NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Consultation report on updating *Aistear:* Phase 1

Contents

Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

A*istear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. The framework is underpinned by 12 Principles and uses four interconnected Themes to describe learning and development. The Themes are Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. The framework also includes four sets of guidelines on Partnership with parents; Interactions; Play; and Assessment. *Aistear* can be used by adults in a variety of settings to support children's learning and development. NCCA is in the process of updating *Aistear* and while the Phase 1 consultation is now concluded, work is underway in preparation for further consultation and engagement in Phase 2 on proposals for an updated *Aistear*.

This document records the findings from Phase 1 of the consultation which focused on engaging with stakeholders to listen to their perspectives on *Aistear*. The consultation began in late May 2021 with the publication of online consultation materials, including an information webinar, submission templates and online questionnaires. It ended in April 2022 when the last focus group was held, and the online consultation was closed. Phase 1 invited stakeholders to share their views on what is working well with *Aistear* and should be retained and what suggestions they had as to how it might be enhanced and updated. A research design was developed and a significant amount of data, the basis for this report, was gathered through a variety of methods. These are outlined in Section 2: Methodology which gives details of the research design, data collection methods and data analysis process. Section 3 presents the findings from the focus groups, questionnaires and submissions. All the data from these various data collection methods was analysed through a rigorous and robust process to identify the significant themes arising, with each data set analysed and reported separately. The findings provide strong foundations which will inform NCCA's proposals for updating *Aistear*. These proposals will be the subject of the Phase 2 consultation, following which NCCA will finalise an updated *Aistear* in late 2023/early 2024.

1.2 Communication strategy

The process of updating *Aistear* endeavoured to engage stakeholders from across the system in answering two broad questions:
1. What is working well with *Aistear*?
2. What needs to be enhanced/updated in *Aistear*?

NCCA focused on supporting broad, far-reaching and inclusive awareness of, and engagement in, Phase 1 of the updating *Aistear* process. Various communication tools were used and the Early Childhood Education Developments section of the NCCA website was updated so that all information and associated materials and tools were easily accessible. An information webinar on the Principles and Themes of *Aistear*, as well as a short information video on the update itself, along with a background paper were made available (in English and Irish) on the website. NCCA's e-communication *info@ncca* regularly contained information on how individuals and organisations could get involved in the various consultation events and activities. Information articles were included in professional publications and key updates and information were shared on NCCA's

social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) to ensure the highest possible participation in Phase 1 of the updating process.

Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Design

The purpose of the Phase 1 consultation was to ensure that any person or organisation that wanted to express a point of view on *Aistear* would have a way of doing so and this was achieved through a range of methods for providing feedback. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic required a sequence of adaptations to the plan, with the data gathering ultimately taking place later than had initially been anticipated and with a far greater focus on online events than had originally been planned. Despite this, the basis for the data gathering did not change and the design of the methodology was structured around the two key questions outlined above. These were the basis for all data collected during the consultation and ensured consistency across all the data gathering methods as well as contributing to coherent communications.

The NCCA worked in teams, including independent note-takers and researchers, for both data gathering and analysis to enable peer evaluation and reflexivity (Chenail, 2011). As an example, at each online focus group, the team consisted of a facilitator from the NCCA and an independent note-taker. Following each focus group, a de-briefing meeting of the facilitators and notetakers took place. Additional measures, such as consulting with parent representative groups on the questionnaires designed for parents/guardians, were taken to enhance the accessibility of the data gathering processes. In relation to the analysis, an early childhood education officer worked with an independent researcher in relation to the focus group data while a member of the NCCA executive worked with the two researchers involved in analysing the online submissions and questionnaire data. This *'reflexive dialogue'* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82) was built into the analysis process, with NCCA personnel working with the researcher for discussion and decision-making in theme/topic identification and to mitigate against the risk of researcher bias.

2.2 Data gathering

Data gathering during Phase 1 involved different modes for providing feedback (see Table 1). Two online questionnaires – one for professionals and one for parents/guardians - were the key quantitative tools available on the NCCA website. The qualitative component of data gathering involved an online submission template and a series of online focus groups where participants had the opportunity to share their feedback on *Aistear* around the two key questions – what is working well and what needs updating. Early years educators, academics, advocacy groups, parents, primary school teachers, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, support services and other interested groups participated in the focus groups. A face-to-face stakeholder consultation event was also held in Dublin on March 22, 2022. In total, 12 focus groups were held with stakeholders between November 2021 and the end of April 2022, 11 in English and one in Irish. NCCA received 523 completed professional questionnaire responses, 522 in English and 1 in Irish. There were 153 completed parent/guardian questionnaire responses, 148 in English and 5 in Irish. Online submissions were received from 35 authors - four individuals and 31 from organisations. Five of the organisation submissions were in Irish and these were translated for analysis and made available to the researcher in both Irish and English.

Table 1: Overview of data gathering in Phase 1

Consultation method	Participants/Respondents	Number
Online focus groups	Educators, parents, support organisations, academics	12 meetings with 259 participants
Face-to-face event	Stakeholder organisations	40 participants
Completed online questionnaires	Professionals	523 (1 in Irish)
Completed online questionnaires	Parents/guardians	153 (5 in Irish)
Written submissions	Organisations and individuals	35 (5 in Irish)

2.3 Data analysis

As the data gathered included both qualitative (focus group data/submissions) and quantitative (questionnaires) material, different methods of data analysis were used.

2.3.1 Focus groups

The purpose of the analysis of the focus group data was to identify patterns (themes/topics) in the data collected. Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was the methodology adopted. The raw data from the focus groups was 'triaged' by the independent notetakers as the first step in the analysis, and the data was categorised in line with the two questions addressed during the consultation. Two data sets were collated for analysis by an independent analyst who worked with NCCA personnel. This data included the feedback from the face-to-face consultation event, in addition to the 12 online focus groups.

The analysis was conducted using Braun and Clark's (2006) six step thematic analysis process. In step 1, the two data sets were read through several times and the analyst made preliminary notes, considered particular areas mentioned and provisionally loosely categorised points under broad areas. Initial codes were then applied systematically across all data in step 2. A second review of the coding was conducted, ensuring the accurate application of initial codes. Once completed, the analyst then conducted a review of the data to ensure codes that arose later in the process were also applied appropriately to the earlier data. During this review chunk-coding was used to collate codes into broader categories, initiating step 3. Codes and categories that were assigned allowed for more deductive third-round coding. At this point, in the fourth step, a review of the developing themes/topics occurred, thematic/topical maps were developed to present the study's core themes/topics. Individual maps within themes/topics were also compiled to identify interrelated sub-themes. Based on identified categories, findings were organised into over-arching themes/topics that tell the story of the data in step 5. In the final step, the process of compiling and producing this report took place and included a selection of data extracts that represent the bullet summary points generated by the focus group note-takers. Analysis continued throughout the writing process to ensure the report most authentically represented the data.

The findings represent the overall summary points from the focus group data collectively, rather than specific opinions of individuals or direct transcripts of specific focus group broader discussions.

2.3.2 Written submissions

The 35 written submissions, including translations of the five Irish submissions, were shared with an independent analyst. The written submissions template had four sections. The first section was an opportunity to provide overall comments about *Aistear*, the second section focused on the Principles of *Aistear*, the third section on the Themes of *Aistear* and the fourth section on the Guidelines for Good Practice. Given the scope of the submissions received and the rich feedback shared by organisations and individuals, the analysis of the written submissions mirrored the sequence of the template for clarity and presentation. Using the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and referenced above in relation to the analysis of the focus group data, an iterative and rigorous thematic analysis was undertaken by the analyst who worked with NCCA personnel. The coding process involved applying codes to data segments (chunk-coding) or line-by-line as appropriate. Detailed data tables, outlining developing themes/topics, across *Aistear's* Principles, Themes and Guidelines were developed and updated throughout the data analysis process. These tables included salient commentary from each submission providing the context for the codes applied, as well as the overarching topics, developed from consolidating the codes over time. At this juncture, themes/topics featuring in only one or two written submissions were eliminated, leaving codes which were further consolidated. It is also important to note that in addition to this analysis, all submissions, for which consent to publish has been given, will be published online alongside this consultation report on the NCCA website.

2.3.3 Questionnaires

Two questionnaires, one for professionals (523 completed responses) and the other for parents/guardians (153 completed responses), were completed. These were hosted on the Survey Hero platform. Both questionnaires were divided into four categories of questions:

- Identifier Questions
- Principles
- Themes
- Guidelines for Good Practice.

The professional questionnaire provided a link to the written submission template for anyone wishing to provide additional information. The parent/guardian questionnaire provided a section at the end for additional comments. All responses were downloaded using Excel and compiled into two master files, one for professionals and the other for parents/guardians for analysis by an independent researcher working with NCCA personnel. Only completed questionnaires were analysed. The data in each Excel file was analysed using the COUNTIF formula in each column of the data and then tabulated for each question. These tables were then used to produce graphs representing the findings using different chart types. Descriptive text is included below each chart illustrating the particular significance of the chart.

Section 3: Findings

3.1 Focus group data

3.1.1 What is working well with *Aistear*

Five over-arching thematic areas were identified in terms of what is working well with *Aistear* (see Table 2).

Table 2: What is working well with *Aistear*

1	Image of the child
2	Structure of the framework
3	The importance of play
4	Parents, families and communities
5	Accessibility and flexibility

Image of the child
A key area identified as working well within *Aistear* was the image or view of the child. The focus groups highlighted how this image is reflected through the Principles, Themes and the Guidelines for Good Practice. The focus groups noted the framework's child-centred vision, the voice of the child, the centrality of the Principle of children as citizens and the view of children from birth to six years as competent and confident learners with agency. For example, it was noted that there was a child-centred focus with the emphasis on hearing and acting on children's voices. It was also noted that there was an underpinning view of the child as a valued citizen which places their views at the centre of practice helping to emphasise quality responsive relationships and avoids a formulaic or tick box approach to young children's learning and development. There were also several mentions of *Aistear's* holistic view of children's learning and development with comments noted such as the Guidelines and Principles reflect international approaches and are working well. They embed the holistic experience of the child and include the child's voice. The inclusive nature of *Aistear* was also highlighted, and it was noted that *Aistear* is inclusion-focused and promotes an adaptive model of provision/practice which gives all children opportunities to participate. Adults have scope to respond appropriately to individual children. Another point noted that *Aistear* is child-led, child-centred, follows children's interests, and can be adapted to suit the individual child.

Structure of the framework
Aistear's structure was highlighted as working well and a positive feature. One of the key areas identified was the Themes which are broad and incorporate the importance of learning in early childhood and provide a useful lens for understanding child development in a holistic way. This holistic approach and the interlinking Themes were identified as a current strength of *Aistear* and the most noted theme was that of Identity and Belonging. In relation to the Principles, while not mentioned as often as the Themes, they were highlighted as very relevant to children's lives and learning, and it was felt that they are informed by international research, are well set out and should remain a key element of the framework. It was noted that the Principles paint a positive picture of children's holistic development, are exceptionally strong, and their presentation in three

groups promotes a depth of understanding. Additionally, the importance of the following Principles was noted: Play; Equality and diversity; Children as citizens; The adult's role; and The learning environment. In other discussions, the Principles were described as a revolutionary shift focusing on child agency and bringing out child voice and noted that if adults embrace the Principles and start with the image of the child as competent and capable, they will create the necessary learning environment to support emergent learning. The importance of learning dispositions was also noted as a positive aspect and strength of *Aistear* although not referenced as frequently as the Themes.

The importance of play
The importance of play was identified as very significant in the focus group discussions and an important aspect of *Aistear*. The importance of play was considered to be evident in the Guidelines for Good Practice which were highlighted as enhancing children's learning and development through the Themes. It was noted that *Aistear* provides an understanding of why play is important and how the various types of play can be supported in early childhood. The pedagogy of play, children's learning and development, and the importance of encouraging outdoor play were raised throughout the discussions.

Parents, families and communities
The importance of promoting a focus on parents, families and communities featured in the focus group discussions. Promoting parental involvement in terms of identity and belonging, working in partnership with parents, embracing cultural diversity and multiculturalism were highlighted as needing to be retained. In terms of communicating with parents, *Aistear* was viewed as a good guide to help parents understand and support the learning and development of their child, and useful for sharing information with parents using the Themes and through documentation. It was noted that *Aistear* supports educators to develop partnership with parents and by sharing pedagogical documentation has made children's learning more visible to parents and helped them to value the importance of play in children's learning.

Accessibility and flexibility
Aistear's accessibility and flexibility was identified as a supportive feature in working with the framework. This was mentioned repeatedly in relation to the flexible nature of *Aistear* as a framework which allows for professional interpretation due to its non-prescriptive nature. It was also noted that the framework is used among various stakeholders and it was felt that it is appropriate and supports a diverse range of users and is applicable irrespective of the model of curriculum or type of setting. It was noted that *Aistear's* framework approach supports the transitions of young babies into childcare settings. The simplicity of the language works across different backgrounds supporting parents and babies from different environments and contexts. *Aistear* was recognised as being 'a common language' in itself as it offers a way of communicating with various parties involved in the child's learning and development.

3.1.2 What to update in *Aistear*

Four overarching thematic areas were identified as needing to be updated (see Table 3).

Table 3: What to update in *Aistear*

1	Equality, diversity, inclusion and interculturalism
2	Greater focus on parents, families and communities
3	Structure of the framework
4	More focus on play

Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism (EDII)

EDII was identified as the key aspect that needs to be updated within *Aistear*. This area was referenced most frequently across the focus groups and highlighted the importance of a greater focus overall on diversity and inclusion when updating *Aistear*. The changes to Irish society since *Aistear* was initially developed were noted and it was frequently stated that *Aistear* needs to reflect Ireland's changing society. The language of diversity and inclusion should be addressed in order to update terminology and more examples that reflect diversity need to be embedded throughout *Aistear* 'to ensure it is inclusive and anti-bias' and includes the diverse ways in which children learn and develop. It was suggested that it would be helpful to include better sample learning experiences for intercultural learning, including reference to different cultures and backgrounds and to acknowledge the multiple languages of children in early childhood settings now. It was noted that, while *Aistear* acknowledges that children have their own language and family situations, this needs to be developed further, beyond just one particular theme but more explicitly throughout the framework. It was also noted that *Aistear* should reflect more on gender identity. The importance of a rights-based approach was mentioned several times and the importance of ensuring this is reflected through the language of *Aistear* was noted. Agency was a term highlighted on several occasions in terms of children, but also in terms of the agency of adults who work with children. Empowerment was also mentioned on several occasions as important. There were also suggestions about translating *Aistear* into different languages and about having further examples and guidance around working and sharing information with parents and families from multicultural backgrounds. The importance of Irish culture and heritage was also noted by some focus groups, but not consistently throughout. Further guidance in relation to sharing information and working with parents of children with additional needs was noted and a greater focus on supporting children with sensory differences was called for. It was suggested that more explicit signposts to other significant policy documentation such as *the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (Government of Ireland, 2016) and the *Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings* (Government of Ireland, 2019) be made in the update.

Greater focus on parents, families and communities

As noted earlier, parents, families and communities featured as a strength of *Aistear* in the focus group discussions, however this area was also raised as needing updating. There was also some overlap here in relation to key points highlighted within EDII. Many of the focus groups mentioned the importance of parental involvement and how this really needs to be promoted more through *Aistear*. One of the key areas identified was raising awareness of the importance of *Aistear* with parents and the importance of the role of play in early childhood. Another aspect raised was that of effective communication with parents. Further guidance was sought on

effective sharing of documentation about children's learning and development particularly when working with parents of children with additional needs. The role of digital communication and how this was utilised during the Covid-19 pandemic was also mentioned but by a minority. Working with parents with English as an additional language and from different cultures, and including further links to communities and cultural events were also highlighted, and the opportunity to develop new examples within *Aistear* was also stressed.

Structure of the framework

While there were positives in relation to the structure of the framework there were also key areas identified for updating, including the terminology used across *Aistear*. Various suggestions were made in terms of terminology, and recommendations from the focus groups included several suggestions in relation to updating and condensing the learning goals. Although the *Aistear* Themes were identified as a key area to keep, it was noted that inclusion should be embedded within all of the Themes. It was also noted that the Themes can sometimes overshadow the Principles, and the update is an opportunity to enhance the connections between them. In addition to the creation of such connections, the Principles need to be highlighted more strongly. It was acknowledged that the Aims and Learning Goals are still relevant and important aspects of the framework. However, it was suggested that the Learning Goals could be shortened to support educators in conducting observations and engaging with reflective practice. In relation to the presentation of *Aistear* in general, retention of the hard copy format was requested, but with interactive content online. Including reflective questions was also mentioned and another suggestion included having three separate but linked frameworks by age. Again, it was suggested that there should be clear links or signposts to key policy documentation. In addition to highlighting changes that are needed in terms of updating the framework, discussions also raised the issue of areas in which new support materials are needed. For example, there were several mentions of:

- the importance of documentation and the need for further guidance in terms of assessment, and in particular more focus on children's participation in assessment
- support in sharing information on children's learning and development with parents
- clear links with the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (ASPG) and in particular to documentation templates
- continuing professional development (CPD), training and support to implement the updated version of *Aistear*.

