

12 April 2017: Dr Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar (then Minister for Social Protection) at the announcement of 'More Affordable Childcare'.

CHAPTER 1 EARLY CHILDHOOD



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2017: A Year of Progress and Promise

Early childhood education is rapidly finding its feet



Dr Thomas Walsh

Lecturer, Maynooth University

Dr Thomas Walsh shines a beacon of hope on the early childhood education sector as he walks us through the rapid progress made in 2017 in the key areas of affordability, professionalisation, inspection, regulation, quality and inclusion.

Developments in the early childhood education (ECE) sector continued with a relentless momentum in 2017. Initiatives under way in 2016 have been progressed, and a plethora of new policy and practice developments have been mooted or introduced. The pace of development reflects the increased State involvement and investment in the sector and is having a profound effect on the expectations of early childhood professionals.

Given the extensive policy and practice developments for the sector in 2017, this chapter will trace thematically some of the key events affecting the sector. The four themes addressed here are:

- » Affordability
- » Professionalisation
- » Inspection and regulation
- » Quality and inclusion

Affordability

Affordability of childcare and ECE for parents, while also being sustainable for the early childhood sector, has been a perennial challenge in Ireland. This is due in no small part to the long history of substantial State underinvestment in the early years sector in Ireland. The advent of the Free Preschool Year in 2010 and its extension in 2016 represented the first universal ECE provision for children in Ireland. The extension of this scheme to children from the age of three has led to an increase from 67,000 children participating in 2015–16 to 121,000 children in 2016–17.

A number of targeted schemes were also established to provide additional funding to parents and families, such as the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme and the Training and Employment Childcare programmes. 2017 also saw the extension of the CCS programme to include the Resettlement, Relocation and Transition programme to support children and families experiencing homelessness.

In Budget 2017, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced the development of an Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) based on the principle of

Leaders in early childhood education settings must be qualified to level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

Most early childhood professionals earn just marginally more than the minimum wage in spite of the increased expectations placed on them.

progressive universalism. The ACS has both a universal and a targeted component. The universal component relates to all children from six months until they enter the Free Preschool Year scheme and provides for up to approximately €1,000 annually to be paid directly to Tusla-registered settings. The targeted component applies to children from six months to 15 years of age and is means-tested.

The original intention of introducing these measures from September 2017 has not been met, due to the delay in developing an ICT system that can deliver the targeted elements of the ACS. In the interim, a scheme known as More Affordable Childcare will be implemented for 2017–18. While the introduction of the ACS has been delayed and its detail has caused much confusion and frustration in the sector, it is to be welcomed as a further commitment to more universal provision for ECE in Ireland from the age of six months that can be extended into the future. Consideration of its integration with the Free Preschool Year provisions is warranted, to ensure greater coherence for the sector. Further information is available at the website <http://affordablechildcare.ie>.

A Programme for a Partnership Government (Government of Ireland, 2016) committed to undertaking an independent review of the cost of delivering quality childcare, to be overseen by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). This review was initiated in August 2017 and is expected to be completed in a ten-month timeframe. It will include an analysis of the current costs of providing childcare in Ireland, and an examination of the current State funding for ECE schemes and their impact on salaries, terms and conditions for ECE professionals. It is envisaged that this will be a strategic report for determining future policy and investment for the sector.

Professionalisation

Allied to the rapid development of the sector have been increased efforts and demands for the professionalisation of the ECE workforce. The 2016 Preschool Regulations introduced for the first time a minimum qualification (level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications [NFQ]) for ECE professionals, and this became operational in 2017. Leaders in ECE settings must be qualified to level 6 on the NFQ. Moreover, additional capitation is paid under the Free Preschool Year scheme to settings where the leader is qualified to level 7 on the NFQ and where all other staff meet the minimum qualification standard. These, among other measures such as targeted learner funds, have led to an increasingly well-qualified ECE workforce, with close to 20 per cent of ECE professionals now qualified to level 7 or above on the NFQ. In June 2017, a working group was established to develop draft professional award criteria and guidelines to inform the development and review of level 7 and level 8 ECE degrees in Ireland. The feedback and input of the sector will be sought on these draft criteria and guidelines by the end of 2017 before they are finalised.

An allocation of seven days for non-contact time per service per contract was paid to settings for the first time in 2016–17, in recognition of the need for time to administer the various ECE schemes and for planning within settings. The DCYA Early Years Forum established a Sub-group on Professionalisation in January 2017, and this has advanced a number

The More Affordable Childcare scheme, implemented for 2017-18, is to be welcomed as a further commitment that can be extended into the future.

of areas of work, including a research proposal for developing an Early Years Council, developing a Code of Ethics for the sector, and having a consultation process to elicit views on an agreed title for the profession. The DCYA commissioned the Early Childhood Research Centre at the University of Roehampton to prepare a report on occupational role profiles in the early years sector, and this was published in April 2017 (Urban et al., 2017). This provides a solid research basis for developing specific role profiles and criteria for the profession in Ireland.

Increased qualifications, however, have not led to any appreciable improvement in the salaries, terms, conditions or career prospects of ECE professionals. Most earn a salary marginally above the minimum wage in spite of the increased expectations placed on them by the new ECE policy and practice landscape. This has resulted in attrition from the sector as well as much frustration at the lack of recognition of the profession relative to other professional groups.

In 2017, two trade unions escalated their work to develop a pay model for the sector. SIPTU is operating a 'Big Start' campaign for fair pay, recognition and better funding for the sector. It aims to develop a national agreement or Sectoral Employment Order on the salary, pension entitlements, and conditions of ECE professionals. IMPACT is also campaigning for better pay and conditions in the sector. Both unions are actively recruiting members, and it is likely that the momentum for professional recognition will grow in the months and years ahead.

Wider political movements are also supporting increased professionalisation of the sector, such as the report on the working conditions of ECE professionals being undertaken by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs will undertake a sectoral report on workforce planning for the ECE sector, and will put forward policy actions and structural changes required to ensure adequate workforce capacity for the sector into the future. There is considerable momentum at present for a breakthrough on salaries and conditions, but this will not be possible without substantial and sustained State investment.

Inspection and Regulation

2017 is the first full year in which the education-focused inspections by the DES and the revised Tusla regulations have been in operation. Education-focused inspections were introduced in April 2016, and approximately 870 inspections had been undertaken by summer 2017. The DES is preparing a review of the themes emerging in the first year of operation, and this is scheduled to be published in autumn 2017.

The Tusla Preschool Regulations are inspected by the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate since June 2016, focusing on record keeping, Garda vetting, learning environments, and communications. Following Tusla inspections, settings are required to set out the corrective actions and preventive actions they will take in any area deemed non-compliant. A Quality Regulatory Framework has been promised to provide additional clarity and practical insight on the regulations, and this is being overseen by the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate Consultative Forum. In addition, ECE

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Better Start continued to expand in 2017 and now employs close to 100 early years specialists and mentors.

settings are subject to compliance, audit and risk visits by Pobal officials to verify compliance with DCYA-funded programmes.

The Operations and Systems Alignment Group, comprising DCYA, Tusla, DES, Better Start, and Pobal representatives, is currently investigating the merits of a single inspection agency that focuses on care and education needs. This is a very welcome review, considering the current level of regulation and inspection by a variety of departments and agencies. Moreover, the increased focus on self-evaluation and action planning as part of the inspection and regulatory framework is building the capacity of settings to identify and address quality issues. As the sector evolves, such a level of oversight should not be necessary. It should also be possible to recruit professionals from the sector who will have the professional expertise and experience to provide the full range of regulatory oversight necessary within a single system of inspection.

Quality and Inclusion

Developing and ensuring quality of provision remained high on the priority list for the ECE sector in 2017. Better Start, a national initiative established by the DCYA to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in the ECE sector, continued to expand in 2017. It now employs close to 100 early years specialists and mentors to work with services on quality development or the inclusion of children with additional needs under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

AIM was introduced in September 2016 and developed the nature and range of its provisions significantly in 2017. Based on a continuum of support from universal supports to targeted supports, it seeks to support settings to deliver an inclusive ECE experience where all children can participate fully. By May 2017, 2,069 applications were approved for level 4 (expert early years educational advice and support), 200 applications were approved for level 5 (equipment, appliances, and minor alterations grants), 47 applications were approved for level 6 (therapeutic intervention), and 1,193 applications were approved for level 7 (additional assistance in the preschool room).¹

As part of the universal supports under AIM, close to 900 ECE professionals graduated in September 2017 with a level 6 special purpose higher education award from the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme. These will be eligible to undertake the role of inclusion co-ordinator in their settings. A further 900 students are currently enrolled to undertake the LINC training in 2017–18. The City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are also delivering diversity, equality and inclusion training to providers based on the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA, 2016) to support the universal elements of AIM. The National Disability Authority has also begun work on Universal Design Guidelines to support the development of inclusive cultures in ECE settings.

The National *Aistear Síolta* initiative provides central support and co-ordination of *Síolta* and *Aistear* implementation across the early childhood

¹ Unpublished Weekly Report from Pobal to the DCYA, 8 May 2017.

The NCCA is developing reporting structures and templates to improve the transfer of information between early childhood education settings and primary schools.

sector. It is a joint initiative of the DCYA, DES, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and works closely with the Better Start initiative. This has led to the appointment of a national *Síolta* co-ordinator in the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) and a national *Aistear* co-ordinator based in the NCCA. It has developed ten hours of workshops to support early years practitioners' understanding and use of the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide as well as on-site coaching support. This is delivered by a team of 68 *Aistear Síolta* mentors who are drawn from the National Voluntary Organisations and the CCCs. Work is also being undertaken on updating the *Síolta* manuals and the criteria for the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme.

Based on actions arising from the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011), the NCCA is currently working on developing reporting structures and templates to improve the transfer of information between ECE settings and primary schools. It is anticipated that this transfer of information to improve the transition experience of children will become a requirement into the future. Such transitions are also likely to be affected by the proposed changes to the structures of ECE and infant class provisions, on which the NCCA is currently undertaking consultation (NCCA, 2016). A working group has been established in 2017 to progress work on developing standards for School Age Childcare based on the DCYA and DES Action Plan on School Age Childcare published in March 2017 (DCYA and DES, 2017). A working group is currently developing a structured set of reforms and supports for the childminding sector.

As part of its quality remit, the DCYA has issued a request for tenders to undertake a measurement and assessment of the quality of early years provision in Ireland. This research is significant as it will provide a baseline for the present quality of provision in Ireland and identify best practice. This will be used into the future to inform policy development and to measure developments by the quality of provision.

Conclusion

It is evident that the ECE sector has witnessed much development and initiative in 2017, with the promise of a similar trajectory in 2018. While this is welcome, the increasing expectations and requirements placed on the sector will need to be matched by increased and sustained State investment and support. Regrettably, another year has passed without publication of the promised National Early Years Strategy, which has the potential to offer a unifying vision for the sector. Even in its absence, however, there are reassuring signs, at both grass-roots and system levels, of an emerging unity and coherence that are so necessary for a competent system to thrive. The sector is confidently asserting its importance and professionalism and, hopefully, will continue to play a strategic and central role in developing its own destiny.

I would like to acknowledge the support of Ms Teresa Heeney and the staff of ECI in identifying the key themes for inclusion in this chapter.

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Pictured recently at Mary Immaculate College were Margaret O'Sullivan from Killarney, Co Kerry who graduated from the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme and received the overall Best LINC Portfolio Award in addition to the Best Regional LINC Portfolio Award for Kerry, and Dr Emer Ring, Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies.



Towards the Affordable Childcare Scheme

An opportunity to improve quality of provision for our youngest children



Amy McArdle

Policy Officer, Early Childhood Ireland

Amy McArdle has one big bone of contention regarding the Affordable Childcare Scheme – its total neglect of measures to support professionalisation or to improve the pay and conditions of the early childhood workforce. The current delay which has arisen in implementing the ACS should be used to redress this imbalance which is intrinsically correlated to quality of provision.

A single Affordable Childcare programme was first announced in October 2015 by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr James Reilly TD, as part of an extensive package of childcare measures in Budget 2016. Dr Reilly stated that a dedicated project team would be established to develop the programme. It was hoped that the scheme would be introduced in 2017.¹ The current Minister, Dr Katherine Zappone TD, took up the baton and secured €19 million in Budget 2017 to assist parents with childcare costs from September 2017.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) followed quickly with the publication of a detailed ‘Policy Paper on the Development of a new Single Affordable Childcare Scheme’ in October 2016.² According to the DCYA, ‘The Affordable Childcare Scheme will be a new, national scheme of financial support towards the cost of childcare. In line with the principle of progressive universalism,³ it will encompass both universal and targeted elements which can be incrementally expanded over time.’⁴ The policy paper sets out the intention of the new scheme, namely to:

Streamline the existing targeted schemes for parents and providers and replace them with a single, more user-friendly scheme of wraparound care for preschool and school-aged children.⁵

- » Provide a fair and consistent system of progressive financial support.
- » Provide a robust and flexible platform for future investment in childcare.⁶

More Affordable Childcare

DCYA was unable to develop the necessary IT system for the Affordable Childcare Scheme in time for September 2017. Instead, More Affordable Childcare was introduced and was described by DCYA as the ‘first step toward the new Affordable Childcare Scheme’.⁷ More Affordable Childcare comprises the originally planned universal subsidy, along with enhanced subvention rates and eligibility criteria

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for the existing targeted supports. It will continue to operate throughout 2018, and until the Affordable Childcare Scheme is fully developed.

