

# ‘It Makes Us Happy, and That’s Good!’

The child’s voice in democratic practices, through the lens of *Aistear*

---

This research explores children’s perceptions of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, to better understand how children interpret its four themes: Wellbeing, Communicating, Identity and Belonging, and Exploring and Thinking. This article outlines the research background and methodology, and describes its findings for each of the four themes.

---

## Introduction

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector strives to support meaningful change in the lives of children and families. A review of *Aistear*, the curriculum framework, began recently. *Aistear* is adaptable, designed to enhance child-led pedagogical practices. It creates space for the child’s voice, facilitating innovation and promoting participation (I’Anson, 2013).

The *Aistear* Principles and Themes state that the opinions of children ‘are worth listening to’ and that ‘they have a right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them’ (NCCA, 2009, p.8). While empowering, this is dependent on an educator’s recognition of children as capable and able to competently make sense of and share their views (Murray, 2019). Furthermore, it is essential that children see their views responded to, feel heard, and recognise themselves as agents of change. This active participation enhances their ability to flourish (Dobson et al., 2023) and facilitates the tailoring of experiences, resulting in meaningful learning (Murray, 2019).

To successfully implement *Aistear* in a manner which best supports each child, educators benefit from a greater understanding of how children interpret and engage with its four themes: Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communication, and Exploring and Thinking.



**Paula Kelly**

ECEC Educator, St. Nicholas Montessori



**Dr Tasha O'Donnell**

ECEC Lecturer, Marino Institute of Education



**Jane Craven Swan**

Preschool Deputy Principal, St. Nicholas Montessori

## The research

This research exploring children's perspectives of *Aistear* was conducted in an urban Montessori preschool with 24 children, aged 3–6 years, attending an ECEC state-funded class. The researchers were also educators and had a pre-existing relationship with the children, some of whom were neurotypical, neurodiverse, or did not speak English as a first language.

---

*The children recognised being calm as 'wellbeing for your whole body', and understood preschool fire drills as 'keeping us safe, so that's wellbeing'.*

---

The children were invited to participate in focus group discussions, to share as they wished and leave at any time. Both parental consent and child assent were sought, meeting the preschool requirements for ethical practice. The children were invited to describe how they 'see' each theme of *Aistear*, the results being documented and read back to the children to offer them an opportunity to confirm or edit their comments.

Analysis was conducted under three themes: prosocial behaviour, interpretation of space, and socio-cultural creativity. The findings, presented below, captured children's insights and revealed innovation in their interpretation of the themes of *Aistear*. The findings were then used to inform preparation of the environment and the planning of meaningful playful learning opportunities.

## Findings

### *Wellbeing*

The children suggested that wellbeing 'keeps us healthy and feels good'. Along with healthy eating, they acknowledged 'helping each other', providing the example of reminding each other 'how to be safe'. This shows that the perception of wellbeing spans both the physical and the emotional, encompassing a duty of care for each other. The children described the library as a place to 'relax . . . and read books' and considered music 'good for your brain'. They insightfully recognised 'being calm' as 'wellbeing for your whole body' and understood preschool fire drills as 'keeping us safe, so that's wellbeing'.

### *Identity and Belonging*

The children recalled 'letting other people visit our school' and 'when the football team came to teach us about football', capturing their sense of belonging within their preschool and the wider community. Their description of celebrations 'like Australia Day when our classroom was a beach' indicated appreciation of shared cultural experiences. Profound self-awareness was evident as they discussed how 'teaching people about stuff helps them belong' and acknowledged being 'kind and we help each other'. Further insight was

evident in their recognition of ‘working together’ while also ‘respecting people if they want to work on their own’.

### *Communicating*

The children initially focused on verbal communication, such as ‘greetings’ and ‘discussing our work’. However, they also noted that educators ‘don’t really use words for some work, they just show us . . . communicating with no words’. More abstractly, they identified art as a form of communication, ‘because sometimes you paint stories’. Shared values were evident in ‘communicating how to play nicely with each other’ and ‘how to be a good friend’. They further said, in dialect, ‘We be’d kind by listening’ – recognising this as an important component of communicating.

### *Exploring and Thinking*

The children showed cognitive awareness of behaviour: ‘we think about being a friend and being nice’. They also presented themselves as agents of change, saying, ‘we decide the type of classroom we want and how to keep our classroom the way we want it’. They recognised their autonomy and indicated responsive pedagogy, noting the importance of ‘talking about the stuff we want to learn about, and then the teachers help us’. Their understanding of the wider community was evident as they discussed ‘places we might like to visit’. They highlighted the significance of creativity, enquiry, and concrete experiences, as they spoke of ‘making stuff, that’s exploring’, appreciating the autonomy to produce work of their own, ‘like when we made a cloud rainbow’.

---

*By providing time and space for children to reflect on and discuss Aistear, a shared understanding emerged, empowering children and educators.*

---

## **Conclusion**

This research investigated children’s perceptions of *Aistear*, the curriculum framework for ECEC. It showed children’s innovation in their interpretation and better positioned educators to support child voice and agency in democratic preschool environments. By providing time and space for children to reflect on and discuss *Aistear*, a shared understanding emerged, empowering children and educators.

This collaboration, founded on mutual respect, enhanced children’s wellbeing and allowed educators to better understand children’s perceptions of their ECEC experiences and how they make sense of issues important to them (Dobson et al., 2023). The data that was generated informed the provision of tailored learning opportunities and framed assessment in a manner recognising the strengths of each child. It reaffirmed for each child that their views matter and that they have autonomy to shape both their learning and the environment in which it takes place.

---

**REFERENCES**

Dobson, M.R., Absalom-Hornby, V., and Baca, E. (2023) "Be beside me": Exploring children and young people's visions for belonging and citizenship', *Issues in Educational Research*, 33(4), 1362–1379.

l'Anson, J. (2013) 'Beyond the child's voice: Towards an ethics for children's participation rights', *Global Studies of Childhood*, 3(2), 104–114.

Murray, J. (2019) 'Hearing young children's voices', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(1), 1–5.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

---

 \*\*\*
 

---

## Naíonra

A fly-on-the-wall heartwarming three-part series where TG4 cameras follow all the action in two Naíonraí over the course of one year.



From Naíonra Chaitlín Maude, Tallaght, Dublin: Senan Byrne, Ruby Sheenhan, Halle Redmond, Freya Dowling, Kanan Selby, Phoenix Blu Clare, Millie Rose O'Hanlon Barnwell (photo credit Bryan Brophy)

For the first time in Ireland, we get a fly-on-the-wall insight into a small world where big things happen – welcome to the wonderful world of the Naíonra. In this heartwarming three-part series, cameras follow all the action in two Naíonra over the course of one year, one in Tallaght, Dublin, and one in Mallow, County Cork.

Aisling Breathnach is director of Naíonra Chaitlín Maude in Tallaght. She "loves the honesty of the kids and how they make her laugh".

Máire Uí Bhriain is director of Naíonra Thomáis Dáibhís in Mallow. She "relishes connecting with the children by connecting with her own inner child".