



Submission paper from Early Childhood Ireland on the review of Aistear.

6 May 2022

## Introduction

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading membership organisation in the early years sector, focused on our compelling vision of putting the child at the centre of our work. Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) has a strong track record which spans over five decades, and we currently have 3,900 members, supporting over 120,000 children and their families through preschool, afterschool, and full day-care provision nationwide. Our work includes quality enhancement, research, communications and publications, advocacy, training, support & information for a sector that employs over 30,000 people. The best interests of children are of the utmost importance to Early Childhood Ireland, and we work to ensure that children thrive in high-quality education and care settings.

Early Childhood Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the process of reviewing Aistear. Following a decade of Aistear being introduced, implemented, and reflected on, to varying degrees, it is timely to review and identify what has worked well and what aspects need updating. As stated by NCCA in the background paper to the review this is an *'opportunity to re-vitalise and re-invigorate interest in, appreciation for and use of the framework to enhance children's lived experiences in early childhood.'*<sup>1</sup> It is important that this opportunity is maximised to ensure that,

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<sup>1</sup> NCCA (2021), Updating Aistear, Rationale and process [https://ncca.ie/media/5053/updating-aistear-rationale-and-process-background-paper\\_2021.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/5053/updating-aistear-rationale-and-process-background-paper_2021.pdf) [accessed 4.5.2022]

as Aistear heads into its second decade, it continues to support, enhance and make children's learning and development through play visible and valued.

An update of Aistear is also an opportunity to have a renewed focus on and awareness of Aistear within the sector, as gaps continue to remain among individuals' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum framework. We believe this review provides an opportunity to ensure that Aistear is implemented to its fullest extent through a renewed focus on Aistear as a curriculum framework. The concept of Aistear being a framework rather than a curriculum is one that many educators still grapple with. The overall lack of training and sometimes inappropriate training has led to this confusion and lack of clarity. Furthermore, it is important that training, both initial and CPD, and resources deeply reflect the voice of children in practice every day. The review can be seen as an opportunity to address this issue.

In addition, it can also provide a renewed focus on promoting Aistear among parents.

### [This submission](#)

This submission will cover the following areas:

- Overall comments and observations on updating Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
- What is working well with the Aistear principles and what needs to be enhanced / updated
- What is working well with the themes and what might need to be enhanced or updated
- What is working well with the guidelines and what might need to be enhanced or updated

## Overall comments and observations

The centrality of the view of children as being competent and confident learners has always been a major strength of Aistear, along with its focus on play, the value of relationships and the importance of partnership with parents. Prior to the development of Aistear, very little was in place in the Irish context in relation to planning and assessment. Documentation generally took the form of tick lists of what topics had been covered by children, these topics were likely to have been chosen by the adults, with little or no consultation with children and often these topics did not reflect children's lives and their own experiences. Also common were developmental milestones check lists, that similarly were very one-dimensional and did not convey any richness or evidence of the complexity of what and how children learn. The advent of Aistear provided a new lens through which to look at children's learning and development. Our learning about other approaches to documentation that are more developmental in nature, more relevant to children's lives and that took a more dispositional approach have enabled a big shift away from check lists and very static curriculum development. It is important to ensure that Aistear reflects an emphasis on 'embedded listening' and not 'knowledge accumulation' (Arnott & Wall, 2022) we can now think of the next big steps on this continuum. <sup>2</sup>

The introduction to the NCCA's *Updating Aistear, Rationale and Process* paper outlines many of the developments in the sector since October 2009. At that time, the Child Care Pre-School Services Regulations had been relatively recently updated in 2006. Since then, the 2016 version has been developed, the Quality and Regulatory Framework was developed and launched, and a new review of the Regulations is currently underway. The ECCE scheme has been introduced and extended. *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* has been published and is being implemented. The Department of Education commenced inspections of ECCE settings and will shortly expand to include all settings for children under six years. This is a welcome development, given the vital

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<sup>2</sup> Arnott, L and Wall K, (2022): *The Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood An International Exploration*. Routledge, London.

importance of the care and nurturing of children under three years. The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines have been updated and launched. Better Start and AIM have been developed to provide support and quality guidance. The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years Programme (LINC) and other CPD and training has been provided to support reflection and practice about equality, diversity and inclusion. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide<sup>3</sup> was created in 2015 with the aim of supporting educators to use Aistear and Síolta together to reflect on and develop quality in their settings. The Mo Scéal materials have been researched and developed to support more supportive transitions between settings, specifically between pre-school and primary school.

