Submission to the National Council for Curriculum Assessment on the Draft Updated *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Introduction

Professional Educators and Managers Ireland (PEMI) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the draft updated *Aistear*. We commend the NCCA on its work in facilitating the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) profession to engage in the consultation for an updated *Aistear*.

This submission begins by providing general commentary relating to terminology, and new concepts within the draft updated *Aistear*. It then discusses the Principles of Early Learning and Development, Themes, and proposals for supporting an updated *Aistear*.

Terminology and New Concepts

PEMI welcomes the shift in terminology within the draft updated *Aistear*. In particular, we welcome the following:

- Practitioner to '**Educator.**' We feel the term educator reflects recent policy initiatives, notably, *First 5*, *the While of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* (Government of Ireland, 2018), *Nurturing Skills* (Government of Ireland, 2022), and the *Guide to Early Years Education Inspections* (Department of Education (DE) 2022). Importantly, it reflects the wishes of those who work directly with young children in early childhood settings. The term educator, which is broadly associated with someone who teaches or educates, more accurately reflects the professional identity of those working within the ECEC profession. PEMI believes that embedding the term Educator throughout the framework, ensures that it becomes part of ECEC parlance, and will overtime, consolidate the position of early childhood as an integral part of the educational continuum. Hence, it will enhance recognition of ECEC as a profession, in its own right, rather than an industry or a sector.

  We note however, that the term educator includes those who work in professional roles, parents, childminders and other adults (foot note p.4). Yet, childminders are mentioned only twice within the framework, i.e., on page 14, in relation to transitions, and again, on page 30 in relation to 'Building partnerships between parents and

practitioners.' PEMI suggests that childminders should be more visible throughout the framework, particularly in light of the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which seeks 'to support childminders in their work of providing high quality early learning and care and school age childcare, thus supporting child development and learning outcomes…' (DCEDIY, 2021, p.2).

- Children to '**babies, toddlers and young children'** which ensures that each age group is clearly visible within the framework. Furthermore, in keeping with the emphasis upon children under three years old in the Department of Education Inspections (DE, 2022), specifically naming babies and toddlers throughout the framework, ensures that due attention is afforded to their care and education in early childhood curricula, within and across early childhood settings;

- equality' to '**equity**' ensuring everyone achieves equal outcomes, and in line with the proposed Equal Participation Model, as proposed within *First 5* (Government of Ireland, 2018) and Together for Better (2023);

- Needs to '**rights**.' Up to 18 years old, children's rights are a universal entitlement in international law (i.e., UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). It is promising therefore, to see children's rights embedded within the draft updated *Aistear*. Perhaps, the introduction to the updated *Aistear* could acknowledge/recognise the child's right to access quality ECEC in line with Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2018).

In addition to the terminological shift, PEMI notes the focus on parents as the most important people in the child's life. However, given the increasing diversity of family make-up, in Ireland, such as blended families, PEMI suggest that the framework states that:

✓ Family (which is inclusive of such diversity), is most important to children.

We note too, the focus on 'acknowledging our cultural and linguistic history and story' (draft updated Aistear, p. 5). While we acknowledge that words, phrases and proverbs as *Gaeilge* have been embedded throughout the framework, we are concerned that this may appear tokenistic, rather than a systematic approach to acknowledging our cultural and linguistic history and story. In this respect, PEMI suggests that:

- ✓ The principles of learning and development be presented in both Irish and English throughout the framework, e.g., Relationships and Interactions/Caidrimh agus idirghníomhaíochtaí; Transitions/Aistrithe mar shampla;
- ✓ The Themes of *Aistear* be presented in both Irish and English throughout the framework, i.e., Well-being/ Folláine; Identity and Belonging/Féiniúlacht agus Muintearas; Communicating/ Cumarsáid; Exploring and Thinking/Taiscéalaíocht agus smaoineamh;
- ✓ Babies, toddlers and young children also be presented in both Irish and English throughout, i.e., leanaí, lapadáín agus leanaí óga;
- ✓ The Irish words used throughout the framework must make their way into daily practice within settings to avoid tokenism.

