

Aistear



A journey without a road map

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INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, there is currently an unprecedented policy focus on education and care for children in the years before compulsory schooling. This policy focus is warranted. We know without question that high quality early childhood education and care reaps measurable gains in thinking and social skills for all children. In addition, studies have demonstrated that for those young children living with the injustice of poverty those gains are even greater. These benefits are primarily determined by early childhood educator knowledge and understanding of child development and learning, providing appropriate cognitive challenge; strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences; and the quality of educator-child verbal interactions through open-ended questioning, meaningful conversations and extension of children's language and thoughts (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002¹).

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The early childhood education and care sector in Ireland has witnessed many positive developments over the last decade. Some of these include:

- The launch of *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in 2006², which sets the broad context for ensuring quality in early childhood settings within which early learning is best supported.
- The development of *Regulation 5* as part of the revised *Pre-School Regulations* also in 2006 and the attendant *Assessment Guide* for inspections of early childhood settings in 2011³. For the first time, very young children's learning and development was addressed within our legal framework.
- The introduction of the Free Pre-School Year (in 2009) has provided a universal right for children of three and four years of age to access early childhood education and care and there is now debate about extending it to a second year⁴ within the proposed National Early Years Strategy (itself a positive development announced in 2012 by the Minister for Children Frances Fitzgerald).

While these and many other policy initiatives are significant, it could be argued that if one were to pick a development with the greatest potential to accomplish the objective of enhancing the quality of young children's experiences and extend their early learning and development it would be *Aistear*.

AISTEAR

Aistear, the Irish word for journey, was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and launched in 2009⁵. *Aistear* is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years and focuses on planning for the provision of enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning experiences for children. The development of *Aistear* was underpinned by consultation with the early childhood sector, commissioned research papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007 & Dunphy, 2008⁶) and portraiture studies of young children. These are all available on their website www.ncca.ie. This rigorous and inclusive approach has led to a framework for early learning which is soundly based in research and draws from the contributions of our diverse early childhood sector.

Aistear includes four sets of user-friendly guidelines on parents, play, interactions and assessment all of which contain excellent suggestions, exemplars of practice and highlight the particular relevance of these issues to support quality practice. The on-line *Aistear* Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/Aistear toolkit) is continually under development and provides podcasts from recognised authorities in the field with a welcome focus on interactions, for example there is one on 'language development

in the preschool year' (Anne McGough) and 'critical thinking and book talk' (Mary Roche). There is a tipsheet on thinking and talking and a tipsheet for parents on play, which is now translated in to six languages. There are many snapshots and short films of early educators in practice categorised within the four themes of *Aistear*: Well-being; Identity and belonging; Communicating and Exploring and thinking.

The most recent additions to the Toolkit include a series of templates prepared in collaboration with Early Childhood Ireland. One tool combines *Aistear* and *Siolta* to support early childhood educators to think about and audit their learning environments indoors and outdoors. In addition, there is a short-term curriculum planning template and a learning record template with worked examples.

The thematic approach to presenting children's learning and development within *Aistear* is itself to be applauded. The four themes provide a flexible support for early childhood settings and 'conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner, and the totality of his/her learning needs' (NCCA, 2004, p. 22⁷). Developmental domains such as cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, spiritual and physical cannot be separated out; neither can subjects such as mathematics, science and art. The themes bridge the developmental and subject domains and move towards a more integrated approach, which is more in tune with how children learn and develop. Within *Aistear*, children are supported to grow and develop socially, physically, creatively, cognitively, linguistically and so on, but in a way which is natural, meaningful and enjoyable for children. Children's interests and learning dispositions (for curiosity, wonder, resilience, playfulness) are at the centre of what and how they learn. An effective curriculum such as this acknowledges that children learn and develop holistically. As a framework *Aistear* also acknowledges the diversity of the early childhood settings to which it applies.

The success of *Aistear* is manifested in its integration into national programmes such as the National Early Years Access Initiative, where each of the 11 projects must be underpinned by *Aistear* (and *Siolta*). The forthcoming revised primary curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants will seek to ensure 'greater consistency with *Aistear* (NCCA, 2012, p.14⁸). This has many positive implications. Firstly, there is recognition of early childhood (birth to six years) as a time in and of itself, with its own continuity and rhythm. Secondly, a pedagogy that supports play and building on children's interests as a pathway to early learning will be ensured for our youngest children. Thirdly, *Aistear* is in tune with international recommendations in relation to educational models. Laevers (2005)⁹ analysed a thematic review of highly regarded early education systems

(Experiential Learning [Belgium], HighScope [USA], Reggio Emilia [Italy], and Te Whariki [New Zealand]). Through this analysis, Laevers identified six characteristics of professional practice in early childhood education considered to be the cornerstones of any educational model of the future. These characteristics are:

- 1 Respect for the child
- 2 An open framework (curriculum) approach
- 3 A rich environment
- 4 A process of representation
- 5 Communication, interaction and dialogue
- 6 Observation and monitoring

Aistear conforms to these characteristics.

