Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Education and Care

Steering Documents and Types of Activities

The Department of Education and Skills has funded two practice frameworks, Síolta [1] and Aistear [2], to support the development of quality provision in pre-school services. Delivering high quality early childhood care and education in Ireland is not an option, it is an imperative.

Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education [1], was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education at the request of the Department of Education and Skills. This policy initiative was first published in 2006, following an extensive three-year research and consultation process with a wide range of stakeholders. Síolta is designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECCE settings. Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit [3] (EYEPU), in the Department of Education and Skills, has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta.

The ECCE sector has been experiencing a challenging period of change since the announcement in April 2009 of direct State funding for a Free Preschool Year. With the introduction of ECCE provision, Síolta has been embedded into this initiative with a requirement that services deliver on a programme of activities that adheres to the Principles of Síolta. Whilst this is a very broad statement and only requires early years practitioners to be able to discuss the Síolta Principles and how they are incorporating them into practice in their setting, it is a very positive first step in ensuring that Síolta has a practical influence on the quality of early childhood education experiences for young children.

Síolta is process-focused rather than product-focused and sets out quality benchmarks based upon the twelve principles: the value of early childhood, children first, parents, relationships, equality, diversity, enriching environments, welfare, role of the adult, teamwork, pedagogy and play. Sixteen quality standards translate the vision of quality contained in the principles into areas of practice to be addressed. Quality indicators assist practitioners in implementing the Framework. A final report [4] on the implementation of this phase of Síolta was published in December 2013.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework [2], is a curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years of age in Ireland, and has been developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA’s remit is to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. The Council developed Aistear in partnership with the early childhood sector, and published the Framework online in 2009 following eight years of collaborative work with children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, early childhood agencies/organisations and relevant government departments, as well as with the international early childhood community. Whilst Síolta
addresses quality across all dimensions of practice in an ECCE setting, Aistear specifically addresses issues related to supporting children’s wellbeing, learning and development and provides a comprehensive set of information, guidance and practical tools in this regard. Despite the different focus and processes associated with each framework, they are very complementary in nature and together constitute essential ‘pillars of quality’ in ECCE settings in Ireland. As part of ongoing collaborative work, the EYPU and the NCCA co-organised a number of information seminars in 2010 on the two frameworks for support organisations in the ECCE sector.

Aistear can be used in the range of early childhood settings including children's own homes, childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services and infant classes in primary schools. The Framework has both implicit and explicit links with the Primary School Curriculum (1999) [5]. With its focus on children from birth to six years, Aistear can play an important role in the NCCA’s ongoing review of the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and in supporting continuity and progression in children’s learning.

The NCCA has developed a network of Aistear Tutors who are supporting infant teachers in primary schools in their use of Aistear. An online Aistear Toolkit has also been developed and provides easy access to a valuable range of resources to support implementation. Over time, the Toolkit will include examples of Aistear-in-action in different types of settings. These examples will include video clips, photographs and samples of children’s work. The examples will also show how Síolta and Aistear can be used together to support high quality practice across all ECCE settings.

On July 8th 2011, the National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy [6], was launched to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people. This publication is a milestone in the development of the early years sector in Ireland, as it recognises the critical role played by experiences in early childhood in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. A number of recommendations refer directly to the importance of high quality early education provision. Core principles of Síolta and Aistear are referenced throughout the document, including partnership with parents, the centrality of play and interactions in early childhood pedagogy and the key role of the skilled and qualified adult.

Teaching Methods and Materials

As an early childhood curriculum framework developed at national level, Aistear does not subscribe to a particular pedagogical approach such as Montessori, Froebel, Steiner or High-Scope. Instead, the framework is firmly rooted in research about how children learn and develop. The guidelines describe good practice and use a number of learning experiences to show what this practice might look like. While these learning experiences usually focus on a particular age group of children and a particular type of setting, many of them can be adapted to suit other age groups and other settings. Thinking about my practice questions help the adult reflect on what he/she does and says to support children’s learning and development. Aistear aims to help bring greater continuity and progression in children’s learning and development as they move from home to various out-of-home settings and on to primary school. Instead of looking at individual developmental domains such as physical, social etc., Aistear is based on the belief that all learning is connected and that different aspects of children’s learning and development often take place at the same time. The Framework includes guidelines on using play to support learning and development.

Early childhood settings are not required to use Aistear - it is optional. The NCCA has developed free online resources - the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide Toolkit - to help the early childhood sector to become familiar with Aistear and to use it to support children’s early learning and development. These resources include information leaflets, podcasts, presentations and activities. Aistear tutors are working through local education centres to support teachers to use Aistear.
The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide Toolkit provides internal self-evaluation processes but is not widely implemented by setting as of yet. An Aistear Síolta Practice Guide introductory workshop was developed by the NCCA in Spring 2016 and is designed to be an accessible, practical, hands-on guide for practitioners drawing from experience and learning in Irish settings. The workshop, delivered through the City and County Childcare Committees and the National Childcare Organisations, serves to build awareness of the Practice Guide and to disseminate information about its purpose and structure. Síolta-Aistear support initiatives are consistently developed for Early Years to boost the reach, impact and co-ordination of our national quality and curricular frameworks.