New Concepts

With regards to the new concepts introduced within the framework, PEMI welcomes, in particular, the **Agentic child** and **Agentic adult**. None the less, we are disappointed to see that in both cases, the definition is included as a foot note (draft updated *Aistear*, p.9). Given the complexity of these concepts, their centrality to quality ECEC, and to realising children's rights, PEMI believes that:

- ✓ A more in-depth definition of both is required
- ✓ These definitions must be front and centre within, and throughout the framework for clarity, and, to support those who may be unfamiliar with the concepts.

While PEMI appreciates that the framework highlights 'the educator's role in facilitating voice and influence in early learning and development' (draft updated *Aistear*, p.11), we recommend that in keeping with the concept of slow relational pedagogy, and against the backdrop of the Lundy (2007) model of participation, that the framework also:

- ✓ References the need for educators to create **space** and **time** for children to express their voice within the early childhood setting, and for their voice to be listened to, acted upon, and influence what is happening within the setting, vis a vis the daily activities, for example.

We are heartened by the introduction of '**Slow relational pedagogy**,' and **Education for Sustainable Development.** Again, we suggest the need to:

✓ Provide a definition of both concepts, and to include these in the proposed glossary of terms.

Principles of Early Learning and Development

In general, PEMI welcomes the reduction from 12 to 9 principles of learning and development, which, we propose, should continue to be presented in three groups as per the previous iteration of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), i.e., *Children and their lives in early childhood*; *children's connections with others*, and how *children learn and develop*. We also welcome the introduction of a principle focused upon **Transitions,** which takes account of transitions within the early childhood setting, as well as from one educational setting to another. Table 1 provides an overview of feedback relating to the principles of learning and development, as well as child voice in relation to these principles.

Table 1. Feedback relating to the Principles of Learning and Development

Principle. Agentic Global Citizens

This principle seems quite broad in the context of very young children. Perhaps, it could be reframed as Agentic Local and Global Citizens	
Child Voice	
I am an agentic citizen and use my 'voice' to show you what is important to me (p.12)	Voice suggests verbal communication. This is not the only way children 'voice' their opinion. A reference to the 100 languages of children would be beneficial, and more inclusive, in this regard
Provide meaningful opportunities for me to live sustainably (p.12)	Suggest expanding to read: Provide meaningful opportunities for me to *appreciate the environment and learn how to* live sustainably.
Principle. Relationships and Interactions	
Babies', toddlers' and young children's fundamental need to be with others is embedded in caring connections and pedagogical practice where loving and responsive relationships and interactions are nurtured with key people in their lives. Early friendships with other babies, toddlers and young children are noticed and celebrated (p.12)	Suggest changing to: Babies', toddlers' and young children's fundamental need to be with others is embedded in caring connections and *relational* pedagogical practice where loving and responsive relationships and interactions are nurtured with key people in their lives. Early friendships with other babies, toddlers and young children are noticed, *nurtured* and celebrated.

Child Voice	
I benefit from time and space to be with others – family, friends, peers and educators as well as coming to know others in my local community (p.13)	Suggest changing to: I *need* time and space…
You support me to co-regulate and self-regulate my emotions and help me to learn to be with others, to handle conflicts and to solve problems (p.13)	Suggest changing to: *Help me* to co-regulate…
Principle. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	
All babies, toddlers and young children have a right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences *to fulfil* their potential as unique individuals (p.12)	Suggest changing to: *to help them reach their* potential as unique individuals
Meaningful participation is informed by an awareness of age, gender, family status, ethnicity, religion, worldview, and membership of the Traveller community (p.12)	Suggest including *disability* here also to fully encapsulate the concept of inclusion
Child Voice	
Recognise and celebrate my achievements at every age and stage of development (p.12)	Can we move away from ages and stages?
Principle. Family and Community	
The lives of babies, toddlers and young children are enriched by those who nurture and care for them: parents, extended family, educators and community members (p.13).	Consider removing the sentence: '*In turn, babies, toddlers and young children bring joy, hope and happiness to enrich the lives of others.*' (p.13)
Principle. Agentic Educators	
Child Voice	
I learn more and better when you recognise and build on my abilities, interests, identities and experiences (p.13).	Need to explain what 'learn more and better' means – may be open to misinterpretation (risk of schoolification)
I trust that you will find appropriate resources and to *help me to get access to professional support and services when I need it* (p.13).	Suggest reframing as: *And in partnership with parents and families,* help me to get access to professional support and services when I need it
Principle. Transitions	
Ensuring progression in learning and development and continuity of experiences requires consistent relationships with a shared responsibility between families, childminders, educators, settings and schools in the best interests of the baby, toddler and young child (p.14)	Can this statement be recast as two sentences so there is no connection/association made with babies/toddlers and school?
Principle. Play and Hands-on Experiences	
These experiences help them to regulate and co-regulate their feelings, develop as thinkers and *language users*, develop socially, be happy, creative and imaginative, and lay the	As above, use of the term 'language users' warrants attention. May need to reference augmentative communication etc., here