LACK OF IMPLEMENTATION

Having acknowledged the many positive benefits of *Aistear*, there is one major drawback; the weakness of its implementation. While many resources and supports have been developed to support early childhood educators in their practice, *Aistear* is not underpinned by legislation, early childhood settings are not mandated to implement *Aistear* (unlike in primary schools where the Primary Curriculum is implemented universally) and there are no specific and detailed implementation plans currently for the roll-out of *Aistear* in all early childhood settings. In addition, there is no funding currently available for the education and training of early childhood personnel in order for them to translate *Aistear* into everyday practice, planning and supervision.

The brief of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment as outlined in the Education Act (1998), 'is to advise the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to ...the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum' (NCCA, 2012, p.5). The NCCA has no remit for implementation of the curriculum. In light of the lack of a national implementation plan for *Aistear*, the NCCA

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developed the on-line *Aistear* Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/Aistear toolkit) to support the educators, trainers and others to use *Aistear*. Indeed it is not clear which, if any, government department or agency has the responsibility to roll out *Aistear* by supporting early childhood settings to implement *Aistear*, although it appears that many have a potential role.

Currently the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) has the responsibility to allocate financial resources through the Free Pre-School Year, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) scheme and the Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) scheme. The DCYA have responsibility for the city/county childcare committees (CCCs), the national childcare organisations, childminders, and childcare initiatives such as afterschool childcare, and parent and toddler schemes among others¹⁰.

The Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) of Department of Education and Skills is co-located in the DCYA. EYEPU has responsibility for the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan for the early childhood sector; targeted early years interventions for children who live in areas designated as disadvantaged, and provision of policy advice and representation on national and international policy development initiatives. EYEPU also has responsibility for the implementation of *Siolta*¹¹. There are 40 part-time and full-time *Siolta* mentors employed throughout the country to support settings with the implementation of *Siolta*. There is no named body with responsibility for implementation of *Aistear*.

The new contract for the Free Pre-School Year, however, states that settings

...are required to use *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) to provide an appropriate educational and care programme for children in their pre-school year. Participating service providers may be supported in meeting the requirement by a range of designated support services and agencies including their local City or County Childcare Committee. Service providers must facilitate visits and use advice from support staff from such organisations.

(DCYA, 2012¹²)

The Minister for Children Frances Fitzgerald (2013) has pointed to the success of the Free Pre-school Year with '94% of all qualifying-age pre-school children now participating. This pre-school year provides important opportunities to support children's early learning and development, mainly as a result of the requirement for practitioners to use *Aistear*: the

Early Childhood Curriculum Framework developed by NCCA'. Furthermore, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011¹³) contains many references to *Aistear* (see also French 2012¹⁴). These statements clearly suggest that settings should use *Aistear* and that organisations must be enabled to support early childhood staff. Successful implementation of *Aistear* could produce identifiable outcomes in relation to the social, language and cognitive learning and development of children attending those settings. However, without specific and detailed plans which focus on supporting organisations, up skilling the workforce, as well as providing clear directions to the implementation of *Aistear* how can our young children receive the quality service they merit?

EYEPU has responsibility for the implementation of *Siolta* and mentors are in place to support (albeit selected) early childhood settings. However, it appears that currently the implementation of *Aistear* falls to settings themselves with (depending on where the setting is located) inconsistent and variable support from national voluntary organisations, county childcare committees, colleges of further education and institutes of technology. *Aistear* and *Siolta* are closely aligned. *Siolta* sets out the broad parameters for ensuring quality in early childhood education and care settings within which early learning is best supported. This includes standards in relation to organisational considerations, professional practice and interactions as well as those focused on play, establishing a learning environment and ensuring a relevant broad based curriculum (*Aistear*) is in place. It is a logical step that *Aistear* and *Siolta* should be seen as one unit.