The role of play

Suggestions emerged on enhancing the role of play in *Aistear*. Children's right to play was acknowledged and the role of play in promoting children's learning within early childhood noted. This was identified as being particularly pertinent in relation to transitions and the role of play, and the interpretation of *Aistear* within primary schools. The role of play-based learning, a stronger emphasis on play and the implementation of *Aistear* more holistically, beyond an *Aistear* hour in primary schools, was noted on several occasions as needing addressing. There were calls too for better continuity and alignment across sectors particularly between *Aistear* and the updated *Primary School Curriculum*. Further training and CPD in the area of play was also highlighted as important for the future of *Aistear*. The importance of outdoor play was also highlighted, but this was not prominent overall in terms of key aspects to update in *Aistear*.

Further areas

Other areas that were raised for the updating of the framework included children's well-being, particularly in terms of their social and emotional well-being. The links between well-being and agency, inclusion, outdoor and risky play and the importance of physical experiences for very young children were also highlighted. The importance of the outdoors, nature and sustainability were mentioned. However, in terms of frequency through the focus groups overall, this was not a key aspect identified to be updated. STEM, ICT and the use of digital tools was also raised, but again, this was not consistently identified as a key priority for the update of *Aistear.* The need to include specific examples relating to very young babies and toddlers was also highlighted but was not prominent in the list of key priorities. The applicability of *Aistear* to childminders was also raised but did not feature consistently across focus groups.

Summary

The focus group datasets were presented for analysis in two separate files and analysed through the same rigorous process. Through this process, it became apparent that there was not always convergence on certain points and at times, some of the areas highlighted as important to maintain were also areas identified as needing to be updated. Because of this, the findings of both were considered together in a bigger picture, to formulate the next steps in informing the process of updating *Aistear.* The Themes, Aims and Learning Goals were recognised as key features in the structure of the framework but there was a consensus that the number of Learning Goals could be reduced and simplified. The image of the child was identified as a strength but also in need of an update in terms of children's rights, agency, empowerment, inclusion along with the need to further recognise and embrace diversity. *Aistear's* current focus on parents, families and communities was identified as important, but also in need of updating in relation to including parents further, with particular cognisance to be taken of multiculturalism in Irish society. The importance of play in the framework at the moment was highlighted as a strength but also in need of updating. Suggestions included having a stronger emphasis and creating further awareness of the role of play, particularly in primary schools, in raising parental awareness of the importance of play in supporting learning and development, and the role of play in the home/childminding environment. The accessibility and flexibility of *Aistear* was noted, but it was suggested that it also needs updating in terms of the recognition of the professional educator and the need to update terminology in relation to equality, gender, diversity and inclusion. The importance of children's well-being as a feature of the framework was also noted (although not to the same extent as other areas identified previously) but also in need of further development in terms of socio-emotional well-being, inclusive well-being, trauma-informed practice, the outdoors and promoting sustainability.

In relation to the Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice of *Aistear*, the general consensus was that the structure should remain the same. However, it was strongly suggested that inclusion should be embedded across the Themes. It was also acknowledged that the Themes can sometimes overshadow the Principles and that there should be better connection between the Themes and Principles in the update. It was noted that the Principles are still relevant and that the three-group layout is useful. However, it was also noted that there was scope for updates particularly in relation to inclusion and to the Principles in Group 2 which includes Principles on Relationships; Parents, family and community; and The adult's role. As well as updates to the framework, the findings indicate the need for additional guidance around documentation, assessment and planning along with further examples of children's participation and self-

assessment, shared documentation with parents and the use of digital technology. In relation to the guidelines, more examples to reflect current society in Ireland were requested.

Drawing on the findings from the analysis generated from the focus group data, Table 4 documents an overall summary of the key areas identified to maintain and the priorities to address in the update. The priorities are listed in order of frequency, with those at the top of the lists identified most frequently and therefore deemed most important by the participants in the focus groups who provided valuable insights to inform the process of updating *Aistear*.

Table 4: Overview

Working well	*Update*	*How?*
Children birth to six years		
Maintain the image/view of the child, importance of play, holistic view of children's development, importance of identity and belonging.	Greater focus on: inclusion, equality and diversity; the languages of children; rights perspective; right to, and role of, play particularly for primary aged children; socio-emotional well-being; outdoor play; sustainability.	Language/terminology; additional examples; signposts to policy; transitions to school; play including primary school.
Parents, families and communities		
Keep the importance of parents, families and communities	Greater focus on: diversity; interculturalism; inclusion; languages; raising parental awareness of *Aistear* and role of play; transitions to school; importance of home learning environment; childminders; Irish heritage.	Language/terminology; agency and empowerment; more examples; communication; international research; links with PSC.
Structure and implementation		
Strengths include the Themes, Principles, Guidelines, dispositions, accessible language,	Greater focus on: language of adult role and professional practice;	Further examples; provide CPD; information and awareness for educators,

flexibility in terms of role of the adult and curriculum, and availability of a hard copy.	learning goals; links between Principles and Themes; further examples, guidance on assessment and documentation, and birth to 3 examples; STEM/ICT references; sustainability.	schools and parents; interactive content; links to ASPG and PSC.

3.2 Written submissions

3.2.1 Principles of *Aistear*

As noted in the Methodology, the scope of the submissions was such that the analysis considered the data on the Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice separately, for clarity of presentation. Of the thirty-five submissions, 20 (57%) commented favourably upon the Principles, with comments such as, 'overall, the 12 Principles remain strong, and relevant, and work well'. Presenting the Principles in three groups '…contributes to their understanding and accessibility; substantiated by a child-centred and rights-based approach, as evidenced in particular by the child's perspective on each principle'. Moreover, 'it was lovely that the voice of the child was being captured and presented…, this [is] very effective and emotive'.

Across the submissions, the Principles are portrayed as:
- Broad and universal
- Child-centered
- Comprehensive
- Focussing upon 'the principle of care, making the child feel cared for and valued as an individual and member of a community'
- Aligning with children's developmental stages
- Providing clear guidance on the fundamental play-based approach underpinning *Aistear*
- Being inclusive and practical, 'agus ba chóir an ghné a bhaineann le sealbhú teanga i dteach an pháiste a mholadh' (the aspect of language acquisition in the child's home should be recommended)
- Recognising the role of family and community in a child's life
- Focussing upon building relationships between child and parent/guardian, child and educator, child and peers, and educator and parent/guardian
- Supporting and encouraging educator autonomy and professionalism
- Directing the educator's attention to the child's understanding and experience of the world.

Group 1: Children and their lives in Early Childhood, is 'well-defined and working well', especially the components: Child, Family and Community, and Equality and Diversity, which 'are of great relevance to countering bias and stereotyping'. Another submission noted that play and hands-on experiences (Group 2) act, 'as a platform for the development of a variety of skills and dispositions'. Although six submissions suggested an enhanced focus upon Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), one stated, 'the focus on connection and exploration of the

world around them is an excellent opportunity for young children to develop knowledge and skills of how they look after and care for our world and each other…,' while another stated, the Principles:

> propose that young children are ready to learn about concepts such as fairness, justice and respect…a global justice perspective [can be] be included in this work in an age-appropriate manner.

In the context of primary school, 'the Principles…are working well and…align' with the:
- Existing principles of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999)
- Domains and standards of *Looking at our Schools (LAOS) 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (DES, 2016)
- SPHE Curriculum and the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 – 2025*.

Updating the Principles
However, it was also highlighted that the Principles, 'require updating and strengthening'. 74% of submissions (n=26) provided suggestions in this regard. There were concerns that the, 'Themes seem to have overtaken the significance of the Principles'. It was recommended therefore, to 'prioritise the core importance of the Principles as well as the Themes'. They should be, 'given equal importance, updated and emphasised more to allow educators to reflect on how [they] impact[s] on their practice in early years settings and primary infant classrooms'.

The broad updates relate to:
- Language and terminology along two dimensions:
  - Empowering language for children and educators
  - Alignment with policy initiatives, e.g., Nurturing Skills and the redeveloped *Primary School Curriculum* to 'ensure consistency as much as possible across *Aistear* and other DoE documents…clarity and understanding for teachers and school leaders' (See Figure 1).
- Irish culture and heritage, vis-à-vis
  Cultúr na hÉireann sna blianta luath-óige do gach páiste, lena n-áirítear 'eispéiris oiriúnacha a chur ar fáil do pháistí... go háirithe páistí a bhaineann le nádúr agus an timpeallacht shóisialta áitiúil, sa chaoi go dtuigeann páistí gur ball iad den phobal sin – go háirithe más é pobal na Gaeilge nó na Gaeltachta a bhíonn i gceist. (Irish culture in the early years for every child, including providing appropriate experiences for children…especially for children who connect with nature and the local social environment, so that children understand they are a member of that community – especially if it is an Irish or Gaeltacht community.)

Exposing children to, 'language and culture experiences, will help children to develop their own personal identity in a productive manner', thus coinciding with *Aistear's* Principles, 'especially the Principles in 'Children and their life during early childhood'.

Figure 1: Proposed updates to language and terminology

Current terms	Suggested Terms
Children's needs	Children's rights
Practitioner	Educator
Support	Empower
She/he His/her	They/their
Special Educational Needs	Individual Needs
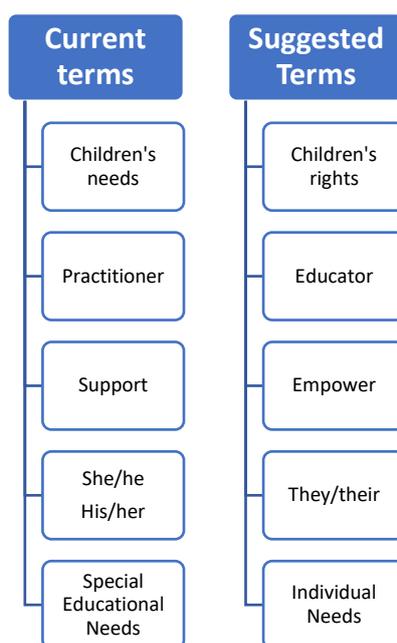
The Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice must, 'reflect the move toward a graduate-led ECEC workforce', and

> align with the terms used by stakeholders in the sector, while also being attentive to the ongoing discussion regarding the use of appropriate terminology to describe the early childhood staff and the roles they play.

Focussing specifically upon inclusion, a submission recommended using the term, 'all children throughout', rather than 'including those with special educational needs to align with recent DoE documents'.

Group 1: Children and their lives in early childhood

Of nine submissions recommending updates in relation to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, six suggested renaming the current Principle on Equality and Diversity. Four recommended changing it to Equality Diversity and Inclusion, 'in keeping with the thrust of the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter (2016) and, the Access and Inclusion Model (2016)'. One suggested 'Justice and Fairness' as an alternative title, with one recommending that the current Principle on Equality and Diversity, 'merge with Children as Citizens to form one overarching principle: Inclusion'.

Transition to School featured across ten submissions, with one calling for the inclusion of a new Principle: Transitions. However, four submissions referenced a tension between early childhood and primary school settings' interpretation, understanding and facilitation of play as a methodology. There is, 'confusion in schools about *Aistear*. It is not a subject'. Another noted, 'tension for infant teachers juggling *Aistear* and the subject crowded primary school curriculum', with another requesting that, '*Aistear* be presented as playful pedagogy to emphasise the complementary nature...with the *Primary School Curriculum* and *Primary Language Curriculum*'.

Table 5: Updating Group 1: Children and their lives in Early Childhood

Principle	Suggested update
The child's uniqueness	• Explore how a child develops a sense of identity and belonging, nested within family and community • Revise child's uniqueness to child's identity, to reflect various and intersecting identity grounds children and their families may identify with • Address cultural and linguistic diversity
Children as citizens	• Explain active participation and importance of the voice of the child. Include Lundy's participatory model (2007) Space, Voice, Audience and Influence • Explore value of promoting/supporting children's ability to negotiate, debate, philosophise and collaborate • Create comprehensive link with Sustainable Development Goals • Strengthen by including more pro-active criteria, e.g., children as citizens: be specific in relation to 'rights-holders'
Equality and diversity	• Amend Equality and Diversity to Diversity, Equality and Inclusion or Fairness and Justice, or merge together as one Principle: Inclusion • Broaden definition to include providing equal opportunities for all children to participate in 'society' rather than equal participation, and to reflect Diversity within settings/schools ensuring all children feel a sense of belonging • Emphasise importance of inclusion and equity

Group 2: Children's connections with others

Although parents were identified as 'the most important people in the child's life', Group 2 Principles, 'need to be updated to take into the consideration the varying nature of relationships children will have in their lives' (Table 6).

Table 6: Updating Group 2: Children's Connections with Others

Principle	Suggested update

Relationships	• Include:
	  ○ Diversity of relationships in life
	  ○ Concept of slow relational pedagogy
	  ○ Guardians and parents to reflect the diversity of familial structures in society
	  ○ Other members of the community relevant to the child, e.g., OT/SLT services etc.
	• Merge with parents, family and community
	• Reinforce:
	  ○ Parents as the child's primary educators

	• Importance of reciprocal adult-child interactions from a child development perspective
	• Importance educator-parent/guardian relationship and maintaining the integrity of relationships throughout the progression of the child's time in the service
Parent, family and community	• Include:
	o Voice of parents/guardians/community and their role in children's holistic development
	o Learning in context and through the community, recognizing bio-diversity and sustainability
	• Stress:
	o Child's participation in society and home
	o Importance of understanding and respecting diverse families
The adult's role	• Define bi-directionality of this relationship more discreetly
	• Strengthen adult's role to include differentiation for children with varying needs/abilities
	• Increase educator visibility
	• Align more closely with the *Síolta* principles
	• Emphasise:
	o Professionalism of educator role; link to professional standards within sector
	o Significance of competent and confident adults scaffolding children in reaching their potential
	o Importance of critical reflective educator
	o Adult's role in leading pedagogical practices and supporting/mentoring other educators
	o Child's right to lead the learning

One submission suggested aligning the Principle: Parent, family and community more closely with:
the ideas of 'Funds of Knowledge' as a bedrock for learning and the idea of
children's 'Working theories' being a useful way to acknowledge existing knowledge
and understanding within an emergent and inquiry-based approach to curriculum
development.

The adult's role, presented as complex and multi-faceted (Table 7), is, 'integral to the child's
holistic learning and development and reinforces the relationship of a learning transaction where
adult and child are learning together'. The need to, 'support the importance of the ongoing
development of the critical reflective practitioner', was reiterated. One submission recommended
including a principle on, 'Participation and the adult's mediating role in supporting all children's
rights to participatory experiences indoors and outdoors in ECEC'.

Group 3: How children learn and develop
It is noteworthy that one submission suggested the, 'learning environment (and learning culture)
may be an overarching principle in this section and may be better placed at the top of the list',
while another suggested Group 3 Principles, 'could have led with 'communication and language' as
a foundation for the additional principles'. This submission mentioned the need for continuity and

progression in terms of language and communication, while another suggested grouping the four Principles: Holistic learning and development, Active learning, Play and Hands-on experiences, and Relevant and meaningful experiences together under the name: 'Playful and engaging learning experiences [which] would be reflective of the Preparation for Teaching and Learning Guidance document and the *Primary Language Curriculum*'.

Assessment featured strongly in relation to Relevant and Meaningful Experiences, in terms of the language of assessment, assessment methods and educator reflection on what is observed. Specifically, in relation to childminding:

> define what assessment looks like in a childminding setting/suggest another term.
> When speaking to childminders directly, maybe the word ASSESSMENT could be expanded/supported by terms such as capture and/or communicate.

This submission called for, 'the role of a childminder and the uniqueness of a childminding setting...to be recognised throughout *Aistear*', as well as, 'the importance of the continuity of care offered by a childminder'. It also referenced the need to include, a 'mixed age category birth to 6 years+ more reflective of a childminding setting'.

Table 7: Updating Group 3. How children learn and develop

Principle	Suggested update
Holistic learning and development	- Emphasise importance of how opportunities for learning and development are experienced outside of the ECEC /SAC setting - Reference developmental stages and pace at which the child learns - List the learning areas, dispositions etc. - Include processes of learning and how children learn
Active learning	- Include need for whole body movement - Explore: - Meaning of active and passive learning - Valuable input parents/guardians have in their child's learning - Emphasise active learning from birth
Play and hands-on experiences	- Explore: - What play is, emphasize free-play - Child-led, adult-led and a combination of both - Emphasise child's right to play - Accentuate potential of play for developing STEAM skills
Relevant and meaningful experiences	Specify that children learn and develop through slow relational pedagogy
Communication and language	- Include: - Language rich environment and two-way conversation from birth - Activities to develop communication skills, e.g., singing, nursery rhymes - Explore: - Meaningful engagement and sustained shared thinking - Technology as a tool to support communication

The learning environment	• Consider need for flexibility to adapt group and individual learning needs • Incorporate child voice into ongoing development of the learning environment • Take account of principles of UDL • Reference use of outdoor/forest school approach • Include children in decision-making processes in the learning environment

Proposed new Principles

In addition to renaming Equality and Diversity, and, introducing an additional principle on Transitions, analysis indicated that 6 new principles are suggested across the submissions received (Table 8).