foundations for becoming effective communicators and explorers (p.15)	The absence of any reference to relevant and meaningful learning experiences is problematic
	Should a reference to an emergent inquiry-based curriculum be included here?
Principle. Learning Environments	
The environment, both indoors and outdoors, influences how and what children learn. In consultation and collaboration, babies, toddlers, young children and educators plan and *create aesthetically pleasing, challenging and inclusive spaces* (p.15).	Need to emphasise an emotionally supportive environment here also, taking account of the temporal aspects
They also embrace possibilities in the local environment. There is an emphasis on natural spaces and resources, a commitment to sustainability and to active, *adventurous play* (p.15).	Requires a definition of adventurous play, which should also be included in a glossary of terms
These environments support babies', toddlers' and young children's meaningful participation, holistic development *and learning about place* (p.15).	The reference to *learning about place* seems out of place and tokenistic – sense of an 'add-on'
Child's Voice	
I like being in spaces that *allow me freedom of movement between the indoors and outdoors*. I benefit from being outside in all kinds of weather! (p.15)	Suggest changing to: I like being in spaces that allow me freedom of movement between the indoors and outdoors, *as much as possible*. This qualifier is essential, as depending on the setting, it may not be possible, or appropriate to allow unlimited freedom of movement between indoors and outdoors

Themes

Here again, PEMI welcomes the reduction in the number of learning goals, from six to three for each aim associated with the themes of *Aistear*. We are reassured to note that the goals 'remain intentionally broad, yet observable, statements to support flexibility of interpretation that contributes to holistic learning and development,' (p. 5). Such flexibility of interpretation has been a key strength of *Aistear* since its inception in 2009. As such, it takes account of the educator's knowledge, skill and professional judgement in terms of facilitating babies, toddlers, and young children's learning and development vis a vis an emergent inquiry-based curriculum. Critically, it embodies the concept of holistic learning and development, a distinct characteristic of early childhood education and care.

Table 2. Feedback relating to the themes of *Aistear*

Theme	Comment
Well-being They have a right to be agentic and to have a say in matters that impact on them. They are also respectful of themselves, others, and their environment. Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances babies', toddlers' and young children's wellbeing. It provides opportunities for them to enhance their sense of *ionadh* (wonder), awe, ritual, gratitude and *taitneamh a bhaint as an saol* (to get enjoyment from life) (p.18)	Suggest changing to: *As agentic competent and confident learners, babies, toddlers and young children have a right to have a say in matters that affect them.* Include the term 'spiritual' in a glossary of terms
Promoting babies', toddlers' and young children's good overall physical health is important (p.18)	Suggest changing to: Promoting babies', toddlers and young children's physical health *and well-being* is important
Communicating	Although this theme acknowledges multi-modal communication, it retains an inordinate focus on oral language and verbal communication
Exploring and Thinking	The lack of reference to STEAM is notable. While the individual areas are mentioned in the framework, PEMI believes that this approach is contrary to the concept of STEAM as an integrated or transdisciplinary approach, which draws upon knowledge and skills from across the individual domains in a practical sense conducive to problem solving, and critical thinking etc through hands on play-based experiences. Furthermore, if ECEC is truly acknowledged as the beginning of the educational continuum, as indicated in the framework, then the profession itself, should determine the terminology appropriate to ECEC, which is STEAM. It is no longer appropriate to adopt terminology (e.g., STEM/STEAM/STEM and the Arts) simply because it is what is used in primary school.