Towards the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS)

The objectives set out in the DCYA's policy paper on the ACS remain critically relevant in the ongoing developmental period. They are to promote: (i) a reduction in child poverty, (ii) positive child development outcomes, (iii) labour market activation, and (iv) improved quality.⁸ However, it does not appear that the focus of the scheme reflects the priorities in this order, or that the scheme, as currently proposed, can address all the objectives. Rather, as the name suggests, and as is abundantly clear in the policy paper, affordability for parents is the driving objective behind the ACS, with labour market activation a close second. Indeed, it is difficult to see what in the proposed ACS could be described as a quality enhancement measure. There is nothing to support professionalisation or to improve the pay and conditions of the early childhood care and education (ECE) workforce, which are intrinsically linked to quality.

Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE)

Early childhood learning lasts a lifetime and yields broad dividends for children, families, communities and businesses.⁹ We know that investment in early years is investment in a public good and a cost-effective way of promoting economic growth. We also know that there is no return on investment if quality in early childhood services is not maintained.¹⁰ An experienced, knowledgeable, and competent ECE workforce is one of the most influential determinants of quality in early years provision, and it is the qualification of the whole staff team that is key.¹¹ This poses a concern in the Irish context, and has been identified by the European Commission.¹² The most recent review of the ECE sector found that only 18 per cent of the workforce hold a level 7 degree or higher.¹³ This is markedly lower than the EU recommendation for a 60 per cent graduate-led ECE workforce by 2025.¹⁴

There are many reasons for the low level of graduate qualifications in the sector. However, it ultimately pertains to poor pay and conditions, which is the result of historic underinvestment and fragmented policy development in ECE by successive governments. At 0.5 per cent of GDP, though including expenditure for children under 6 years of age in primary school education, the level of State investment in ECE is improving.¹⁵ However, considering that 0.1 per cent of Ireland's current GDP is approximately €250 million, our gap behind the OECD average of 0.8 per cent and the UNICEF international benchmark of 1 per cent of GDP is significant.¹⁶ Furthermore, we still do not know how much it costs to provide quality childcare in Ireland that is consistent with the principle of ongoing professionalisation. Accordingly, State funding, albeit improving, continues to miss the quality-improvement mark.

Doing the sums

The fundamental problem with the ACS, as presented in the DCYA's policy paper, is the cost model used to calculate the 'hourly' unit cost of childcare and thereafter the various subsidy rates.¹⁷ The model was conceived on the inaccurate premise that the current financial models operating in the ECE sector are working. Research commissioned by Early Childhood

Affordability for parents is the driving objective behind the ACS, with labour market activation a close second. There is nothing [in the proposed CS] to support professionalisation or to improve the pay and conditions of the workforce.

The most recent review of the ECE sector found that only 18 per cent of the workforce hold a level 7 degree or higher.

Ireland (ECI) in September 2016 examined these models and found to the contrary. Among the findings were:

- » The average childcare service in Ireland, whether private or community, urban or rural, operates on a breakeven basis.
- » The professional workforce responsible for delivering quality ECE services for children is low-paid and employed increasingly on a part-time/38-week basis.¹⁸

If the ACS is to succeed in improving quality and positive child development outcomes, it is essential that its cost model does not perpetuate the status quo of a breakeven and badly paid sector, in which the highly qualified personnel necessary to ensure quality of provision to children are increasingly difficult to find.¹⁹

Opportunity

The delay that has arisen with the ACS provides an opportunity to redress some of the imbalances and to think creatively about how the scheme can improve the quality of early childhood care and education in Ireland. The following are three examples of how the ACS can be strengthened to improve the quality of care and education for our youngest children.

Recognition that quality costs

In August 2017, Minister Zappone announced that an independent review of the cost of delivering quality childcare would be completed in time to inform the 2019 Budget.²⁰ This is very welcome. It is essential that future budget considerations and the cost models underpinning future developments in childcare policy, not least ACS, be informed by an evidence base which takes account of the financial realities facing a very diverse sector. The review must look at the variations that impact the cost of quality childcare provision. These include whether the service is community or private; its location, including whether it is based in a socio-economically disadvantaged community; and future cost pressures such as wages. It must also be consistent with the principle of ongoing professionalisation of the sector.

Early Years Policy

There is a proposal under ACS to reduce the means-tested subsidy to a maximum of 15 hours of childcare per week, inclusive of time spent in school or preschool, for children where one or both parents are not engaged in formal work or study.²¹ This appears to be motivated by labour market activation without proper consideration of the many and complex reasons that keep parents, particularly woman parenting alone, distant from the labour market. Such reasons include poverty, domestic violence, homelessness, drug addiction, mental health difficulties, and disability.

To ensure a quality ECE experience for children, early years policy must be driven by the best interests of the child and by recognition that not all children receive the same start in life. While the best interests of the child depend on multiple factors, in the context of ECE and our youngest children, their physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, educational, and social well-being should be the paramount consideration in policy development.²²

A new universal subsidy for under-threes was introduced as part of More Affordable Childcare in September 2017.

ECE plays a specific and vital role in addressing the effects of poverty on children as well as on their families and wider communities. Access to quality subsidised childcare must be viewed as part of holistic support for low-income, disadvantaged families. Early years policy in Ireland must ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families are not penalised by a disproportionate focus on parental labour market activation. The 15-hour subsidy proposal should be removed in the further development of ACS.

Inspections

A new universal subsidy for under-threes was introduced as part of More Affordable Childcare in September 2017. This is the first time the State has subsidised the care and education of our youngest children. The introduction of ACS and the legislation that will accompany it presents an ideal opportunity to extend the remit of the Department of Education and Skills' Early-Years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI), to inspect the quality of education to this cohort. The quality of education for under-threes is paramount to outcomes in later life and yields higher returns on investment in education and training than at any other life stage.²³

Such a move would be in keeping with the position of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy (2013), which stressed the importance of standards across the entire early years age range:

*Quality matters for young children of all ages, equally for under-3s and for over-3s. It is essential, therefore, that quality standards apply equally to all age groups and that quality-raising supports are available equally to services working with all age groups.*²⁴

There is scope to do this under Head 6(1)(c) of the Heads of Bill and General Scheme of the Affordable Childcare Scheme, which states that the written agreement for approved providers of ACS shall:

*Specify requirements that must be met by the provider in order to participate in the Scheme, which shall include requirements in relation to the quality of the childcare services which are subject to a subsidy under the Scheme.*²⁵

This is the first time the State has subsidised the care and education of our youngest children.

Conclusion

Enhancing the quality of early childhood care and education is clearly not the priority in the planned Affordable Childcare Scheme. However, it provides a significant opportunity to redress some of the imbalances in favour of improving quality of provision, and with it the quality of children's experiences. ECI will be working constructively on behalf of our members with other stakeholders, the DCYA, and the legislature to ensure that the rights and best interests of our youngest children are front and centre of the legislation that will underpin this new scheme. The Scheme will need to be implemented as part of a wider Early Years strategy which sees quality, sustainability, and affordability as interdependent priorities for future government investment in our vital sector.

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Is it time to establish an Early Years Council?

A plausible solution to inordinate fragmentation



Ian McKenna
Director of Saint
Nicholas Montessori
College Ireland



Mary Moloney
Researcher, author
and lecturer at Mary
Immaculate College
Limerick

Ian McKenna and Mary Moloney argue convincingly for the establishment of an Early Years Council, saying it would promote the standing of the Early Years Professional, establish a Code of Professional Practice and Responsibility for Early Years Teachers, and create a national register of Early Years Professionals.

Achievements to date

In many ways, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland has come a long way in the last decade. Not only do we now have two national practice frameworks, *Síolta* (2006) and *Aistear* (2009), but there is also a universal Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme since 2010, the Access and Inclusion Model (2015), a minimum qualification requirement (2016), and Education-focused Inspections of settings participating in the ECCE scheme, also in 2016. Overall, the professionalisation of the ECEC sector seems to be on an upward trajectory. Or is it?

Unsatisfactory image

In spite of the many initiatives mentioned here, it is widely acknowledged that the sector in Ireland is not perceived as a profession at either a macro (government, society, other pedagogical professions) or micro (local, setting) level. This overall lack of recognition can be traced to the traditional care and education divide, where mothers in the home cared for children, while education was seen to begin with formal schooling.

However, Ireland's entry to the EU, economic prosperity, and women – especially mothers – entering the workforce from the mid-1980s onwards dramatically challenged the State's position on care and educational provision for children outside the home, prior to school entry.

It can be argued that the State rose to this challenge, and invested heavily in developing a childcare infrastructure, which at the time (c.2000–2010) was essential to enabling mothers, in particular, to return to and remain in employment. Ireland can be justifiably proud of the physical infrastructure that has been established throughout the country.

Developing the Educators

But quality ECEC is not just concerned with bricks and mortar: equal consideration must be given to those who work with young children in settings. What, then, of the ECEC educators? How has the ECEC profession been supported and developed over the years? It goes

Until December 2016 there was no mandatory training or qualification requirement for those working with children aged 0-6.

Regrettably, the notion prevailed that anyone can mind a child.

without saying that, while a parallel investment in staff training and development was required, little attention was in fact paid to this.

Gaining qualifications

It is widely recognised that the early years, from birth to six years, are a critical period in a young child's development. It is recognised also that educator qualifications are a critical determinant of quality in early years settings. Remarkably, in spite of this, until December 2016 there was no mandatory training or qualification requirement for those working with children aged up to six years. Regrettably, the notion prevailed that anyone can mind a child, or that attendance at a one-off workshop or series of workshops was all that was required. Although the current level 5 mandatory training requirement is a welcome development, it falls far short of the training associated with being a professional, that is, advanced knowledge and rigorous training over a long period. Crucially, professionals hold a body of knowledge, skills, and expertise that is generally unknown to the lay public. They also enjoy the trust of the public that this knowledge will be exercised in a selfless and altruistic manner for the betterment of society.

A Professional Association is the norm

One of the hallmarks of a profession is having a professional association which acts to protect the status and position of its members. Members tend to share a singularly focused interest, a common bond which sets aspirations for the occupation. But does this exist in the ECEC workforce, which includes employers and owners of small and large settings, community settings where employees are engaged under Community Employment Schemes, managers and employees with various levels of early years qualifications? Their interests are multi-faceted and do not always coincide.

Challenges arising from lack of an Early Years Council

Contrast this with the State-regulated teaching profession, which is overseen by the Teaching Council. That council determines the entry criteria and licence to practise. There is no corresponding overarching body with decision-making power to determine the suitability of training, and fitness to practice, of ECEC educators in Ireland. When it comes to who can work with young children in ECEC settings, it seems that almost anybody can. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) maintains and regularly updates a recognised list of Early Year Qualifications. In 2017, this list indicates that more than 500 qualifications from across 37 countries are acceptable for working in the ECEC sector in Ireland. Is there another sector where this is the case? Of course there isn't. This is fraught with challenges relating to the following:

- a. Absence of assessment criteria to determine the suitability of these 500+ qualifications in the Irish context. This is especially important given the focus on implementing the *Síolta* and *Aistear* practice frameworks. How, then, can qualifications from outside Ireland take account of these critical initiatives?
- b. Absence of fitness-to-practice criteria which signify the validity and adequacy of the training. Indeed, fitness to practice is considered the

- ‘mark of a professional’ (Uhlmann Schuette and Yashar, 2010 , p. 468). It ensures a standard of practice, education and qualification.
- c. Lack of criteria for the hours of practice required for entry to the field. A recent study by PLÉ Ireland, based on fourteen higher education institutes (HEIs) offering full-time degree programmes in ECEC, found that practice in the field during the training period ranged from 540 to 1,000 hours. Findings from this study signify the need to establish a set of criteria for practicum across the HEIs in Ireland.

Fragmentation at multiple levels

The sector is characterised by inordinate fragmentation at multiple levels, including qualifications, as outlined, but also in governance, inspection, and resourcing. It is governed by both the DCYA and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). According to Moloney (2016) , this dual governance approach perpetuates a traditional polarity of care and education in the sector, where those providing education and care for children under three years have been denigrated as ‘care’, resulting in a ‘dumbing down’ of their role vis-à-vis educational qualifications and a lack of investment in this aspect of the early years. Moloney also argues that educators working with older children in the ECCE scheme (aged 3+) have had their employability and skills status somewhat elevated through the payment of higher capitation to early years providers, based on their level 7 or higher qualifications.

