



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

*The Story of ¹Aistear: the Early
Childhood Curriculum Framework:
Partnership in Action*

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¹ *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* used to be called *The Framework for Early Learning*.

Abstract

This paper looks at the background to and the development of the *Framework For Early Learning*², a curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years. The paper explores the partnership through which this took place. It describes the consultative process the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook in 2004 and how this influenced and guided the development of the Framework. It also explains how the early childhood sector supported and provided expertise to the on-going development of the Framework. The paper presents a brief outline of the contents of the *Framework for Early Learning* marking eight years of collaborative work between the NCCA, children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, early childhood agencies/organisations and relevant government departments.

² *The Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear* in 2009

Introduction

The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* marks an exciting milestone in early years education and care in Ireland. It is the outcome of eight years of partnership between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the early years sector. In developing the Framework the NCCA placed a strong emphasis on consultation and on developing partnerships with different interest groups. Pugh and De’Ath (1989 p. 5) describe partnership ‘as a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability’. There are four partnership pillars underpinning the *Framework for Early Learning*. These are:

- the expertise and support of the Technical Working Group and the Early Childhood Committee;
- the consultation findings (NCCA, 2005);
- the portraiture study (NCCA, 2007);
- the four background papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; and Dunphy 2008).

These partnerships have led to the development of a curriculum framework that is unique to Ireland and which it is hoped will help all children under six years to become competent and confident learners. The *Framework for Early Learning* builds on and supports many of the other important developments for children under six years in Ireland. These include

- the *Childcare Act* (Department of Health and Science, 1991)

- Ireland's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 (United Nations, 1989)
- the *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Forum Secretariat, 1998)
- *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999a)
- the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b)
- the formulation of guidelines for the protection and welfare of children, *Children First* (Department of Health and Children, 1999) and *Our Duty to Care* (Department of Health and Children, 2002)
- the *National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives* (Department of Health and Science, 2000)
- *Ready, steady, play! A National Play Policy* (National Children's Office, 2004)
- *Early Childhood Care and Education Report 31* (National Economic and Social Forum, 2005)
- *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 1996/2006)
- *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006).

The impetus for the Framework came ten years ago and it is to this we turn now.

Policy Background

In 1998 for the first time ever a national forum on early childhood education was held in Ireland. Amongst the issues raised at the Forum was concern over the lack of a national curriculum for young children outside of the primary school sector (including

those under the age of three years). The White Paper on Early Childhood Education *'Ready to Learn'* (1999) which emerged from the Forum recommended the development of national curriculum guidelines for the early years sector. The aim of doing this was to ensure that early childhood provision would be structured, developmental and of high quality. The guidelines were required not to prescribe specific curricular details but were to outline instead the broad principles of early childhood while giving individual providers the discretion to design and modify their particular curriculum. It was suggested that the guidelines would have regard to providing a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of children's development and that the need for learning through play be taken into account. The inclusion of appropriate teaching methodologies was also recommended.

In addition, the development of a *'specimen' curriculum for pre-school children, which will provide more specific detail on content and methodology* (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 57) was recommended. This specimen curriculum could be used by providers if they so wished. For children under three years a less formal curriculum was to be developed, emphasising how children learn and how adults can help. Little reference was made to children aged four to six years as the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science 1999b) for children from four to twelve years was due to be published.

The NCCA

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body that advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood, primary and post-primary education as set out in Article 41-1[b] of the

Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1998). Beginning the work in early childhood education the NCCA developed a background paper, *Early Childhood Framework for Learning* (NCCA 2001). The paper presented an initial exploration of the curriculum context related to early childhood, in Ireland and internationally. It also mapped the way forward for the NCCA's work in developing an early years curriculum. In that paper, the NCCA recommended to the Minister for Education and Science that rather than having three separate curricula, (one for birth to three year olds, one for three to four years olds, and one for four to six year olds in the primary school) a single national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years should be developed. The Minister accepted the NCCA's advice and the NCCA began developing the Framework for all children from birth to six years of age. The Framework is relevant to all adults who care for and educate children in their early years – parentsⁱ and practitionersⁱⁱ.