In order to implement policy, early childhood educators need to understand the policy and in order to develop policy, policy makers need to appreciate the working conditions of the implementers. In the literature on policy making and implementation, a cognitive perspective contributes to an understanding of policy implementation 'by unpacking how implementing agents construct ideas from and about state and national standards' (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002, p.420)¹⁵. A top-down, bottom-up approach is advocated for the implementation of standards in education. In such a scheme 'the ideas about changing behaviour that implementing agents construct from a policy' involves the policy signal; the implementing agents' knowledge, beliefs, and experience; and the circumstances in which the local actor makes sense of policy (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 420).

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reflect on their practice and embrace the valuable factual messages that *Aistear* contains. As expressed by Stone (2002, p.28)¹⁶ '...interpretations are more powerful than facts'. Ideas from policy provide leverage for change only if policymakers persuade implementing agents to think in a different way about their actions, to question their current behaviour and therefore enable them to create other ways of acting. In Ireland, there is no national persuasion by policy makers currently in implementing *Aistear*.

NCCA STRATEGIC PLAN 2012–2015

The NCCA has developed a Strategic Plan 2012–2015 which contains a vision, mission, strategic goals and planned outcomes. For example: Goal 1.4 is to ensure that '*Aistear* is increasingly used in the early childhood sector'; specifically the NCCA plan to 'expand the online *Aistear* Toolkit' (NCCA, 2012, p.13).

In the absence of an implementation plan, the *Aistear* in Action Initiative highlighted in the next article in this issue is one example of how resources will be developed for the Toolkit. The Toolkit has proved a very useful resource for all those who have used *Aistear* to enhance the experiences of the children they work with. Many of the resources are available in hard copy, however, depending on the availability of broadband, the computer literacy of early childhood staff, time and their motivation to engage, not all settings may avail of the Toolkit, in particular the podcasts and videos of practice. Instead they may rely, in the short term, on early childhood support organisations, attendance at conferences and training to inform them of the content. To support the online element of *Aistear* nationwide, access to adequate broadband is required and a programme of computers for early childhood settings established.

In relation to Goal 2, the NCCA plan to 'support a number of school and early childhood setting networks to gather

examples of how *Aistear* can be used to support children's learning and development, by 2014' (NCCA, 2012, p.16). Again, the *Aistear* in Action project is an excellent example of how settings could be supported to engage with *Aistear* successfully to enhance their practice. But this is in only a handful of settings; if 'building the capacity for change' is the goal, the same project should be implemented in every early childhood setting in Ireland. All our children should have the same quality of experience to the children in those settings.

The NCCA Strategic Plan specifically refers to working directly with the '*Aistear* Tutors and the education centres to engage infant teachers in reflection on and introduction of the principles and methodologies of *Aistear* in primary classrooms' (NCCA, 2012, p.17). This implies a focus on direct support of teachers through their continued professional development. With the revised curriculum, Junior and Senior Infant teachers will be mandated (and supported) to implement *Aistear*. In contrast, the NCCA plan, in relation to settings excluding the primary sector, is to 'continue our work with Early Childhood Ireland and initiate work with other organisations to support practitioners in working with *Aistear*' (NCCA, 2012, p.17). It is acknowledged that systems have long been in place to support primary teachers. In addition, the early childhood education and care sector, excluding primary education, is developing. However, to prioritise children in Junior and Senior infants could be seen as ignoring what we know about the importance of early childhood education and care from birth (French, 2008¹⁷; French, 2013¹⁸).

If we take early speech and language development as an example, we know that:

- From birth there is a narrow window of opportunity to capitalise on children's rapid brain development and support children's speech, language and communication (Gerhardt, 2005¹⁹; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000²⁰).
- Every educational skill presupposes the use of language – it is the foundation for lifelong learning (Boyer, 1991²¹).
- Children with speech, language communication needs (SLCN) are at high risk of later difficulties with reading, writing and spelling (The Communication's Trust, 2011²²).
- Studies have demonstrated that language competence is positively correlated with success in the educational system (Cregan, 2008²³; Riley, Burrell & McCallum, 2004²⁴). What is known is that for some children there is a discontinuity between the language of the school and of the children; due to a mismatch of language use. '*It is now generally accepted that culturally and linguistically different children are not non-verbal, do not lack experiences and are not*

culturally disadvantaged...For them the major difficulty is learning how to handle the scholastic demands of the dominant culture that is significantly different in many respects from their own'. (Cregan, 2008, p.19)

- The long-term consequences of poor early language development on children's educational attainment and life chances are severe and unjust (National Economic and Social Forum, 2009²⁵).

