., during both child-initiated and more teacher-directed, task-related activities. Further explanations or evidence of practice of both child-led and teacher-led play would be welcome as part of the update.

Teachers are fundamental in establishing a safe, collaborative and productive classroom climate that values play. More support on the role of the teacher to facilitate meaningful interactions would be welcome in the form of case studies and videos. This may differ depending on the content being planned, for example mathematics, science, STEM etc.

Formative assessment is something that is prominent in the literature and in research and should play a more central role in any Aistear update. Real life samples would bring this to life. Digital technologies could also play a central role here and how it could be used as a digital portfolio for assessment.

Parents
Parents' reflections on Aistear and partnerships with schools will be a welcome insight to the consultation. Their experience of home schooling during the pandemic may give parents a different insight to early childhood education and the value of less didactic approaches in the early years. There are opportunities to develop early childhood education both in the school and the home when updating Aistear.

New Curriculum (PLC and Mathematics)
Aistear as a stand-alone document/ curriculum framework has worked particularly well for teachers who have benefitted from professional development. As the Aistear framework was not mandatory when published in 2009, a percentage of teachers have never engaged in professional development in Aistear and may not have the prerequisite knowledge to engage with the new curriculum. This should be considered in updating Aistear.

Policy
The implementation of new policies since the introduction of Aistear need to be considered such as the Literacy and Numeracy strategy and STEM policy from the Department of Education. While a draft primary mathematics curriculum has been published there is no reference to STEM. An overall vision needs to be decided upon to integrate these policy

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changes as well as Aistear's place within them. Feedback from teachers on how they envision this working would be necessary. The consultation on curriculum structure and time may also help with this vision.

Transition from preschool to primary

Preschool early childhood education has experienced a different journey in comparison to primary school teachers. The implementation of Aistear looks very different in both settings. Primary school teachers have the added pressure of implementing the Primary School Curriculum 1999. Publications such as Siolta were not integrated into primary schools across Ireland and as a result early childhood education could be considered to be disjointed. Streamlining of the early childhood education from birth to 6 years would be welcome and would assist the transition from preschool to primary.

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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.**
>
> From a primary school perspective, the Primary School Curriculum takes precedence and as a result the principles do not play a central role in planning and preparation for the implementation of Aistear. While primary school teachers are aware of the principles, is there a way that this can be integrated into the classroom or is this awareness enough? This is where streamlining early childhood education and presenting a vision for Aistear and what it should look like is essential. The recent publication of the PLC espouses meaningfully integrated play as part of the curriculum but professional development is needed for this to become a reality. Early childhood education is complex and should not be underestimated. This will need to be communicated clearly with teachers in order to avoid a lack of understanding among primary 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](#)

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.

Working well

There appears to be greater awareness of dispositions and skills in recent years due to the introduction of the Primary Language Curriculum and the upskilling of teachers nationwide. Recent publications from the DE such as the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* have shed greater light on the theme of wellbeing in primary education.

Needs to be enhanced or updated

There appears to be a lack of understanding among primary educators regarding the themes and aims of Aistear as the Primary School Curriculum's objectives seem to be the main focus of implementing the framework in Ireland. The themes and aims are used more specifically in early childhood education settings so perhaps there should be more alignment here. Primary school teachers who have trained in Aistear have an awareness of the themes in the document but may not be using them, while other teachers have had no training in the Framework at all.

Even though there has been a greater awareness of dispositions and skills in recent years due to the Primary Language Curriculum, more emphasis needs to be put on these. Research and samples of practice would be beneficial to help demonstrate the benefit of skill development and dispositions in the classroom.

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Attitudes and values of teachers need to be changed first in order to impact the students and therefore, transformative professional development is necessary.

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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.

1. **Building partnerships between parents and practitioners**
   Schools are sharing information and resources with parents. Recent experiences of remote learning during school building closures have had very varied impacts on these important partnerships.

   A cohort of schools embrace parental involvement by inviting them into the setting, while other schools do not espouse such practices. More examples or suggestions of parental involvement specific to primary education would be beneficial.

   Some parents, understandably given their own school experience, have misconceptions about the formalisation of schooling in the infant classes and do not understand playful approaches. Guidance around communicating the benefits of play to parents could be developed further.

   Clarity around the intended audience for this section would be beneficial. Parents are addressed specifically on page 8 but are not addressed in the same manner in other sections.

2. **Learning and developing through interactions**

The term interaction isn't yet commonly used at primary school level for teaching and learning. The specific references to interactions in the Preparation for Teaching and Learning document are welcome and highlight the importance of teacher - child and child - child interactions. Although the Aistear manual has suggestions for teachers, these could be developed further and made more accessible in the online space. The Aistear Toolkit was very beneficial in supporting teachers in this regard and its reinstatement to the website if possible would be welcome.

3. **Learning and developing through play**

   Teacher led and child led play is not referenced in this section. However, teacher led and child led play were previously explicitly explained in professional development courses (see Section 1). More information for teachers on the importance of both in the development of skills and dispositions is necessary. Integration and flexibility is needed to enact the primary school curriculum alongside Aistear and as a result guidance on how to do this would be helpful. Aistear's Planning Framework for Play was a practical support for teachers in helping them prepare for child-led play. Although a blank version is still available online, a completed sample such as the Arctic which was previously available was very beneficial for teachers.

   https://ncca.ie/en/resources/planning_framework_for_play

4. **Supporting learning and development through assessment**

   Visible, invisible and recorded preparation and assessment as outlined in the Preparation for Teaching and Learning Guidance will give teachers agency to follow the lead of their pupils in developing an emergent curriculum that values play. The section on *What I Assess* on page 74 is an important element of assessment throughout the school. Suggested approaches to how to do this would be welcome. The importance of feedback would also be beneficial as part of these guidelines. Assessing the knowledge, skills and dispositions explored during child-led play can be challenging so advice and support for teachers in assessing play is needed.

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