

# Updating *Aistear*

## Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals

This template is intended to help you (and your colleagues) develop a written submission in relation to Updating *Aistear*. Please e-mail your completed submission to [aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### **Organisation submission details**

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

Yes

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

Founded in 1990, the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) is the national advocacy and membership platform which brings together Travellers and representative organisations to develop collective solutions on issues faced by the community to achieve greater equality for Travellers. ITM represents Traveller interests in national governmental, international and human rights settings, and is led by grass-roots community membership.

The Yellow Flag Programme was founded by ITM in 2009 as a practical 8-step framework to guide schools in becoming more inclusive of all ethnicities, cultures and religions, and to challenge racism. It is the only programme of its kind in Ireland that takes a whole-school approach to tackling racism on both an institutional and social level.

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# Section 1

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

## **Background**

The Yellow Flag Programme was founded by the Irish Traveller Movement as an innovative, intercultural solution to tackle racism at a social and institutional level, and equip schools with the tools to cultivate an inclusive learning environment, where diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions is valued and celebrated.

In 2017, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted an audit to review the inclusion of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum. A key finding in that report was the efficacy of the Yellow Flag Programme in building inclusive learning environments, and a concluding recommendation highlighted that “it would be beneficial if the Yellow Flag Programme was extended to include Early Childhood setting”.<sup>(1)</sup>

In light of this recommendation, and informed by the insights derived from working with over **103 schools, 41,472 students and 3,292 teachers**, the Yellow Flag Programme welcomes the opportunity to submit to the review of Aistear, and to share insights on components of the programme which could enhance existing principles and themes of the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

## **Diversity and Racism in Ireland**

In recent years, the cultural diversity of Ireland has increased rapidly, with people from over 200 countries now comprising our population, and approximately 45,397 to 57,287 Travellers in Ireland.<sup>(2)</sup> This diversity brings opportunities, but also challenges, that must be addressed by schools and early childhood settings, which are quite often a first point of interaction for migrant parents and children within Irish society, and given the formative experiences produced there, with long-term ramifications for educational outcomes.

- The Yellow Flag Programme recognises that an insecure connection within the educational setting, and associated negative identity-based experiences, render Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) students, including Travellers and Roma, vulnerable to adverse psychosocial impacts, early school leaving, and reduced education and employment outcomes. Despite Government efforts to promote migrant integration, and policy intended to ensure Traveller inclusion, those groups are not achieving the same educational outcomes as their settled, Irish peers.<sup>(3)</sup>

- The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) highlighted the occurrence of school-located identity-based bullying saying; “Both Traveller and Roma children are significantly more likely to have negative experiences in school, including experiences of bullying, racism, and discrimination, and this can result in them hiding their identity or leaving school early.” <sup>(4)</sup>
- Make Minority a Priority <sup>(5)</sup> highlighted the pervasive nature of racism in the lives of young people from Black Minority and Ethnic BME communities in Ireland, and cited consistent findings in education, that basic cultural competency (for students and teachers) was currently inadequate, and quite often, problematic behaviour came from teachers, and was perpetuated by schools that did not respond sufficiently or appropriately.
- The role of schools and early childcare settings as learning environments in which to defeat racism and promote inclusion at a critical early life stage, gives the Yellow Flag Programme a core operating framework, and importantly, equips children at those schools with the tools to take that learning into their home and community settings.
- The education setting as a central value was evidenced in the Interim Report of the National Action Plan Against Racism 2021, currently in development, which noted: “education, while it cannot on its own eliminate racism, is crucial for addressing it as well as being a key site for its reflection and reinforcement.” <sup>(6)</sup>

## Section 2

### Principles of *Aistear*

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

There are a number of principles which have particular resonance with the ethos and learning outcomes of the Yellow Flag Programme.

#### **1a and b) The child's uniqueness; Equality and diversity**

A comprehensive discussion of the role of inclusive education in the early childhood setting as intrinsic to a child's cognitive, social and cultural development, can be found under Section 3 in relation to the theme Identity and Belonging.