Points to consider

PEMI is concerned about the potential risk for differing interpretations of challenge, risk and safety between educators and the Tusla and DE inspectorates. For example, the learning goals reference activities such as 'sewing' using 'scissors' and 'adventurous play' as a way to support children's learning. Will Tusla, for example, perceive these types of activities as dangerous, or high-risk? Anecdotally, settings are no longer allowed use hammer and nails. Envisioning activities as dangerous and/or high-risk, undermines a) the vision of young children as agentic, competent and confident learners, and b) educator professional competency, and judgement, i.e., agentic educators.

The framework also mentions opportunities for mixed-age groupings in settings. While positive, we ask, where does this approach fit in the context of the current Early Years Services Regulations, 2016?

To address these potential misinterpretations, PEMI recommends that:

- ✓ Hyperlinks to the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018) and the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide etc., should be included throughout the framework to support educators to directly access appropriate resources, and guidelines directly from the *Aistear* document.

In a welcome and progressive development, the framework reiterates the need to support children's learning indoors and outdoors, with children being able to move freely between both environments. Depending on the setting, this is not always possible (e.g., an activity room may be located upstairs). Again, as question how the inspectorates will interpret this proposal? In relation to the outdoor environment, the framework references the need for the environment to be 'well-kept...safe yet challenging'. These concepts can be misinterpreted in the context of the outdoor environment in particular.

It is imperative that educators and inspectors (both Tusla and the DE) hold a shared vision of an outdoor learning environment, particularly, in relation to the characteristics of such an environment. This will involve co-professional dialogue among all concerned; educators and inspectors, with mutual respect for each other's professional judgement.

The framework also states that educators and children should enjoy meals together. While this is a very welcome suggestion that will considerably add to babies, toddlers and young

children's experiences of mealtimes, there are implications from a regulatory stance. As above, therefore, PEMI recommends the inclusion of

- ✓ Links to click directly into guidelines for best practice from the ASPG and/or inspectorate guidelines. These would help and provide a cohesive integrated approach, resulting in educators continually accessing appropriate and up to date information as websites are updated etc.

Supporting *Aistear*

It is important to state here that PEMI recognises the role of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in advising the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. In this respect, it is not surprising that the proposals to support an updated *Aistear* do not extend beyond updating the Guidance for Good Practice, and the *Aistear* toolkit. We note the intention to expand on some of the important big ideas introduced through the principles and themes, and to organise these according to the original Guidelines for Good Practice.

While Brennan and Forster (2022) acknowledge notable advancements in engaging with *Aistear* since its publication in 2009, others point to the challenges faced by educators in implementing the curriculum framework. Challenges include lack of support, and limited projects aimed at equipping educators with the necessary skills to engage effectively with the framework (e.g., Walsh, 2016; DES, 2018).

Farrell and Daly (2023) outline two primary mechanisms for implementing *Aistear*, since 2009:

1. The *Aistear in Action* Initiative, a collaboration between the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), which occurred from 2011-2013 in seven pre-school settings. The purpose was to bring *Aistear* to life for children availing of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, following its introduction in 2010, by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Learnings from the initiative were recorded and, shared with the wider sector through the final NCCA/ECI report (2013), and through a number of face-to-face events (Skehill and Daly, 2023). Additionally, examples and ideas from practice gained through the initiative were shared through the NCCA's *Aistear* Toolkit; an online resource to support engagement with *Aistear* across a range of early childhood settings. The Toolkit was decommissioned in 2015 when all the material on it was moved to the

2. *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) an online toolkit to support educators in using *Aistear* and *Síolta* together to develop the quality of their curriculum, and in doing so, to better support babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development (Skehill and Daly, 2023, p.17).

The effectiveness of these supports is questionable, with the DES (2018), for example, indicating that many educators struggle to incorporate the principles, themes and guidelines of the original *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) into their practice.

Within the educational continuum, other professionals are trained in their respective curriculum, or subject area/s. This is a statutory requirement. Primary school teachers, therefore, are currently trained in the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999), and through pre-service training in the future, will be trained in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools* (Department of Education (DE), 2023). Although high-quality ECEC is thought to lay the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability and social integration (e.g., European Commission 2018), no such mandatory requirement exists for early childhood educators with regards to training in *Aistear,* the early childhood curriculum framework.