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

It is clear that the early childhood sector in Ireland requires significant and radical development with the same attention given to training and continuing professional development as enjoyed by the primary school sector. Early years educators are in a crucial position with regard to valuing the diversity of children's language use and enhancing children's language capacity. However, early years educators need to be supported to engage children in the kind of language use expected but not explicitly taught in schools (Cregan, 2008). A lack of training of early childhood educators was identified as a particularly pressing problem in Ireland (Start Strong, 2013²⁶). Engaging children in ways that promote the cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, creative and social development requires understanding, knowledge and skill. It is acknowledged that in order to meet current and future early childhood education and care policy commitments the workforce needs to be developed (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2010²⁷).

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Literature and research are clear that children's thinking and language is enhanced when children are listened to and supported, when a range of pedagogical interaction strategies are used, and when children are encouraged to solve problems (Tayler, 2001²⁸). These skills require professional development. Therefore, professional preparation is arguably one of the features most relevant to interactions (Tayler). *Aistear* focuses on the kinds of interaction strategies that support children's

language and thinking and supports early literacy, numeracy, respectful communication and problem-solving. In terms of supporting the quality of children's experiences it should be implemented fully in every early childhood setting.

It is recognised in Irish policy documents that the role of the adult is central to enhancing the quality of young children's experiences with the requirement that those who work in early childhood settings should have relevant qualifications (DES, 2009; DES, 2010). Up to the announcement of the Free Pre-School Year in 2009, there were no standard qualification requirements in settings, excluding the primary system in Ireland. In order to avail of the grant to deliver the Free Pre-School Year, at a minimum, the leader in a room is required to hold a Further Education and Training Council (now Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 5 qualification in early childhood education. There is no evidence that students with Level 5 are getting the opportunity to engage with *Aistear* (or *Siolta*). In addition, currently a quarter of the workforce in centre-based early childhood settings (excluding primary school) is without a Level 5 qualification (Start Strong, 2013). All training institutions and colleges in relation to early childhood care and education also have a role to play to ensure the implementation of *Aistear*.

In its Strategic Plan 2012–2015, the NCCA has outlined the constraints under which it is operating. These challenges include the backdrop of our current deep recession, resulting

in low staff numbers, the public sector employment restrictions, and the reduction in public funding in education generally. However, as stated by Minister Frances Fitzgerald (2013) 'early intervention must become part of our national psyche'. We currently enjoy the highest birth-rate in Europe, approximately 75,000 children are born each year. This is a significant advantage. 'A younger population may well prove to be one of Ireland's greatest resources in economic recovery' (NCCA, 2012, p.6). Due to the enormity of Ireland's financial crisis it is the next generation which will be paying back our national debt.

Investment in early childhood education, specifically investment in prevention and early intervention, effective implementation of national quality and curriculum frameworks in early childhood settings and professionalisation of the sector should be a national priority in Budget 2014; 'we owe it to our children – literally' (Wolfe, 2013²⁹). Without comprehensive, detailed and funded implementation plans there will be little possibility for educators in early childhood settings to reflect on their practice and consider how to enhance children's learning. This is important for all children and particularly those who are at risk of educational inequality or who are linguistically or culturally different. As discussed earlier, research has identified the significant benefits derived from participation in high quality early childhood education in terms of later educational attainment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and



Development, 2006³⁰; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002³¹; Schweinhart et al., 2004³²).

CONCLUSION

It is clear that a number of bodies have some role in *Aistear*. The responsibility for implementing *Aistear* in early childhood settings should be given to a nominated agency or organisation. This could include the NCCA themselves, the county childcare committees, national organisations, EYEPU or any combination of the above provided it is organised, monitored and reviewed by one appointed body. As discussed, policy makers need to appreciate the working conditions of the implementers (Spillane, 2002). From the perspective of the early childhood sector in Ireland there are

two frameworks to adhere to (*Siolta* and *Aistear*), in addition to

the Regulations and now the National Standards for Pre-School Services³³. All of these could be aligned, using *Aistear* as the starting point, and addressed within the Assessment Guidelines of the Pre-School Inspectorate and inspected as a unified whole.

We have a unique opportunity to get it right; Ireland's first-ever National Early Years Strategy (NEYS) is now at an advanced stage of development. Inclusion of plans to roll out *Aistear* (with *Siolta*) in the NEYS will provide the first important steps for a lifelong journey of learning and

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