When it comes to who can work with young children in ECEC settings, it seems that almost anybody can.

Disparate inspection systems

Adding to the fragmentation is the issue of inspection. Care and education quite rightly reside together in the core values of all educators in Ireland. But although the DES called for a unitary inspection system as far back as 1999, the opposite has happened. Today there are two disparate inspection systems, which further perpetuates the false perception of a care/education divide. Settings participating in the ECCE scheme are subject to DES Education-focused Inspections, while Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, continues to inspect services for younger children.

Sector in crisis

Many working in the sector claim it is in crisis. Services report it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain educators in a context where minimum wage prevails. The simple fact is, the sector is not given appropriate recognition or status, and educators – many qualified to honours degree level – are not appropriately remunerated for their contribution to the most formative years in a child’s life. The workforce is dispirited and disenfranchised.

Functions of an Early Years Council

Could the establishment of an Early Years Council (EYC) address some of the fragmentation in the sector? Is the time right for such a council to be established? What contribution might an EYC make to addressing some of the issues arising from policy delivery fragmentation? At the outset, it is important to stress that an Early Years Council must be an autonomous single agency responsible for accrediting education and training providers, developing key standards for education and training programmes, and

More than 500 qualifications from across 37 countries are acceptable for working in the early childhood sector in Ireland.

An Early Years Council must be an autonomous single agency responsible for accrediting education and training providers, developing key standards for education and training programmes, and handling workforce registration and fitness to practice.

handling workforce registration and fitness to practice. Its core functions would be to:

- a. **Promote the standing of the Early Years Professional.** This would include regulation to support minimum qualifications, promotion of a Code of Professional Responsibility, and promotion of best practice in education and care, innovative practice, and inspirational leadership in the sector.
- b. **Establish and maintain criteria for Early Years Professional registration.** This includes maintaining and improving standards of learning and care, through knowledge, skills and competence, accrediting programmes in education and care to be delivered by competent early years teachers, and developing agreed models of professional practice placement as part of pre-service training.
- c. **Establish and maintain a Code of Professional Practice and Responsibility for Early Years Teachers,** by establishing high standards of behaviour and professionalism, embedding the code in other public policies with education and care, and collaborating with other professional bodies to ensure shared values and codes
- d. **Establish and maintain a national register of Early Years Professionals.** This includes developing transparent criteria for registration, and establishing and maintaining ‘fitness to practice’ criteria, and procedures for removal from public register.

Positive outcomes

The responsibilities outlined underscore the long-overdue development of the ECEC profession and could, over time, reduce fragmentation, redress the issue of 500+ recognised qualifications as an entry point to the field, promote a clearer identification of the workforce, and establish a more focused pathway towards enabling members of the profession to remain up to date with current and new information, practices and knowledge in order to maintain professionalism.

Reducing bureaucracy

Naturally, the suggestion to establish an EYC will be met with some initial stakeholder resistance. People may see it as another layer of bureaucracy on top of a highly regulated sector. On closer examination, however, the purpose is to reduce bureaucracy. Remember, what is proposed is an independent, autonomous, statutory body with overarching responsibility for the sector into the future. Examples of such councils can be found in places like Australia and New Zealand, where they have been integrated with broader educational councils.

Finding new ways forward

What is proposed here is an Early Years-specific council. This is an innovative approach that could be unique to Ireland. It is an opportunity for Ireland to lead the way, rather than follow what others are doing. It requires vision, commitment, and daring. Are we ready for the challenge? Do we want to promote and support the development of an early years profession in Ireland? If the answer to these questions is yes, then it is time to consider new and innovative ways of achieving these goals. It is time to consider establishing an Early Years Council.

The proposed apprenticeship model

Reflections on its introduction into the Early Childhood sector



Mary Moloney
Mary Immaculate
College Limerick



Gerard O'Carroll
Institute of
Technology, Tralee

While the authors fully concede the value of the apprenticeship model per se, they argue strongly against its introduction into the Early Childhood sector. Their reasons are forceful and their conclusion is unequivocal – apprenticeships will not solve the supply problem in Early Childhood.

Has there ever been such focus on the Early Childhood Education and Care sector? The last two years alone have seen the introduction of the Early Years Services Regulations 2016, the expansion of the ECCE scheme, Early Years Education-focused Inspections, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines and Charter. Change is ubiquitous, as initiative after initiative and scheme after scheme are introduced to an over-stretched, undervalued, underpaid and fragmented sector. Evidence is emerging of a sector in crisis, as providers articulate the challenge of attracting and retaining personnel who are no longer willing to work for €10.27 per hour.

The latest suggestion is to develop and introduce an apprenticeship model for the sector. The government claims that this will address existing and future skills needs, create an alternative source of varied skills supply for employers, and provide career options for young people. It is also thought that such a model will address the supply problem resulting from the increasing staff turnover which is all too common in the sector. However, it is difficult to see how introducing an apprenticeship in ECEC now can redress this issue or realise the ambitious government targets outlined here.

Let's be honest. An apprenticeship model is a tested and trusted mechanism of training or upskilling the early childhood education and workforce that is used effectively in many countries. Germany, for example, has a long tradition and proven track record in this area. So if it works for Germany, why not here? The fact is, in Germany the apprenticeship model is predicated on a well-developed, traditional system, input from stakeholders, and well-defined existing career pathways. This is not the case with the ECEC sector in Ireland.

As with all aspects of quality in ECEC, a competent system is a prerequisite for introducing an apprenticeship model. Unfortunately, Ireland does not have a competent system but one underscored by sectoral fragmentation, considerable variance in quality, and a dispirited and disenfranchised

Evidence is emerging of a sector in crisis.

A competent system is a prerequisite for introducing an apprenticeship model.

workforce. Not only that, but it seems almost anybody can work with young children in Ireland. Look no further than the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2017) recognised list of Early Year Qualifications, where over 500 qualifications from 37 countries are considered acceptable for working in the ECEC sector. Yet we are planning to introduce another qualification. This would not happen in any other sector. Clearly, Ireland is not ready for the requirements of an apprenticeship model, and the sector is not currently in a position to support such a model.

The apprenticeship model is packaged and promoted as ‘real life learning’, offering students a combination of ‘on-the-job’ and ‘classroom teaching’. The suggestion is that existing, pre-service training programmes are somehow lacking in this respect. The empirical evidence does not support this notion. The current model at all QQI levels incorporates elements of apprenticeship but with inbuilt quality control from educational institutions. In 2016, PLÉ undertook a study¹ across fourteen higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland offering full-time undergraduate degree-level programmes (QQI level 7 & 8) in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Interestingly, the findings indicate that across these various programmes, students undertake 540–1000 hours of supervised professional practice experience. This means they spend on average 40 per cent of their time engaged in professional practice placement – that is, working in settings and gaining practical experience. Opportunities already exist for upskilling via the Learner Fund at QQI levels 5 and 6, and PLÉ recommends that this be strengthened and extended to QQI levels 7 and 8 in the first instance. Blended learning opportunities can allow the existing workforce to upskill in a professional, reflective space appropriate to graduate education.

Task or performance achievement is a significant aspect of any apprenticeship model, so the question must be asked: Do QQI levels 5 and 6 currently not meet this approach? National and international research overwhelmingly points to the need for a more reflective, professionalised system rather than a focus on tasks alone. Some of the greatest advocates of quality in ECEC, such as Peter Moss and Helen Penn, argue that practitioners should be perceived as much more than task-oriented technicians. Moreover, the ‘Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care’, which was presented to the DES and Early Years Advisory Group on 28 May 2017, advises that in terms of ‘the necessary systemic professionalisation of the sector, such initiatives [apprenticeship] should be approached with extreme caution’ (Urban, Robson, and Scacchi, 2017, p. 52). As noted by Murray (2017) and supported by the PLÉ research mentioned earlier, there is a shortage of excellent ECEC settings available to students while on training. This is especially problematic in an apprenticeship model, because while undertaking an apprenticeship, the ‘apprentice’ is supported, mentored, and coached by the ‘master’ while engaging in ‘on-the-job training’. This issue requires considerable attention before any attempt is made to introduce an apprenticeship model.

1 Funded by the Teaching and Learning Forum.

Ireland is not ready for the requirements of an apprenticeship model in the Early Childhood sector.

A further consideration is the current climate of economic entrenchment and scarce resources. This calls into question the capacity of HEIs to adequately service the needs of an apprenticeship model in a new area such as ECCE. It would therefore be difficult to ensure quality.

We know of no empirical evidence of the demand from the sector for a new apprenticeship model. What the sector requires, and which is widely documented, is the strengthening of its professionalisation and identity. As indicated by Urban et al., an apprenticeship model, at this premature stage, could have the unintended outcome of weakening the emerging professional identity of the sector. The requirement of moving towards a graduate-led if not a graduate workforce is not immediately compatible with an apprenticeship model (CoRe, 2011).

As mentioned at the outset, the ECEC sector is beset by change, and many providers are struggling to embrace and comply with new and complex requirements from an increasing array of sources. Administrative and management survival is the order of the day in many services, and it is therefore unlikely to garner buy-in from the sector for introducing another initiative.

The concerns outlined in this article in no way take from the value of an apprenticeship model. Rather, they are intended to highlight the fact that the ECCE sector in Ireland is not presently in a position to manage and benefit from such a system. We believe that introducing an apprenticeship model now is premature and will not address the supply problem (deemed to be at the core of this initiative), which can only be addressed through better working conditions, better and fairer remuneration, clear career pathways, and professionalisation of the workforce.

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Mentoring in Early Childhood Settings

A key support in achieving quality



Dr Siobhán Keegan

Coordinator, Better Start Quality Development Service

The mentoring role and process are addressed in this article along with the supportive, cooperative relationship between mentor and educator, ensuring opportunities for meaningful change and quality development.

Mentoring is internationally acknowledged as a key support in ensuring quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. The OECD's (2012) Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care Policy notes that mentoring is widely regarded as one of a number of mechanisms to ensure that educators remain aware of appropriate research, methods, and knowledge to inform their curriculum and practice. The Better Start Early Years Quality Development Service was established by Ireland's Department of Children and Youth Affairs in late 2014, to work alongside, and complement, existing national ECEC curricula and quality-inspection services.

Better Start adopts a voluntary, strengths-based, and whole-of-ECEC-setting approach to mentoring Irish ECEC services that apply for support to develop quality. It engages with an average of 250 ECEC services per year, and around 500 ECEC services to date have engaged with the support of a Better Start early years specialist for the purpose of quality development. The role of this specialist is to work directly with ECEC services to build their capacity to deliver high-quality, inclusive early education and care experiences for children and families. The early years specialist supports educators to engage in behaviours, practice, and thinking that lead to positive educational experiences for children, at the same time promoting in the educators a sense of personal accomplishment, competence, and empowerment to sustain and develop quality independently. This work is guided by the principles and standards of *Síolta*: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009).

Better Start defines mentoring as:

A supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist. This relationship is based on the values of respect, openness and a commitment of both parties to quality early childhood education and care experiences for children. The process is reflective, strengths-based and tailored to the individual context of each early years setting.

Mentoring is a supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist.

The mentoring relationship is based on the values of respect, openness and a commitment of both parties to quality experiences for children.

Mentoring for quality

Traditionally, mentoring in ECEC has been conceptualised in the context of the professional development of newly qualified ECEC teachers, as part of efforts to strengthen the pedagogical expertise of staff working in ECEC settings (European Commission, 2014). A move towards ‘mentoring for quality’ in education settings has begun (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; ISSA, 2004; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014 ; Shearsby, 2015). In the ECEC sector, mentoring for quality focuses on the quality development needs of individual ECEC services, staff, children and families. It offers opportunities for meaningful and lasting change in the ECEC sector, as well as a realisation of a vision of ECEC quality that is equipped to change in response to child, family, policy, and cultural needs.

Mentoring for ECEC quality helps to ensure that quality development can take place in diverse systems and settings. In Ireland and many other countries, quality development in ECEC has been associated with compliance with national curricula or frameworks, or with quality assessments or inspection processes. Such approaches, however, may not address the developmental needs of ECEC systems with widely varying degrees of compliance capacity between individual ECEC services (Urban et al., 2012). This may occur because the national ECEC system is in transition or still in development. It may also be relevant in the context of an ECEC system where individual services are challenged to achieve the desired standard due to inhibiting factors (such as funding constraints or availability of qualified staff) unrelated to the ECEC service’s commitment to quality development.

Mentoring programmes that focus on quality development in ECEC relate to five quality statements proposed in the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (European Commission, 2014). The statements cover key areas of ECEC quality (access; curriculum; evaluation/monitoring; and governance and funding). The statements on professionalisation of the ECEC workforce and the use of child-centred curricular approaches have particular relevance for the design and content of mentoring programmes focused on ECEC quality. The fact that mentoring is a flexible and open-ended process ensures that professional development can involve opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork, and cooperation as outlined in the proposed EU Quality Framework. When underpinned by a well-defined, child-centred curricular framework, mentoring for quality ensures that children and their development are kept at the centre, and that quality development can be structured around that same framework in a clear and consistent manner.

