



**Consultation on Draft Principles for Engaging with the Arts in
Early Learning and Care**

Submission

May 2023

Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with 4,000 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings. Early Childhood Ireland advocates for an effective and Early Years and School Age Care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

Early Childhood Ireland has a strong track record that spans over five decades, and we are currently delivering our Strategic Plan 2021 to 2026.

Early Childhood Ireland is the Irish partner of the International Reggio Network. The Reggio Emilia approach is a world-renowned philosophy with a strong emphasis on Art principles as a guiding force in early childhood education curriculum development and practice. The approach recognises the power of artistic expression in fostering children's creativity, imagination, and divergent thinking skills. By incorporating art principles such as observation, documentation, collaboration, and reflection, this approach encourages educators to facilitate open-ended and child-led activities, creating a rich and stimulating learning environment that supports holistic development.

Early Years

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the development of principles for engaging with the Arts in Early Years. This submission aims to highlight the existing link between play, creativity, and learning while emphasising the necessity of continuous professional learning and development. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) should embed these principles within Aistear, the national childhood curriculum framework currently under review. Therefore, we will highlight how Aistear is an excellent framework to guide curriculum development and quality-of-service provision, where children can construct their knowledge through relationships with peers and educators and active engagement in their environment, including the Arts.

The importance of the Aistear framework

Our National Quality Curriculum Framework Aistear does not impose an outcomes-driven curriculum within the Early Years profession. As a framework, it supports educators in implementing a local curriculum. A way of ensuring that settings can develop and have shared principles, aims, and objectives, but most importantly, there is not a 'one size fits all' approach. We must recognise and understand this premise and that methods, activities, and content will emerge with the context and interests of children and the group. However, training is essential to ensure a clear understanding of this point across the Early Years profession. It is necessary to recognise the importance of the framework, *Aistear*, and continue using it as a guiding tool moving forward. Educators can do this through participation with families, action research within settings or learning communities, documentation, and making children's learning and processes visible.

Early Childhood Ireland believes in the importance of the environment we create (physical and emotional environment), our relationships, and how we respond to

children. The most important practice in every setting is responding to children in the moment, building their sense of belonging. Through caring, trusting, and loving relationships, educators can develop environments where care and education weave together and create creativity. Focusing on 'dispositions' is the starting point when implementing a local curriculum for all children. When educators see children as 'confident and competent,' as suggested at the centre of Aistear, their dispositions thread through everything they do. We know that some educators in our profession have interpreted Aistear as a 'curriculum' rather than a curriculum framework. Our profession's experience is that many educators like the control of knowing what they have covered and can tick a box. Bringing the focus back to the 'dispositions of learning' helps re-align thinking, helping educators interpret Aistear as its intended framework. The draft principles for engaging with the Arts are another mechanism to support educators in developing their local curriculum using the principles of Aistear.

[The Arts and Early Childhood Development](#)

Research has consistently demonstrated the positive impact of Arts engagement on early childhood development. The Arts support children to explore their creativity, problem-solving abilities, and critical and divergent thinking skills. Moreover, artistic expression encourages children to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and ideas, fostering language development and enhancing self-esteem. Creativity is not limited to creative expression but encompasses a broader sense of imaginative thinking and problem-solving. All learners should be able to experience a broad, balanced, and fulfilling curriculum that supports all aspects of their development, not just the academic dimension but the social, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, and physical dimensions. Learners should also experience continuity in their creative skills from early childhood to adulthood. Creativity includes imagination, curiosity, risk-taking, wonderment, flexibility, experimentation, breaking boundaries, and openness to new perspectives (Prentice, 2000).

[Integrate the Arts into play-based experiences.](#)

Babies and young children learn through play, through active, hands-on experiences that are relevant and meaningful to them. They know many different things at the same time. As children and young people develop, their learning changes as they move through their learning journeys from Early Years, primary school, and post-primary school.

Play, an integral part of Aistear, complements and intertwines with Arts-based activities. Play provides an open and flexible space for children to engage in self-directed learning, exploration, and imaginative thinking. Aistear supports educators to recognise the importance of play in fostering curiosity, problem-solving, collaborating, and questioning among children. By integrating Arts into play-based experiences, children can develop holistic skills, enhancing their overall development and well-being.

Young children have a natural predisposition towards play, creativity, collaboration, and enquiry. The heart of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is captured by the poem by Loris Malaguzzi, titled '*The hundred languages of Children.*' the poem goes beyond traditional notions of language and encompasses the myriad way in which babies

and young children communicate, learn, and flourish. By embracing the Arts as a powerful tool for education, babies are encouraged to embark on a journey of discovery, utilising all their senses to express, explore, and revel in the wonders of the world around them – through all the sense, sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

Shift from educator direction to transformational teaching.

Creativity is at the heart of childhood and learning. However, to nurture a pedagogy of creativity in Early Years settings, a shift is required: from educator direction to transformational teaching. This means the educator's role in Early Years settings is to support children as they make meaning of the world around them through enquiry, shared learning, and the community. Research now tells us that children are rich in competence and open to all kinds of possibilities. They have a deep capacity for learning and complexity. Too often, however, learning is interrupted by the educator through instruction. Alison Gopnik, one of the leading cognitive scientists of our time, tells us that direct instruction limits children's possibilities. Through play, children make their own discoveries and are emerged deeply in creativity. Gopnik refers to childhood as the 'research department.'

Continuous Professional Learning will extend children's learning experiences through the Arts.