#### Anti-Racism Policy and Procedures

To ensure that all children are treated equally and with respect for their ethnic identity, a robust set of policies and procedures must be developed and implemented. Independent of the anti-bullying policy, the anti-racism policy should define racism, and outline clear steps to recognise, prevent, and where necessary, manage incidents of racism within the school community and institution.

- Four out of ten Travellers say they were bullied in school <sup>(7)</sup>, and one-fifth of migrant students drop out of school, compared with just under 10% of students with Irish parents. <sup>(8)</sup>
- Currently, where identity-based bullying and racism occurs in schools and early childhood settings, there is no overarching incident management framework. This lack of institutional protection means that racism, which may even have been expressed directly or indirectly by teaching staff, is not managed, recorded or remedied.
- The Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013) define racism in Irish education as a phenomenon that occurs between children and young people, therefore, allocating responsibility solely to the students. The importance of the concept of institutional racism (as defined by the Anti-Racism Committee in the Interim Report), lies in its rejection of the reduction of racism to the behaviour of individual students, and its focus instead on policies and procedures that may unintentionally exclude students of cultural, religious and ethnic minority groups.

#### Recommendations:

- Conduct a diversity audit of learning materials associated with Aistear to ensure that they accurately reflect the demographic composition of Ireland
- Embed Traveller culture and history in the curriculum, in line with recommendations made by the NCCA in 2019
- Apply an intercultural approach to education across all 12 principles of the Aistear curriculum, so that equality and diversity is not a stand alone principle, but is embedded across the entire curriculum
- Require all early childhood educational settings to develop and implement an anti-racism policy and a whole-institution strategy to combat racism

### **1c) Children as citizens**

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have a right to “a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.”<sup>(10)</sup> The student voice has become a central value in Irish education policy, but it’s implementation in the early childhood settings is ad hoc and inconsistent, particularly with regard to identity, ethnicity and culture.

- The Yellow Flag Programme amplifies the voice of ethnic minority students and parents through a Diversity Committee. This ensures that marginalised voices are heard and valued within the structures of the institution, while also building capacity in young people from under-represented communities. Additionally, the programme supports schools in undertaking an inclusion survey of all cohorts of the school community (as will be discussed under 3f), and an age-appropriate template has been developed for Junior and Senior Infant students, so that they can participate and share their experience.

#### Recommendation:

- Encourage early childhood settings to introduce structured mechanisms to capture the student voice and experience in an age-appropriate manner, for example, in following the Yellow Flag Programme’s Diversity Committee and Intercultural Review

### **2b) Parents, family and community**

Parental involvement is crucial in the early stages of a child’s cognitive development. Theorists place parents and teachers at the centre of a child’s microsystem<sup>(10)</sup>, and therefore, communication and collaboration between these two cohorts is key. Aistear must prepare early childhood settings to adequately reach ethnic minority parents and engage them in culturally-appropriate ways.

- The recently published report commissioned by the Department of Education, and the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth, “Out of the Shadows”, offered a sombre insight

into the challenges that many Traveller parents face in overcoming their own very “painful educational experiences” <sup>(11)</sup>. Having felt “isolated” and “overlooked” in schools themselves, parents may struggle to feel comfortable in an educational setting, and a sensitive and thorough understanding of the complexities of engrained institutional racism is required here on behalf of staff at early childhood facilities.

- 50% of all Yellow Flag schools reported having involved minority ethnic parents in the Diversity Committee of the programme, and those parents reported feeling empowered, valued and heard as a direct result.
- A school community does not exist in a vacuum, and so the inclusion work of an educational setting must be embedded within the context of the wider community. The Yellow Flag Programme takes a whole-community approach to inclusion, inviting local community representatives and projects into the educational setting, so that strong local relationships are formed between the students and their communities.