These guidelines identify a range of interaction strategies and methods which the adult can use to enhance children’s learning and development. The guidelines describe good practice and use a number of learning experiences to show what this practice might look like. While these learning experiences usually focus on a particular age group of children and a particular type of setting, many of them can be adapted to suit other age groups and other settings. ‘Thinking About My Practice’ questions help the adult reflect on what he/she does and says to support children’s learning and development. There are many connections across the four sets of guidelines. For example, many of the learning experiences in an individual set can support practice in the other guidelines.

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) programme, Assessment, Curriculum and Teaching Innovation on the Net (ACTION), aims to support teachers in the how to of teaching and learning, focusing on showing rather than telling what curriculum and assessment looks like in Irish classrooms. These resources have been developed with teachers and other practitioners to provide useful ideas and helpful guidance on bringing the curriculum alive for pupils.

**Aistear in Action**

In 2011, the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland began a curriculum development initiative based on Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. The initiative was designed to gather practitioners’ stories of their experience using Aistear to develop and enrich the curriculum they provided for children during the pre-school year. It was hoped that these stories would, in turn, provide important insights into the process of curriculum change and development within early childhood services, and in this way, support other services in using Aistear.

The 2016 Government Budget saw an allocation of €344 million for ECCE, with a percentage of the funding ring-fenced for quality improvement. A National Síolta Aistear Initiative was established in 2016, to support the coordinated roll-out of both the quality and curriculum frameworks. It is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is being developed in collaboration with the NCCA and the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills. Two National Coordinators have been appointed as part of the initiative. The Aistear Coordinator is situated in the NCCA and the Síolta Coordinator is situated in the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) in the Department of Education and Skills which is co-located in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

A review of the qualifications available and the extent to which they meet the requirements of this rapidly evolving sector resulted in a survey of Early Years Practitioners: Consultation for the Review of Education and Training Programmes in Early Years (May 2016) (DES). Quality supports have also been introduced with the establishment of Better Start, the Early Years Specialist Service who provide qualified mentors for quality improvement to support settings. Since 2016, education-focused inspections by the Department of Education and Skills inspectorate are being rolled out across the early years’ sector. All of these levers are being used in a coherent way to reflect the needs of the sector and to improve quality.
In the DES Action Plan for Education 2016-19, actions set out include training, mentoring and continuous professional development and up skilling opportunities for practitioners to further integrate and embed both frameworks nationally. The initiative has, to date, trained sixty-eight Síolta-Aistear mentors drawn from County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Childcare Committees and prevention and early intervention Area-Based Childhood programmes. Further training of mentors in Aistear is currently underway as part of the initiative and will include a Train the Trainers programme to be piloted with existing Síolta-Aistear mentors in 2017. Further development of the initiative includes the updating of Síolta resources and materials and website and the coordination of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme and additional mentoring CPD support.

**Educational Transitions between ECCE and Primary Schools**

There are two Early Childhood Frameworks. One is concerned with all aspects of quality in early childhood (Síolta) whilst the National Curriculum Framework (Aistear), developed for children from birth to six years, informs both the ECEC and infant classes in Primary Schools. Both frameworks devote considerable attention to the topic of transitions and provide numerous resources and strategies in self-evaluation tools to promote successful and effective transitions.

As part of the DES and DCYA requirement to make the transfer of information on children’s learning and development available (DES, 2011), written reports will be provided in standard format to schools and settings to which students transfer. Reports are to be provided following the admission of a pupil to the new school/setting. Current plans are ongoing for the implementation of a national transition initiative to integrate information transfer between the ECEC and Primary school sectors. This initiative is being undertaken by the NCCA. This reform has to date included the commissioning of a review of literature nationally and internationally, considering 10 transfer documents in use between Preschools and primary schools. Three reports have been produced thus far:

1. Transition from Preschool to Primary school: Research Report 19 (O’Kane, 2016);
2. Transition from Preschool to Primary school: Audit of policy in 14 Jurisdictions (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016a);
3. Transition from preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016b).

In addition to these reports, the NCCA will pilot transition templates with a variety of ECEC settings and primary schools in consultation with children, parents and other key stakeholders such as primary school principals and ECEC managers. Completion of the initiative timeline is September 2018.

Additional proposed activities of the wider transition initiative include the establishment of local networks, the dissemination of information to families, reciprocal visits by primary and preschool staff and children to schools and preschools, and the development of materials and books to support children with the transition process.

**DID YOU FIND WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?**

YES  NO
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Links
[9] https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/