The Consultative Process

The NCCA undertakes its work in close partnership with the stakeholders in education and works through representative committee structures. Consultation is a central principle of the work. In order to guide the preparatory work for the curriculum a technical working group was established. This Group comprised nine experts from the field of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

The Technical Working Group guided the development of NCCA's consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* which was published in 2004. This document outlined the vision, aims, and model for developing a curriculum for all children in Ireland from birth to six years. The nine key ideas presented in the

document provided the focus for the extensive consultation process that the NCCA then undertook. The early childhood sector was invited to provide feedback on the document in a number of ways. Response forms were available online and in hardcopy. Four regional seminars were held in Cork, Dublin, Galway and Monaghan. A number of briefings were held with organisations and agencies. Written submissions were made by a number of individual organisations and individuals. An invitational seminar was held in Dublin Castle on December 9th 2004 to explore some of the findings from the consultation to date and to gather further feedback.

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Consultation Findings

In May 2005, the NCCA published the document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report*. In this document the early childhood sector expressed broad agreement with the vision and aims outlined for the Framework. Alongside this the sector also identified a number of areas which required further consideration. The areas can be grouped under three headings: the Framework's philosophy, vision and aims; the Framework's contents; and the process of developing and supporting the Framework. These are presented in detail below.

The Framework's Philosophy, Vision and Aims

- Making the philosophical underpinnings of the Framework, including theories of learning and development more explicit.
- Looking at the relationship between care and education within the Framework to emphasise the educative nature of care and the caring nature of education.

- Embracing the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly within the vision to highlight the early years as a crucial time for learning to respect and understand difference as a natural part of life.
- Emphasising the image of the child as an active learner and contributor.
- Exploring further how the Framework's themes might connect more readily with the developmental domains used in both the Primary School Curriculum and in much curriculum guidance used outside the formal education system.

The Framework's Contents

- Further elaborating on the crucial role of play in the holistic development of the child, including the value of outdoor play in particular.
- Placing a greater focus on the creative arts.
- Emphasising the development of first and second language acquisition and the status of Gaeilge.
- Examining the appropriate role of assessment (methods and tools) in early learning and providing explicit advice for adults in how to support their child's learning and development.
- Differentiating the contents of the Framework to cater for the range of adults responsible for children's early learning. This accessibility issue was highlighted as being particularly pertinent in the context of supporting parents as early educators.

The Process of Developing and Supporting the Framework

- Including the voices of children and parents in the Framework.

- Exploring how the Framework could provide sufficient information to childminders and practitioners to support them in their work with children, while avoiding the development of a Framework which would be prescriptive.
- Expressing concern about the interpretation and implementation of the Framework given the diversity of expertise and experience among those in the early childhood sector. The feedback highlighted that the extent of professional development and support provided will significantly impact on the success of the Framework.

The consultation findings provided direction and guidance for the NCCA's ongoing work in developing the Framework. Once the consultation ended the early childhood sector continued to be involved in the development of the Framework through an early childhood committee and through a research study.

Early Childhood Committee

Following the consultation, the Early Childhood Committee (ECC) was set up with a brief to support the NCCA's work in developing the Framework. The Committee had 15 members comprising representatives from the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, government departments concerned with the early years, the Health Service Executive, the National Parent's Council (Primary), the Irish National Teacher's Organisation, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, Foras na Gaeilge and school management bodies. The committee provided ongoing support and expertise from multiple perspectives.

Research Study

In designing the consultation on the document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA planned to undertake a research study to include the voices and experiences of children in the Framework. To realise this, in 2006 the NCCA undertook a portraiture study. Portraiture is a form of qualitative research inquiry and involves developing a picture with words of children's experiences. The purpose of the study was to see what children liked doing, where they liked to be and who they liked to be with. The NCCA worked with 12 children in 11 settings around the country. A range of settings was involved – a home, a childminder's home, a Montessori pre-school, two nurseries, a crèche, a naíonra (an Irish medium pre-school), an Early Start setting, a Traveller pre-school and two infant classes in primary schools. Four girls and eight boys took part in the study and the children ranged in age from nine months to almost six years. A number of key messages were highlighted through the study. These included the importance of holistic learning and development through play and first-hand experiences, the importance of relationships, especially the crucial role of parents, the power of communication, the importance of a sense of identity and belonging and the benefits of observing and listening to children. These key messages have informed the development of the Framework. The portraiture study called *Listening for Children's Stories: Children as Partners in the Framework for Early Learning* is available to download on the NCCA website (ncca.ie/earlylearning). Three additional papers have been written about the study. These are: *Children's voices in the Framework for Early Learning* (Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, Brennan, Maxwell, 2007); *The NCCA's Portraiture Study: Key messages* (Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, 2008); and *Listening for Children's*

Stories: The NCCA's Portraiture Study (Brennan, Daly, Forster, Maxwell, Murphy, O'Connor, Sweeney 2008).