Research evidence to support mentoring for quality

Research indicates that mentoring is an effective form of professional development in early childhood settings (Howe & Jacobs, 2014; Peterson et al., 2010). Historically, professional development initiatives for early childhood educators focused on transmitting knowledge through coursework and training. However, not all training courses have equal benefits for educators and children, because they differ in content, design, and delivery (Fukkink & Lont, 1997). Specifically, research indicates that the degree to which professional development is individualised, and emphasises the application of knowledge to practice, is a critical factor in

Better Start
engages with an
average of 250
ECEC services
per year.

ensuring effective and lasting professional development (Isner et al., 2011; Nolan et al., 2013; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2010; Vujicic, 2008). Change facilitated through mentoring is likely to be sustained, given that it takes account of individual circumstances and allows the change to be directed and realised by those responsible for maintaining it (Cameron, 2003; Chu, 2014; Ehrich et al., 2004; Knowles, 1970; Mezirow, 1985). A 'mentoring for quality' model is complementary to existing mentoring (pedagogical coaching) practice and compliance frameworks and is particularly suited to fostering the development of quality in ECEC services that are challenged to achieve social inclusion or in a context of resource gaps, as is the case in Ireland.

Documenting the Better Start mentoring model

In 2017, work began to document a theoretical and implementation framework for the Better Start mentoring model. The objective is to allow for replication and evaluation of the model and sharing of the learning with national and international colleagues and academics. While articulating the Better Start approach to mentoring for quality development, it is also intended as a resource to help others interested in translating quality into practice. It is not intended as an out-of-the-box solution to ensuring quality, given that ECEC quality is complex and multi-faceted. It will add to the national and internal literature on ECEC mentoring and will have a particular focus on the Irish policy context. Regular updates on the work will be available from the Better Start website, and outputs (including the theoretical framework, implementation guide, and accompanying resources) will be disseminated free of charge to benefit national and international policy makers, researchers, educators, professionals, and parents with an interest in quality development in ECEC settings. For more information on Better Start, please go to: www.betterstart.ie or www.facebook.com/BetterStartIreland.

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Celebrating Children's Stories

The *Wendy Lee Masterclass in Documentation* was presented by Early Childhood Ireland in partnership with DCU Institute of Education in September 2017. Participants gained an understanding of the philosophy and key elements of the Learning Story Approach.

Wendy Lee is Director at Educational Leadership Project, Waikato, New Zealand. She is a frequent keynote and conference speaker at international conferences around the world.

Pictured here are: Wendy Lee with Nickola Cullen, Manager at Beverton Preschool, Donabate, Co Dublin.



Transition from preschool to primary school

Optimising opportunities for mathematics learning



Elizabeth Dunphy

Associate Professor Early Childhood Education, Institute of Education, DCU

Associate Professor Elizabeth Dunphy highlights issues for preschool and school-based early childhood education in Ireland that were raised in recent research in early childhood mathematics education, particularly during the period of transition to school.

The transition from preschool to school can happen at the beginning of the school year after the child's fourth birthday. But since the introduction of the *Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme* (ECCE) in 2010, and subsequent extensions in September 2016, children can avail of preschool education if they are aged over three years and under five and a half. The result is that many children who would traditionally have participated in early childhood education in schools now attend preschools. In 2015/2016 almost 74,000 children availed of the ECCE scheme. It provides three hours of preschool education to children, for 38 weeks of the year.

The importance of transition

While no single definition of transition is likely to satisfy everyone, a consensus about what transition to school means is presented in the *Transition to School Position Statement* (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011). This brings together the views of an international group of researchers with collaborating policymakers and practitioners from preschools and schools. It characterises transition to school as a dynamic process of continuity and change as children move into their first year of school. The transition is understood to begin well before children start school, and to extend over time to the point where children and families feel a sense of belonging at school. Hopes and aspirations of adults during this period often focus on children's abilities to settle in to school, make friends, and meet the challenges of their new learning environment.

Starting school is a key step forward in children's learning journeys, and there is a growing body of research on how best to support children at the time of transition. Children's understandings of capability and maturity play an important role in transition. For example, they see starting school as about being big, and they focus in particular on literacy and numeracy skills (Dockett and Perry, 2007). Research indicates that parents can play a key role in what is termed *academic socialisation*, and that certain parental transition practices are positively

associated with achievement in reading and mathematics at the end of kindergarten (Puccioni, 2015).

Supporting learning during transitions

The government too recognises the importance of the transition from preschool to school. ‘Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011–2020’ (DES, 2011) identified, as a key action to promote smooth transitions, the transferral of relevant information on the child’s learning and development from the home to the preschool, the primary school, and the post-primary school.

The effects of poor or misguided pedagogy in early childhood are likely to have detrimental effects on literacy and mathematical learning for many children.

The ‘Interim review on the national strategy for literacy and numeracy’ (DES, 2017) sets revised targets to 2020. It begins with the statement that ‘being literate and being numerate are key skills which enable our young people, as citizens of tomorrow, to learn to enjoy and confidently participate in the Arts, Sciences and every aspect of day-to-day life’ (p. 5). Pillar 2 of the Review targets the improvement of teachers’ and early childhood care and education practitioners’ professional practice in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Pillar 4 targets the improvement of the curriculum and the learning experience, and Pillar 6 targets the improvement of assessment and evaluation to support better learning in literacy and numeracy.

The actions outlined in Pillars 2, 4, and 6 of the Review are to be welcomed, and efforts here are timely given recent expansion of the preschool scheme. However, these actions will need to be appropriately focused, since the effects of poor or misguided pedagogy in early childhood are likely to have detrimental effects on literacy and mathematical learning for many children. The importance of a good start in these areas is well documented in the literature (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; National Research Council (NRC), 2009).

Supporting mathematics learning during transitions

The discussion which follows focuses on how high-quality mathematics learning and development might be secured in the year before primary school and the year after entry, that is, the transition period. I use the term *mathematics* as opposed to *numeracy* to describe the area under discussion. As Clements et al. observe (2013, p. 32), numeracy is not well defined but has extended over the years ‘beyond purely arithmetical skills to embrace not only other elementary mathematical skills but also affective characteristics such as attitudes and confidence’. While the development of numeracy is important, education and curricula at all levels, including preschool, should encompass a broader view of mathematics and of mathematics learning.

In 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Aistear defines numeracy as ‘developing an understanding of numbers and mathematical concepts’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 56). The framework draws attention to the development of children’s mathematical literacy as ‘children explore ways to represent their ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects and actions through symbols’ (p. 44). Goals are identified whereby young children, in partnership with adults, gradually learn to communicate using a range of symbolic means, including the mathematics sign system. While general

Research strongly supports a coherent curriculum for young children, rather than disconnected sets of activities.

Many early childhood settings do not provide adequate learning experiences in mathematics.

aspirations such as these are what framework documents offer, they can only be fully realised when educators are knowledgeable about how young children learn mathematics.

A focus on mathematics learning is timely for three reasons. First, research has resulted in great strides in supporting young children's literacy, but a similar effort is now required to raise awareness about the importance of paying far closer attention to research on early childhood mathematics than has been the case up to now (NRC, 2009). Second, this past year has seen the publication of the report *STEM Education in the Irish school system* (STEM Education Review Group, 2016), with consequent questions about the relationships between how children fare with mathematics in the school system, and the kinds of early learning experiences they have. Third, while the terms of reference for the recently established working group to develop a Draft Professional Award Standard and Guidelines for undergraduate programmes in ECEC acknowledges significant gaps in certain areas of study, there is no reference to numeracy or mathematics. This suggests there may be considerable scope for developments in thinking about the preparation of preschool educators.

Pedagogy and curriculum

Over the last decade, research in early childhood mathematics education (ECME) is really beginning to have an impact on how countries provide for children aged 3–6 years (Perry, MacDonald, and Gervasoni, 2014). We know that opportunities for mathematics learning in early childhood settings must be prefaced on the mathematics that children have already acquired, through their play and their engagement in everyday experiences in the home and community (Dunphy, 2006). We know that noticing and extending children's freely chosen activities is essential if their mathematical potential is to be realised. We know too that research strongly supports a coherent curriculum for young children, rather than disconnected sets of activities (Dunphy, Dooley and Shiel, 2014). It supports a curriculum with a strong focus on engaging children in mathematical thinking processes, such as reasoning, explaining, and justifying (Dunphy, 2015).

Shaping policy and practice in ECME

Research has provided clear pointers on the issues to be addressed in shaping high-quality mathematics education for young children in preschools and schools (NRC, 2009). Key findings include the following:

1. Most children can learn and become competent in mathematics, but this potential in the early years of school is often compromised by a lack of opportunities to learn mathematics either in early childhood settings or through everyday experiences in homes and communities. Economically disadvantaged children in particular need high-quality early mathematics experiences during the transition to school.
2. Young children can learn the ideas and skills that support later, more complex mathematics understanding. Two areas are particularly important for young children: (1) number, which includes whole number, operations, and relations; and (2) geometry, spatial thinking, and measurement.
3. Many early childhood settings do not provide adequate learning experiences in mathematics. There is a relative lack of high-quality

- mathematics pedagogy and a lack of attention to mathematics throughout the childhood education system, including standards, curriculum, pedagogy, and the preparation and training of educators.
4. Mathematics experiences and activities are often presented as part of an integrated or embedded curriculum, in which teaching mathematics is secondary to other learning goals. Emerging research indicates, however, that learning experiences in which mathematics is a supplementary activity rather than the primary focus are less effective in promoting children's mathematics learning than experiences in which mathematics is the primary goal.
 5. Extensive, high-quality early mathematics education for young children can serve as a sound foundation for later learning in mathematics and can help address long-term systematic inequities in educational outcomes.
 6. While research about how young children develop and learn key concepts in mathematics has clear implications for practice, the findings are not well known in the early education community.

In the terms of reference for the recently established working group to develop a Draft Professional Award Standard and Guidelines for undergraduate programmes in ECEC, there is no reference to numeracy or mathematics.

These findings, and corresponding recommendations, clearly have implications for preparing those who educate children in Ireland's state-supported preschool programmes and in the infant classes of primary schools, as well as implications for the curriculum implemented by those educators.

Until recently, the mathematics education of most four- and five-year-old children in Ireland has been addressed in line with many of the recommendations from the above report. Successive primary school curricula, since the foundation of the state education system, have recognised even the youngest children at school as mathematics learners. Cognitive science research has been used extensively in developing mathematics curricula for use with children aged 4–6 years in infant classes. But we also know that while teachers' understanding of optimal pedagogy for early mathematics is relatively well developed, structural conditions such as class size have been quite inadequate. This has resulted in considerable challenges, difficulties, and forced compromises for teachers in implementing the pedagogies that contribute to optimal learning (Dunphy, 2009). Better ratios exist in the preschool sector, but other serious issues arise, not least the current capacity of the workforce to deliver the kinds of experiences needed to secure optimal mathematics learning.

Preparation for ECME

Against the background of a sector profile where only 15 per cent of the workforce is at graduate level (European Commission, 2016), the Early Years Sector Profile 2015–2016 (Pobal, 2016) provides an overview of over 4,300 facilities providing centre-based childcare across Ireland. Besides profiling qualification levels of survey participants, it sought childcare practitioners' perceptions of training programmes in higher or further education. Respondents were generally positive about how their qualification in early childhood care and education had prepared them for working in an early years setting, with nine out of ten indicating they felt well or very well prepared. On their level of preparedness 'to support the development of early mathematics skills and numeracy', 73 per cent of participants with further education felt adequately prepared, and 82 per cent of those with higher education felt well prepared.

Mathematical knowledge for teaching is as essential for preschool educators as it is for primary school teachers.

Mathematical knowledge for teaching can only be acquired through in-depth study of the wide range of issues pertaining to teaching and learning mathematics in early childhood.

While it is reassuring that these educators feel confident in supporting early mathematics learning, great care is needed in interpreting these figures. Information from surveys such as this must be viewed in the light of international research on the depth of knowledge needed to support mathematics learning and development of all children aged 3–6 years, as well as against the background of changes in the field of early mathematics.

Questions must be asked about how practitioners such as the survey participants above define mathematics skills and numeracy, how they understand mathematics education for young children, what mathematics they think young children can learn, what teaching and learning strategies they think are appropriate, how they view intentional teaching of early mathematics, and how they understand the role that play has in developing mathematical understanding.

Central to educators' capacities to develop young children's mathematical dispositions, knowledge, skills, and understandings are their conceptual frameworks of how children develop in this area of learning and how best to support it. This is often referred to as mathematical knowledge for teaching. This knowledge is as essential for preschool educators as it is for primary school teachers. We are fortunate in Ireland that all teachers in primary schools have had extensive opportunities to study these issues as they pertain to young children, in addition to the extensive study of mathematics teaching, learning, and curriculum for older children.

