

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has begun updating Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, now 12 years old. This article provides a background to the framework, then summarises the rationale for updating it, with reference to some national changes since the framework was published that impact on the curriculum. It concludes with an overview of the plans for updating the framework.

Background to Aistear

Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years and is based on a view of children as competent and confident learners. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed the framework through a partnership with the early childhood sector, including children (Daly and Forster, 2009). It supports adults in providing appropriately challenging, motivating, and enjoyable learning experiences within loving relationships.

Aistear is underpinned by 12 principles and describes learning and development using four interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. The framework can be used in a range of settings and suggests sample learning opportunities and experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children. Accompanying the framework is a series of guidelines on partnership with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

Rationale for updating Aistear

A central tenet of the rationale for updating Aistear is that it is a fundamental part of curriculum infrastructure and enhances children's lived experiences, having become the bedrock of good practice in many settings. Many significant changes that impact on children's lives and on curriculum context have occurred since Aistear was published. These include changes in children's lived experiences, national developments, policies and strategies, and developments in curriculum and assessment.

Some examples of the changed context are as follows:

Changes in the lived experiences of children

Children and their lives are at the heart of Aistear, which celebrates early childhood 'as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as

Updating Aistear

Reflecting on the rationale and process for updating Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework



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they unfold' (NCCA, 2009, p. 6). Children's lived experiences have changed in many ways since Aistear was published in 2009. For example, Ireland has become more socially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, and this is reflected in children's lives. Two years of universal preschool provision through the ECCE programme has led to changes in what children experience before beginning primary school.¹ More recently, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic adds to the rationale for reflecting on Aistear and its contribution to children's lives in Ireland.

Changes in policy and practice

Significant developments have emerged through policy formulation by, and initiatives of, the Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE). Three initiatives that directly referenced Aistear are:

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020 (DES, 2011) (currently under review)

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014–2020 (DES, 2014) and the allied Education for Sustainable Development Action Plan Q4 2018 – Q4 2020 (currently under review).

First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (Government of Ireland [GoI], 2018).

A number of other policy developments will also be relevant to the updating of Aistear, such as the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017–2022 (DES, 2016), the STEM Education Policy Statement (DES, 2017), and the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (GoI, 2021).

Developments in curriculum and assessment

There have been many changes in primary and post-primary curriculum and assessment since 2009. The updating of Aistear will reflect the importance of continuity from early childhood to the end of post-primary education. Aistear was Ireland's first curriculum framework, followed by the Framework for Junior Cycle in 2015 (DES, 2015) and the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020). Aistear is a critical part of the curriculum and assessment infrastructure in the education system, and as it is updated it will be vital to consider how curriculum and assessment continuity is conceptualised, articulated, and achieved.

Stakeholders

Aistear's stakeholder base has expanded since 2009. There are now stakeholders such as Better Start, DE Early Years Inspectors, and providers of degree and training programmes that were not active when it was developed. It is now opportune to hear from these stakeholders on their experiences with Aistear, and also to reflect with stakeholders that were involved in the development of Aistear in the years leading up to 2009.

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (ASPG)

Early childhood provision is also guided by Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). Aistear and Síolta are interconnected, and in 2015 NCCA developed the online ASPG to help practitioners use the two frameworks together. Now part of the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI),² the ASPG is part of the national quality-improvement agenda and has particular relevance to the rationale for updating Aistear. As aspects of the framework have been illustrated and developed through the ASPG resources, the views of stakeholders on duplication, for example, will be sought.

Given these and other changes, it is timely that NCCA updates Aistear to ensure its continued relevance and impact in enhancing quality curriculum provision for our youngest children. It is important to emphasise that there is no intention to conduct a major review of Aistear. Rather, this is an opportunity to revitalise and update the framework to incorporate learning from practice and research, and from there to reinvigorate interest in, appreciation for, and use of the framework to enhance children's lived experiences in Ireland.

Outline of consultation

The consultation on updating Aistear will take place in two phases. Phase 1 began on 26 May 2021 and will gather responses to two key questions:

- What is working well with Aistear?
- What might be enhanced or updated?

Questionnaires for education professionals and for parents have been published, along with submission templates inviting all stakeholders to provide feedback. Depending on developments in response to Covid-19, a series of consultation events will begin towards the end of 2021 to gather feedback from practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders. In the medium term, these events will be online, with the possibility of face-to-face events depending on Covid-19 considerations.

Children are at the heart of Aistear, and a strand of the consultation is dedicated to gathering the views of babies, toddlers, and young children. This will be undertaken by a team led by Maynooth University. Additionally, a team from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, will conduct a literature review to update the research base for Aistear's themes.

The findings from these activities will be used to develop proposals for updating Aistear, and these will be the focus for Phase 2 of the consultation, which will begin in late 2022.

In conclusion

The aim of this consultative process is to hear the views of all stakeholders, including children, on how Aistear can be updated and enhanced. The findings will ensure that Aistear continues to effectively support enjoyable and meaningful learning experiences for babies, toddlers, and young children on their learning and development journeys.

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ENDNOTES

1. Early Childhood Care and Education Programme – the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's programme to provide early learning for children from 2 years and 8 months of age until their transfer to primary school (provided they are not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of the preschool year) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019). Over 95% of eligible children have availed of the programme (GoI, 2019).
2. NSAI is led by the DE in collaboration with DCEDIY, NCCA, and Better Start.