Assessment in *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

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Abstract

This paper describes *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, the new curriculum framework for all children in Ireland from birth to six years (available at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning)). The paper also outlines the process of developing the assessment guidelines in *Aistear*. These form part of a series of four sets of guidelines which describe good practice in supporting children’s learning and development. The key messages from *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment*, a research paper commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and written by Dr Elizabeth Dunphy in 2008 are summarised. These messages informed the development of the guidelines. Challenges in implementing the assessment guidelines are also discussed and in this context a brief outline of how the early childhood sector is being supported to use *Aistear* to inform practice with children is also presented.

Introduction

The publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning) in October 2009 marked an exciting and important development in early childhood education and care in Ireland. *Aistear* is the outcome of extensive research, consultation, planning, and development by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in partnership with the early childhood sector. This model of partnership is explained in the paper *The Story of the Framework for Early Learning: Partnership in Action*, in Volume 3 of OMEP’s An Leanbh Óg (Daly and Forster, 2009: 55-73).

*Aistear* is the new and indeed first curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey, was chosen as a title for the
Framework because early childhood marks the beginning of children’s lifelong learning journeys. *Aistear* sets out broad goals for children’s learning and development. Guided by these, the Framework gives practical information and ideas to help adults provide children with experiences that are fun, motivating and challenging as they set off on their unique learning journeys.

*Aistear* can be used by parents and practitioners in the range of early childhood settings including children’s own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services (pre-schools, playgroups and naíonraí), and infant classes in primary schools. *Aistear* builds on and connects with many developments in early childhood education and care in Ireland. In particular it supports

- *The Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme* (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009).
- *The Revised Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 2006).
- *The Primary School Curriculum* for junior and senior infants (Department of Education and Science, (DES), 1999).

*Aistear* has four elements:

1. *Principles and Themes* describes children’s learning and development.
2. *Guidelines for Good Practice* focuses on partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.
4. Key Messages summarises important points from research used in developing Aistear.

This paper focuses on the assessment guidelines which are included in the Guidelines for Good Practice. Before looking at these it is helpful to visit the principles underlying Aistear to understand the central importance of assessment in the process of supporting children’s learning and development from birth to six years. It is also useful to look at how Aistear describes learning and development during early childhood.

Principles and Themes

Aistear is based on 12 early childhood principles which are presented in three groups.

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The principle Relevant and meaningful experiences explains that ‘On-going assessment of what children do, say and make, and reflection on these experiences help practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This also enables them to improve their practice’ (NCCA, Aistear, Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 11).
The principles underlying Aistear link closely with the principles underlying Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE,ii 2006) and with those underlying the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999). Building on these principles Aistear describes children’s learning and development through four interconnected, colour-coded themes:

- **Well-being (purple)**
- **Identity and Belonging (red)**
- **Communicating (yellow)**
- **Exploring and Thinking (green).**

Each theme has **aims** and broad **learning goals**. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Aistear’s themes**
The themes, aims and learning goals describe important dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding for early childhood. Each theme also offers suggestions for the types of experiences that might be provided for children to help them learn and develop. These are called **sample learning opportunities** and can be adapted and extended to suit the group of children in question.

**Guidelines for Good Practice**

_Aistear_ has four sets of guidelines which offer support to practitioners and also to parents in using the Framework’s principles and themes when working with children.

1. _Building partnerships between parents and practitioners_ explains why partnership is important and shows what partnership can look like in different types of settings and for different age groups of children.

2. _Learning and developing through interactions_ describes how the adult can have good interactions with children and outlines a range of interaction strategies for adults and children, and for interactions between children themselves.

3. _Learning and developing through play_ looks at the different characteristics of play as a process, and at the different types of play. How the adult can use these to extend and enrich children’s learning and development is also described.

4. _Supporting learning and development through assessment_ describes what assessment is and explains a number of ways in which the adult can use assessment to help children progress.
Each set of guidelines provides examples of the guidelines in-action for babies, toddlers and young children. The remainder of this paper focuses on the fourth set of guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment*.

**Research papers**

The NCCA commissioned four research papers to set out the theory behind *Aistear*. These papers were:

- *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).

The papers and their executive summaries are available on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning). While all the papers impacted in their different ways on *Aistear*’s elements, the fourth and final research paper in particular informed *Aistear*’s assessment guidelines. The paper was based on national and international research in the area of assessment.iii Six key features of assessment emerged from the paper, *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* (Dunphy, 2008):

1. **Characteristics and complexities of early learning** - Early learning is highly complex and finding ways to assess that complexity is challenging.

2. **Centrality of relationships** - Relationships are central to the assessment process. The practitioner develops increased understanding of what and how children are learning by interacting with them. Parents because of their unique
relationship with their children, have a very important contribution to make to the assessment process.

3. **Interactive processes** - Assessments of early learning are interactive, informal and often embedded in everyday activities. Watching, listening, talking to, and empathising with children are central. Children’s engagement with peers is also important for illuminating the learning processes.