Allied with all these legislative, policy and guidance changes in the early learning and care context in Ireland, the qualification profile of educators in the sector has undergone a major shift. According to the Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile report 2019/2020, 27% of staff working directly with children now hold a qualification at NFQ Level 7 or higher and some have Level 9.<sup>4</sup> At least a Level 5 is now a minimum qualification requirement for educators to work in services, and Level 6 is required for services to receive additional public funding for the role of room leader. When Aistear was launched in 2009 the number of educators qualified beyond Level 5 was substantially lower, and there was no legal minimum qualification requirement.

Aistear is underpinned by much valuable research, for example, the four background papers and the portraiture study. This work could be foregrounded again along with more recent research, such as the paper by Dr. Geraldine French, (NCCA, 2019)<sup>5</sup> to ensure that students and educators 'new' to Aistear can be aware of the solid research base on which it was built.

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<sup>3</sup> NCCA (2015), Aistear Síolta Practice Guide [www.aistearsiolta.ie](http://www.aistearsiolta.ie) [accessed 5.5.2022]

<sup>4</sup> Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile 2019/2020. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/66671-annual-early-years-sector-profile-report-201920/> [accessed 3.5.2022]

<sup>5</sup> French, Dr. G: Key Elements of Good Practice to Support the Learning and Development of Children from Birth to Three NCCA (2019)

## What is working well with the Aistear principles and what needs to be enhanced / updated

The principles underpinning Aistear are still relevant and should be retained. If anything, in a review, the principles need to be restated more strongly and focused upon. In Early Childhood Ireland's experience achieved through the documentation we receive from our National Awards applications and mentoring and validating on the Siolta QAP, alongside the information we receive through supporting our members' practice, sometimes educators can focus on the themes, aims and learning goals without adequate reflection on the principles. Given more recent research and developments since the launch of Aistear, some of the principles could be made more robust. An example relates to children's participation. In 2021, the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making was launched and in 2021 the European Commission published our Strategy on the Rights of the Child, with its thematic area, Child Participation in Political and Democratic Life<sup>6</sup>. Being enabled to participate is a key part of children's citizenship and this should be expanded upon in the review. In a recent *ChildLinks*<sup>7</sup> article Sandra O'Neill discusses framing listening as relational and responsive and that 'encouraging agency is viewed as a tool to support participation and belonging.

## What is working well with the themes and what might need to be enhanced or updated

The four themes are fundamental to how we support children's learning and development. Encouraging educators, and parents, to see what children are playing, saying and interested in through the lens of well-being, identity and belonging, exploring and thinking and communicating is in itself more supportive of children's

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child\\_rights\\_strategy\\_version\\_with\\_visuals3.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_rights_strategy_version_with_visuals3.pdf) [Accessed 6.5.2022]

<sup>7</sup> O'Neill, Sandra (2022), Barnardos, Childlinks journal [https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/bitstream/handle/20.500.13085/173/childlinks\\_issue\\_3\\_2018\\_0271.pdf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/bitstream/handle/20.500.13085/173/childlinks_issue_3_2018_0271.pdf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) [Accessed 5.5.2022]

development than the traditional academic focus. While this shift of focus from didactic, academic learning is obviously important for all children under six, it is especially so for children under three. In Early Childhood Ireland's experience in engaging with our members, many educators understand the vital need for what Dr. Geraldine French describes as slow relational pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> As Aistear frames this pedagogical approach in settings, it should be clearer, through exemplars, than it is presently, that relationships matter, that nurturing matters, and that taking time to just be with children is essential. This can provide educators with the confidence to defend this approach when perhaps parents or others seek evidence of shapes, colours, etc. being taught. Developing educators' confidence and knowledge to be able to articulate their practices and approaches are as important for those working with children under three years as for those over three. *First 5s* welcome policy that national ECEC quality incentives and supports will be available equally for rooms with babies and young children and rooms with preschool children, currently driven by the extension of the early education inspection model to all children from birth and the new core funding available to employ graduates across the child age spectrum in ECEC services, means that Aistear should be strengthened in terms of exemplars and emphasis in relation to the curriculum framework for children from birth.