While such study is mandatory for teachers, and is constantly under scrutiny from the Teaching Council, this is not currently the case for preschool educators. They too must be given appropriate opportunities to develop their knowledge for teaching. The pre-service education of all those working in preschools is a crucial area to be addressed. Mathematical knowledge for teaching can only be acquired through in-depth study of the wide range of issues pertaining to teaching and learning mathematics in early childhood (Ginsburg, Lee, and Boyd, 2008). No amount of experience can compensate for this.

Conclusion

The DES working group on Draft Professional Award Standards and Guidelines for undergraduate programmes in ECEC provides an opportunity to address the serious current deficit in ECEC undergraduate preparation for early childhood mathematics education. It is an opportunity to ensure that preschool mathematics education is of a standard to which all children are entitled, and that the preparation offered to preschool educators enables them to support optimal mathematics learning for children in their care.

At this key juncture in the development of the preschool service, the capacity and quality issues related to ECME must be addressed hand in hand. We know that professional preparation is a key concern if all children aged 3–6 years are to be appropriately engaged, challenged, and developed mathematically, regardless of educational context. No amount of talking-up of levels of qualifications in the preschool sector will change the reality that preschool educators have not yet been given appropriate opportunities to develop their understanding and pedagogy in the key area of ECME.

Preschool educators have not yet been given appropriate opportunities to develop their understanding and pedagogy in the key area of early childhood mathematics education.

In this article I have argued that it is critical to focus attention on children's mathematics learning and development during transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland. The issues involved are well signposted by research. They include perceptions of what early childhood mathematics education is and how best to do it. Arising from the public consultation on STEM education (STEM Education Review Group, 2016), it was noted that the transition to school is a key juncture at which children's engagement with, and motivation for, STEM can drop. Engagement and motivation are key to children's mathematics learning, and both are more likely to be secured when educators are knowledgeable about the mathematics learning that is appropriate in early childhood, and how it can be optimised.

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Better Start Access and Inclusion Model

One year on

Implementing the programme



Dr Margaret Rogers

National Manager, Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

This article outlines the principles that underpin AIM and how they have guided its implementation to date, the implementation structures developed, and what has been achieved in AIM's first year, particularly in relation to targeted supports – levels 4–7 of the model.

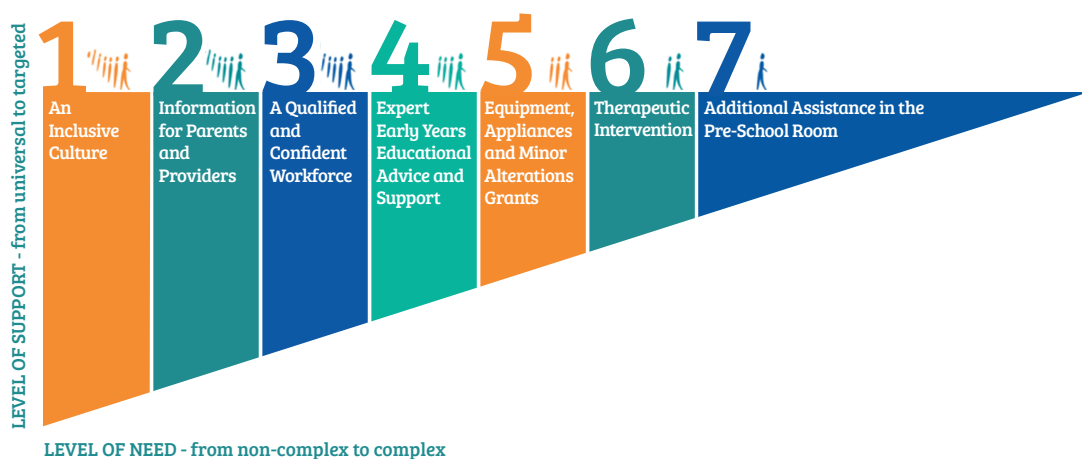
Introduction

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is an ambitious cross-government policy initiative, led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to the state-funded preschool Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Dr Katherine Zappone TD launched the programme in June 2016, and initial implementation commenced nationally over the following year. Full implementation will be achieved over the next three years through the collaborative efforts of all the key stakeholders. AIM is a child-centred model involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the abilities and needs of the child and the preschool setting.

Tailored, practical supports based on need are offered to all children who apply; a medical diagnosis is not required. The goal is to empower service providers to deliver an inclusive preschool experience, ensuring that every child can participate fully in the universal state-funded ECCE programme and reap the benefits of quality early years care and education. ECCE caters for children aged three to five and a half years, which means children can participate in preschool for up to two years before commencing primary school.

Because inclusion takes many different forms, and implementation is influenced by a wide variety of factors, there is significant learning to be gained from the operation of this new model at a national level. This article outlines the principles that underpin AIM and how they have guided its implementation to date, the implementation structures developed, and what has been achieved in AIM's first year, particularly in relation to targeted supports – levels 4–7 of the model.

A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme for Children with a Disability



AIM is an initiative to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to the state-funded preschool Early Childhood Care and Education programme.

Why inclusion?

Inclusion has been defined as ‘the unified drive towards maximal participation in and minimal exclusion from early years settings, from schools and from society’ (Nutbrown and Clough, 2006, p. 8). *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, notes that promoting equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate equally, with the opportunity to fulfil their potential (NCCA, 2009). Inclusion in early years programmes recognises that children with disabilities and their families are full members of their community, with equal rights to opportunities for learning, development, and belonging on a par with all children.

Participation in inclusive, high-quality early childhood settings enhances all children’s early learning experiences (DCYA, 2016, p. 4). In their early years, children are forming their identities and building social skills. They are becoming aware of differences, such as in gender, ethnicity, and ability, and of how they feel about those differences (Derman-Sparkes, 1989). In essence, they are learning to live as part of a diverse social group. Best practice in early years education is rooted in a commitment to recognise and work with children’s individual strengths, needs, and interests (NAEYC, 1996) and a commitment to equity which respects all children’s capacities to succeed (AGDEEW, 2009).

AIM principles

AIM is underpinned by a set of principles that are informed by national and international research. These principles guide the operation of the model:



These principles are elaborated on in the interdepartmental group report (DCYA, 2015), as follows:

Consistent:	The provision of ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be consistent across the country.
Efficient and effective:	Implementation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms and lines of responsibility for the delivery of ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be in place to drive timely and effective implementation.
Equitable:	All children should have equality of opportunity to access and participate in the ECCE programme.
Evidence-informed:	ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be evidence-informed.
High-quality:	ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be of high quality.

Inclusive:	Provision of the ECCE programme for children with a disability should be based on inclusion within mainstream preschool settings (apart from exceptional situations where specialised provision is valid for unavoidable reasons).
Integrated:	ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be designed and delivered in partnership with all stakeholders, including families and preschool providers.
Needs-driven:	The provision of ECCE supports and services for children with a disability should be needs-driven.

Translating principles to practice

The principles informed the development of systems, tools, and processes throughout the development and implementation of level 4–7 supports.

Tailored, practical supports based on need are offered to all children who apply; a medical diagnosis is not required.

Access to supports is equitable and nationally consistent, dependent neither on location nor on diagnosis. A single online application process was developed through the Pobal Programmes Implementation Platform (PIP), the system used by all ECCE settings to register their services. This facilitates direct and efficient access. As AIM is inherently strengths-based, the Access and Inclusion Profile¹ was developed to identify the abilities and support needs of children and the capacities of ECCE settings to meet their needs. This tool forms the basis of the application and appraisal process for targeted AIM supports. It looks at the child's abilities in the preschool setting and does not require a formal diagnosis – although health reports, where available, can be attached to the profile.

Early Years Specialists (n = 60) who implement level 4 – expert early years educational advice and support – are highly qualified and experienced early years professionals. They have undergone rigorous recruitment, selection, induction, and skills training to provide advice, mentoring, and support based on evidenced best practice in early childhood inclusion to ensure consistency and fidelity to the model's principles.

AIM is an integrated model, working in partnership with parents, ECCE providers, HSE services, and other professionals to ensure that children's access to ECCE is supported. Professional collaboration with colleagues in many agencies, both statutory and voluntary, is a key feature of the model, working across a range of disciplines in health and education. Access to critical therapeutic supports is facilitated through an interagency protocol, which allows Early Years Specialists to refer directly to HSE Children's Disability Network teams on a needs basis without the need for a medical referral or diagnosis.

¹ See: <http://aim.gov.ie/key-documents-and-resources/>.

Translating research to evidence-based practice – the role of implementation science

Evidence-based practice (EBP) means applying the best available research evidence in the design and delivery of services in health or education to enhance outcomes for children, families, and communities. It refers to skills, techniques, and strategies used by practitioners when interacting with programme participants.² EBP has its roots in the medical field but has been increasingly adopted in implementing government policy and promoted in disciplines such as psychology and education to build quality and accountability (Metz, Espiritu, and Moore, 2007).

The challenge of translating evidence-based research into practice in real-world settings has been recognised across a wide range of human services, including early childhood education and care (Halle, Metz et al. 2013). Substantial evidence points to the need for more effective ways to ensure that programmes are implemented to best effect (Fixsen and Blase 2009).

Access to supports is equitable and nationally consistent, dependent neither on location nor on diagnosis.

Implementation science tells us that implementation of research evidence in practice happens in four distinct stages which are broadly common to many implementation frameworks (Fixsen et al., 2005). Aarons and colleagues' (2011) conceptual model of implementation in public-service sectors proposed four implementation phases: exploration, adoption/preparation, implementation, and sustainment. In addition, three core elements have been identified as essential to effective implementation:

1. Building and using implementation teams to actively lead implementation efforts.
2. Using data and feedback loops to drive decision-making and promote continuous improvement.
3. Developing a sustainable implementation infrastructure that includes general capacity and innovation-specific capacity.

Building an implementation team or teams who oversee and manage the process at various levels (oversight and governance, project management) is a crucial step. Essential characteristics of an implementation team include:

- » Knowledge and understanding of the selected programme or innovation, including the linkage of components to outcomes
- » Knowledge of implementation science and best practices for implementation
- » Applied experience in using data for programme improvement.

AIM's implementation teams consist of the following:

A cross-sectoral implementation group (CSIG) is chaired by DCYA and comprises representatives of the key stakeholders. It has an oversight function and directs the activity of the project team.

2 National Implementation Research Network's Glossary of Terms, available online at: http://nirn.fmhi.usf.edu/implementation/10_glossary.cfm.

AIM is an integrated model, working in partnership with parents, ECCE providers, HSE services, and other professionals.

The project team is responsible for project management and driving the implementation of AIM on a cross-sectoral basis, ensuring that all delivery partners fulfil their commitments. It comprises stakeholder representatives at operational level, who are responsible for delivering on the implementation.

A number of working groups have developed and delivered on actions related to each of the model levels.

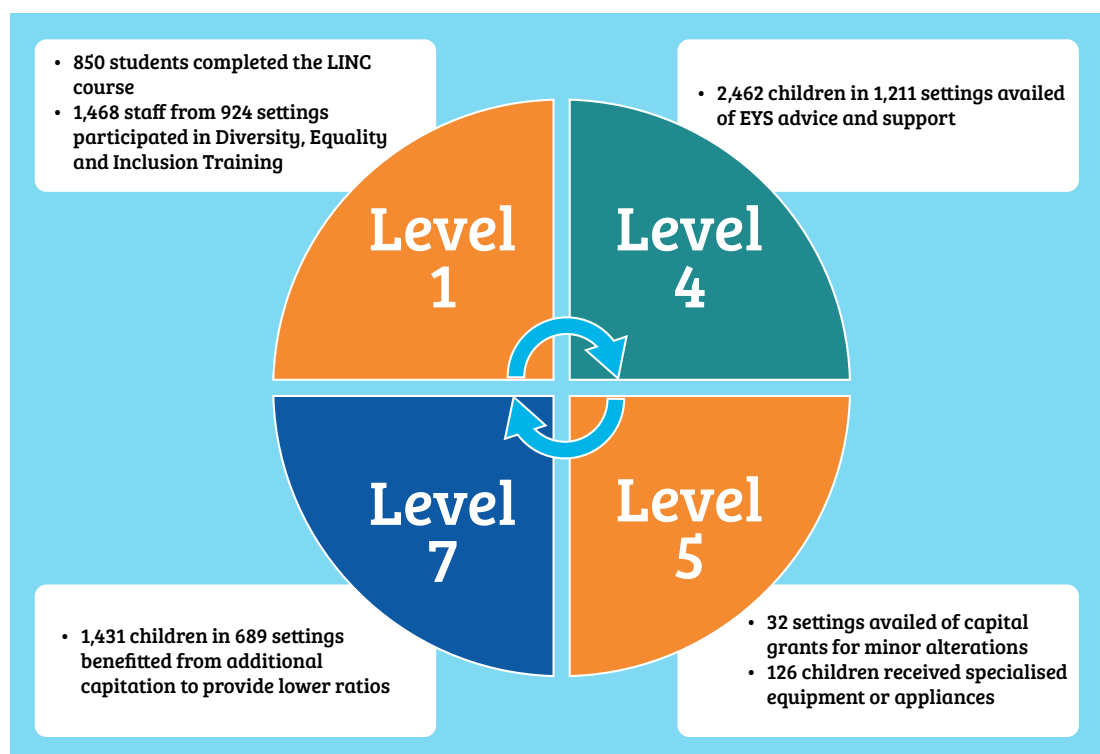
Data, consultation, and feedback loops from all stakeholders were used extensively in developing the model. Data on the prevalence of disability in young children was drawn from HSE and CSO population analysis. A knowledge management framework was created to monitor and analyse the implementation of the model as it progressed. Extensive consultation with parents, ECCE providers, and health and early years education professionals was carried out and continues through the implementation teams outlined above.