Background Papers³

The consultation feedback indicated the importance of documenting the theory 'behind' the Framework. In order to do this, the NCCA commissioned a series of four background papers. The papers were written by experts in early childhood care and education in Ireland. This work represents another element of partnership⁴, partnership with the academic community. The papers and their executive summaries are available to download at www.ncca.ie/backgroundpapers. The papers are

- *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care* (Hayes, 2007)
- *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007)
- *Play as a context for early learning and development* (Kernan, 2007)
- *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* (Dunphy, 2008).

Much of the research used to develop the *Framework for Early Learning* is summarised in these papers. A short synopsis of each of the papers is outlined below.

Paper 1: *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care*

In this background paper, Dr Nóirín Hayes (2007) looks at how the development of the education and childcare sectors in Ireland as 'separate' streams creates challenges in working towards quality early years provision. The paper states that the independent development of the educational and childcare sectors has been identified as one of the key difficulties facing the reform and development of early education in

³ The Background papers are now called Research Papers

Ireland. The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often, contentious concepts of education and care, which are central to the provision of early childhood education. The paper does this by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular the paper considers how approaches to understanding the concepts of education and care impact on the lives of children from birth to six years through their influence on policy, curriculum and practice, and professional development in early childhood care and education (ECCE). In summary, the paper highlights how early years learning environments that are well planned, with a balance between care and education and have well-trained, confident and supported staff lead to positive outcomes for children.

Paper 2: *Children's early learning and development*

In this background paper, Geraldine French (2007) essentially responds to the question - *How should we envision and understand the child as a young learner?* The paper begins by outlining the context for early childhood care and education in Ireland, referring to our economic and social climate, the increasingly multicultural nature of Irish society and relevant legislation and policy. Drawing on centuries of research, the modern day view of the child is one of him/her being a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; a young citizen and participator in many contexts (family, early childhood setting, community and society); actively learning in reciprocal relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present with a focus on *being* rather than *becoming*. In summary, the paper emphasises the importance of meaningful experiences, nurturing, responsive relationships and play and language as priorities for supporting children's early learning and development.

Paper 3: *Play as a context for early learning and development*

In this background paper, Dr Margaret Kernan (2007) addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in early learning and development. The paper seeks both to re-examine the ‘taken for granted’ position of play as central to early childhood curricula, and to conceptualise a rigorous understanding of a ‘pedagogy of play’. A key message in this paper is that all children from birth to six years have a right to play and to benefit from their play experiences. The paper refers to the many types of play—exploratory, constructive, creative, pretend, fantasy, socio-dramatic, physical, and language and word play. Another message in this paper is that the physical environment, the people and objects in it and the time and space available influence how and what children play and the benefits they get from play. Children’s individual characteristics and backgrounds also influence how and what they play. The paper also describes the adult’s important role in supporting and extending play. In summary, the paper stresses that good quality play experiences impact positively on children’s learning and development.

Paper 4: *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment*

In this background paper, Dr Elizabeth Dunphy (2008) responds to the question – *In the early years what should we assess and how?* The paper begins by exploring the interrelatedness of teaching, learning and assessment. It also describes the practice and legislative landscape in which assessment takes place in Ireland. The paper outlines the characteristics and complexity of early learning and identifies key implications for assessment. The paper describes assessment as collecting,

documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop pictures of children as learners. It suggests that formative assessment helps adults to ‘see’ what children are thinking and feeling, what they understand and can do. The adult uses the assessment information to plan future learning experiences, and to make learning interesting and successful for children. The adult assesses by watching, listening, talking with and empathising with children. Over time, children too can assess their own learning. The paper refers to a narrative approach to assessment—describing early learning using notes, stories, samples of ‘work’ and photographs. This offers a way of building a rich picture of early learning and development over time. The paper highlights how this approach can be demanding yet rewarding. Finally, the paper maps the way forward in developing formative assessment practice by identifying the importance of professional development opportunities during both pre- and in-service. In summary, the paper emphasises the importance of assessment in supporting children’s early learning and development.

Contents of the *Framework for Early Learning*

The consultation findings (NCCA, 2005), the portraiture study (NCCA, 2007) and the four background papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; and Dunphy, 2008) along with the expertise of the Early Childhood Committee and Technical Working Group have helped shape the *Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework will be presented in two parts (See Table 1). Part 1 will outline the underlying principles and themes of the Framework while Part 2 will provide a series of practical guidelines. A user guide to help adults use the Framework will also be included.