Other than an acknowledgement that sustained support and guidance is necessary to support educators, and a commitment 'to work closely with stakeholders, education partners, educators and parents to identify practical ways in which settings can be supported in a comprehensive manner as they become familiar with and begin to use an updated *Aistear*', (draft updated *Aistear*, p.36), the NCCA simply propose to expand the practice guide. Clearly, as reported by Walsh (2016) and the DES (2018) for example, this approach has not been effective in the past. Against the backdrop of the many new concepts, shifts in terminology etc., introduced through the draft updated *Aistear*, the absence of a cohesive and strategic roll out of training and continued professional development for all involved within the ECEC profession (e.g., educators; training and education providers) is incomprehensible.

First 5, the whole of Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families, proposes a national plan for the development and implementation of *Aistear* in all settings for babies, toddlers, and young children. This includes 'making the application of these frameworks a contractual requirement of … funding schemes and give consideration, over time, to making adherence to the frameworks a statutory requirement' (Government of Ireland, 2019, p.157). In addition to reiterating the need to make adherence a statutory

requirement, the recently launched *First 5* implementation plan also references the role of the DCEDIY in oversight and approval for *Aistear* (Government of Ireland, 2023). While PEMI would support putting *Aistear* on a statutory footing, doing so, in the absence of comprehensive and systemic initial training and CPD is foolhardy. Some hope can be found in a DCEDIY (2023) proposal that the DCEDIY and the DE in partnership with Better Start and the NCCA strengthen integration of the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) into wider CPD and mentoring supports. Not withstanding this proposal, PEMI calls upon the DE and the DCEDIY to fund mandatory sustained models of training in an updated *Aistear* for educators, and those involved in their professional formation in the further and higher education sectors. In relation to educators, we further call for the introduction of at least 3 EPV or CPD days, in line with the entitlement of other professionals in the educational continuum, to enable educators to access this essential training.

In the context of the draft updated *Aistear*, PEMI suggests that the NCCA, at a minimum,

- ✓ Reference the DCEDIY (2023) proposal for strengthening the NSAI, as a measure to reassure educators that they will receive comprehensive and systematic support in understanding and implementing an updated *Aistear*

Cognisant of its advisory role, PEMI also calls for the NCCA to

- ✓ Advise the DE and the DCEDIY of the need for a sustained model of training in an updated Aistear, as well as EPV or CPD days for educators, and to advocate for this

Conclusion

Overall, PEMI welcomes the suggested updates to *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework, including the shift in terminology; the introduction of new concepts such as the agentic child, agentic educator, slow relational pedagogy and education for sustainable development. We also welcome the reduction from 12 to 9 principles of early learning and development, the retention of the original themes, and the reduction in the number of learning goals. Never the less, throughout this submission, we have proposed a series of recommendations, focused upon further strengthening an updated *Aistear*, and supporting its implementation within the ECEC profession (see Table 3 summary of recommendations).

Table 3. Summary of recommendations

1	Reference the child's right to quality ECEC in the introduction to the framework
2	Recognise the family (rather than the parent) as most important to children
3	Ensure childminders are more visible throughout the framework
4	Present the principles of learning and development in three groups as per the previous iteration of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009)
5	Present the principles of learning and development, the themes of *Aistear*, and the terms babies, toddlers and young children as Gaeilge agus as Béarla throughout the framework
6	Provide in-depth definitions of complex concepts such as agentic child, agentic adult, slow relational pedagogy, education for sustainable development, and spirituality
7	Include a glossary of terms
8	Incorporate the concept of STEAM within the Exploring and Thinking theme as an integrated or transdisciplinary approach
9	References the need for educators to create **space** and **time** for children to express their voice within the early childhood setting, and for their voice to be listened to, acted upon and influence what is happening within the setting, vis a vis the daily activities for example
10	Include hyperlinks to the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018) and the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide etc., throughout the framework to support educators to directly access appropriate resources, and guidelines directly from the *Aistear* document
11	Reference the DCEDIY (2023) proposal for strengthening the NSAI, as a measure to reassure educators that they will receive comprehensive and systematic support in understanding and implementing an updated *Aistear*
12	Advise the DE and the DCEDIY of the need for a sustained model of training in an updated *Aistear*, for educators and those involved in their professional formation within the Further and Higher Education sectors, and advocate for this
13	Advise the DE and the DCEDIY of the need to introduce at least 3 EPV or CPD days for educators, to enable access training, and advocate for this

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