A sustainable implementation infrastructure, including personnel, technology, extended team locations, and expanded specialist, management and administrative capacity was developed by Pobal and other partners to ensure implementation of the model. Sixty early years specialists were employed, working nationally from eight locations, to provide prompt and responsive support to ECCE settings. Fifty additional posts were funded in the HSE to ensure that children's disability teams could provide advice or intervention critical to children's participation. Specific innovative processes were created to facilitate the model, such as the online access and inclusion profile.

Looking at the numbers

Budget 2016 extended ECCE entitlement to two years by broadening the eligible age range of 3.2–4.7 years to 3–5.5 years, essentially expanding the provision from 65,000 to 120,000+ children by June 2017. Research undertaken to inform the development of AIM revealed that 3–5 per cent of children aged 3–5 years have a disability, and about one third of those have complex needs, requiring additional support (DCYA, 2015). It was estimated that 1–1.5 per cent of the ECCE population of 120,717 (June 2017) would require additional assistance in the preschool setting.

In terms of delivery of AIM supports in 2016/17, key elements of levels 1, 4, 5, and 7 are outlined in the diagram below. In addition to those supports, under level 2, a dedicated website (www.aim.gov.ie) was created as well as leaflets, posters, and a nationwide 'roadshow' of presentations to providers, parents, and other professionals facilitated by HSE staff, city and county childcare committees, and Better Start teams. Additional training (level 3) is being developed and will be rolled out in 2017/18. For the 2016/17 preschool year, 2,555 level 4 applications were received from 1,211 services. Fifty-seven AIM referrals (level 6) were made to HSE teams (the vast majority of children with complex needs are already known to the HSE and in receipt of HSE supports, and therefore did not require an AIM referral) and the HSE were consulted on an additional 152 children. It should be noted that a HSE or visiting teacher recommendation is required for all level 5 grants.



AIM Supports 2016/17

Learning and looking forward to the future

Much has been learned in the first year of implementation, and there is much more to learn. Throughout year 1, applications came in relatively consistent numbers from month to month, rather than (as anticipated) in peaks and valleys corresponding to intake periods. This can probably be attributed to the newness of the model and gradual growing awareness over the first year. Already in 2017/18 a different pattern is emerging. Parents and providers welcomed the model and the additional supports it provided to children.

The AIM programme, even in its early days of implementation, has contributed significantly to awareness and a growing knowledge and appreciation of the value of inclusive practice in early years programmes. Already more than 2000 children and families in Ireland have benefitted, and more than 1200 ECCE services have improved their capacity to be fully inclusive through universal and targeted supports. ECCE providers have demonstrated their openness, willingness, and commitment to offer early years programmes to all children, regardless of ability, knowing that supports are available, where necessary, to assist them to do so.

There were inevitable and understandable frustrations and challenges as new systems were established and brought on line. For the vast majority of cases, however, the response was within the committed timeframe. Nationally, delivery of health and disability support systems for children is mixed and uneven: some areas have excellent service offerings while

others are poorly served. This presents challenges primarily to families but also affects interdisciplinary and interagency working and therefore consistency of delivery to children.

On a positive note, significant improvements are being delivered through the HSE Progressing Disability Service for Children and Young People programme.¹ Securing appropriate, accessible, and integrated supports for children with medically complex conditions remains a challenge. Despite these real challenges, the national implementation of AIM is helping to alleviate gaps and align supports, thus creating more equitable and consistent access to ECCE programmes for children and families as intended.

AIM is an integrated model, working in partnership with parents, ECCE providers, HSE services, and other professionals.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is committed to fully reviewing and evaluating the impact of AIM at the end of the first three years of implementation. A formative review of the first year of operation has been commissioned which will seek the views of parents, ECCE providers, and stakeholder organisations. Its findings will inform ongoing implementation. Much has been achieved and good progress has been made in the first year of operation. Feedback from preschool staff, parents, and professionals indicates that children, families, and preschool providers all benefit from inclusive practice in many ways:

[I felt] pride in seeing the child's achievements scaffolded by the supports we put in place. (Preschool staff member)

Increased confidence in our ability to include children with additionally complex needs. (Preschool manger)

A sense of relief at not burdening the service with additional strategies and recommendations. With level 7 in place, I could engage fully with the pre-school around goals and actions. (Parent)

Understanding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of promoting inclusion in early years is still emerging, nationally and internationally. Questions about meaningful inclusion and its implications for policy, practice, and potential outcomes for children and families remain to be explored. However, the AIM programme has demonstrated the benefits and effectiveness that cross-government and interagency working can achieve in a relatively short time. As we move forward with the model implementation, we are informed by children's and families' experience, by ECCE providers, and by the many stakeholders who have contributed to the success of AIM to date.

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1 <http://www.hse.ie/progressingdisabilityservices/>.

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DCU Lego Education Innovation Studio

Dr. Elizabeth Dunphy and Dr. Maurice O'Reilly, DCU Institute of Education, enjoy a round of Lego at the interactive Lego Learning Hub at DCU. The hub enables student teachers and Irish schools to develop innovative and creative approaches to teaching STEM subjects in the classroom.



Promoting Active Citizenship in Early Childhood

The changing discourse on children's citizenship



Elaine Hynes

Training and Practice Manager,
Early Childhood Ireland

Elaine Hynes discusses modern interpretations of children's citizenship which emphasise children's rights and active participation in the present rather than the more traditional aspiration of developing active citizens for the future. 'An entitlement to recognition, respect and participation' is the way that Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework, defines citizenship for children.

The discourse of children's citizenship

Historically, discourses on children's citizenship have tended to focus on future participation and developing active citizens who would contribute to society in a meaningful and productive way. However, changing discourses on early childhood put children's rights and active participation at the heart of early-years policy development. This is reflected in Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Sólta, the National Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006), both of which identify the rights of the child as a key underpinning principle. Citizenship for children is defined as 'an entitlement to recognition, respect and participation' (Willow et al., 2004).

Despite this, children's rights and citizenship are sometimes dismissed as lofty concepts, heavy with rhetoric and ideology and subsequently disconnected from practice. However, in Ireland in 2017, the evidence from both research and practice suggests that Early Childhood Education and Care settings are uniquely positioned to support the shift from rhetoric to reality and to ensure that children's rights are deeply embedded in practice with our youngest citizens.

Our view of children significantly affects how we engage with them on a daily basis. This is clearly borne out in our national practice frameworks, which describe children as competent and capable rights-bearing citizens. This represents a significant shift away from the view of children as dependent and needy. Children are seen not as preparing to be active citizens in the future but as being active citizens in the present. Children by their nature are active, and those working alongside them will recognise they are rarely passive in their approach to learning. However, while a rights-based approach to working alongside children is strongly underpinned by this view, it takes time to make this significant shift in thinking about how children learn and develop.

Children's citizenship – from rhetoric to reality

The relational nature of early childhood settings make them uniquely positioned to develop children's citizenship.

Children are seen not as preparing to be active citizens in the future but as being active citizens in the present.

For many children, the Early Childhood Education and Care setting is their first experience with the world beyond immediate family. It is a place where they learn to be with others and that shapes their identity as an individual, as part of a family and peer group, and as a member of wider society. Early childhood settings play a significant role in our communities, in caring for and educating young children, while acting as a family support, embedded in a network of relationships and connections. The relational nature of early childhood settings makes them uniquely positioned to develop children's citizenship. These settings are not sites of technical practice, but dynamic, enabling, learning spaces, where children and families bring together the richness of cultural and social diversity. It is in this space that children learn about themselves and the world around them.

Right from the start, early childhood settings work to create a culture of democracy and respect. Early years educators constantly look for ways to give voice to our youngest citizens, by celebrating the uniqueness of each child, valuing their families, recognising and respecting children's likes and dislikes, and engaging them in warm, responsive interactions that show them they are important. In this way, children learn how to be with others in a respectful and compassionate way, and to make strong and meaningful connections with the people and places around them. Educators are sensitive to the needs of each child, recognising when they want to be alone and when they need support and friendship. They provide reassurance or comfort when needed. They invite children's opinions, listen intently, and build a curriculum based on their knowledge, interests, and experience of the world, then celebrate and make visible their learning. Early years settings provide a safe and welcoming space for children to take risks, to explore and learn about the world, and to learn how to be with others and belong to a family, a community, and a society.

Early years settings that are committed to promoting active citizenship give children opportunities to be visible in their community, to be independent, and to make choices in ways that are democratic and respectful. While such democratic models are celebrated in Germany, Sweden, and Norway, there are also many home grown Irish models which demonstrate how early childhood settings promote and support active citizenship. These include wonderful, innovative examples of partnerships with parents and families, community fundraising events, inclusive practice, and democratic approaches to children's participation.

Towards active citizenship

Research tells us that actively challenging discrimination and developing empathy are a key role for early years settings in our increasingly diverse society (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010). This important role has been supported by recent policy initiatives which recognise that early childhood is the place to start addressing inequality, bias, and discrimination. In 2016, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to ensure that children can participate in Early Childhood Education and Care, in an environment that is inclusive and responsive to each child's needs.

As part of this initiative, training has been made available for early childhood settings on the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines.

Educators invite children's opinions, listen intently, and build a curriculum based on their knowledge, interests, and experience of the world.

The LINC (Leadership for Inclusion) programme was also introduced in 2016 to train early years educators to upskill as inclusion co-ordinators by completing a HETAC Level 6 Special Purpose Award. More than 900 early years educators graduated from the LINC programme in 2017. These important initiatives continued to gain momentum throughout the year and are set to play a significant role in changing the landscape of early childhood in terms of participation, inclusion, and citizenship.

Early childhood settings clearly play a significant role in promoting active citizenship and making Ireland an inclusive place for our youngest citizens to grow up and live. While many early years educators will aspire to adopting this approach, there is little doubt that training, resources, and opportunities for shared conversations are integral to working in this way. Adopting this approach also requires educators to engage in ongoing reflection, which involves time and space to share ideas, question their practice, and plan for the future. The question arises of how we, as a society, can support ECEC settings in this important work. How can we bring children's participation more to the fore in society and ensure that children's views are reflected in the development of policies that affect them and their families? These questions are significant for all parents, educators, citizens, and policy makers if we are to continue to make progress and support the shift from rhetoric to reality.

Conclusion

Early years settings play a key role in promoting active citizenship through daily practices which contribute to children's understanding of their world and the people in it. These are the practices that are to be celebrated, that build children's active citizenship from the beginning, and that continue to shape their lives into the future. There is much to suggest that raising the profile of early years settings as key to children's active citizenship, and investing in them accordingly, will benefit society well into the future.

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The National Síolta Aistear Initiative



Joanne Roe
National Síolta
Coordinator



Sandra O'Neill
National Aistear
Coordinator

The authors provide information on the recently established National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI), an exciting development for the Early Years sector. The NSAI aims to provide a coordinated approach to the implementation and development of Síolta and Aistear, the national quality and curriculum frameworks.

Introduction

The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI) was established in 2016 to support the national co-ordinated roll-out of *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) and *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). The initiative is being funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is being developed in collaboration between the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the NCCA.

Rationale

Síolta was developed by the CECDE to provide a national quality framework for all types of early childhood settings for children from birth to six years. The initial implementation of the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) was managed by the EYEPU. Working with the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) and some of the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (now part of the Area-Based Childhood [ABC] Poverty Initiative), the EYEPU coordinated the pilot implementation of the *Síolta* QAP between 2009 and 2013 and provided training and continuing professional development opportunities for *Síolta* mentors¹ who supported settings through the pilot. Due to resource constraints, however, implementation of *Síolta* and the QAP was limited.

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It supports adults to develop and enrich learning experiences for all young children. While its publication was widely welcomed, at that time limited funding was provided for its implementation. Since its publication, a number of developments have taken place:

¹ Settings taking part in the QAP are supported by a mentor. During the *Síolta* pilot, these mentors (approx. 20) took on this work in addition to mentoring/support roles in the NVCOs and prevention and early intervention and ABC programmes. Since 2016, this number has been expanded to include mentors from City and County Childcare Committees, and the title has changed to *Síolta Aistear* mentor to signify their wider remit.

