



NCCA

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

Updating *Aistear*

Rationale and process

May 2021

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Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body of the Department of Education and Skills and advises the Minister for Education on:

- curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools.
- assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.

The NCCA has initiated an updating of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), which is now eleven years old. Prior to the arrival of the coronavirus and its impact on the education sector, NCCA had planned to begin this process in early 2020. Necessary adjustments to NCCA's Plan of Work in 2020 meant the updating process was postponed but we are again ready to embark on this work.

This short document outlines NCCA's current plans for updating *Aistear*, including a brief consideration of some aspects of the changes in the national context that have occurred since the framework was published. The central tenet of the updating process is that *Aistear* is fundamental to children's lived experiences of early childhood education in Ireland and has become the bedrock of good practice in many settings. It is crucial that we nurture and develop the early childhood curriculum framework into the future to ensure its continued relevance and impact in enhancing quality provision for our youngest children.

It is important to emphasise from the outset that there is no intention to conduct a major review of *Aistear*. Rather, 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. For example, a recent review of international early years and primary curricula has indicated that *Aistear's* four interconnected themes of *Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating;* and *Exploring and Thinking* continue to describe children's learning and development appropriately (O'Donnell, 2018). It is also an important opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on the changes that have happened in the past eleven years and to see what implications, if any, these have for the framework. The paper begins with a brief

review of curriculum and related developments which have shaped young children's learning experiences in the years since 2009. This is followed by a rationale for the updating process with reference to national developments in early childhood policy and practice. An overview of the plans for the updating process is then provided, followed by concluding remarks.

Background

Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years and is based on a view of children as competent and confident learners. It supports adults in the provision of appropriately challenging, motivating and enjoyable learning experiences within loving relationships. *Aistear* is underpinned by 12 principles and describes learning and development using four interconnected themes – *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating* and *Exploring and Thinking*. The framework can be used in a range of settings and suggests sample learning opportunities and experiences for three overlapping age-ranges. A series of guidelines on partnership with parents, interactions, play and assessment accompany the framework.

In 2001, following on from the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999), NCCA was asked to develop a framework to support early learning and development and did so over the next eight years through a partnership with the early childhood sector in Ireland (Daly and Forster, 2009). This partnership involved children, parents, practitioners, teachers, training and education institutions, early childhood organisations and relevant government departments. The processes involved in developing *Aistear* included work with settings and schools, consultation (including consultation with children through the portraiture study), research reviews and deliberation. Over the years NCCA has been involved in a number of targeted efforts undertaken to support engagement and familiarisation with the framework.

Early childhood provision is also guided by *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) which was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) on behalf of the Department of Education and Science (DES). Its purpose is to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in out-of-home settings for all children aged birth to six years. Many of *Síolta's* Standards relate to curriculum and the frameworks are interconnected.

Rationale

There has been considerable change in the context for the provision of early childhood education in Ireland since the publication of *Aistear* in October 2009 in terms of national developments, policies and strategies, curriculum and assessment developments and children's lived experiences. Significant developments have emerged through policy formulation by, and initiatives of, the Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE). Some notable changes include the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme¹, the emergence of an increasingly qualified workforce, the establishment of Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service and the introduction of Early-Years Education Inspections (EYEI) by DE inspectors. In addition, the increased diversity across Irish society is reflected in the lives of the children who are at the centre of early childhood provision. What follows offers some examples of developments that contribute to the rationale for updating *Aistear* but is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all relevant innovations in the period since the framework was published.

Policy

This brief overview will focus on three initiatives in particular that directly reference *Aistear*.

- *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020* (DES, 2011) has a strong focus on the importance of *Aistear* in, for example, shaping the curriculum for infant classes and the updating of the framework will consider this and other *Aistear*-related actions.
- *The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) 2014 – 2020* (DES, 2014) and the allied *Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan Q4 2018 – Q4 2020*, provides a framework to support the contribution that early childhood education

¹ Early Childhood Care and Education Programme – Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's programme to provide early learning for children from 2 years and 8 months of age until their transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of the preschool year) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019).

can make towards a more sustainable future. The *Action Plan* includes a reference to an audit of ESD as part of the update to *Aistear*.

- *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018) states that a review of both *Aistear* and *Síolta* will happen over the lifetime of the Strategy and it will be important that synergy between the two frameworks is maintained.
- There are a number of other policy developments, such as the *Policy on Gaeltacht Education/ Polasáí don Oideachas Gaeltachta 2017-2022* (DES, 2016) and the *STEM Education Policy Statement* (DES, 2017) that will also be relevant to the updating process.