4. **Assessing what is valued** - Good assessments are holistic in nature and cover all aspects of a child’s development and are concerned with dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understandings. Assessment focuses on strengths and also on aspects of learning that need further development.

5. **Authentic assessment** - Assessment of early learning and development is informal, carried out over time and is embedded in tasks and play-based activities that children see as significant, meaningful and worthwhile.

6. **Professional development for assessment** - Practitioners need extensive education and support in the area of assessment in order to be equipped to carry out assessments that adhere to the principles of good practice, are conducted in a skilled and informed way, and do justice to children.

These six features were central in shaping the development of *Aistear’s* guidelines on assessment.
Guidelines for Good Practice - Supporting learning and development through assessment

*Aistear* presents assessment as part of every practitioner’s day-to-day interactions with children as he/she continually makes judgements about children’s learning and development and uses the information gathered to help children to progress. Children too make judgements about what they are good at, what they enjoy doing, what they can do now with a little help, and what they would like to be able to do in the future. The guidelines, informed by the commissioned research paper, describe what assessment is and what it can look like in early childhood.

**Defining assessment**

*Aistear* defines assessment as the ‘on-going process of *collecting*, *documenting*, *reflecting on*, and *using* information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning’ (*Aistear, Guidelines for Good Practice*, NCCA, 2009, p. 72). This definition is supported by Dunphy’s paper (2008).

The guidelines differentiate between assessment for learning and of learning. They explain that the main purpose of assessment of learning is to inform others like parents and professionals about children’s achievements. In contrast, assessment for learning focuses on using assessment information to help children with the next steps in their learning and development. While both approaches are important the guidelines focus on assessment for learning by encouraging the practitioner to use assessment on a daily basis to help children progress in their learning and development across *Aistear*’s four themes. The importance of ethical considerations in the assessment process is also highlighted. The nature of the power relations
between children during early childhood and the adults who are undertaking the assessment needs to be acknowledged. The adult has a responsibility to ensure that the process benefits children and does not upset or harm the participants in any way. It must be sensitive and respectful to all children and protect their rights. Ultimately, the assessment process must support children’s learning and development (Dunphy, 2008).

Documenting assessment information

The guidelines highlight the importance of documenting children’s learning and development and present a number of ways to do this. These include samples of children’s work, notes, photographs and video or audio records, stories, daily diaries or records of care, checklists, and reports. The guidelines suggest storing these in practitioners’ files, in central files and/or in children’s learning portfolios. A learning portfolio can take the form of a folder, a scrapbook, a shoe/cereal/pizza box or something similar in which assessment information can be stored. The collection tells the story of each child’s learning journey – his/her efforts, progress and achievement over time.

Assessment methods

The guidelines present a continuum of five assessment methods for collecting information on children’s learning and development. (See Figure 2.)
Rather than presenting assessment methods in order of frequency of use starting with observations and conversations, the continuum uses a sequence which reflects socio-cultural theory. This prioritises children having opportunities to lead the assessment process. The continuum begins with self-assessment and conversations where children take the lead in making judgements about their own progress as learners. This is followed by the methods of observation, setting tasks, and testing which involve the adult leading the assessment process. The guidelines point out that while the methods are presented individually each often involves using other methods too. A combination of methods helps the adult build rich and authentic portraits of children as learners.

Learning experiences to show assessment-in-action

As in all the four sets of guidelines learning experiences show the assessment methods in-action across different types of settings and for three overlapping age
groups:

- babies: birth to 18 months
- toddlers: 12 to 36 months
- young children: 2½ to 6 years.

*Learning experiences* are ‘detailed accounts of children learning through particular activities or events in collaboration with other children and adults, while using various objects, play props or materials. They describe what the children say, do and make in the course of the activities or events. They also show the adult’s important role in supporting and extending the children’s learning and development, (*Aistear, User guide*, NCCA, 2009, p.6). Each learning experience is colour-coded to reflect the particular theme it supports. The age group of the children involved and the setting in which the learning experience is based are also shown. There are likely to be particular challenges for the early childhood sector in translating the guidelines to practice. The assessment learning experiences incorporate a range of strategies to show how a number of these challenges can be overcome, for example limited time for the practitioner to gather and document assessment information, the type of information to gather and what type of assessment method to use with different age groups of children. While these strategies are useful, particular challenges will continue to be posed for the sector as they begin their journey of assessing *for* learning. The following section looks at some of these challenges and how they might be overcome.

**Challenges to using this approach to assessment**

For many practitioners and settings the adoption of this comprehensive approach to assessment may be a significant departure from established practice.
**Infant classes in primary schools**

In 2007 the NCCA published the document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* which re-envisioned assessment in the primary school. Like *Aistear*’s assessment guidelines it advocated a broad interpretation of assessment with a clear focus on involving the child. For infant teachers the information on assessment in *Aistear* builds on the information contained in the primary guidelines.