Aistear in Action (2011–2013): a collaborative project between the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland. The initiative used on-site mentoring, cluster groups, and workshops to support curriculum development in several rural preschools. Samples of work created during the initiative were made available to the public to support other settings in using *Aistear*.

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2015–present): Available at www.aistearsiolta.ie, the Practice Guide supports practitioners to use *Aistear* and *Síolta* together to develop the quality of their curriculum and thereby better support children’s learning and development. The website provides tools, templates, and videos to enable practitioners to reflect on and improve their practice.

Whilst *Síolta* and *Aistear*’s principles have been linked to government funding schemes such as the free preschool year, the absence of a comprehensive and sustainable national implementation plan means the frameworks have been used inconsistently in settings.

National co-ordinators and *Síolta Aistear* mentors

In September 2016, two co-ordinators were appointed to ensure the effective roll-out of the NSAI: a *Síolta* co-ordinator working in the EYEPU and an *Aistear* co-ordinator in the NCCA. The coordinators have complementary but distinct roles. Their key responsibilities are outlined in Figure 1 below.

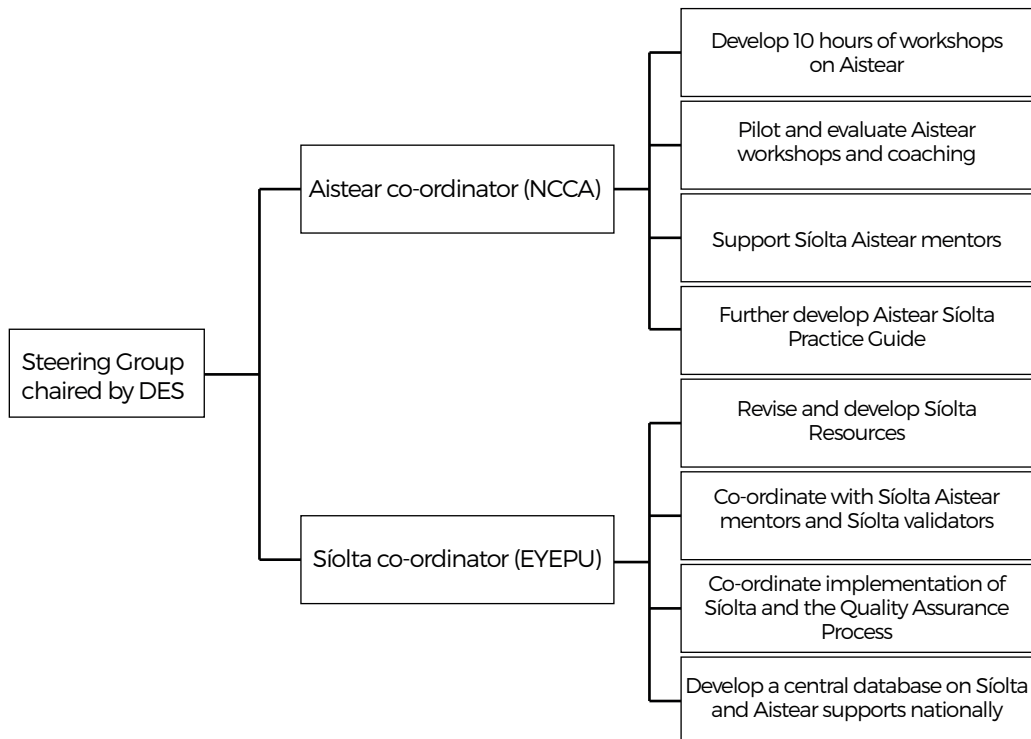


Figure 1: Structure of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland

Síolta provides a national quality framework for all types of early childhood settings.

In addition to the original cohort of *Síolta* mentors,¹ a number of *Síolta Aistear* mentors, nominated by City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), NVCs, and ABC projects, have been working with the co-ordinators since 2016. *Síolta Aistear* mentors facilitate workshops; provide information, mentoring, and coaching for both frameworks; and make connections across the frameworks visible to the practitioners with whom they work. This group was brought together for four days of mentoring training by the EYEPU in 2016, and participates in regular national and regional CPD.

The purpose and detail of the initiative

The purpose of the NSAI is to co-ordinate the implementation of the two national frameworks. Central to this is the provision of clear messaging, centrally devised materials, and defined support structures to ensure that practitioners across the country have access to consistent information and support.

The co-ordinators work closely together on resource development, communication with the sector, *Síolta Aistear* mentor professional development, and the establishment of national and regional structures to support the initiative. For clarity in this document, their actions undertaken as part of the NSAI are described in separate strands below.

Síolta strand

The *Síolta* co-ordinator is responsible for developing and implementing the *Síolta* framework, including the QAP. Key areas of responsibility include:

Revise and develop resources: The original *Síolta* user manuals were recently revised and combined into one user manual applicable to all types of early years settings.² New *Síolta* resources include four *Síolta* awareness-raising workshops, resources to support settings and mentors engaged in the *Síolta* QAP, and revised *Síolta* validation materials.

Co-ordinate and support *Síolta Aistear* mentors and *Síolta* validators: A priority in the *Síolta* strand was to increase the number of *Síolta Aistear* mentors available to support settings. Since the NSAI was established, an additional 56 *Síolta Aistear* mentors have been trained by the EYEPU, increasing the number to 68. *Síolta* validators who externally assess settings that have completed the QAP are also given ongoing support, CPD, and training relevant to their role.

Co-ordinate the implementation of *Síolta* and the QAP: The *Síolta* co-ordinator oversees the implementation of *Síolta* and the QAP primarily through the mentors' work. Mentors facilitate *Síolta* introductory and awareness-raising workshops, provide tailored mentoring supports on a cluster or individual setting basis, and support engagement in the *Síolta* QAP. The QAP provides structured engagement

1 To be considered for the role, mentors had to have at least a level 8 qualification relevant to Early Childhood Education, plus relevant practice or mentoring experience.

2 Manuals can be ordered online by emailing publications@opw.ie, or by phoning the Government Publications office on 01 647 6834. Manuals cost €5, and postage is free.

The purpose of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative (NSAI) is to co-ordinate the implementation of the two national frameworks.

for early childhood settings that seek external assessment of their setting's practice against the *Síolta* standards of quality. Settings are supported by a *Síolta Aistear* mentor through a ten-step process to enhance quality and create a portfolio of evidence which is externally validated by *Síolta* validators. To date, 121 settings have completed the QAP.

Develop a central database: NSAI partner organisations submit quarterly progress reports on activity related to *Síolta* and *Aistear*. A central information database has been developed to gather information on *Síolta* and *Aistear* supports being provided nationally.

***Aistear* strand**

The *Aistear* co-ordinator is responsible for developing and implementing *Aistear*. Key areas in the *Aistear* strand include:

Develop 10 hours of workshops on *Aistear*: The NCCA was tasked with developing, piloting, and evaluating an *Aistear* CPD initiative (see the DES Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 for further details). The audience is primarily early childhood practitioners in sessional, and full- and part-time day-care settings. Five 2-hour workshops were developed using resources from the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide. Between workshops, the *Síolta Aistear* mentors visit each participant for an hour to support the development of emerging skills and apply learning from the workshops in their own room or setting.

Still in its infancy, the NSAI has achieved a great deal in a short time.

Pilot and evaluate *Aistear* workshops and coaching: In December 2016, 27 *Síolta Aistear* mentors were identified to pilot the *Aistear* workshops and coaching materials across the country. In early 2017, the NCCA facilitated three days of seminars for these mentors to further their understanding of the Practice Guide's key messages and structure. Mentors worked with 14 participants each (401 practitioners from 162 settings in total) from February to June 2017. The pilot is currently being evaluated, and a report will be published in autumn 2017.

Support *Síolta Aistear* mentors: *Síolta Aistear* mentors are supported in their role by the provision of a private online platform called NING, overseen by the NCCA. NING hosts *Aistear* workshops and coaching pilot resources, and provides an online forum for mentors.

Further develop the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide: The NCCA also continues to update and improve the Practice Guide. New tip sheets, videos, and updated templates and overviews have been added since the NSAI was established. Improvements to the website's ease of use and navigation are expected in autumn 2017.

Conclusion

The NSAI is the first co-ordinated national implementation plan for *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Still in its infancy, the NSAI has achieved a great deal in a short time. Priorities for the next year include:

- » Increasing connections with other organisations providing supports related to *Síolta* and *Aistear* to support consistency and co-ordination at national and local level.
- » Further developing materials and resources which support implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*.
- » Reviewing the functionality of www.aistearsiolta.ie.
- » Developing resources to inform parents about *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

The national co-ordinators will continue to work together, under the direction of the NSAI steering committee, to achieve these goals.

Rediscovering Empathy

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre biennial conference, 'Rediscovering Empathy', took place in June 2017 at the Institute for Lifecourse and Society, NUI Galway. The perceived decline in empathy, care and social solidarity across the globe is a cause for concern. Research has shown that empathy in individuals is essential to healthy social and emotional functioning and contributes to the enrichment of civic society.



Keynote speakers at the conference pictured here are:

(L-R Front Row) Ms Ciara Beth Ní Ghríofa, 17 year old youth researcher at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre; Prof Kathleen Lynch, Professor and Chair of Equality Studies at University College Dublin; Dr Bernadine Brady, Lecturer at the School of Political Science & Sociology, NUI Galway; Ms Aisling Dunphy; Prof Pat Dolan, director of the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway.

(L-R Back Row) Prof David Howe, Emeritus Professor of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom; Dr Jean Clinton, Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, McMaster University, Canada; Prof Mark Brennan, UNESCO Chair in Community, Leadership, and Youth Development, Pennsylvania State University, USA; Ms Mary Gordon, Founder & President, Roots of Empathy, Canada; Dr Anantha Kumar Duraiappah, Director, UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development;

The Montessori Pedagogical Approach

Integrating Montessori within the Aistear Curriculum Framework



Lyn Bowers

Owner, Montessori Alliance

Lyn Bowers demonstrates how Montessori and Aistear are indistinguishable from each other - both have the holistic development of the child at their core. The Montessori pedagogical approach fits seamlessly within the Aistear Curriculum Framework but Montessorians must have prepared themselves, have the knowledge required to embrace change, and must be actively engaging in speaking the new common language which unites the early years sector in Ireland.

The Montessori pedagogical approach is over a hundred years old. In many parts of the world it provides a structured learning methodology not only to children at preschool but also to those at primary and secondary level. In Ireland, Montessori and preschool are considered one and the same. Indeed, when Montessori is mentioned in an educational context, it is taken for granted to mean preschool. Despite being part of the Irish education system at both preschool and primary level since 1920, Montessori is most widely recognised as a pedagogical approach for children under six years of age. Nevertheless, Montessori schools for children up to 12 years exist in Ireland. They are few and far between, but they are there.

It is necessary to acknowledge the place that Montessori has in the continuum of education in order to appreciate that it is not a pedagogy which stops when the child turns six. It is in fact a method of building children's knowledge and awareness of the world around them while appreciating individual learning styles.

Maria Montessori observed children, appreciated where their passions and interests lay, planned and constructed learning opportunities to exploit these interests, observed the children interacting with the learning opportunities, altered the learning opportunities as a result of these observations, and reintroduced the learning opportunities to the classroom. This whole cycle of plan-do-review, a common practice in many pedagogies, continues in much the same way today.

The holistic development of the child is the central tenet of the Montessori approach and also of the Aistear Curriculum Framework. The child is considered an active agent in their own learning. By connecting with those around them in an interdependent and intradependent way, they develop the skills necessary for life. Montessori acknowledged the importance of the learning environment and its ability to impact on the child's development. She included everything the child came into contact with under the umbrella of 'environment', in much the same way as

Montessori
and Aistear are
indistinguishable
from each other.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory links the child to society and society to the child. The Aistear Curriculum Framework was published in 2009, but the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide, which supports practitioners in implementing the two national frameworks, was not launched until 2015. This left a sizeable period of time when practitioners were struggling to figure out how the curriculum and pedagogical approach they were using mapped to the Aistear Curriculum Framework. Montessori Alliance responded to the need for information and help by creating a suite of resources for Montessorians. These included a set of posters which linked the Montessori approach to the four themes of Aistear, and also the Montessori to Aistear Mapping Tool (MAT), both of which are available as downloads or in hardcopy format from the Montessori Alliance website (www.montessorialliance.ie).

The clear and simple format of the posters adds to their appeal and usability. Although there is no one way to do Montessori, the posters managed to link the core ideals common to Montessori and the Aistear Curriculum Framework seamlessly. An extract from one of the posters is shown in Table 1, showing the Aistear theme of identity and belonging linked to the Montessori approach.