#### Recommendations:

- Advise early childhood settings to establish a Diversity Committee with parental representatives from ethnic minority communities
- Ensure that key information about the child’s development, as well as the policies of the institution, are communicated to parents in plain English
- Encourage early childhood settings to engage multi-ethnic community groups in school life

### **2c) The adult’s role**

The Aistear framework does a good job of highlighting the impact that an individual educator can have on the development of a child. However, if these professionals are not equipped with anti-racism training, and the opportunity to build intercultural competence, interactions between students and educators can have a negative effect on the development and educational outcomes of the child.

- A 2014 DEIS study found that 92% of Traveller children were estimated by their teachers to be in the “below average ability” category, which the author asserts is “a clear indicator of structurally embedded patterns of inequality”. <sup>(12)</sup> It is vital that educators are given the opportunity to address unconscious bias, so that teaching practice does not intentionally or unintentionally exclude or discriminate.
- In an early childhood setting, practitioners are ‘influential models’, whose behaviour is observed and encoded by children <sup>(13)</sup> (McLeod 2011). Therefore, educators and practitioners are uniquely placed to influence the perspectives of children, both positively and negatively.
- The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses for educators are devoid of mandatory intercultural awareness and anti-racism practice. An assessment of

teacher capacity at entrant level across YF schools found that 90% reported not having received any form of previous equality training. A review of the Initial Teacher Education programme guidelines was undertaken in November 2020 and resulted in the Céim - Standards for ITE. This was intended to increase the prominence of diversity and anti-racism in teacher education, however, new guidelines focus primarily on diversity of learning ability, and do not explicitly address, or even name, racism.

- Although Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education were produced in 2006 by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Yellow Flag Programme is not aware of any training opportunities offers to practitioners in the sector. The production of guidelines should be accompanied by capacity-building activities, to ensure adequate implementation. <sup>(14)</sup>
- Additionally, over 99% of entrants to primary teacher education identified as ‘White Irish Settled’, and although this only accounts for a portion of early childhood practitioners, it has ramifications for the experience of ethnic minority students in junior and senior infants, whose educators have an entirely different lives experienced to their own. <sup>(15)</sup>

#### Recommendations:

- Review Initial Teacher Training (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to incorporate anti-racist and intercultural elements
- Introduce positive action initiatives to encourage members of ethnic minority groups to enter the teaching force

### **3f) The learning environment**

As a site of cultural and socio-political learning, the experience of a young person in school impacts their social, personal and intellectual development, and will inevitably shape how they see and interact with society into the future. The creation of an inclusive learning environment and school community is pivotal to the wellbeing of a student, and can determine their ultimate education outcomes.

- In 2018, there were 2,633 Traveller children attending Early Years Services in Ireland and that while according to this data 25% of Traveller children, aged 0 to 4 years, were attending an early years-service, just under half of Traveller children entitled to a place in the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2010, 2019) availed of ECCE (47%) <sup>(20)</sup> (Baker, 2021). This can be seen as potential evidence that those spaces are not inclusive or welcoming for Traveller children and their families, thus places are not being taken up at the same rate as is present in the settled population.
- Leveraging a whole-school approach, the Yellow Flag Programme works with all cohorts of the school community - students, teachers and parents - to build an inclusive learning environment, which is respectful and reflective of the diversity of Irish society. Key steps in the process include, a survey to understand the ethnicities and cultures present in the community, a diversity audit of the classroom

space, and a critical analysis of the 'hidden curriculum' within the school or setting, to understand the subtle practices and signage that influence the culture of the institution.

Recommendations:

- Require all early childhood learning settings to develop and implement a whole-school/whole-institution strategy to combat racism which would ensure learning settings are welcoming for all children
- Progress at the centralised level of the Department of Education, a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of institutional racism and inclusive education, which is trauma-informed



# Section 3

## Themes of *Aistear*

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

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

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

### **Identity and Belonging**

Of all four themes running through the *Aistear* framework, the Yellow Flag Programme emphasises the importance of Identity and Belonging in the intercultural development of a child.