Table 8: Proposed new Principles

New Principle	Rationale or detail
Co-construction of knowledge and critical reflective practice	• Educators cultivating their own position about their beliefs and what influences them, drawing on new theories and questioning old beliefs
Child well-being	• Focus on attunement and co-regulation to nurture resilience
Early intervention and support services	• Reflect supports available through the AIM and various services which young children (birth to six) may engage with
Key person approach	• Reinforce and consolidate need for trust between children/key person/family etc.
Empowerment	• Develop curriculum in collaboration with children, parents/families, teachers and community, encapsulating concept of 'contributing'
Children as rights holders	• Related to participation; non-discrimination, equality and empowerment

3.2.2 Themes of *Aistear*

Twenty-one (60%) submissions felt the *Aistear* Themes have 'stood the test of time':

> Even with the raft of change in a much-changed society…the *Aistear* themes still encapsulate the integrated and holistic learning and development priorities of children in 2022, as well as the requirements for this to be facilitated.

The Themes are 'fundamental to how we support children's learning and development' and have, 'helped some educators to focus more specifically on children's needs'. Accordingly, 'there is greater emphasis on meeting children's needs and the individuality of the child.'

Across the submissions, the Themes are portrayed as:

- Being based on relationships with the child as an active contributor and creative partner with others, and the educator using democratic practices in the setting, supported by parents at home
- Supporting affective, spiritual, physical and social development of each child in an integrated fashion
- Holding a distinct connection for language potential, inclusive of, but not exclusive to, the theme of Communicating
- Encouraging children to have a positive sense of who they are, to feel valued and respected
- Being inclusive of all children, supporting equal participation of all children
- Supporting children to develop and strengthen lifelong skills
- Allowing settings to reflect on child-centred learning, supporting children in tailoring experiences to meet individual needs
- Supporting educators to move away from 'schoolifying' children; providing them with knowledge around dispositions, attitudes, values and skills; supporting them to know why/how/when they plan
- Allowing educators to see the learning that is important for children.

Updating the Themes, Aims and Learning Goals

Eighteen submissions, (51.4%) provided information about updating specific Themes, with an additional nine (25.7%) providing general commentary. One submission suggested

> reflecting the *Aistear* principles through the themes. View each theme through three lenses – (1) children and their lives in early childhood, (2) children's connection with others, and (3) how children learn and develop.

Another, referred to reviewing assessment:

> promoting the idea of assessment for learning rather than of learning needs to be restated and made more prominent, as the distinction is not always appreciated by educators or some other stakeholders.

Additionally, 2 submissions asked that, 'critical reflection', be included for each theme. Having ninety-six learning goals was identified as problematic in another submission, which indicated, the, 'emphasis can be placed on that level of detail, rather than on capturing the value of *Aistear's* Themes and Aims'. Reducing the level of detail, 'would enable educators to focus more on what is happening for children rather than deciding if learning goal 3 or learning goal 6 is being achieved.' Similarly, another suggested omitting numbering, 'as presenting learning experiences by linking them for example to Aim 1, Learning Goal 3 etc. detracts from the key message being communicated'.

Well-being

As Table 9 illustrates, child agency is central to Well-being, with regards to child voice, respecting themselves and their environment, caring for the environment and active citizenship. Children's psychological well-being, social and emotional development, resilience etc., is also prioritised. One submission proposed illuminating, 'the centrality of culture and arts in ECEC in a more tangible/comprehensive way', with a greater overall profile for creativity across all Themes. While considerable focus was given to transition to school vis-à-vis updating the Principles, here it has broader connotations (albeit mentioned in 1 submission only), relating to the importance of all transitions in the child's life, which should be afforded 'equal weighting' within *Aistear*. Some

specific suggestions were made about enhanced precision in the terminology used, such as replacing 'warm and supportive relationships' with a reference to the importance of consistency and continuity of relationships.

Table 9: Updating Well-being

- Update the definition of well-being to reflect more updated definitions of this term
- Embed well-being across all four Themes not just as a stand-alone theme
- Strengthen the focus on psychological well-being
- Emphasise mindfulness, health and welfare
- Stress the link between play and well-being; the fundamental influence of play on children's development
- Include a wider range of strategies such as mindfulness, yoga, music, engaging with nature and their connection to supporting children's social and emotional well-being
- Include a focus on infant and child mental health, e.g. children need to be supported to form close relationships, recognise and express emotions, and explore and learn about the world around them
- Focus on how to support children in developing resilience and the foundations for a lifetime of positive mental health
- Emphasise relationships with the learning environment
- Include Global Citizenship Education in terms of enabling children to respect themselves and their environment, care for the environment and to be active citizens
- Expand upon children's voices, e.g. their opinion on what they want to do and learn is important, hearing children's opinions, and allowing space for this. Their voice is more than opinions, expression of need, accomplishments, likes and dislikes
- Reference outdoor play; children learn and develop outdoors as well as indoors
- Reference risky play, e.g. play within a safe and well-supervised space, that is exciting and challenging to children
- Respect and affirm home languages as a core component of well-being
- Emphasise transitions, continuity and progression, e.g. recognising the importance of all transitions in a child's life.

Identity and Belonging

Of the 31 submissions that suggested updating the Themes, fourteen (45%) mentioned Diversity, Equality, and Anti-bias in relation to the theme of Identity and Belonging. Issues raised included fostering respect, awareness of minority ethnic cultures and traditions, including Traveller culture and history, and ensuring children develop a sense of pride in their culture and background. Moreover, 3 submissions indicated the need to link the theme to the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Charter and Guidelines (2016), or to embed these guidelines across all four Themes.

Irish language and culture also featured. A parent, writing 'in English for absolute clarity', felt, 'the Irish language has a rich role to play'. Further emphasising Irish culture, another submission, suggested Identity and Belonging should place:

> níos mó béime a leagan ar cheol, mar shampla, ceol traidisiúnta, Ceol na hÉireann, ceol domhanda chun tuiscint a fháil ar thuiscint an pháiste ar fhocail, rithim agus struchtúir an cheoil. (put more emphasis on music, for example, traditional music, Irish music, world music to get an understanding of the child's understanding of the words, rhythm and structures of music.)

Other suggestions included acknowledging the role of digital technology and outdoor and nature play across all Themes.

Table 10: Updating Identity and Belonging

- Emphasise:
  - The importance of a connection to place for children's development, and importance of their developmentally appropriate awareness of the world beyond their own community
  - The virtual world children experience and how this influences how they view themselves
  - Dispositions and how to support educator's awareness of these
  - The educator's role in relation to supporting children to develop metalinguistic awareness
  - Language use at home
  - Promote Irish language as form of communication
  - Recognise languages are relevant across this theme (language and cultural identity are linked)
- Include:
  - Greater links with the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter (2016), guidelines and training
  - Principles of the 'anti-bias' approach
  - Concept of relational pedagogy throughout, especially in relation to children aged birth to three years
- Name:
  - Multiple identities and their intersectionality
  - The need for high expectations for all children, but ensure learning goals are realistic for young children (6 years).

As with the Principles, submissions referenced the need to update language. For example, with reference to the Irish language:

> an teanga a labhraíonn páistí sa bhaile m.sh., Béim ar an teanga a láidriú – an Ghaeilge mar fhoirm chumarsáide, agus béim ar an teanga a labhraíonn páistí sa bhaile. An Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn mar fhoirm chumarsáide. (the language children speak in the home for e.g. Emphasise strengthening the language – Irish as a form of communication, and emphasis on the language spoken by children at home. To promote Irish as a form of communication.)

Communicating

In terms of potential updates to the theme of Communicating, 3 of seventeen submissions (17.6%), proposed changing the name (figure 2).

Figure 2: Proposed name change to Communicating theme
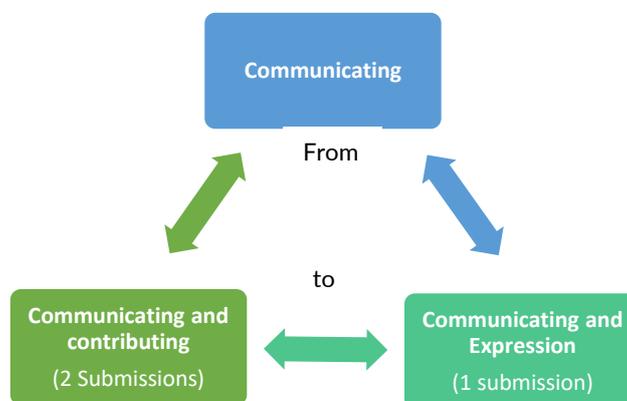
Communicating and Contributing takes account of 'the expanded understanding of Citizenship and incorporating Lundy's Model of Participation (2007)', whereas, Communication and Expression, recognises, 'the definition of language and communication in *Aistear* to include art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories'. Furthermore, as, 'language potential, is inclusive of, but not exclusive to, the theme of Communicating', it should be embedded across all 4 Themes. Similar to Well-being, child agency features strongly within proposed updates to the Communicating theme (Table 11).

Table 11: Updating Communicating

- Include:
  - Importance of children making their needs known
  - Importance of children communicating through their behaviour
  - How meeting a child's expressed needs and wishes encourages them to communicate
  - Examples of various types of communication
  - Reggio Emilia concept of the 100 languages of children, making visible their myriad ways of communicating
  - Importance of children's voices and consultation with them
  - Digital learning, e.g., using technology to support children's learning and development
  - Stronger concept of silence
  - Unpack strategies to acknowledge non-verbal communication
- Strengthen focus upon:
  - Pre-literacy, designating it a full aim within *Aistear* similar to language
  - EAL and multilingualism
  - Creativity, e.g., children using their imagination and thinking about how to solve problems

- Reference various learners, e.g., children learning Irish as a second language, children learning English as another language (EAL) and children with special needs
- Promote Irish in English medium settings, e.g., learning simple Irish words and phrases through play

Exploring and Thinking

The need to include STEM featured in 4 of 9 written submissions that suggested updating the theme of Exploring and Thinking. Essentially, the views expressed favour play-based STEM learning to have greater visibility, not just in Exploring and Thinking, but across all 4 Themes.

Table 12: Updating Exploring and Thinking

- Strengthen the introduction:
  - To take account of interacting systems, e.g., attachment system and exploratory behavioral system
  - Critical thinking, e.g., helping children to solve meaningful problems
  - Child agency, e.g., children learn best when they have choices about, and are interested in, what they are doing
- Incorporate:
  - Reasoning skills
  - Nature and the environment (sustainability)
  - STEM
  - Emergent numeracy, i.e., learning experiences involving measuring, patterns or distance
- Reference benefits to the learner of making mistakes and how to react to this
- Promote the social, rather than the medical model of disability

Summary of findings on proposed updates to *Aistear's* Principles, Themes, Aims and Learning Goals

- Update underpinning theory, taking account of the importance of early brain development

- Foreground *Aistear* in a rights-based approach, linking to Lundy's Model of Participation (space, voice, audience and influence) leading to an enhanced focus upon Child Agency (100 languages of children)

- Update terminology to align with language in policy initiatives, and reflective of diversity, equality and inclusion

- Update and reduce the number of learning goals

- Include a clear articulation of Irish Culture and Heritage taking account of Irish Language

- Provide a clearer articulation of the adult's role

- Embed Diversity, Equality and Inclusion throughout; link to DEI Charter and Guidelines

- Reinforce the concept that learning occurs in the context of relationships, and acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the relationship with parents and families

- Embrace the concept of relational pedagogy

- Emphasise children's social and emotional development

- Accentuate the potential of play for developing STEM (STEAM)

- Incorporate technology, to support pedagogical practice and develop children's digital competencies

- Create comprehensive links with the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2020).

3.2.3 Guidelines for Good Practice

In general, the Guidelines for Good Practice were perceived as a valuable and useful resource worth retaining. Findings indicate that the Learning Experiences are valued for the insights on capitalising on children's interests and motivation. The Guidelines on, 'Learning and Developing through Play,' are considered helpful in providing support on the types of play, the challenges that some children may experience in accessing play, and the adult's changing role in preparing for play. The consistency between the Guidelines on Supporting Learning and Development through Assessment and the *Primary School Curriculum* was noted.

Updating Guidelines for Good Practice

Twenty-five (71.4%) submissions provided information relating to updating the Guidelines for Good Practice. The areas identified most frequently across submissions related to:
1   Assessment
2   Partnership with parents
3   Learning and developing through play
4   Learning and developing through interactions
5   The role of the educator
6   Babies, toddlers and very young children (under three years).

Again, it was suggested that 'information in the Guidelines is sometimes overlooked as the Themes tend to take prominence'.

Notwithstanding the positive feedback on the current Guidelines, some commentary emerged about the volume of documentation and the practicality of using them on a daily basis, with some suggestions emerging about creating a single location for a suite of resources. Other suggestions emerged about incorporating the Guidelines into the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide. Three submissions called for a fifth set of guidelines - Inclusion, Diversity and Equality which incorporates anti-racism, anti-discrimination aspects and align with the EDI charter and guidelines (2016).

3.3 Questionnaire data

Two separate questionnaires, one for professionals and one for parents/guardians were conducted using Survey Hero. 1906 professionals responded to one or more question, with 523

completing the full questionnaire. 810 parents/guardians responded to one or more questions and 153 completed the full parent/guardian questionnaire. The findings in this section reflect only the completed questionnaires.

3.3.1 Identifier questions

Both professionals and parents/guardians were asked a series of identifier questions. Professionals were invited to identify their role and had the choice to select more than one option. 50% of professionals selected 'Early Childhood Practitioner' as their current role, this was followed by 'Early Childhood Setting Manager' (29%) and 'Primary School Teacher' (18%).

Figure 3 Professional Questionnaire, Question 1:

What is your role?

Number of responses: 523
Note: Multiple responses from some respondents.

Role	Times selected
Early Childhood Practitioner	259
Early Childhood Setting Manager	151
Primary School Teacher	96
Primary School Principal	7
Childminder	5
Early Childhood Support Service	20
Early Childhood Organisation	13
Early Childhood Tutor/Lecturer/Academic	36
Early Childhood Student	31
ITE Lecturer/Academic	7
ITE Student	0
Other	27
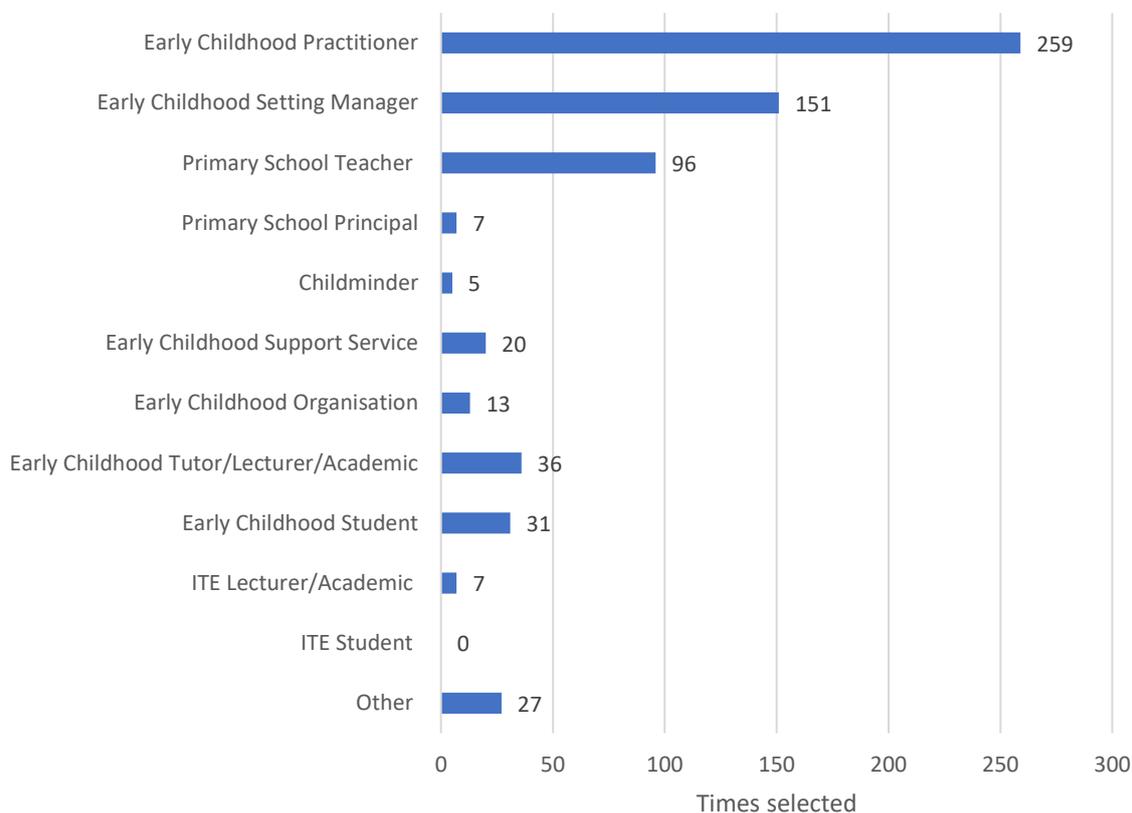
Professionals were invited to indicate their setting context and had the option to make more than one selection. 'Sessional preschool' was the most commonly selected setting, selected by 40% of professionals, followed by 'Full-time day care setting' (33%) and 'Primary school' (19%).