Early Childhood Ireland recommends that the NCCA consider reducing the level of detail in the learning goals in Aistear. In Early Childhood Ireland's experience of supporting our members to frame their practice using Aistear, early years educators often use tick lists to document achieving these goals. This has also given rise to companies creating stickers, software etc, using the 'lists', which are then sold to services as being attractive for parents as they 'assess learning'. Because there are ninety-six learning goals in Aistear, the emphasis can be placed on that level of detail, rather than on capturing the value of Aistear's themes and aims: Simplifying the 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. The

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<sup>8</sup> French, Dr. Geraldine. Slow relational pedagogy podcast, Early Childhood Ireland [Slow relational pedagogy \(buzzsprout.com\)](https://www.buzzsprout.com) [accessed 5.5.2022]

*Aistear Siolta Practice Guide* discusses the concept of an 'emergent and inquiry-based curriculum'. Encouraging a focus on the essence of the theme and making the evidence of this visible is a more authentic way to document. Encouraging this developmental, narrative form of documentation and assessment is very important.

Continually 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. Reducing reliance on observation templates would be an important step in this regard. Many people tend to approach templates like assignments that must be completed, rather than a set of prompts that may or may not be relevant. The work of Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee leads the way in this regard, and the richness of the documentation their Learning Stories demonstrate is much more illuminating and meaningful than a series of templated tick lists.<sup>9</sup>

A member of ECI whom we consulted with to inform this submission to the NCCA said:

'In terms of the themes, we don't do the tick box. We feel what is really happening for the child. What is the child experiencing? That is what we would be documenting'.

The communicating theme needs to incorporate the Reggio Emilia concept of the 100 languages of children, making very visible our understanding that children communicate in myriad ways.

Similarly, in technology, so much has changed since Aistear was developed. We now see technology as a valued way in which children can learn and develop. Assistive technology has been transformative and the use of digital devices such as cameras, microscopes, and webcams enable children to be creative and involved in their

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<sup>9</sup> Carr, M and Lee, W (2019): Learning Stories in Practice. Sage Publications Ltd

learning as never before. Advances such as these should also be reflected in the themes and sample learning experiences.

### What is working well with the guidelines and what might need to be enhanced or updated

The information in the guidelines is excellent. However, this information is sometimes overlooked as the themes tend to take prominence. As one Early Childhood Ireland member says, 'I think one of the problems is that people have relied on the themes and not addressed the principles, guidelines for good practice, I think they are really strong'.

The areas of transitions and environment may be areas that could be expanded on in the guidelines section. As previously mentioned, Mo Scéal is a valuable resource for children, educators, parents and teachers to use to make the transition from pre-school to primary school a more supported process for children. Much work has been done in this regard and capturing some of that in the updated Aistear would be beneficial. It would help to ensure a continuum of Aistear between early childhood settings, the child's home and primary school, as the importance of well-being would be seen, visible and implemented in all aspects of children's lives.

Aistear, in 2009, did not elaborate in a specific way on the learning environment, though its importance was implicit. Since then, our understanding of the role of the environment in what and how children learn has deepened even more. The description of the environment, inside and outside as the 'third teacher' has almost become cliched. However, it is true that the spaces, resources, and equipment in settings have a major role to play in how children play and learn. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide provides resources to assist educators to reflect on their spaces and enable them to identify what is working well and to make any changes they may feel are needed. Updating and incorporating some of this material into the guidelines would give prominence and guidance on how environments can be that 'third teacher'.



Many educators in Ireland have always seen the outdoors as a key area in which children can explore and think, feel calm, safe and secure and in which relationships can be nurtured. Since COVID-19 many more educators have seen the benefits of spending increased time outdoors. The themes and associated learning experiences could be updated to reflect this, especially in challenging or adventurous play.

Children need opportunities to challenge themselves. Greenman (2007:306) writes:

‘Children are driven by nature to seek challenges, that is how they learn ... If there are no challenges on a playground children will create their own acts of daring or experimentation that can result in harm’.<sup>10</sup>

The provision of spaces where children can explore and challenge themselves is very important. Reflecting this in the update of Aistear would support educators to provide for this kind of play even further. However, it is important, we feel, that environments are considered as a whole space, rather than outdoors being seen as separate to indoors.