Curriculum and assessment developments

There have been many changes in the curriculum and assessment space since 2009 and one of the priorities for the NCCA is synergy, consistency and continuity across its curriculum and assessment development work from early childhood to the end of post-primary education. *Aistear* was Ireland's first curriculum framework, followed by the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015) and the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020). Consultation is underway on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* which sets out a vision for primary education, providing a clear description of the proposed structure and content for the redeveloped curriculum. Since the publications of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, two years of universal preschool provision through the ECCE programme has led to changes in what children experience before beginning primary school. The *Primary Language Curriculum / Curaclam Teanga Bunscoile (PLC/CTB)* (DES, 2019a) states that the language curriculum for junior and senior infants builds upon the principles of *Aistear*. In addition, the PLC/CTB includes a reference to appropriately playful learning experiences as the context for young children's language learning (DES, 2019). *Aistear* is a critical part of the curriculum and assessment infrastructure in the education system, and in the updating process, it will be vital to consider how curriculum and assessment continuity is conceptualised, articulated and achieved.

Stakeholders

Initiatives by both DCEDIY and DE since 2009 have led to an expansion of *Aistear's* stakeholder base and there are now stakeholders such as Better Start, DE Early Years

Inspectors and providers of degree and training programmes that were not active when the framework was developed. It is now opportune to hear from these stakeholders on their experiences with *Aistear*, as well as reflecting with those that were involved in the development of *Aistear* in the years leading up to 2009.

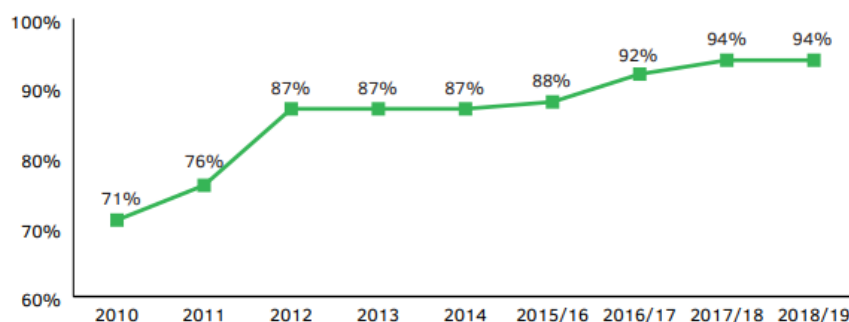
Aistear Síolta Practice Guide

As part of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI), led by the DE in collaboration with DCEDIY, NCCA and Better Start, the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (ASPG)* is part of the national quality improvement agenda and has particular relevance to the rationale for updating *Aistear*. Now that aspects of the early childhood curriculum framework have been illustrated and developed through the ASPG resources, the views of stakeholders vis-à-vis issues of duplication and/or opportunities for streamlining the text will be sought.

Workforce development

Significant development has been achieved in early childhood workforce qualifications since *Aistear* was published in 2009, as illustrated in the graph.

Figure 7.13 Percentage of staff who have an NFQ Level 5 qualification or above (from 2010 to 2018/19)



(Pobal, 2019, 128)

The updating of *Aistear* will consider how the framework could reflect more fully this changing professional profile, particularly in relation to ongoing work on the Workforce Development Plan (DCYA, 2019). In a related consideration, it is also the case that since *Aistear* was published, there has been a large increase in the number of academic institutions providing early childhood education and care degrees, thereby expanding the range of

stakeholders that will be involved in the sectoral dialogue as referenced earlier. Ongoing developments in relation to the *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland* (DES, 2019b) and the *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care (ELC), School Aged Childcare (SAC) and Childminding Sector* (DCYA, 2019) also contribute to the rationale for considering the interaction between *Aistear* and the ongoing professionalisation of the early childhood workforce.

Children’s lived experience

Children and their lives are at the heart of *Aistear* which celebrates early childhood ‘... as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold’ (NCCA, 2009, 6). This brief overview of some of the developments in the early childhood sector since *Aistear*’s publication would be incomplete without reference to children’s lived experience in Ireland as the country has become more socially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse in recent years. For example, the range of languages now spoken by children in early childhood settings has increased since 2009 and supports provided through the [Access and Inclusion Model \(AIM\)](#)² have been significant in enabling children with disabilities to access and benefit from experiences in early childhood settings. Cultural sensitivity also requires attention; for example, NCCA has begun work on Traveller culture and history and this work aligns well with the intention to ensure that *Aistear* fully reflects children’s lived experience. In addition, the experience of children over the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic will also be a reference point in this process. It is now timely to consult with the sector on the degree to which *Aistear* supports them in promoting children’s learning and development in the context of increased diversity, and enables them to work with all children.