Figure 4 Professional Questionnaire, Question 2:

Please indicate your setting context.

Number of responses: 523
Note: Multiple responses from some respondents.
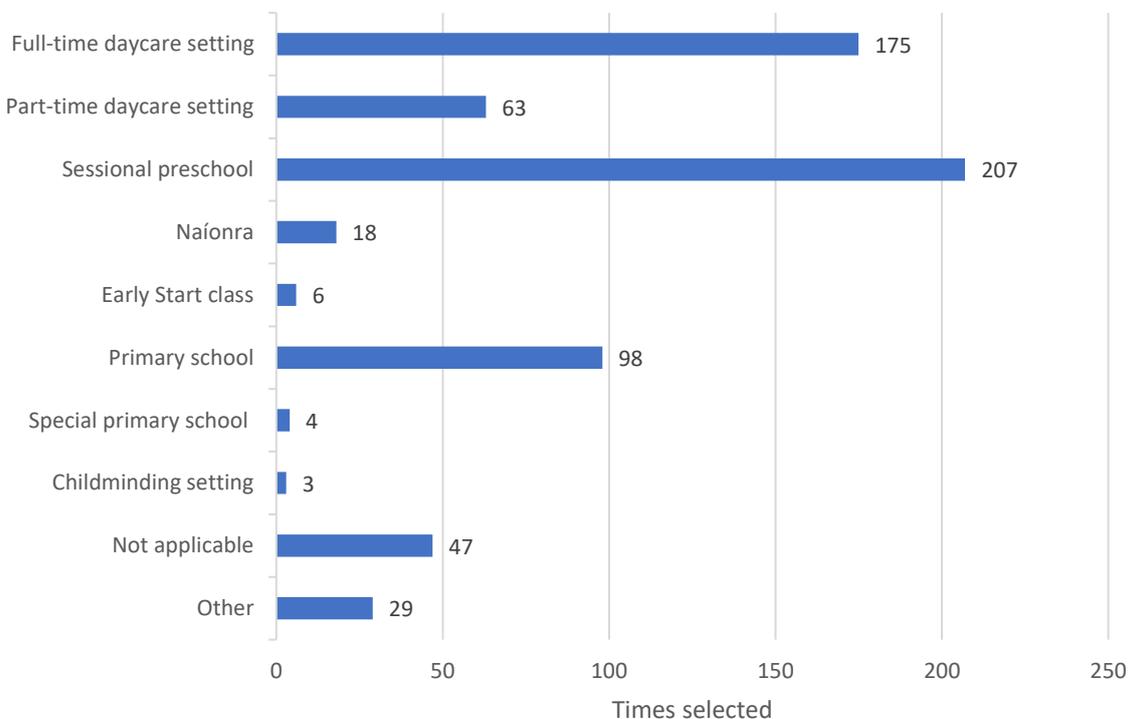
Professionals were asked to indicate the age group they worked with and had the option to make more than one selection. 66% indicated 'Preschool' followed by 'Junior Infants' (22%) and 'Senior Infants' (21%).

Figure 5 Professional Questionnaire, Question 3:

What age group do you work with?

Number of responses: 523
Note: Multiple responses from some respondents.

Age group	Times selected
Babies	58
Toddlers	104
Preschool	346
Junior Infants	114
Senior Infants	110
Not applicable	61

Times selected
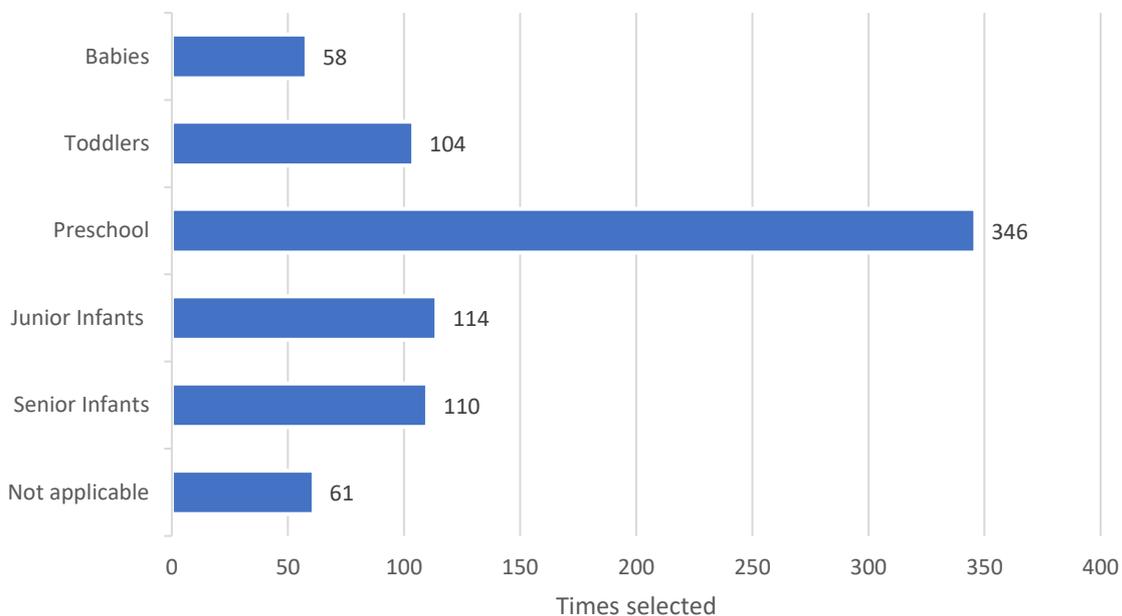
Parents/guardians were invited to indicate the age(s) of their child(ren) and had the choice to select more than one option. 41% reported that their children were aged 6+ while just over 11% reported that their children are under 1.

Figure 6 Parent Questionnaire, Question 1:

What ages are your children?

Number of responses: 153
Note: Multiple responses from some respondents.
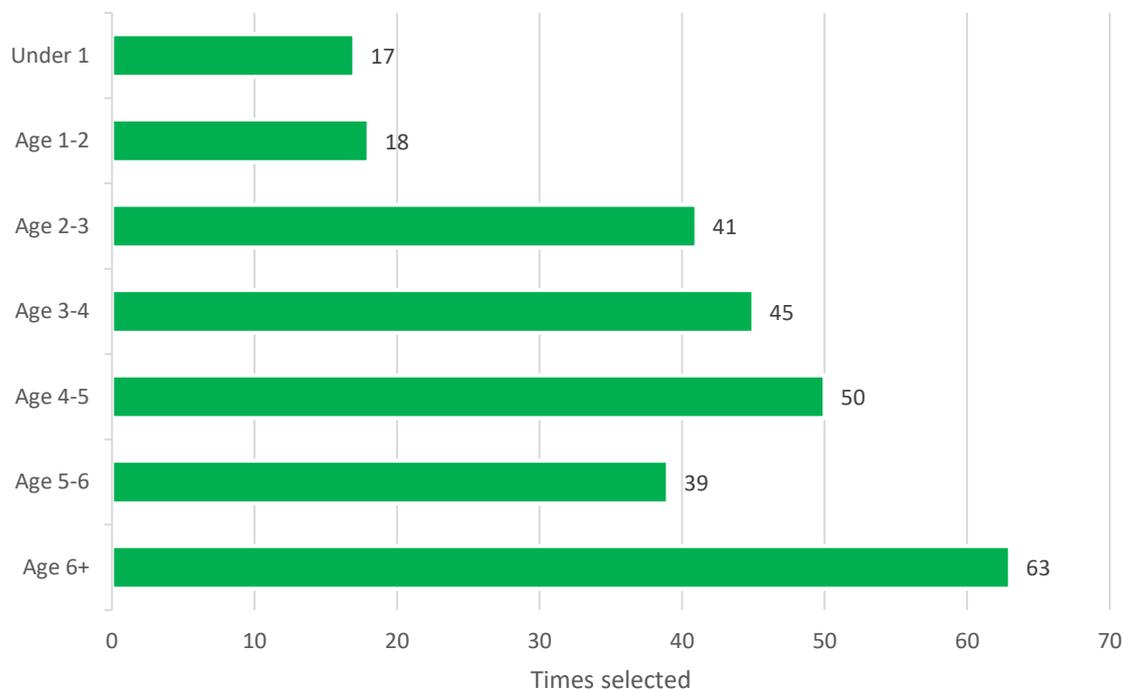
When asked if their child(ren) attended an out of home setting, 54% of parents/guardians selected 'Primary School', followed by 'Preschool' (50%) and 'Part-time daycare setting' (16%). For parents/guardians with more than one child, they had the option to select all that were relevant.

Figure 7 Parent Questionnaire, Question 2:

Please indicate if your child(ren) attend an out of home setting.

Number of responses: 153
Note: Multiple responses from some respondents.

Setting	Times selected
Full-time daycare setting	20
Part-time daycare setting	24
Preschool	77
Naíonra	15
Early Start class	1
Primary school	82
Special primary school	1
Childminding setting	17
Not applicable	3
Other	6
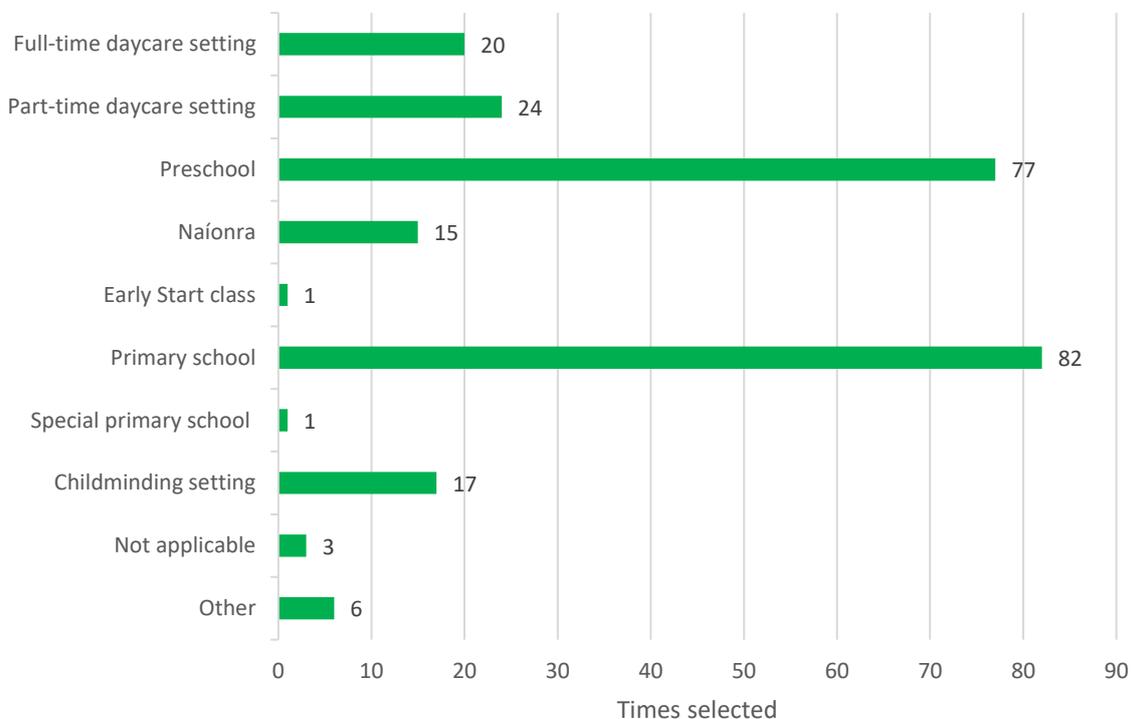
Parents/guardians were asked whether they were aware that *Aistear* is intended to support parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood (Birth - 6 years) as well as for use in early childhood settings; 68% of parents answered 'Yes' with 32% parents/guardians selecting 'No.'

Figure 8 Parent Questionnaire, Question 3:

Are you aware that *Aistear* is intended to support parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood (Birth – 6 years) as well as for use in early childhood settings?

Number of responses: 153

- No, 32%
- Yes , 68%

■ Yes ■ No
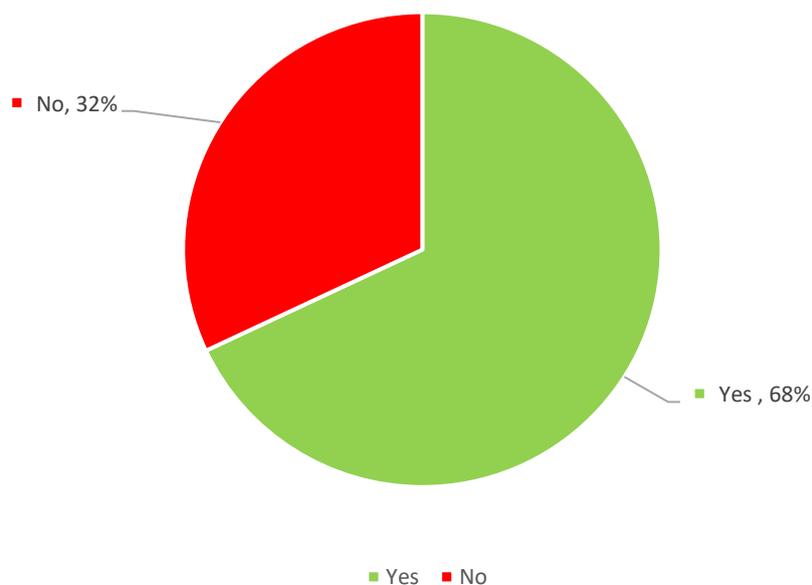
3.3.2 Principles of *Aistear*

Participants were invited to reflect on the content of *Aistear's* Principles and asked to select the extent to which they would agree/disagree with the relevance of each Principle in turn.

Professional responses were largely positive in relation to each of *Aistear's* Principles. Reponses were most favourable toward 'Relationships' and 'Play and Hands-on Experiences'; 95% of professionals strongly agreed/agreed that these Principles are relevant. This was followed closely by 'Communication and Language' and 'The Learning Environment' where 94.5% strongly agreed/agreed with their relevance. There was less agreement regarding the relevance of 'Equality and Diversity' and 'Children as Citizens'; 7% selected 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree.'

Figure 9 Professional Questionnaire, Question 4:

How relevant do you think the content of each *Aistear* 'Principle' is?