#### Cognitive Development and Prejudice

A wealth of academic research attests to the importance of the early childhood years in the social and behavioural development of a child, including their own sense of identity, and their understanding of the world around them. <sup>(16)</sup>

- As highlighted by the OECD, it is a critical time of rapid growth that takes place until the age of six, during which the central nervous system is developing, and the child is gaining “the basic cognitive and socio-emotional skills that are fundamental for their future achievements in school and later on as an adult.” <sup>(17)</sup>
- Studies show that children recognise differences, such as gender and ‘race’, from as early as 5 months<sup>(18)</sup>. From 2 years, children are associating behaviours with ‘race’, and from 5 years, there is evidence of a preference being expressed for their own ‘race’<sup>(19)</sup>.
- Crucially, children develop in interaction with the world around them, and through observing the behaviour of others, come to form prejudices, which ultimately inform behaviour. However, conversely, there is also an opportunity at this age to expose children to diversity, and to speak about difference in positive terms, to ultimately prevent the development of stereotypes and prejudice.

Ireland is much more diverse than it was when Aistear was published in 2009, and it is crucial that the early childhood curriculum is reflective of, and sensitive to, the multitude of identities now present in Ireland, while giving children the chance to explore concepts of racial equality and diversity in an age-appropriate manner. For example, it is widely acknowledged that there is limited understanding among the general population about Traveller culture and history. By focusing on ways in which Traveller culture and history can become more visible in the curriculum, Traveller identity is imbued with meaningful recognition to children from the community, but also their settled counterparts, who build understanding and tolerance through learning.

### Further considerations

Several further considerations under this theme of the curriculum have already been highlighted in the previous section in relation to the principles of Aistear, but to repeat and re-emphasise:

- Efforts must be made to embed Traveller culture and history within the Aistear curriculum, as was highlighted by the NCCA. This section of the curriculum offers ample opportunities for the inclusion of minority ethnic cultures and traditions, to ensure that difference is visible and normalised.
- Government support for the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill is very welcome, but the success of this initiative will hinge on the support given to educators in delivering this content in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner.
- Similarly, as was addressed under 2c, educators and early childhood practitioners must be given the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of minority ethnic cultures, and examine their own unconscious bias. While the inclusion of a theme dedicated to belonging and identity is very positive, the lived experience and personal prejudices of the practitioner will influence the impact that this learning will have on children.
- Within this theme, it is vitally important that children are given the opportunity to see themselves and their unique identity in the learning materials used. A diversity audit can highlight the gaps, and ensure that resources reflect the ethnic diversity of Ireland.

## Section 4

### **Guidelines for Good Practice**

These describe how the adult can support children's learning and development across *Aistear's* principles and themes. *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice can be accessed [here](#)

The guidelines for good practice do not currently include any reference to general oversight of early childhood settings, or monitoring of framework implementation.

### **Implementation of Aistear**

The framework offers a comprehensive pedagogical approach to early childhood education, which, between its principles and themes, leaves ample room for the exploration of issues pertaining to identity, belonging, equality and inclusion. However, Aistear is not underpinned by legislation, and because early childhood settings are not mandated, there are no assurances that the framework is being implemented across the board. This has negative implications for children of ethnic minority groups, who may not be benefiting in full from the rich contents of the curriculum and guidelines.

### **Recommendation:**

- Introduce monitoring mechanisms to ensure the consistent implementation of the Aistear framework across all early childhood settings

### **Anti-Racism Training for Inspectors and Supporting Bodies**

During an Early Years Education Inspection (EYEIs), the inspector observes the processes and practices relating to a child's learning. To ensure that this individual is equipped to monitor the adequate implementation of the Identity and Belonging theme, and that they are informed in intellectual pedagogy, anti-racism and intercultural awareness training must be offered to both the individual inspectors, and the supporting bodies associated with Aistear, including Better Start, Child care Committees, and the Professional Development Service for Teachers.

### **Recommendation:**

- Introduce training opportunities for EYEI inspectors and supporting bodies associated with the monitoring and implementation of Aistear in early childhood education setting

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