Aistear Identity & Belonging & Montessori

Aims	Learning Goals	Montessori Approach
<p>Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories</p> <p>Montessori Classroom</p> <p>The child is gaining knowledge of himself, his environment and how to act & interact with others within it. He is also developing internal and external skills. In essence he is constructing himself. Adult treats everyone with respect, actively listens, constructs learning opportunities for the child who hasn't yet found something that absorbs him both mentally & physically.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult children will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. build respectful relationships with others 2. appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday) 3. understand that as individuals they are separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities 4. have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities 5. feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment 6. express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourage active listening skills, opportunities to share thoughts & feelings in a respectful way by being taught the skills of social engagement 2. Circle Time - discussions which allow each child to take his/her turn and listen to others. Provide activities/pictures/games which enable children to identify that they are unique. 3. Grace & Courtesy exercises. Individual exercises allow the child to choose what he is interested in and progress as his own pace. 4. Home from home - child is encouraged to be independent and self confident by the security & consistency the setting provides. 5. Adult models behaviour, gets down to child's level, listens to child & acts on what child says/does. Environment is constructed so that it engages child, this is done by constructing learning opportunities that follow the child's interests. 6. Free choice of work/activities. Freedom of speech, movement, thought, etc.
<p>Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.</p> <p>Montessori Environment</p> <p>The child discovers that everything & everyone is interrelated and interdependent. Everyone has a part to play and work to do for the good of the whole. Each person is an individual who has a right to his own thoughts, actions, speech, but is also part of a community and a society and needs to respect the rights of others.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. feel that they have a place and a right to belong to the group 2. know that members of their family and community are positively acknowledged and welcome 3. be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds 4. understand and take part in routines, customs, festivals and celebrations 5. see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people 6. understand the different roles of people in the community 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Circle Time - discussions which allow each child to take his/her turn and listen to others. Topics initiated by adult & child. The order of the environment gives the child consistency; he knows where to put something and where it can be found. Care of the environment exercises foster responsibility and love for the environment both within and outside the classroom. 2. Diverse range of experiences including poems, rhymes, songs, bring the community into the classroom. Adult models behaviour and treats everyone with respect. Child is encouraged to bring in pictures, plants, leaves, objects from home. Things experienced at school are brought home, in this way home & school become united. 3. Freedom of speech enables child to share personal experiences. Circle Time & culture exercises introduce children to various ways families are constructed. 4. Culture materials 5. Visits from guards/firemen/shopkeeper/parents/grandparents as well as trips to local parks/centres

Table 1: Aistear's Identity & Belonging Theme linked to the Montessori Approach by Montessori Alliance

The Montessori to Aistear Mapping Tool which was published in 2010 is more comprehensive. It was designed to be a living document, to grow as our knowledge of child development grows. It was born out of a need for a common language, a way for the Montessori approach to be easily understood by everyone who works in the early years sector, especially the early years inspectorate.

The mapping tool takes the exercises and planned activities most commonly found in a Montessori setting and places them within the Themes, Aims and Learning Goals of Aistear (see Tables 2 and 3).

Aistear Learning Goals - Communicating

1	range of body movement, facial expressions and early vocalisation to show feelings and share information
2	understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact
3	interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others
4	understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others
5	combine verbal and non-verbal communication to get their point across
6	express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication
7	interact with other children & adults by listening, discussing & taking turns in conversation
8	explore sound, pattern, rhythm & repetition in language
9	use an expanding vocabulary of words & phrases and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning
10	use language with confidence and competence for giving & receiving information, asking questions, requesting, refusing, negotiating, problem-solving, imagining & recreating roles & situations & clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings
11	become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages
12	be positive about their home language and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations
13	use language to interpret experiences, to solve problems and to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings
14	use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world
15	build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others
16	become familiar with and use a variety of print in an enjoyable and meaningful way
17	have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way
18	develop counting skills & a growing understanding of the meaning and use of numbers and mathematical language in an enjoyable and meaningful way
19	share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving & responding to these experiences
20	express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting and sewing
21	listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments
22	use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences
23	respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song and drama
24	show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks and thinking creatively

Table 2: Aistear Learning Goals for Communicating in Montessori to Aistear Mapping Tool

The holistic development of the child is the central tenet of the Montessori Approach and also of the Aistear Curriculum Framework.

As the Montessori approach is a child-centred and child-led curriculum, there is room in the mapping tool for the practitioner to add their own bespoke exercises or activities, mapping them on to the Aistear framework. As Table 3 illustrates, not all of Aistear’s Aims and Learning Goals attributed for each Montessori exercise or activity will be relevant every time the child engages with it. It is up to the adult to decide which Aims and Learning Goals are most evident and note these on the child’s learning journal. Heretofore the early years setting was a micro-community of which parents had little comprehension. The aim of the learning journal is to bridge the divide between children’s home and their early years setting. It offers a means of two-way dialogue between parent and educator and acknowledges the vital role of children’s first educators: their parents.

Montessori	Aistear																							
Area: Sensorial	Communication Children will use non-verbal communication skills. Children will use language. Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language. Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.																							
Exercise	Aim 1						Aim 2						Aim 3						Aim 4					
	Learning Goals						Learning Goals						Learning Goals						Learning Goals					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Cylinder Block 1,2,3,4		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Cylinder Blocks 2 together		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Cylinder Blocks 3 together		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Cylinder Blocks 4 together		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Pink Tower Exercise 1		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Pink Tower Exercise 2		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Broad Stair Exercise 1		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Broad Stair Exercise 2		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Long Rods Exercise 1		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Long Rods Exercise 2		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Pink Tower, Broad Stair, Long Rods		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Knobless Cylinders		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Colour Box 1 - Matching		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Colour Box 2 - Matching		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Colour Box 1 or 2 - 3pl		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Colour Box 3 - one shade		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Colour Box 3 - colour wheel		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Sound Boxes Exercise 1		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Sound Boxes Exercise 2		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●						●	●					●
Smelling Bottles Exercise 1		●	●	●	●	●			●	●	●	●						●	●					●

Table 3: Extract from Montessori to Aistear Mapping Tool (2010) created by Montessori Alliance

Montessori teachers are accustomed to observing and recording how children interact with the learning opportunities in a prepared environment. Historically these notes were written using Montessori terms and without photographic evidence. An example is shown in Table 4.

Name: Kirsty Smyth				
Exercise	Introduced	Practised	Mastered	Notes
Cyl blk 1 – promotes concentration; order; development of fine motor movements; perseverance; hand-eye coordination; awareness of shape, size, differences/similarities.	01/11/15	Yes	10/11/15	Pincer grip good; hand-eye coordination good; enjoyed the exercise; mixed cylinders and challenged herself; built in sequence from tallest-smallest & smallest-tallest on floor. Used language 'tall'; 'round'; 'smaller'; 'soft'; 'sequence'. Drew around each cylinder using pencil and paper. Took cyl blk 2 from shelf

Table 4: Example of previous format of Child Learning Record




Montessori Alliance responded to the need for information and assistance by creating a suite of resources for Montessorians.

Although the example in Table 4 is a clear record of what the child has done, it lacks depth and detail. If shown to a parent, it would have little meaning unless the parent had in-depth knowledge of Montessori pedagogy. The introduction of the Aistear Curriculum Framework heralded a revamp of how observations are communicated to parents. The 'hidden purpose' behind Montessori materials is no longer hidden. As the activity in Table 4 shows, the most straightforward purpose for doing the exercise is for the child to figure out which cylinder is suitable for each socket. But this activity has much more to it, which Montessorians were in danger of assuming everyone knew. The Aistear Curriculum Framework enables Montessorians to make the invisible visible – the development processes going on in the child who is using the Montessori materials in an environment prepared for them to optimise their learning.

The recording templates provided by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Early Childhood Ireland offered structure and guidance to practitioners. As shown in Figure 1, the information recorded is rich and multi-layered. The comments are extensive and add context to the work the child has been doing. More importantly, it enables the Montessori practitioner and the parent to become partners in the child's learning and development.

The templates have been superseded by Learning Journals with less emphasis on identifying every learning goal the child attains. Flexibility in recording styles is built into the Aistear Curriculum Framework. This was deliberate and stems from the NCCA's reluctance to provide a blueprint on how to do Aistear. The NCCA did not want Aistear to become a tick-box exercise; they wanted it to be thought about, to be discussed critically, for it to evolve, and for practitioners to find where their particular pedagogy fitted in to the framework.

The Montessori to Aistear Mapping Tool... was born out of a need for a common language; a way for the Montessori Approach to be easily understood by everyone who works in the early years sector.

 Aistear <small>Creatchuraciam na Luath-Oige The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</small>		Learning Record Template			
1 Look at what I'm doing Include a short description and one or two photos of me as I learn and develop.	Child/children Kirsty Smyth	Practitioner Lyn Bowers	Date 26/11/2015	Description Kirsty prepared her work area by laying a mat on the floor, chose the piece of equipment she wanted to use and brought it to her work space. Kirsty took out all of the cylinders using her pincer grasp and stood them between the two cylinder blocks. One of the cylinders fell over and Kirsty spent time trying to get it to stand up but eventually gave up and lay it on the mat. Kirsty chose each cylinder, looked at it and placed it in the socket she thought it belonged to. Through trial and error she successfully replaced all the cylinders.	
2 What does this experience tell you about me? Think about my interests, dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and my understanding. Link to Aistear's themes, aims and learning goals.	Kirsty likes working in a systematic way. She perseveres and works out things by creating her own way of doing things. With the smaller cylinders she used her pincer grasp and with the bigger cylinders she wrapped her fingers around the cylinder to lift it. She didn't speak during the time she was doing the exercise but seemed to be absorbed by the task. At times she had to stretch to reach the cylinders. She repeated the exercise a number of times and seemed to get great enjoyment from finding the right fit. When she had finished with the equipment she returned it to the shelf and spent a bit of time touring the room looking at what others were doing. Aistear Links – ET, A1 LG 1,5,6; A2 LG 1,4,6; A4 LG 1,2,3,5,6; IB, A1 LG5,A3 LG2, A4 LG3,4,6; WB, A1 LG4,5,6; A2 LG1,3; A3 LG4; A4 LG1,2,3,4				
3 What will we do next to support my learning? Think about how you can help me to learn more in ways that excite and interest me.	Kirsty will be introduced to the knobless cylinders and encourage to explore how these relate to the knobbed cylinders. The knobless cylinders will allow Kirsty to refine her pincer grasp, make judgements and give her the opportunity to build towers which will require dexterity. Her friend Jack will be introduced to this material at the same time as Kirsty and this will add a social element where they will cooperate, plan, discuss and what they are doing.				
4 I want to show my family what I can do. Let me bring my learning record home so I can share it with my family. They love to see and talk to me about what I'm learning.	Parent's/Guardian's signature: _____ Date: _____ Comment:				

www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit
This resource was developed through the Aistear in Action initiative.

Figure 1: Example of Evidence of Child's Learning Record

Montessori and Aistear are indistinguishable from each other. Both have the holistic development of the child at their core, the appreciation of the child as an active learner and a social actor who has a place in society. They acknowledge the importance of creating an early years environment which encourages exploration, autonomy, self-directed learning, development of critical thinking skills, independence, and social awareness. The Montessori pedagogical approach fits seamlessly within the Aistear Curriculum Framework if the Montessorian has prepared themselves, accepted new ways of recording and corresponding with parents, equipped themselves with the knowledge required to embrace change, and is actively engaging in speaking the new common language which unites the early years sector in Ireland regardless of the pedagogical approach used.

First ever conferring of LINC

Finian McGrath TD, Minister of State with Responsibilities for Disability Issues, was guest of honour at the first ever conferring of the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme which took place on 28 October 2017 in Mary Immaculate College Limerick. 847 students from 27 counties were presented with a Level 6 Special Purpose Award.

LINC is a higher education blended-learning programme established in 2016 and designed to enhance inclusion of children with additional needs in early years' settings through the development of the role of Inclusion Coordinator. It is offered by a consortium led by Mary Immaculate College and including Maynooth University – Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, and Early Childhood Ireland.

The programme is free of charge to participants and employers, and is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills and the Dormant Accounts Fund. Settings with an ECCE contract can nominate an employee for LINC and the nominee must have a full Level 5 Award or higher in a relevant discipline.

While over 80% of the programme is delivered online, the classroom-based sessions are offered in nine regional centres in order to ensure access to practitioners across the country. The centres for 2017/18 are Cork; Dublin North; Dublin South/West; Galway; Kildare; Kilkenny; Limerick; Meath; and Sligo.

Pictured here are six LINC graduates from Limerick: Carol Lyons (Clever Cats Pre-School, Ballysimon Road); Rachel Cosgrave (Wilmott's Childcare, Annacotty); Sandra Gleeson (Castletroy View Montessori); Rosemarie Wilmott (Wilmott's Childcare, Annacotty); Pamela Walsh (Starting Small Standing Tall, Ballysimon Road) and Mary Cuddihy (Radharc Na Coille Montessori, Kildimo).

837 students from 27 counties graduated in October 2017 with a Level 6 Purpose Award (Higher Education)