Number of responses: 523
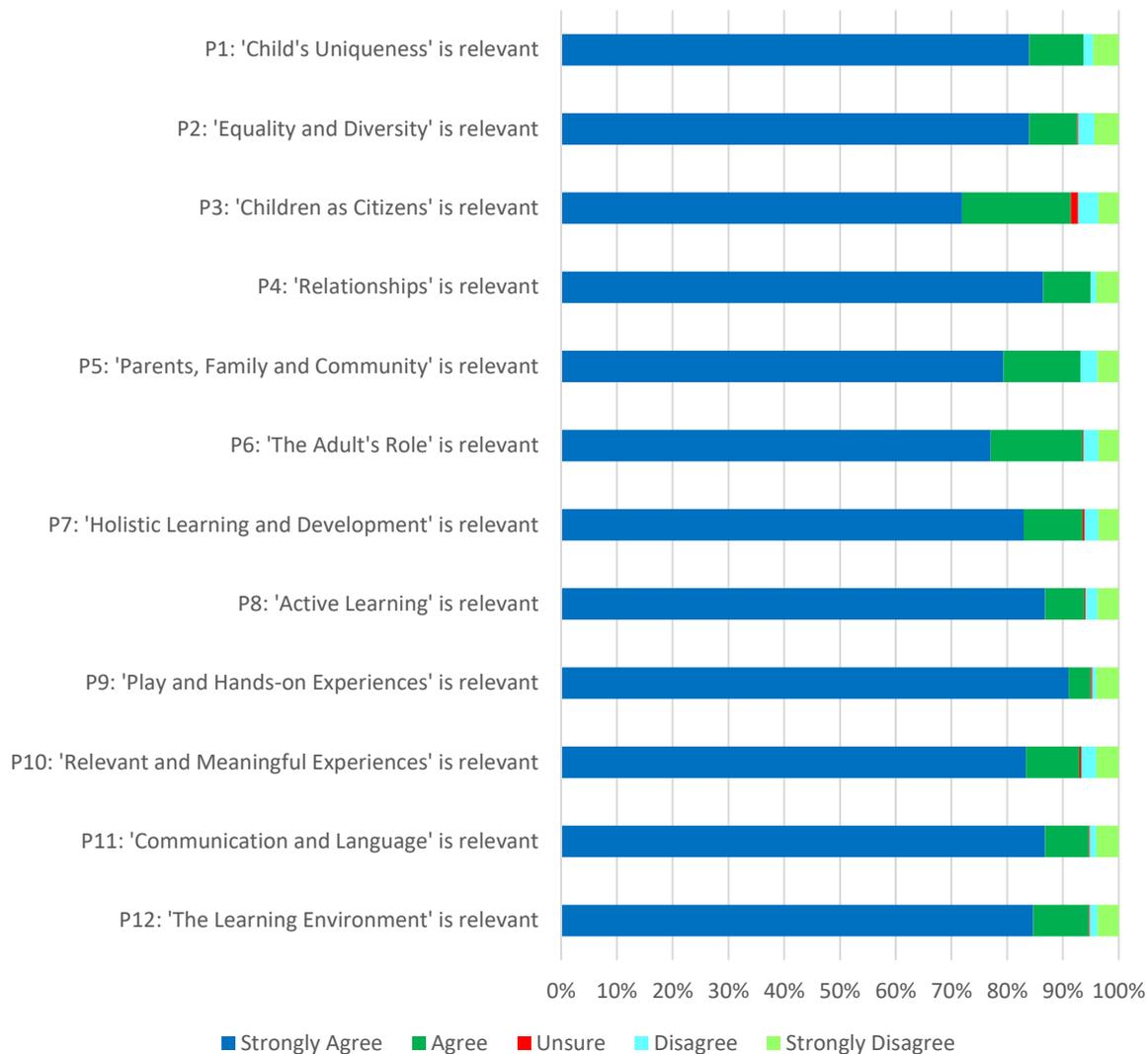
Parent/guardian responses were similarly positive; over 90% strongly agreed/agreed that the content in *Aistear's* Principles is relevant. Responses were most favourable toward 'Child's Uniqueness,' 'Parents, Family and Community' and 'The Adult's Role' where 97% of parents/guardians strongly agreed/agreed with the relevance of their content. It is notable that, similar to professionals, parents/guardians were less sure about the relevance of 'Equality and Diversity'; 4% selected 'unsure' and a further 4% strongly disagreed/disagreed. The largest number of parents/guardians selected strongly disagree/disagree for 'Children as Citizens' (6%).

Figure 10 Parent Questionnaire, Question 4:

How relevant do you think the content of each *Aistear* 'Principle' is?

Number of responses: 153
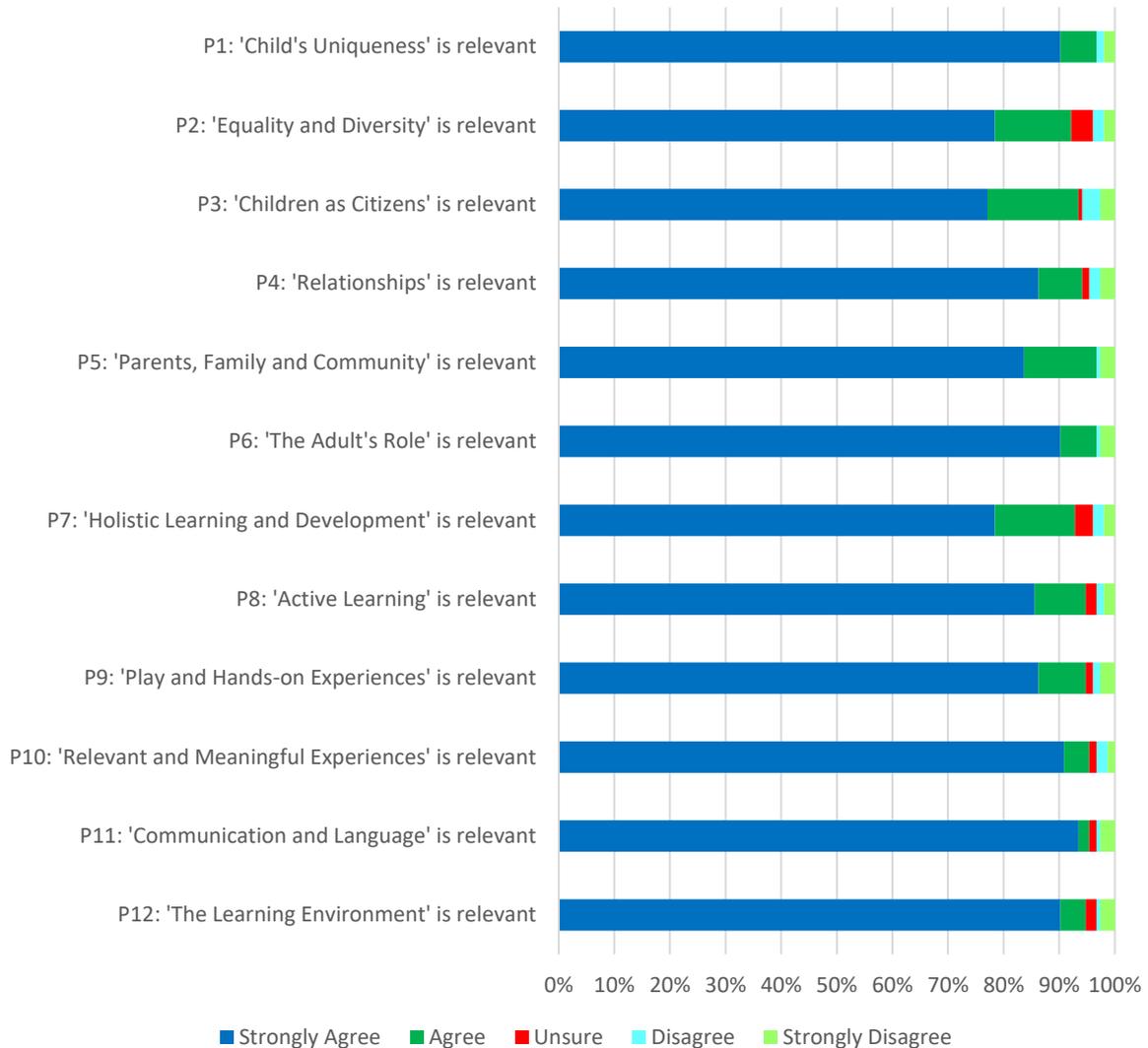
Participants were invited to consider potential additional Principles and rank suggested additions in order of importance from 1 – 6. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

The responses demonstrate that, if *Aistear's* Principles were added to, there is greatest support for a principle on 'Equity.' In the overall ranking score, this received the highest support from both professionals and parents/guardians. It is notable that, when looking at individual ranking placement, a significant number prioritised 'Equity' as their number 1 preference; 37% of professionals and 29% of parents/guardians. From the parent/guardian perspective, 'Outdoor learning' was placed in joint first in the overall ranking with 24% identifying this as their number 1 preference. There was less interest among parents/guardians in a focus on 'Professional Practice.'

For professionals, there is less interest reported for an additional principle on 'Transitions, continuity and progression.'

Figure 11 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 5:

If the Principles were to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:
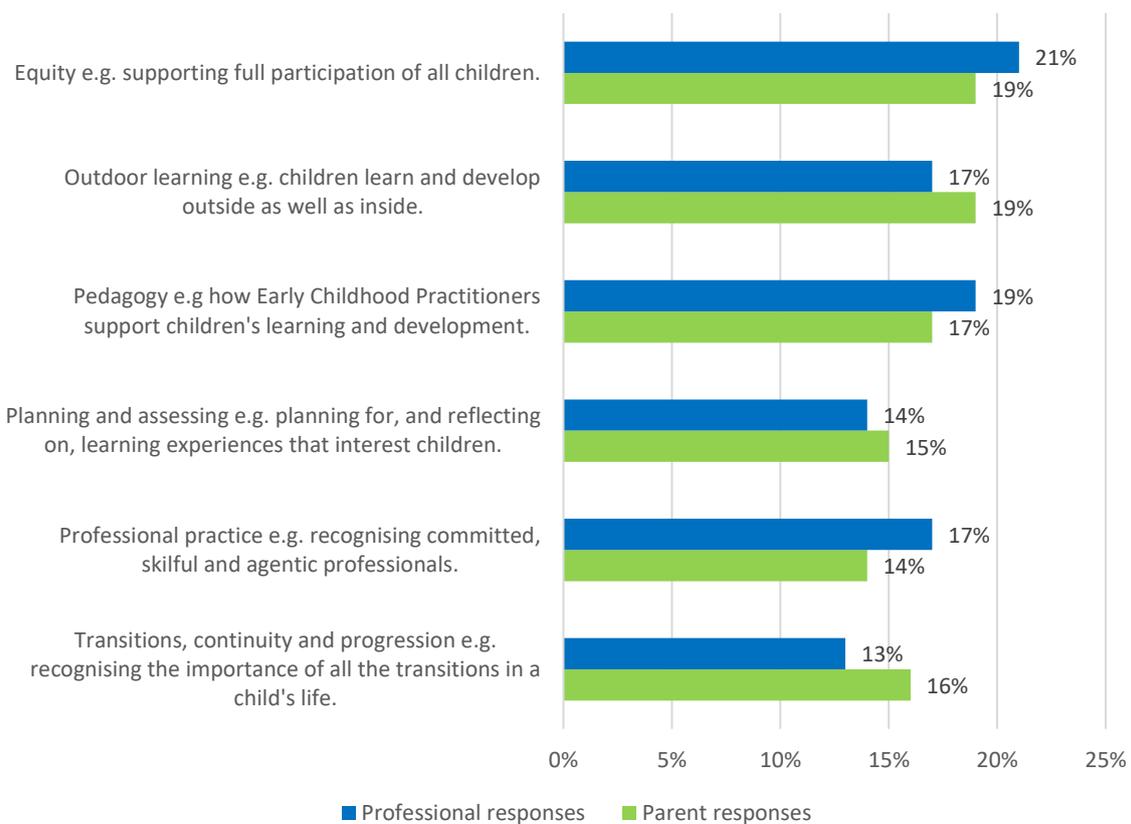
3.3.3 Themes of *Aistear*: Well-being

Participants were invited to reflect on each of *Aistear's* four Themes.

A large majority of responses were positive in relation to the content of Well-being; 91% of professionals and 95% of parents/guardians strongly agreed/agreed that the content of the Aims and Learning Goals for Well-being is relevant.

Figure 12 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 6:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of the Aims and Learning Goals for 'Well-being' is relevant?
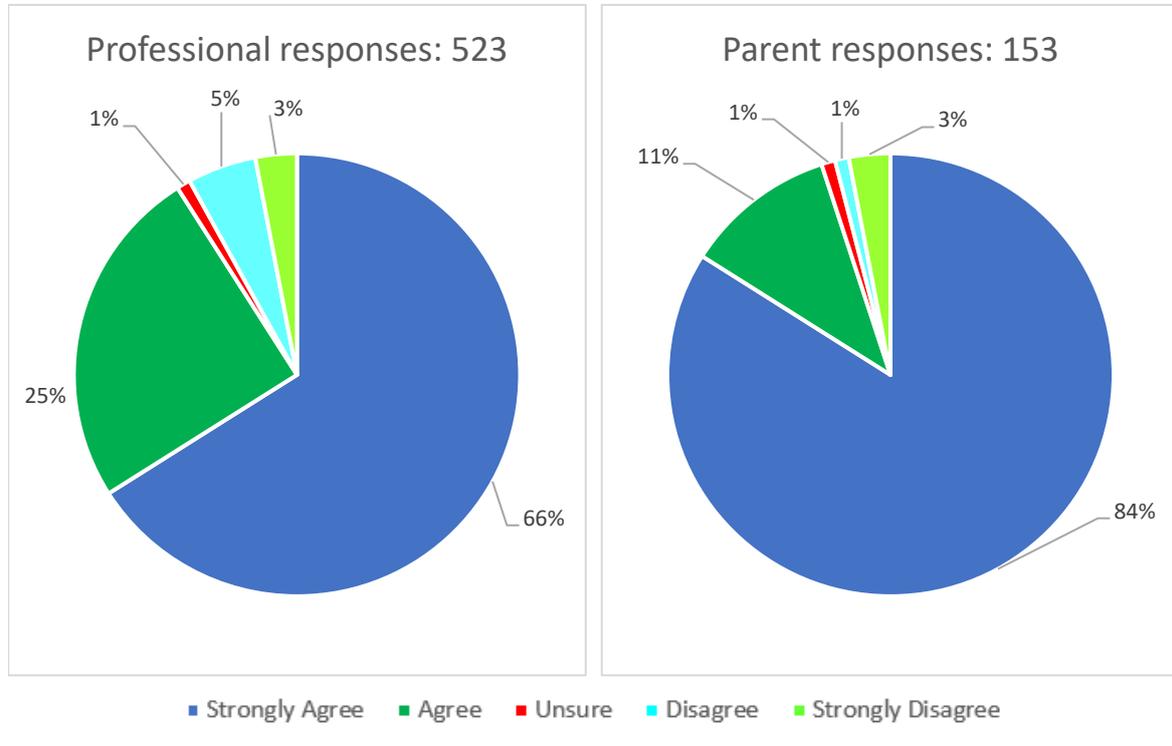
Participants were invited to consider possible additions to the theme of Well-being and asked to rank them in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

The responses demonstrate that if the theme of Well-being was to be added to, there was support among professionals for a focus on 'Including children's voices' (44% ranked this as number 1) whereas there was greatest support among parents/guardians for an additional focus on 'Infant and child mental health' (39% ranked this as number 1). There was less support among professionals and parents/guardians for a focus on 'Transitions, continuity and progression.'

Figure 13 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 7:

If the theme of 'Well-being' was to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

Category	Professional responses	Parent responses
Including children's voices e.g. children's opinion on what they want to do and learn is important.	22%	20%
Infant and child mental health e.g. children need to be supported to form close relationships, recognise and express emotions; and explore and learn about the world around them.	21%	22%
Outdoor learning e.g. children learn and develop outdoors as well as indoors	15%	15%
Relationship with the learning environment e.g. children's experience of the people, places and things around them that have on impact on their well-being.	17%	16%
Risky play e.g. play, within a safe and well-supervised space, that is exciting and challenging to children is important.	14%	14%
Transitions, continuity and progression e.g. recognising the importance of all the transitions in a child's life.	11%	12%

■ Professional responses ■ Parent responses

3.3.4 Themes of *Aistear*: Identity and Belonging

Participants were invited to consider to what extent they would agree/disagree that the content of the Aims and Learning Goals for Identity and Belonging is relevant. Both professional and parent/guardian responses were largely positive and a large majority strongly agreed/agreed; 92% and 93% respectively.

Figure 14 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 8:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of the Aims and Learning Goals for 'Identity and Belonging' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523

Parent responses: 153

Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Unsure ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree
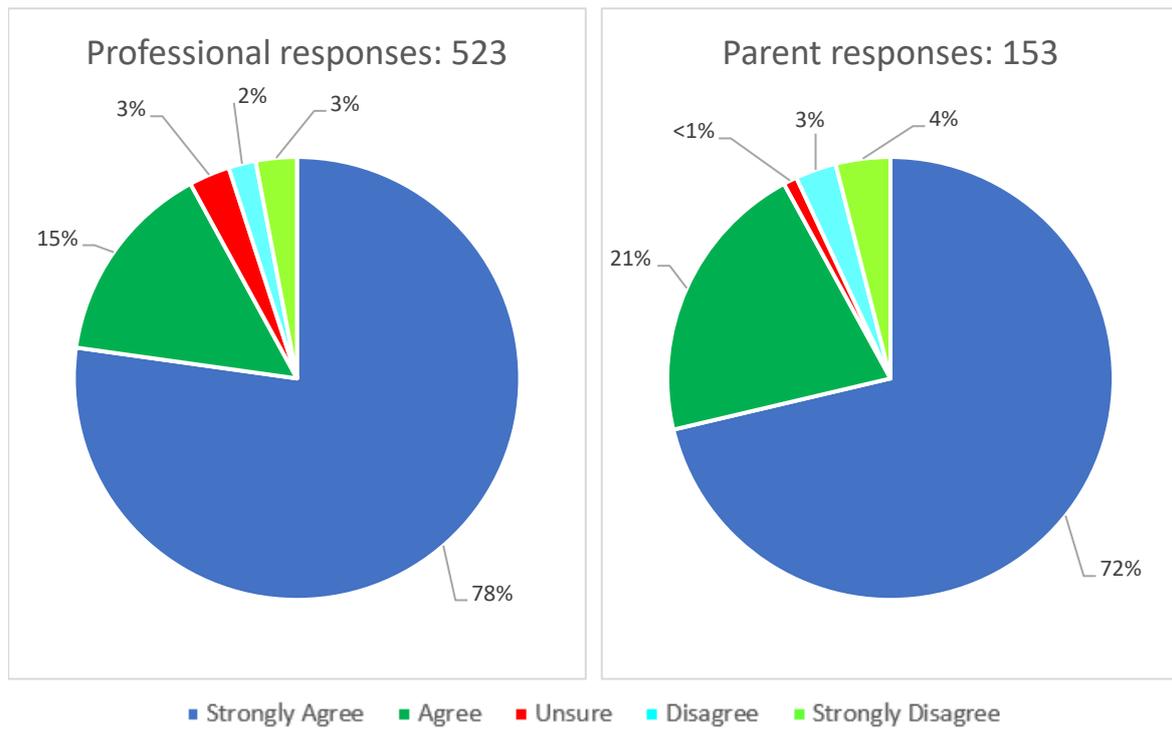
Participants were invited to consider possible additions to the theme of Identity and Belonging and asked to rank them in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

Professionals and parents/guardians were in agreement that if the theme of Identity and Belonging was to be added to, they would prioritise a focus on 'Children's rights.' It is notable that 55% of professionals and 46% of parents/guardians ranked this as number 1. Professionals placed 'Cultural awareness/Inclusive practice' and 'Partnership with parent' as their joint second priority. Parents/guardians identified 'Partnership with parents' as their second priority, followed by 'Cultural awareness/Inclusive practice.' For professionals, there was less support for an additional focus on 'Linking with the community,' whereas among parents/guardians, there was less interest in a focus on 'Language diversity.'