Given the breadth of change, it is now timely to pause and reflect on these, and other developments, with a view to ensuring that *Aistear* continues to be effective in providing enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for every child throughout the early childhood period. Undoubtedly, there will be other issues that will come to the fore in what is intended

² The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a cross-Government initiative designed to ensure that children with disabilities can fully access the ECCE programme.

as an opportunity for reflection on *Aistear*'s capacity to support quality provision in early childhood education.

Outline of plans for updating *Aistear*

Plans for the updating of *Aistear* are focused on engaging with stakeholders, including children, practitioners and parents to hear their perspectives on the framework. The process will begin in late May 2021 and be carried out over two phases:

- Phase 1 will take place between May and December 2021 and will focus on asking stakeholders what is working well with *Aistear* and what suggestions they have as to how it might be enhanced and updated. We will take the feedback and perspectives from this first phase of consultation and develop proposals for updating *Aistear*.
- Phase 2 will begin in Q3 2022 with the sharing of those proposals on updating *Aistear* and will gather feedback from stakeholders about them. Following this second phase of consultation, NCCA will finalise the updated *Aistear* with the intention of it being published in late 2023. This timeline may be reviewed in light of continuing developments in response to the pandemic.

Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 will provide different ways and opportunities for individuals and organisations to get involved. It will also include processes to ensure that children themselves and their parents have opportunities to actively contribute to the dialogue as key participants.

Gathering feedback

Data gathering during Phase 1, from September to December 2021, will involve online questionnaires and a submission form available on our website, and a series of online seminars where participants will have the opportunity to share their feedback on *Aistear*. It is envisaged that practitioners, academics, advocacy groups, parents, the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and other interested groups will participate in the online seminars. Depending on public health advice in the final months of 2021, there may be an option to hold a face-to-face stakeholder consultation event.

Involving young children

In developing *Aistear*, NCCA conducted a portraiture study that facilitated children in contributing to the process (NCCA, 2007). Since that ground-breaking initiative, the inclusion of child and student voice in matters that have an impact on their lives has become

increasingly prevalent in Ireland, and particularly so in NCCA's curriculum and assessment work. The updating *Aistear* process will continue this strategy and gather children's views on their experiences of the framework. A Request for Tender (RfT) is being issued by NCCA inviting interested researchers with the appropriate experience and expertise to submit a proposal for a consultation with young children to hear about what they enjoy doing, who they like being with and where they enjoy being.

Research

An audit of early years and primary curricula in eight jurisdictions (O'Donnell, 2018) has indicated that the four themes of *Aistear* remain broadly relevant and appropriate when compared with international early childhood education curricula. However, it is important, eleven years on from the framework's development, to reflect recent research on children's learning and development in the research base for *Aistear*'s themes and to adapt to new information. An RfT inviting interested researchers with the appropriate experience and expertise to submit a tender proposal is being issued by NCCA. An audit of the four themes will be conducted following the completion of the research review to consider their alignment with current research.

Communications

NCCA is focused on supporting broad, far-reaching and inclusive awareness of and engagement in updating *Aistear*. Building on prior communications work most notably as part of the on-going consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*, various communication tools are being developed. The dedicated Updating *Aistear* pages of the Early Childhood Education Developments section of the NCCA website will hold all information and associated materials/tools related to the process, such as an information webinar on the principles and themes of *Aistear*, a short information video on the updating process and links to questionnaires and a submission template. NCCA's e-communication info@ncca will contain information on how individuals and organisations can get involved in the various consultation events and activities. Information articles will be published in professional publications and key updates and information, when available, will also be shared on our social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram).

Concluding remarks

While issues have been noted in relation to the implementation of *Aistear* (French, 2013; Farrell, 2016; Walsh, 2016), nonetheless, there have been considerable developments in the policy and practice environment. With this in mind, NCCA views the updating of *Aistear* as an important opportunity for collaboration and deliberation with stakeholders and interested parties in a process that will:

- underpin the view that children and their lives are at the heart of *Aistear* and that this must be a starting point for all dialogue
- focus on the context of children's lives in the 21st century including, but not limited to, wellbeing, inclusion and voice
- recognise the changes in the early childhood education and care landscape, including this unique time during the pandemic
- provide an opportunity to reflect on the past while looking ahead to future opportunities for further enhancing the quality of provision for our youngest children's learning and development.

NCCA is very conscious of the level of consultation and change happening in the early childhood education sector and in order to avoid consultation fatigue and of adding to the stress at this time, its deliberation will be taken at a pace that works for stakeholders.

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