Table 1: Contents of the Framework for Early Learning

Part 1: Principles and Themes	Part 2: Guidelines on good practice
Principles Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Well-Being</i> ▪ <i>Identity and Belonging</i> ▪ <i>Communicating</i> ▪ <i>Exploring and Thinking</i> 	Partnerships with parents Interactions Play Assessment
User Guide	

The *Framework for Early Learning* is based on 12 early childhood principles which will be presented in Part 1 of the Framework in three groups. The principles will be presented using a theoretical or philosophical statement followed by a detailed interpretation from the child’s perspective of what this requires of the adult in practice.

Table 2: Principles underlying the Framework

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The child’s uniqueness ▪ Equality and diversity ▪ Children as citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relationships ▪ The adult’s role ▪ Parents and family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Holistic learning and development ▪ Active learning ■ Play and hands-on experiences ▪ Communication and language ▪ Relevant and meaningful experiences ▪ The Learning Environment
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In addition Part 1 will present the themes of the Framework and will describe the types of experiences which are important for children in early childhood. All learning

is connected and different aspects of children’s learning and development often take place at the same time. Rather than looking at physical or intellectual development in isolation or at curriculum subjects like English or Visual Arts the Framework will use four broad themes that connect and overlap with each other to outline children’s learning and development. The themes will be – *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking* (see Table 3). Together the themes will offer a way to plan for and support children’s learning and development so that they benefit from positive and enjoyable experiences in their early childhood years.

Using the four themes the Framework will focus on developing children’s dispositions and skills, nurturing attitudes and values, and building knowledge and understanding of their world. The themes will be presented using aims and broad learning goals. Sample activities will be used to illustrate practice in three overlapping age stages - for babies (birth to 18 months), toddlers (12 to 36 months) and young children (2 ½ to 6 years).

Table 3: The Framework’s themes

Well-being	Identity and Belonging	Communicating	Exploring and Thinking
... is about children being confident, happy and healthy within themselves and in their families, communities and society.	... is about children developing positive feelings about who they are and having a sense of belonging in their families and communities.	... is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.	... is about children investigating and making sense of the world.

The second part of the Framework will include guidelines that describe good practice.

These guidelines will focus on:

- developing partnerships with parents and families;
- interacting with children;
- learning through play;
- using assessment to support early learning and development.

A series of reflection prompts to help adults to think about their pedagogy will also be included as will sample activities to illustrate key messages from the guidelines.

Connections

The *Framework for Early Learning* will build on and support many of the developments that are already in place in Ireland for children under six years. The Framework has been developed through widespread consultation and negotiation with the early childhood sector. This has culminated in a Framework that will be descriptive, practical and reflective of children, families and practitioners and their respective settings and experiences in Ireland. The *Framework for Early Learning* will allow for individual interpretation and local decision-making informed by common aims and goals for all children. The Framework will complement existing policy, legislation and structures already in place such as the *Revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 2006), *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b).

A key piece of legislation for all practitioners outside the primary school sector is the *Revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and

Children, 2006). The Framework will help practitioners to implement these regulations, in particular Regulation 5. This regulation emphasises the importance of providing appropriate learning opportunities, activities and interactions for children to support their learning, development and well-being. The Framework will help practitioners to provide children with these experiences.

The Framework also has strong links with *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. In particular, the Framework will help practitioners with the *Síolta* standards related to curriculum, environments, identity and belonging, partnership with parents, interactions and play. The NCCA and the CECDE worked collaboratively on an audit to identify similarities and differences between the two frameworks and to show how the two could be used together by practitioners to enhance their early years practice. The audit was used to inform the User Guide for the Framework which includes sample plans using the Framework and *Síolta*. A similar audit was also carried out on the Framework and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b). This audit shows how the Framework and the *Primary School Curriculum* can be used together by teachers to plan for, teach, assess and review their work with junior and senior infants. This audit was also used to inform the Framework's User Guide.

The Framework also complements and supports the many different curricula being used in settings around the country. It can be used to support and extend children's experiences while still maintaining the particular ethos of the setting. Together with appropriate resources, the *Framework for Early Learning* can make a positive

contribution to the experiences of children under the age of six in Ireland and can be a useful resource to all adults who educate and care for them.

Conclusion

The publication of the *Framework for Early Learning* will mark an important milestone for early years education and care in Ireland. It will be the outcome of a partnership between the NCCA, children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, and relevant agencies, organisations and government departments. This partnership has enabled the NCCA to draw upon and build on the expertise and commitment within the early years sector and has culminated in a curriculum framework that will help all children under age six to reach their full potential as young learners.

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ⁱ The term *parent* refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardian(s).

ⁱⁱ The term *practitioners* refers to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings including childminding settings and infant classes in primary schools. Practitioners have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.