Continuous Professional Development is crucial to implement the draft principles for engaging with the Arts and leveraging the power of Arts engagement in early childhood education. In First 5, improving access to high-quality training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a significant action point. It is outlined in Nurturing Skills that Core Funding will provide financial support for non-contact time and a focus through quality action planning. Continuous Professional Learning ensures that educators can adapt their teaching practices to support and extend children's learning experiences through the Arts. It also enables educators to create rich and meaningful environments that promote creativity, exploration, and self-expression.

A robust continuous professional development infrastructure empowers educators to be knowledgeable and responsive leaders. In turn, creatives must be knowledgeable and understand Aistear the national curriculum framework. There must be a shift in understanding what 'creativity' means in early learning and school-age care. It is equally important to promote the concept of 'divergent thinking.' For example, creativity and divergent thinking are cultivated within the Reggio Emilia approach. Invention is not limited to creative expression but encompasses a broader sense of imaginative thinking and problem-solving.

School Age Care

Early Childhood Ireland believes that the principles of Aistear and embedding the principles of engaging with the Arts within the Aistear framework can be applied to School Age Care. School Age Care programmes support children's growth outside school hours. They provide opportunities for children to engage in various activities, explore their interests, and develop essential social and emotional skills. Integrating the Arts, such as music, visual Arts, drama, and dance, into these programmes can

foster children's creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression. Creating a continuum in learning from early learning care to school-age care. By incorporating the principles of Aistear into School Age Care programmes, we can create enriching environments that support children's creativity and imagination.

Benefits include:

- Engaging in artistic activities helps children of all ages develop cognitive skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and abstract thinking. Children can explore and experiment with ideas, materials, and techniques through an Arts-based programme, fostering intellectual growth.
- Artistic expression provides a medium for children to communicate and express their emotions. Children can better understand their feelings through engaging with the Arts.
- Collaborative projects encourage negotiation and cooperation among children. By working together on creative projects, children can learn to communicate effectively, respect diverse perspectives and develop social skills.
- Engaging in the Arts supports children to express their voices and share their ideas.

Key Supports

Several key supports are necessary to implement principles for engaging with the Arts in Early Years and School Age Care.

These include:

- **Creativity** involves deep exploration and practical skills. It also requires a high level of focus and critical thinking. For educators, the goal is to create conditions where creativity can begin. Many Early Years settings hinder the conditions required for children to enter a state of flow. Children must be given the opportunity and conditions to move into this state.
- **Resources and materials:** provision of a wide range of art materials and tools help to enable children to explore and express their ideas creatively and to engage in divergent thinking. Using natural materials, flexible learning spaces/areas, and open-ended materials stimulates creativity and divergent thinking. Drawing from the Reggio Emilia Approach, environments act as third teachers alongside educators and children, fostering collaboration, creativity, and exploration. Create dedicated spaces within settings and school-age care environments that are inviting and flexible—well stocked with art materials, musical instruments, and other artistic resources.
- In Early Years settings, **documentation** is used as a reflective tool: documentation involves capturing and showcasing children's learning experiences, thoughts, and creative expressions. It serves as a tool to record the learning process and helps educators, families, and children reflect on their journey. Documentation encourages critical thinking and self-reflection and nurtures children's ability to think divergently and creatively. It can enrich children's learning journeys in school-age care documentation, where children's creative processes and experiences are recorded and shared. It can

include photographs, videos, and written reflections documented by and with the children.

- **Project-based approaches** for early learning and school-age care children support children to explore topics of interest through various art forms. Projects can span over days, months, and even years. They allow for in-depth exploration, research, and creative expression.
- **Physical environment:** creating inspiring and inviting spaces that reflect the principles of Aistear, with a focus on documentation to share children's experiences.
- **Collaboration and reflection:** opportunities for educators to collaborate, share experiences, and reflect on their practice with peers, mentors, and experts in the field. It promotes ongoing professional growth and the exchange of ideas.
- Establish **partnerships** with local artists, musicians, and cultural organisations to provide workshops, performances, and exhibitions. These collaborations offer children exposure to different art forms and diverse cultural perspectives.
- **Family and community engagement.** Partnerships with families and the broader community to involve them in children's artistic experiences and ideas. Perhaps through exhibitions, celebrations, and making children visible. Fostering a sense of belonging and shared ownership.
- **Policy support:** recognition and support from policy makers to increase overall State investment in Early Years, which in turn will allow adequate resources, time, and professional development opportunities for educators on Aistear and Arts engagement.

With these supports, we can ensure educators have the tools and resources to implement a local curriculum effectively, leveraging the Arts to enhance children's learning and development within early learning and school-age care settings and spaces. Creativity involves a deep level of exploration and practical skills. It also requires a high level of focus and critical thinking. For educators, the goal is to create conditions where creativity can begin. When children are motivated to love learning, their creative mastery flourishes.

Conclusion

This is the perfect opportunity to ensure the principles for engaging with the Arts are embedded within the national curriculum framework, Aistear. As Aistear is currently under review, the timing of the draft principles is particularly advantageous. We already have a fit-for-purpose framework with which the draft principles work in synergy. Aistear is a robust framework for engaging with the Arts in Early Years and School Age Care, fostering creativity and divergent thinking.

Research consistently underscores the profound impact of Arts engagement on children's holistic development, while continuous professional learning enables educators to become more knowledgeable. By providing the necessary support, we can create an ecosystem where young learners can flourish creatively, collaboratively, and joyfully. Additionally, by integrating the Arts and principles of Aistear School Age Care programmes, we can create dynamic learning environments

that inspire children's curiosity, imagination, and self-expression—supporting children on their continuum and cyclical learning journey through childhood and into adulthood.

For further information about this Submission, please contact:

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