The amount of time needed to engage in new forms of assessment of early learning and development has been raised nationally (Ridgway, 2002) and internationally (Fleer and Richardson, 2004). Time constraints coupled with high pupil to teacher ratios plus uncertainties about how to go about doing comprehensive assessments may present particular challenges and tensions for teachers. There is evidence to suggest that teachers are unsure about aspects of assessment practice. To date, the two phases of *Review of the Primary School Curriculum* by the NCCA (2005; 2008) highlighted teachers’, including infant teachers’ requests for support in developing their assessment practice. For example, they wanted support in using a wider range of assessment methods and in using the information gathered to plan future learning.

Indeed, assessment policy and practice are areas that were identified by the DES in 2005 as requiring considerable attention in primary schools. In-service training and on-going support and mentoring will be key to helping teachers to re-envision their use of assessment in the infant classes in order ‘to enrich teaching and learning, and report this information to all those concerned with children’s education’ (NCCA, 2007, p.3).
Early years settings in the community, voluntary and private sector

For early years settings outside of the primary school *Aistear*’s assessment practice is also likely to pose similar difficulties, especially for practitioners with limited training in the area. The use of portfolios to compile documentation as suggested in *Aistear*, may offer a practical starting point in developing assessment practice across the sector. However, using the information that has been documented to inform decision-making about children’s learning and development is likely to pose challenges for practitioners.

**Responding to the challenges**

‘Assessment is a matter of informed judgement’ (Dunphy, 2008, p.57) and involves the practitioner in judging the nature and extent of the child’s learning and development. Judgements like this need to be informed by professional knowledge including:

- a comprehensive understanding of early learning and development and its integrated nature
- an understanding of the diversity amongst children and their families
- an understanding of the different ways in which early assessment may be carried out, and the ability to use these in ways that enable children to display their dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding.

Training and education needs to support practitioners in developing knowledge and understanding of, and competence in these areas in order to help them implement comprehensive assessment practices as advocated in *Aistear*. Ongoing work on the
Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs includes the development of new standards for the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Childcare Training Modules. These standards are informed by *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Ongoing support and mentoring will also be necessary. Organisations such as the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, the City and County Childcare Committees and the Education Centres are providing information and workshops to practitioners as they begin to use *Aistear*.

Planning, teaching and learning, evaluation and assessment are inseparable processes and the practitioner needs to incorporate all of these in order to facilitate children’s holistic development. Component 7.6 of *Síolta’s* Standard 7 on Curriculum states that ‘Planning for curriculum or programme implementation is based on the child’s individual profile, which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning’ (CECDE, 2006). Through implementing *Síolta* and *Aistear* together practitioners will start to develop more comprehensive assessment systems leading to enriched and extended learning opportunities for children during early childhood.

**Implementing *Aistear* and its assessment approach**

The NCCA is using a number of strategies to help those working in the early childhood sector to begin using *Aistear*, including its guidelines on assessment.

- An *Aistear* toolkit has been created at www.ncca.ie/aiseartoolkit (NCCA, 2010). This provides a variety of resources to help people to begin to use *Aistear*, and will be added to on an on-going basis.

- In late 2010/early 2011 the NCCA proposes to begin working with a number of settings using *Aistear* to guide their work with children. The area of assessment will
be key in this work. This project would enable the NCCA to gather examples of *Aistear* being used in settings and to share these with others through the NCCA website.

- The NCCA continues to collaborate with other organisations in supporting the sector to use *Aistear*. In April 2010 the NCCA in collaboration with the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) held seminars on *Aistear* and *Síolta* for staff in support, training and education, and inspection roles. The seminars aimed to support others in providing information sessions and workshops on *Aistear* and *Síolta*.

- A small number of primary school teachers have been appointed as *Aistear* tutors. In collaboration with their local Education Centres they will run workshops for teachers interested in finding out more about *Aistear* and in using the Framework in their classrooms.

**Conclusion**

Children, like adults, are natural assessors of their own progress and achievements. Adults can enrich and extend children’s experiences through assessment by identifying learning and development, feeding information back to children, celebrating their progress and achievements with them, and adapting practice and planning for further learning. In this way assessment helps the adult create portraits of children which show the richness of their learning and development. The active inclusion of children in this process is particularly noteworthy and beneficial. Good assessment practice guides children’s learning journeys. While the early childhood sector may encounter challenges in developing this practice, in time both children and practitioners should experience the benefits.
References


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¹ *Aistear* uses the term ‘practitioner’ to refer to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings including primary schools and childminding settings.

² The CECDE closed in November 2008 and responsibility for the implementation of *Síolta* now lies with the Department of Education and Science.

³ This paper only references Dunphy’s paper and the *Aistear* guidelines. For the full bibliography refer to the paper ‘Supporting early learning and development through assessment’ Dunphy 2008 at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning), Research Papers.