Figure 15 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 9:

If the theme of 'Identity and Belonging' was to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

Children's rights e.g. children have rights, such as the right to play and the right to be educated, that must be respected — Professional 23%, Parent 21%

Cultural awareness/Inclusive practice e.g. an awareness, celebration and understanding of all children's cultures and abilities — Professional 18%, Parent 18%

Language diversity e.g. different languages are acknowledged and celebrated — Professional 13%, Parent 12%

Linking with the community e.g. children learn from interacting with the community around them — Professional 12%, Parent 15%

Partnership with parents e.g. parents and practitioners share information to promote full participation of all children. — Professional 18%, Parent 19%

Social justice e.g. children learn about equity, fairness and decision-making through play. — Professional 16%, Parent 16%

■ Professional responses ■ Parent responses

3.3.5 Themes of *Aistear*: Communicating

Participants responded positively to the relevance of the content of the Aims and Learning Goals for 'Communicating'; 93% of professionals and 95% of parents/guardians strongly agreed/agreed.

Figure 16 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 10:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of the Aims and Learning Goals for 'Communicating' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523
- 75% Strongly Agree
- 18% Agree
- 1% Unsure
- 3% Disagree
- 3% Strongly Disagree

Parent responses: 153
- 87% Strongly Agree
- 8% Agree
- <2% Unsure
- 1% Disagree
- 2% Strongly Disagree

Legend: ■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Unsure ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree
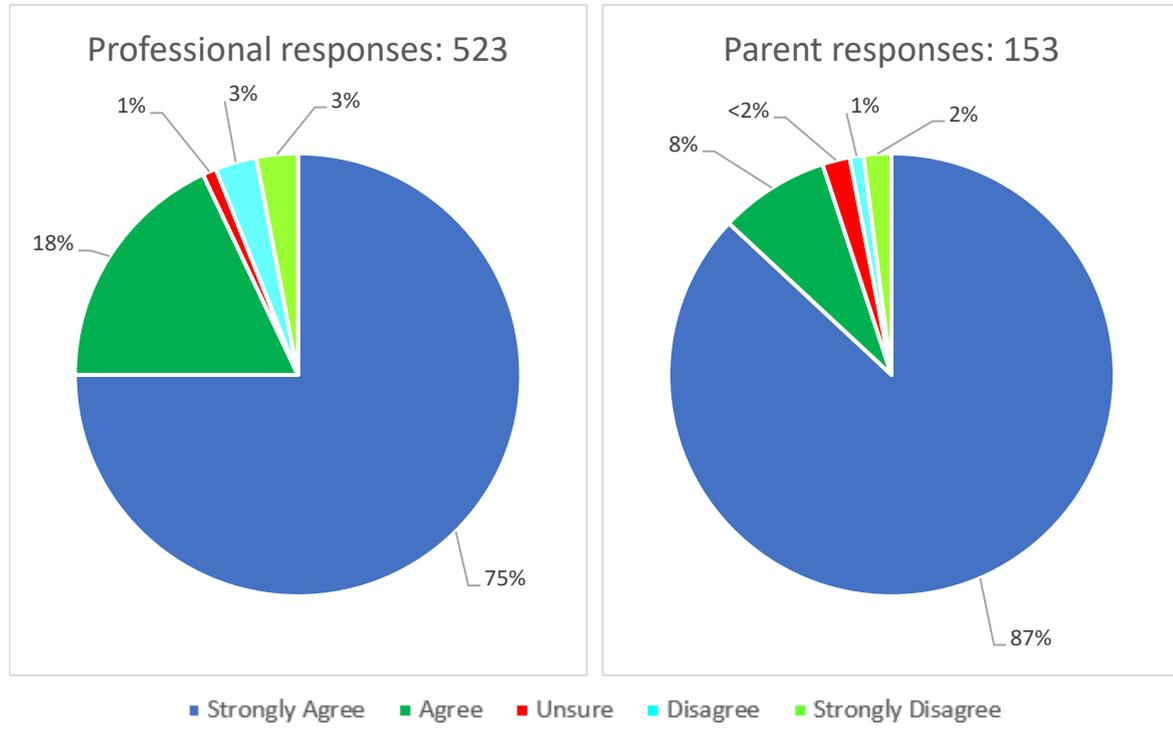
Participants were invited to consider possible additions to the theme of Communicating and asked to rank them in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

If the theme of Communicating was to be added to, there was greatest support among professionals for a focus on 'Including children's voices' with 42% identifying it as their number 1 priority. This was followed by 'Creativity' and 'Emergent language and literacy.' For parents/guardians, 'Creativity' was identified as the number 1 priority, ranked in first place by 45% of respondents. They placed 'Emergent language and literacy' and 'Including children's voices' in joint 2nd. Interestingly, both professionals and parents/guardians ranked 'Digital learning' in 6th place.

Figure 17 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 11:

If the theme of 'Communicating' was to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

	Professional responses	Parent responses
Creativity e.g. children using their imagination and thinking about how to solve problems	22%	23%
Digital learning e.g. using technology to support children's learning and development	8%	11%
Emergent language and literacy e.g. talking, playing, painting and sharing storybooks are important for emergent literacy	21%	20%
Including children's voices e.g. children's opinions on what they want to do and learn is important and should be reflected in their learning environment	23%	20%
Language diversity e.g. different languages are acknowledged and celebrated	14%	14%
Promotion of Irish in English medium settings e.g. learning simple Irish words and phrases through play	11%	12%

3.3.6 Themes of *Aistear:* Exploring and Thinking

Participants were invited to consider to what extent they would agree/disagree that the content of the Aims and Learning Goals for Exploring and Thinking is relevant. A large majority agreed; 93% of professionals and 95% of parents strongly agreed/agreed.

Figure 18 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 12:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of the Aims and Learning Goals for 'Exploring and Thinking' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523

Parent responses: 153

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Agree   ■ Unsure   ■ Disagree   ■ Strongly Disagree
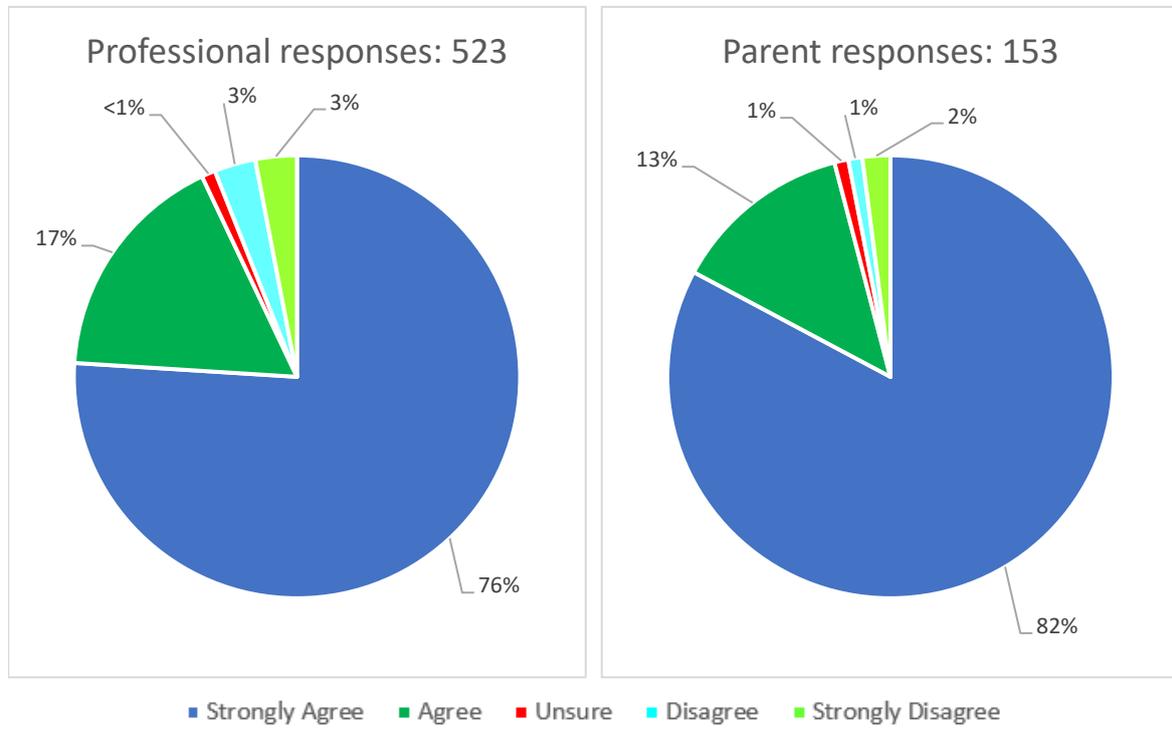
Participants were invited to consider possible additions to the theme of Exploring and Thinking, and asked to rank them in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

If the theme of Exploring and Thinking was to be added to, professionals were most in favour of an additional focus on 'Child agency' with 51% ranking this as their number 1 priority. This was followed by 'Critical thinking' and 'Risk-taking.' Parents/guardians placed 'Critical thinking' as their number 1 preference with 29% of respondents placing this as number 1. Following this, parents/guardians were most in favour of a focus on 'Child agency' with 'Risk-taking' and 'STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths)' in joint 3rd. It is interesting to note that both professionals and parents/guardians ranked 'Emergent numeracy' in 6th place.

Figure 19 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 13:

If the theme of 'Exploring and Thinking' was to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

|	Professional responses	Parent responses
Child agency e.g. children learn best when they make choices about, and are interested in, what they are doing	22%	19%
Critical thinking e.g. helping children to solve meaningful problems	19%	21%
Emergent numeracy e.g. learning experiences involving measuring, patterns or distance are important for emergent numeracy	13%	13%
Nature and the environment (Sustainability) e.g. establishing good routines around composting, recycling and water is important	14%	15%
Risk-taking e.g. encouraging children to try new experiences	16%	16%
STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) e.g. playing with blocks, sand and water	15%	16%

3.3.7 Guidelines for Good Practice

Professionals and parents/guardians were invited to give their views on *Aistear's* four sets of Guidelines for Good Practice; Partnership with Parents, Interactions, Play and Assessment, which describe how the adult can support children's learning and development across *Aistear's* Principles and Themes.

Parents are the most important people in children's lives and communication between parents and the child's early childhood educator is essential for the child's learning and development. Professionals and parents/guardians were in agreement that the content of 'Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners' is relevant; 92% of professionals and 93% of parents/guardians selected 'strongly agree' or 'agree.'

Figure 20 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 14:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of 'Building Partnerships between Parents and Practitioners' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523

1%
3%
4%
17%
75%

Parent responses: 153

3%
1%
3%
7%
86%

■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Unsure ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree
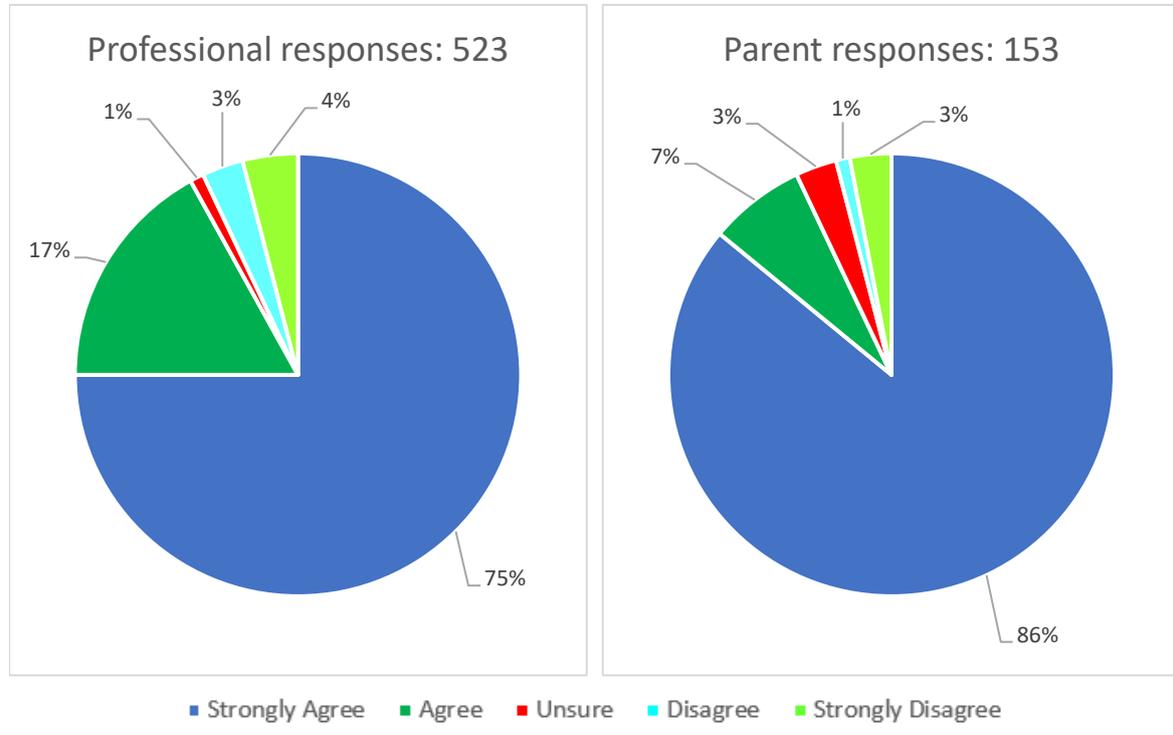
Children's relationship with adults, other children and their learning environment impacts on their learning and development. When invited to consider the content of 'Learning and Developing through Interactions, professionals and parents/guardians were largely positive; 95% of professionals and 96% of parents strongly agreed/agreed that the content is relevant.

Figure 21 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 15:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of 'Learning and Developing through Interactions' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523

<1%
<1 %
4%
14%
81%

Parent responses: 153

<1%
<1%
7%
3%
89%

■ Strongly Agree　■ Agree　■ Unsure　■ Disagree　■ Strongly Disagree
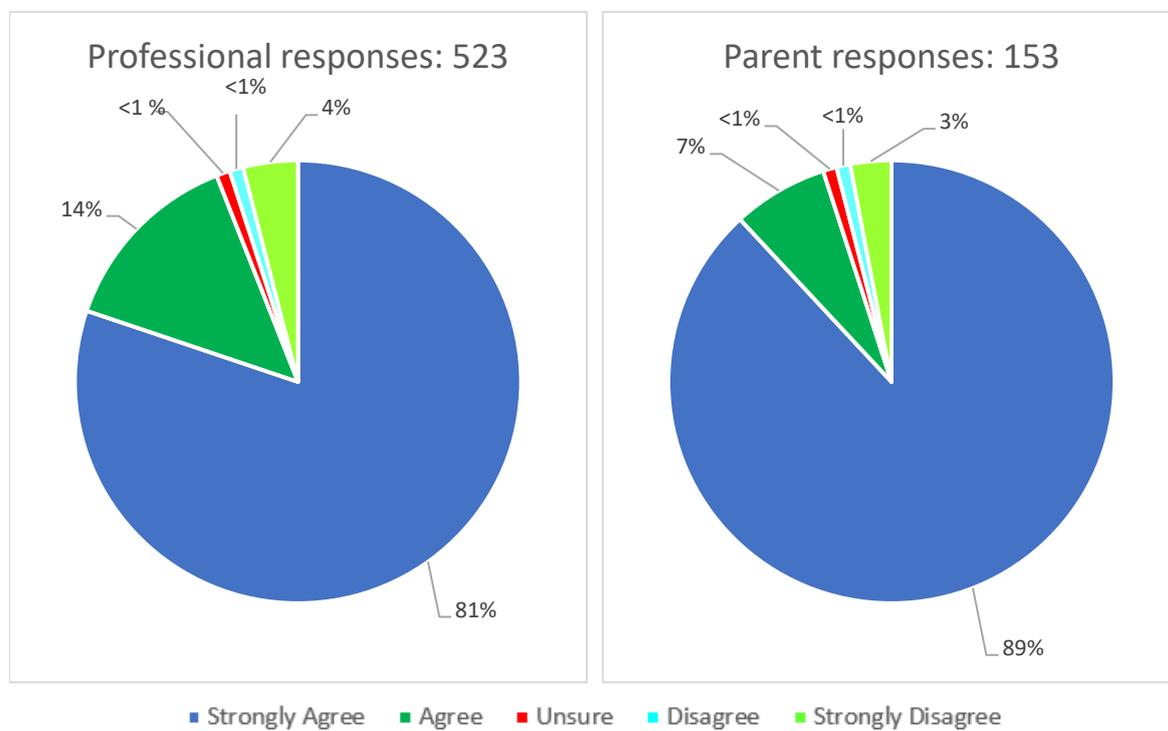
Professionals and parents/guardians were similarly positive toward 'Learning and Developing through Play' which describes how children learn by having lots of time and space to play, and making choices about what, how and with whom to play; 94% of professionals and 93% of parents/guardians strongly agreed/agreed that its content is relevant.