The guideline relating to parents needs to be updated. Prior to COVID-19 many settings had built incrementally on their work building partnership with parents. However, the pandemic years have unfortunately set that back in some cases. Practical ideas and suggestions on developing partnerships with families, in a reciprocal manner, where both parties are equal partners is needed. The Ireland of today is vastly different in terms of the diversity of families that educators may be working with. Supporting them to value this diversity, while providing practical ideas from practice to enable them to overcome challenges (perhaps around language for example) and to celebrate multilingualism and diversity would be useful and timely.

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<sup>10</sup> Greenman, Jim (2007): *Caring Spaces, Learning Places*, Exchange Press Ltd

## Other comments

In our discussions regarding the review of Aistear, internally and with members of Early Childhood Ireland, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide came up frequently. It is seen as a tool where links between Aistear and Síolta can be made clear, more practical examples and resources can be included and this can ease the burden of how to interpret Aistear. This could also be supported by the inclusion of a section on pedagogical approaches, with perhaps examples of how some approaches can be used within the Aistear framework.

A view was expressed by one of our members that Aistear and Síolta need to be combined and interlinked more, reducing the number of frameworks and guidance documents that educators need to be aware of. This has happened in Australia, where the quality and regulatory framework were merged, thus making it easier to move beyond compliance to a more holistic, child-centred place of quality, as educators didn't have to be concerned with the competing priorities of different early years inspectorates.

## Leading Practice

Within early childhood education and care in Ireland, it is recognised that educators cultivate positive experiences for children through pedagogy. However, training and resources to date have not supported leaderful practice or the 'pedagogical leader'. Aistear as a curriculum framework supports educators to develop a local curriculum to best meet the needs of children and families within a setting. But there must be a commitment to continually build the professional development of educators and enhance their capacity to lead practice to ensure each curriculum is positively influenced by effective leadership. This is particularly pertinent to educators working with babies and young children, whose highest level of qualification is more likely than preschool rooms to be levels 5 or 6.

It is important to ensure all stakeholders including early years educators, further and higher education tutors and lecturers, and anyone providing mentoring, has up-to-date training and that this implementation is in some way monitored. Anecdotally, we often hear from students who do not cover the national frameworks in any detail

in their courses. This does not bode well for the future implementation of Aistear. As course outlines and syllabi are revised Aistear must be an integral part of the delivery of all courses, including ongoing professional development.<sup>11</sup>

## Equality and Diversity

The inclusion of the area of equality and diversity in the original Aistear guidelines has been a vital part of ensuring that all children and their families are considered and included in how we develop our curriculum. An important aspect of the update is to develop the aspect of authentic inclusion, to ensure that children's views are actively sought and included, as discussed previously. Arnott and Wall (2022)<sup>12</sup> discuss the concept of social pedagogy bringing into focus the need to view work with children as an ethical practice or way of being where communication in all forms is key. It takes a nurturing approach. This idea of a nurturing approach is integral to Aistear and the update can bring this forward making it explicit around inclusion.

## Self-Regulation

Aistear supports the idea of the holistic child and self-regulation. It is important to ensure that we emphasise that self-regulation cannot happen without a calm brain, calming an uncalm brain. A dysregulated child needs a tuned in, regulated and responsive adult. It is important that Aistear supports educators to develop a local curriculum that is responsive to the well-being of children, that is based on the most up-to-date research in neuroscience and that adults recognise the role they play in regulation. We need to ensure self-regulation is dependent on co-regulation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Early Childhood Ireland (2020) Inspiring Leadership in Early Learning and Care

<https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/learning/elearning/continuous-professional-learning/> [accessed 5.5.2022]

<sup>12</sup> Arnott, L and Wall K, (2022): The Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood An International Exploration. Routledge, London.

<sup>13</sup> Early Childhood Ireland, (2020) Mental Health and Well being series, Self- regulation

<https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/learning/elearning/mental-health-and-well-being/> [accessed 5.5.2022]

## Concluding comments

Ireland has been fortunate that play has been recognised as the key way in which children learn. Aistear encapsulated this philosophy and provided evidence for it. The play principle in Aistear states that, 'children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop socially, be creative and imaginative and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and thinkers.' This emphasis on play has been so important in helping us all in the ECEC sector to counter the academic focus we understand is stifling creativity and learning internationally. This review of Aistear is a valuable opportunity to refresh the framework and ensure that new research is reflected in the early childhood curriculum framework to take us into the future.