Figure 22 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 16:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of 'Learning and Developing through Play' is relevant?

Professional responses: 523

1%
1%
4%
7%
87%

Parent responses: 153

1%
3%
3%
13%
80%

■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Unsure ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree
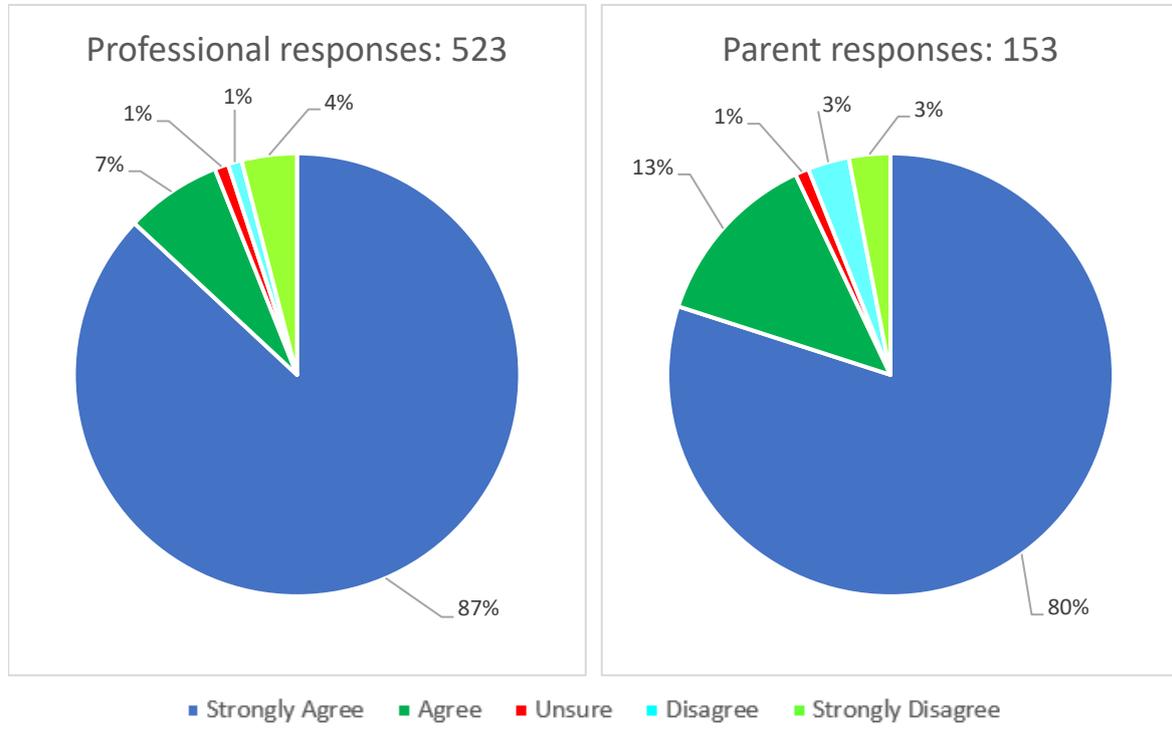
'Learning and Developing through Assessment' describes how practitioners observe children playing, communicating and exploring and then plan to support the next steps in learning and development. Participants were more equivocal regarding the content of 'Learning and Developing through Assessment.' While 91% of parents/guardians strongly agreed/agreed that the content is relevant, 18% of professionals strongly disagreed/disagreed that the content is relevant and 2% selected 'unsure.'

Figure 23 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 17:

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: The content of 'Learning and Developing through Assessment' is relevant?
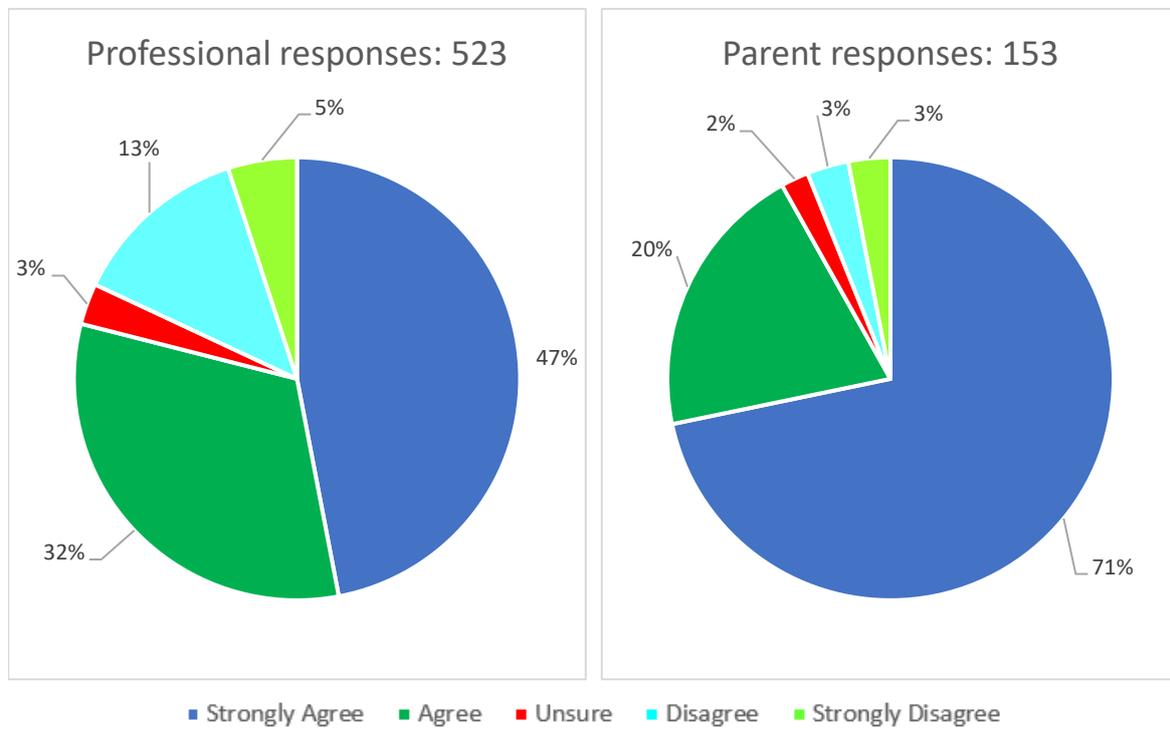

Participants were invited to consider possible additions to the 'Guidelines for Good Practice' and asked to rank them in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

It is interesting to note that if the 'Guidelines for Good Practice' were to be added to, there was greatest support among professionals and parents/guardians for additional Guidelines on 'Emergent curriculum' and 'Inquiry-based learning'; both ranked as the top two priorities for professionals and parents/guardians in the overall ranking score. Professionals were most in favour of an additional Guideline on 'Emergent curriculum,' with 45% of professionals selecting this as their top priority. Parents/guardians would prioritise 'Inquiry-based learning' with 27% of parents/guardians ranking this as number 1. There was less interest in an additional Guideline on 'Planning and Assessment'; 36% of professionals and 31% of parents/guardians ranked 'Planning and Assessment' in 6th place.

Figure 24 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 18:

If the 'Guidelines for Good Practice' were to be added to, please prioritise the following additions by ranking from 1-6 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

Category	Professional responses	Parent responses
Emergent curriculum e.g. planning learning experiences around what children are interested in	22%	19%
Inquiry-based learning e.g. asking children open-ended questions and encouraging them to investigate possible answers	19%	20%
Intentional teaching e.g. purposefully responding to, and building on, children's interests to extend their learning	16%	17%
Pedagogy e.g. how children's early childhood practitioner supports learning and development	16%	15%
Planning and Assessing e.g. planning for, and reflecting on, learning experiences that interest children	12%	12%
Supporting progression of children's learning e.g. planning learning experiences and supporting children to challenge themselves	15%	17%

■ Professional responses ■ Parent responses

Participants were invited to consider suggested additional supports for engagement with *Aistear's* Principles and Themes and asked to indicate which supports would be most useful, ranking 1-5 in order of importance. Their responses were used to generate the chart below demonstrating professional and parent/guardian preferences as overall percentage rankings.

In the overall ranking, both professionals and parents/guardians selected 'Examples of children learning' as the most useful support and ranked 'PDF guidelines similar to those provided at present' as the least useful. In individual rankings, 36% of professionals ranked 'Examples of children learning' as the most useful support and 37% placed 'PDF guidelines similar to those proved at present' in 5th place. 41% of parents/guardians selected 'Examples of children learning' as the most useful support, while 43% ranked 'PDF guidelines similar to those provided at present' in 5th place.

Figure 25 Professional Questionnaire and Parent Questionnaire responses to Question 19:

If supports for engagement with/supports for parents on *Aistear*'s Principles and Themes were to be added to, please indicate which supports would be most useful by ranking 1-5 in order of importance, where 1 is the most important:

Number of professional responses: 523
Number of parent responses: 153

Overall percentage ranking:

Support	Professional responses	Parent responses
Examples of children learning e.g. photos and videos	24%	24%
Expert input on topics related to children's learning and development e.g. interviews and podcasts	17%	18%
PDF guidelines similar to those provided at present e.g. detailed information that can be downloaded	15%	14%
Sample documentation e.g. learning journals explaining what and how children are learning	23%	21%
Tip-sheets/information booklets e.g. short documents discussion topics like Risky play, infant mental health, etc.	21%	23%

■ Professional responses   ■ Parent responses

Parents/guardians were given the option to add a final comment and 39 parents/guardians responded. *Aistear* was praised as having a positive influence on children's early childhood experience, for example one participant commented that they are, 'really seeing the positive influence of *Aistear* in our children's learning and happiness'. *Aistear's* emphasis on playful approaches was particularly welcomed, with one comment describing playful learning as, 'powerful'. Some parents/guardians commented on the significance of a clear sense of progression into primary school. There was some concern around consistency of approach/understanding of *Aistear*, in particular in primary schools. There was some indication that parents/guardians wish for a greater emphasis on playful approaches in primary schools with some expressing a wish for continued playful approaches beyond infant classes. Some parents/guardians highlighted the importance of outdoor learning opportunities and expressed a wish for a greater emphasis on outdoor play. One participant commented that, 'Outdoor play is so important both for a child's development and mental health'. A number of responses highlighted the importance of communication with parents, with some believing that communication with parents needs to be stronger to, 'enable them as the primary educators of their children'. Others expressed the view that extended families should be acknowledged. Some respondents expressed

a wish for a more inclusive approach that supports the needs and learning of all children, including children with special educational needs, and acknowledging and celebrating language and cultural diversity.

Section 4: Executive Summary of consultation with babies, toddlers and young children

4.1   Introduction

The aim of this research was to design and implement an appropriate consultation with babies, toddlers and young children on what is working well with *Aistear* as they experience it and how it might be updated. NCCA are world-leaders in this regard, because while other jurisdictions may consult with children in curriculum change, wide-scale consultation with the youngest children from birth is to our knowledge extremely rare. This executive summary gives a brief overview of the methodology, ethical considerations, sample, and key findings of this consultation.

4.2   Methodology

There is a growing critique of consultation processes as tokenistic (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012), particularly when engaging with the youngest children (Wall et al., 2019). Partnership with practising educators who know children well, and with whom children are comfortable, supports research where babies, toddlers and young children feel at ease to express their views. Through familiarity with the children, educators can identify the (often subtle and nonverbal) ways they communicate. Therefore, this project employed a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013; O'Toole, 2020) with early childhood educators as 'co-researchers'. The role of the co-researcher educators was conceptualised as interpreters of the 'hundred languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1996); it was important that they were viewed by researchers and viewed themselves as *interpreters of children's voices* rather than direct informants to ensure that the focus was always on children's perspectives, rather than adults' experiences.

The consultation used a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2008) with a suite of methodological instruments drawing on the approaches to pedagogical documentation already used by the educators. These included:
- Observations and learning stories
- Photography (by adults and children)
- Video
- Children's drawings
- Other arts-based methods (e. g. puppets, role play)
- Child conferencing

4.3   Ethical Considerations

Our ethical perspective viewed babies, toddlers and young children as agentic and capable of self-expression, while acknowledging power imbalances for them. The consultation was underpinned by Lundy's (2007) model of child participation which conceptualises the child's right to participation using the concepts of 'space', 'voice', 'audience' and 'influence'.

Figure 1: Lundy's Model of Child Participation (2007)

'Space' means that children are provided with inclusive opportunities to express their views. Leveraging the pre-existing relationships with educators rather than 'parachuting' in researchers who would be strangers to the children, provided safety and space for expression. 'Voice' means that children are facilitated to express their views, and this was achieved through use of creative methodological tools, and the fact that children's early childhood educators who know children well can pick up on small cues that would most likely be missed by external researchers. 'Audience' means that children's views are listened to, and 'influence' means that they are acted upon. These are provided by NCCA who are giving audience to the views of babies, toddlers and young children through engaging with the reporting of the consultation and are acting upon them by ensuring that these views influence the updating of *Aistear.*

We sought a relational approach to ethics (Arnott et al., 2020) whereby consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis through attunement, respect and responsiveness towards the unique, and often subtle, modes of communication of babies, toddlers and young children (Skånfors, 2009) to complement formal ethical procedures. Extensive care was taken with the issue of 'adult gaze', which refers to the necessity for raw data from the settings to be interpreted through an adult lens. The role of reflexivity was strongly centred to identify and acknowledge the lens we use when interpreting children's voices, and a detailed theoretically-based underpinning for the data analysis strategy is provided in the full report. Importantly, the process of analysing the data to identify what children were telling us about their experiences of *Aistear* (the consultation) has been kept separate from the process of engaging with the granular detail of Aims, Learning goals, etc to tease out what changes to *Aistear* may be appropriate based on what they told us (curriculum framework development). This ensured that, to as great an extent as possible, the voices of babies, toddlers and young children were not obscured by adult agendas.

4.4   Sample

While research employing quantitative methodologies like surveys tends to have a wide sample with high numbers of participants, such methodologies would have been highly inappropriate to access the voices of babies, toddlers and young children. Instead, detailed, rich, qualitative data typically relies on much smaller samples, aiming for depth rather than breadth, and using multiple data sources for triangulation to ensure rigour (Mukherhi and Albon, 2018).

This consultation adopted a case study approach, with a purposive sample chosen on the following criteria:

- Settings in which we knew, through our networks, that there was an educator with the expertise to take on the highly skilled role of 'interpreter of the hundred languages of children'. The co-researcher educators who led the consultation in their settings for the most part held Level 8 qualifications or higher and had experience with educational research, but the qualifications of the supporting educators in their settings ranged from Level 5 to Level 8.
- Settings to cover all categories relevant to *Aistear* (home, naíonraí, pre-school/sessional, full day-care, Early Start, infant class in primary school, childminder, private settings, community settings);
- Settings with a diverse range of babies, toddlers and children, regarding language (including Gaeilge), culture, age, disability/neurodiversity, gender, family structure, social and economic (dis)advantage;
- Geography: rural, towns and cities;
- Settings with positive Tusla reports[1]

Across the 11 settings which constituted the final sample, 136 children took part, ranging from 9 months to 6 years. There were less participants in the birth to three-years cohort (28) than in the three-years to six-years cohort (108) due to features of the early childhood sector outlined in detail in the main report. Nevertheless, the sample of 28 babies and toddlers was deemed sufficient within a detailed qualitative research design focused on depth rather than breadth. The experiences of babies and toddlers are presented separately from those of young children in the Findings section of the full report to ensure that their voices are not obscured by the larger sample size of young children.

There were a diverse group of children involved, 72 boys and 64 girls, with 18 different languages spoken in their homes, a wide range of family structures, cultures and religious backgrounds represented, 23 children with additional needs, at least 10 children living in consistent poverty and 3 children experiencing homelessness. It should be noted that this sample unfortunately did not include any Traveller or Roma children or any children with same-sex parents. These will be important considerations for Phase 2 of the research.

There were 11 co-researcher educators who were a direct part of the research team, but 23 additional educators were involved in data collection (32 educators in all). It is important to note that with their high level of qualifications and research experience, the co-researcher educators are not representative of the typical early childhood educator in Ireland, but representativeness was not necessary or even desirable for the co-researcher educators because their role was not as direct informants. Rather than being typical of educators in the sector, it was necessary for this group to be highly skilled in accessing the voices of children, and to be relatively familiar with research processes. The supporting educators in their settings had qualifications ranging from Level 5 to Level 8.

4.5 Key Findings

In general, findings were similar *conceptually* for children from birth to three and children from three to six but could look quite different *when enacted in practice*. Multiple rich examples from

the data are shown in the full report to illustrate this, structured around the Principles and Themes of *Aistear*, but a brief overview is provided here.

In reviewing what babies, toddlers and young children told us about their experiences of *Aistear*, perhaps most notable is its power to provide excellent opportunities for learning and development in the hands of informed, highly-educated, expert early childhood educators who form strong relationships with children and families, communicate and interpret the 'hundred languages' of children, and provide opportunities for learning and development in fully resourced indoor and outdoor environments.

Relationships underpin how educators see and hear children, how they respond to their needs and strengths in attuned ways, and how affordances are translated through interactions into learning and development. These babies, toddlers and young children told us that their relationships are of the utmost importance to them. Some areas to consider for updating *Aistear* are to focus more on children's friendships, to help educators understand what a slow relational nurturing pedagogy looks like and to empower them to implement it.

Personal and family identities are very clearly represented in the data, and educators view babies, toddlers and young children as confident and competent learners. *Aistear* frames their practice to support children to see themselves that way too. However, one area of potential focus for updating *Aistear* could be to make more explicit the relevance of culture for practice, to explain what is meant by multiple identities (gender, disability/neurodiversity, language, etc) and to show what authentic, meaningful culturally responsive pedagogy could look like in practice. Visibility of multiple dimensions of diversity in the books, toys and resources used, and visibility of children in their communities could be foregrounded in an updated *Aistear*.

Further areas for consideration are to explore babies', toddlers' and young children's rights *and* responsibilities as democratic citizens and to continue and extend the focus on modes of communication beyond language, with support for educators to document this. Other findings recommend foregrounding children's freedom of movement and choice, continuing the emphasis on play, and reconsidering the role of creativity and ICT in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Section 5: Reflecting on the Consultation with babies, toddlers and young children: Informing the proposals for updating *Aistear*

The report on the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children addresses the Space and Voice aspects of the Lundy model (2007) as it relates to the development of proposals for updating *Aistear*, and this document addresses the Audience and Influence aspects. Taken together, the intention is to ensure that babies', toddlers' and young children's contributions effectively influence the proposals currently taking shape. The following key areas have been identified and are outlined in this document:

- Citizenship and Responsibility
- Relationships
- Multiple identities, visibility and inclusion
- Engagement with families and visibility in communities
- Role of the Adult
- Creativity

What follows is not intended as a comprehensive treatment of each issue, but rather an indication of the considerations identified through this process for developing proposals for updating *Aistear*.

5.1 Reflective process

A concern emerged around the potential of the 'adult gaze' to overwhelm the children's voice in the process of identifying the implications of the consultation with babies, toddlers and young children for proposals to update *Aistear*. To address this concern, the research team and the NCCA team put in place a process to reflect sensitively on the draft report, at all times conscious of and continuously reviewing the discussion for evidence of moving too far into adult over-interpretation.

To begin, the teams worked through the draft report and highlighted the key findings. The next step was to identify the categories or areas of concern that run throughout the key points in the report. This was an iterative process, with these areas being continuously reviewed and amended as the team continued to work through the draft report. The final configuration is presented in the next section.

Having these cross-cutting areas is significant in terms of influence as the wider consultation has identified the need for greater connectivity between *Aistear's* Principles and Themes. Having the key ideas grouped into areas allows for the babies', toddlers' and young children's views to exercise influence across the Principles and the Themes in a consistent way.

The research team and the NCCA team held three meetings (two in person and one online), with analysis and drafting continuing between meetings. As the consultation moves into Phase 2, the

intention is to continue this engagement as we navigate this innovative and groundbreaking project.

5.2   Key areas

5.2.1 Citizenship and Responsibilities

Aistear is founded on the respectful image of the child as a 'competent and confident learner', In addition to this child-led and rights-based approach to citizenship, the report draws attention to the responsibilities of our youngest citizens, both in the setting and as members of their community. Empowering and valuing babies, toddlers and young children is evident in the data through the provision of challenging learning experiences and embedding a foundation of social justice and responsibility in their daily routines through, for example, real jobs in the setting. There is a need to make explicit the competencies of babies, toddlers and young children in this regard with specific goals for their exploring, thinking and engagement with the environment in relation to, for example, sustainability and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths).

5.2.2 Relationships

'Children's connections with others' have also been foundational within the *Aistear* framework from its inception, with relationships and interactions embedded throughout the Principles and Themes as central to learning and development. Through the interpretation of the Reggio-inspired '100 languages of children' (Malaguzzi 1994), the report reinforces the importance of relational pedagogy in developing trust and finding security and comfort in others. Building such relationships requires time, commitment and space to notice. Consideration should be given, in proposals for updating the framework, to emphasising a slow, nurturing pedagogical approach in building relationships with babies, toddlers and young children as they navigate their journey in the early years. In creating this trusting environment between the educator and the child, a safe place is created from which they can wander and explore friendships with others. The report illustrates a variety of examples of such early friendships from the youngest participants where they respond joyfully to social interactions with other babies and toddlers, actively seeking out and responding to their peers. An increased emphasis on relational pedagogy in knowing the value of slowing down, being present and responsive to the voice of the child, creates space to see the uniqueness of each child, respecting their individuality, and creating meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences.

5.2.3 Multiple Identities, Visibility and Inclusion

Key messages from the report draw attention to issues of equity and social justice in ensuring those voices that may be more vulnerable to exclusion, are listened to and responded to in the early years. The Principles and Themes of *Aistear* describe how babies, toddlers and young children should be valued, respected, empowered, cared for and included, yet there may be an undertone of ableism in parts by a lack of emphasis on multiple modes of communication and participation.

 The report draws attention to this concept of inclusion by virtue of the absence of specific reference to children from different cultures, abilities and backgrounds in the data. This may arise from equity in provision in those settings in which the data was collected, and Phase 2 will provide an opportunity to explore this further. The theme of Identity and Belonging emphasises this importance of naming and valuing diversity in family structures, cultures and backgrounds.

Consideration might be given to how family culture; 'funds of knowledge' from home; identity; language; neurodiversity and (dis) ability are incorporated and made visible in the early years' environment and curriculum in a more explicit and meaningful way so children can see themselves reflected in their space. There is scope for consideration of how the curriculum framework might provide exemplars to ensure equity of experience for all children.

From a rights-based perspective, *Aistear*'s Wellbeing theme has Learning Goals that reference confidence, self-reliance and resilience, but this could be interpreted as placing too much weight on a child developing such dispositions as an individual. Proposals for updating *Aistear* could address this by emphasising that children develop such dispositions through the secure relationships that *Aistear* emphasises, and the importance of a slow, nurturing approach to manage uncertainties, anxieties and traumas.

5.2.4 Engagement with Families and Communities

Partnership with parents has been a central feature of *Aistear* since its inception, embedded in the Principles and Guidelines of the framework. Findings from the data allude to a need for a more meaningful engagement with families and communities as aspired to in these principles relating to connections with others. The theme of *Identity and Belonging* emphasises the importance of valuing diversity in family structures, cultures and backgrounds. The report draws attention to a need for further visibility of the diversity of identities within the setting through visual displays, resources and affordances; for example, proposals for updating *Aistear* could promote valuing those we see within the local and wider community, even if such diversity is not present or visible in the setting itself. Acknowledging potential for Exploring and Thinking in this interactional space, from local history and folklore; native flowers and trees; animals and birds; as well as getting to know neighbours and friends in order to enhance learning experiences is a consideration in developing proposals.

5.2.5 The Role of the Adult

The report consistently emphasises the centrality of the role of the adult in supporting children's learning and development. Particular emphasis on the intentionality of caring and nurturing affordances for babies, toddlers and young children in proposals for updating *Aistear* may provide scope for recognition of the importance of these relationships in guiding and empowering babies, toddlers and young children. This is of particular significance in the first three years where we know profound brain development occurs.   The report illustrates the importance of purposeful documentation that can guide and support children's learning, transitions and development as well as capturing important moments in their lives. The findings reaffirm the purpose of planning and assessing children's learning and development in response to their interests, likes and needs, again underpinned by a slow relational pedagogy in taking time to be present, to notice, to hear their voices and appreciate their communicative intent. As well as emphasising relational practice and documentation, much of the role of the adult relates to the creation of affordances and environments for optimal learning and development. The flexibility of the framework which encourages creativity of interpretation from the different lenses of those who use *Aistear*, is a real strength that needs to be maintained in the updated version.

5.2.6 Creativity

Relational pedagogy is woven through the key findings in the report, and this concept emphasises the importance of time and space to enable meaningful communication, exploration and play. In developing proposals for updating *Aistear*, while maintaining the core Principles around active and hands-on learning experiences within inclusive learning environments, the report illustrates how the changing context of children's lives, with particular reference to outdoor play, digital technologies and artistic expression, might be evidenced further in the updating process so that children's creativity and competencies are supported and optimised. Such considerations have the potential to enhance *Aistear*'s current emphasis on active and hands-on learning experiences within inclusive learning environments, which will be maintained.

While the preferences of the babies, toddlers and young children are essential considerations, their enjoyment of art, drama, music, and outdoor adventures reflect the importance of well-resourced and aesthetic spaces, both indoors and outdoors, and the rights of the child in making choices about their play. The centrality of self-directed learning and choice within the daily routines is reinforced in the report as key features of children's learning and development. Proposals for updating *Aistear* might consider how exemplars of provocations and activities might inform and inspire educators to respond to the voices of children in seeing how their interests can guide learning across all four of the Themes.

Section 6: Conclusion

This report documents Phase 1 of the consultation on updating *Aistear* which afforded a range of opportunities for individuals and organisations to have their say on the future of the framework. There was widespread engagement from stakeholders across the various data collection processes, as indicated in this report. Given the purpose of the updating process is to ensure that *Aistear* continues to support quality early childhood education in Ireland in the years ahead, Phase 1 set out to understand what people think is working well with *Aistear* and what needs to be updated. As with all early childhood consultations conducted by NCCA, it was pivotal to hear and to learn directly from babies, toddlers and young children about the kind of learning experiences that they value in their lives. Hence this strand of the consultation is central to the updating process. The range of voices, offering a variety of perspectives, evidenced through the consultation are valued. The result is a rich and textured collection of findings which along with the Literature Review to Support the Updating of *Aistear*: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, forthcoming), lays the very important groundwork for the next steps in the updating process.

Underpinning all findings and relevant to all aspects of the framework is the feedback that emerged on the image of the child. Across the consultation formats, the central image of children as 'competent and confident learners' was identified as a key strength in *Aistear*. There was real consensus that this image at the heart of the framework should be maintained. However, it was also recognised that more could be done to strengthen children's empowerment through the updating of the Principles and the Themes. Strengthening this image of children should also embrace the multiple forms of diversity and inclusion using a rights-based approach to childhood and early education. It was felt that the concepts of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism should be embedded across *Aistear* in response to modern societal beliefs and attitudes. These findings will be a key driver of the proposals that will be the subject of consultation in Phase 2.

6.1 Summary findings

6.1.1 Principles

The findings indicate that *Aistear's* Principles remain purposeful and responsive in underpinning the framework but would benefit from being strengthened and highlighted more strongly. The role and influence of the Principles was also questioned due to a strong sense that the Themes sometimes overshadow them. The findings suggest that the updating process is an opportunity to enhance the connections between the Principles and the Themes while affording the Principles greater visibility and prominence. The image of the adult in the Principles in Group 2 concerning children's connections with others came in for considerable focus. The evolving role and identity of the professional workforce in early childhood education needs to be reflected in *Aistear*.

A significant issue for consideration in updating the framework is the imperative to reflect more extensively issues of inclusion and diversity in all their dimensions. Inclusion and diversity were referenced in relation to a range of contexts, including language and family diversity and were identified as being relevant across the entirety of the framework and not alone in the Principles.

Aistear's existing focus on the socio-cultural contexts of parents/guardians, families and wider communities also within the Principles in Group 2 was identified as being very welcome and important. The findings also demonstrate a need to strengthen the emphasis on engagement with parents/guardians and children's families, and to support early years educators in promoting parental and family involvement in and understanding of their children's learning experiences, especially through play. In addition, community involvement in children's early education and promoting awareness of such involvement was referenced. As part of the feedback on diversity as noted earlier, cognisance also needs to be taken of changing family structures in Irish society and culture and the need to positively acknowledge and welcome this change. There is a need and an opportunity to reinforce the concept that learning occurs in the context of responsive, caring relationships and to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of the relationship with parents/ guardians, families and communities.

6.1.2 Themes

The findings show broad agreement that the relevance of the content in the four Themes of *Aistear* have stood the test of time and have made a positive impact on young children's learning and development. The concept of child agency as expressed through the Aims and Learning Goals came in for attention. The findings show a need for a greater focus on a strengths-based approach to child agency within and across the Aims and Learning Goals. A common thread across feedback on all Themes is support for enhanced visibility for child agency, specifically as such agency is demonstrated by opportunities for children to have a voice in their unfolding daily experiences. In addition and with regard to the specific Themes, the findings suggest:

- **Well-being**: a need to support children's respect for themselves and their environment, being aware of and for the environment, and active citizenship.

- **Identity and Belonging**: a need to foster greater diversity, equality and anti-bias along with children's rights.

- **Communicating**: greater awareness of and opportunity for creativity and emergent language and literacy.

- **Exploring and Thinking**: greater emphasis on critical thinking and learning in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM).

An overarching comment on the Themes focused on the number of Learning Goals which was cited as creating difficulties for educators and a reduction in the number and the level of detail therein was suggested.

6.1.3 Support materials

In general, the Guidelines for Good Practice came in for positive comment and are viewed as a useful resource in working with the Principles and the Themes. In considering the need for future resources, it is clear from the findings across the early childhood sector that practical resources for educators in working with *Aistear* to create meaningful early educational experiences are essential. Many examples of resources were provided across the data strands and these include references to important materials such as guidance around sharing information on children's learning with parents/guardians; working with documentation; supporting assessment and

children's participation in assessment. Other suggestions around practical resources to use with *Aistear* include resources on working with an emergent curriculum in practice and the promotion of inquiry based-learning. The development of practical support materials in planning for and working with *Aistear* will require careful consideration.

6.1.4 Language

A common thread running through the findings is the need to review the language style and register in *Aistear* to reflect Ireland's modern and contemporary society. There is a need to reflect on how inclusive *Aistear* currently is and whether the incorporation of more empowering language for children and adults is key to this. There is a need to guard against a risk of exclusion and marginalisation. The language should support meaningful access and participation for all, with a belief in the dignity and importance of the child and the adult. The language used should be aligned with national policies and strategies.

6.1.5 Play

The importance of play in *Aistear* was highlighted as a real strength. However, there is a need to enhance and update the conceptualisation of play in response to relevant contemporary research and evidence-based approaches. The findings show a need for more recent research to inform and guide the articulation of the role of play-based learning in *Aistear*, and acting on this finding will be enabled by the literature review commissioned by NCCA to support the updating process (NCCA, forthcoming).

6.2 The next phase of work

As noted, Phase 1 of the consultation provided the first opportunity, since 2009, for those interested in early childhood education to consider what's working well with *Aistear* and what needs to be updated in the framework. The findings from all three strands of Phase 1 – (1) Consultation with the early childhood sector; (2) Consultation with babies, toddlers and young children; and (3) the Literature Review to Support the Updating of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* will be used in the coming months to develop proposals for an updated curriculum framework. This work will be supported by, and progressed with, the education partners through NCCA's *Aistear* Development Group, Board for Early Childhood and Primary, and Council. Following this period of deliberation across NCCA's structures, a draft updated framework will be published as a 'living and live document' for a Phase 2 public consultation in the first half of 2023. This will be a further opportunity for individuals and organisations who participated in Phase 1 to provide additional feedback on the proposed updated framework. The findings from Phase 2 will then be reported on and used to finalise the updated version *Aistear*.

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