Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

early childhood ireland

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
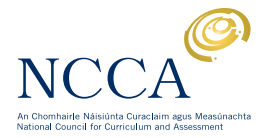
Aistear in Action initiative: Final report
A collaboration between NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland

2013

Table of contents

List of tables and figures

Introduction

In 2011, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (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 initiative was aptly named *Aistear in Action.* This final report outlines the rationale for the initiative, its design and its outcomes, and highlights important messages about supporting and enabling curriculum change across the early childhood sector.

Policy context

The last ten years can largely be defined as a decade of accelerated change in the early childhood sector. During this time, public policy has shifted from a focus on equal opportunities for women in the labour market supported through access to early childhood care and education to an emerging focus on the importance of quality experiences for children during their early childhood years. This is reflected in the inclusion of references to *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) and to *Síolta; the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE[1], 2006) in the 2012-2014 contracts for participation in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (Free Pre-school) Scheme.

Early in 2013 in the 8-point Action Plan for improvements in pre-school care and education, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, referred to the importance of supporting practitioners in using the two national frameworks, *Aistear* and *Síolta.* On October 10th 2013 Minster Fitzgerald launched the report of the Expert Advisory Group on the National Early Years Strategy (birth to six years). *The Right from the Start Report*[2] is to form the basis of Ireland's first ever National Early Years Strategy.

The Expert Advisory Group, chaired by Dr Eilis Hennessy of University College Dublin, comprised a range of individuals with knowledge and expertise across the issues that affect children in their early years, including childhood development, care, education, health and well-being. The report of the expert group highlights the need to

develop a national plan for the phased, supported and simultaneous implementation of the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, to achieve their roll-out at all levels of the early care and education system, including in all services and at the levels of inspectors and trainers themselves. Core elements of both frameworks should be extracted and prioritised for implementation

(Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013:19).

In the recent budget on October 15th 2013, €4.5 million euro was allocated to support quality in the sector including €2.5 million towards the establishment of a new National Quality Support Service to assist practitioners to implement the *Síolta* framework and *Aistear* curriculum framework (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013a[3]).

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[1] Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
[2] The report is available at www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/policy/RightFromTheStart.pdf
[3] www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=3019

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear was published by the NCCA in late 2009. *Aistear* is the curriculum framework for all children in Ireland aged from birth to six years. It can be used in a variety of settings including children's homes, childminding settings, infant classes in primary school as well as in sessional services and in full and part-time daycare services. The Framework is underpinned by 12 principles of early learning and development many of which are shared with *Síolta*.

Table 1: *Aistear's* 12 principles

Children and their lives in early childhood	• The child's uniqueness • Equality and diversity • Children as citizens
Children's connections with others	• Relationships • Parents, family and community • The adult's role
How children learn and develop	• Holistic learning and development • Active learning • Play and hands-on experiences • Relevant and meaningful experiences • Communication and language • The learning environment

Informed by these principles, *Aistear* describes children's learning and development using four interconnected themes: *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating,* and *Exploring and Thinking*. It also provides practical ideas and suggestions for how children can be supported in their learning through guidelines on partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

Aistear, the Irish word for a journey, represents the beginning of children's lifelong adventures as learners. The framework highlights the critical importance of the first few years of these journeys and the need for children to have rich and varied experiences from which they can learn and develop. The framework also highlights the important role adults play in nurturing and extending this learning and development. In his foreword to *Aistear*, Batt O'Keeffe, the then Minister for Education and Science noted:

I am confident that such a curriculum framework can contribute greatly to helping our youngest citizens grow up with a strong sense of well-being; proud of themselves, their families and communities; confident and competent communicators; curious and resilient explorers; and creative thinkers.

(NCCA, 2009a:3)

Since *Aistear's* publication, there has been no national, co-ordinated plan to support services in using the curriculum framework to guide their work with children. Despite this, a growing number of services are beginning to use *Aistear* to develop their practice. Services in some areas of the country have had access to professional development workshops on the framework provided by City and County Childcare Committees and by the Voluntary Childcare Organisations including Early Childhood Ireland. However, many other services have had little or limited opportunity to engage with the curriculum framework. Consequently, in 2011 the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland decided to work in partnership in an initiative that would bring *Aistear* to life in early childhood services and to share this experience with the wider sector through the online Aistear Tookit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit) and through subsequent training and professional development events.

The partner organisations - NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland

The NCCA is a statutory agency with responsibility for advising the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. Becoming statutory in 2001 brought an expanded remit which included responsibility for early childhood education. Working in partnership with the early childhood sector and drawing on a wide research base together with evidence from practice, the Council developed an early childhood curriculum framework which reflected the experiences of practitioners, children and parents. Following the publication of *Aistear* in 2009, the NCCA developed the online Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit) as a repository of practical resources to support practitioners and those in training and professional development roles in becoming familiar with, and using, *Aistear* in their work. Today, the Toolkit has 100+ learning objects many of which have been developed in partnership with practitioners, parents and researchers.

Early Childhood Ireland is a membership-based national voluntary childcare organisation whose members provide daycare and pre-school services. The organisation has a long history of support and training with early childhood practitioners and has been to the forefront in supporting practitioners in translating government policy and frameworks into everyday practice. More recently, mentors from Early Childhood Ireland have been involved in supporting the implementation of the two national frameworks, *Aistear* and *Síolta*, through the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme and the *Aistear in Action* initiative as well as through an extensive range of workshops and publications.

Design of the initiative

In recent years, the site of learning and development has become key to the curriculum improvement process with a high value being placed on the role of early childhood practitioners and teachers as generators of real knowledge about what works in teaching and learning (NCCA, 2009b:11). It follows that a curriculum framework, such as *Aistear*, comes alive only in the very particular social contexts of early childhood settings and must therefore be explored in these contexts in a process of local inquiry. The initiative used an action research model which involved 24 practitioners in seven services reflecting on their practice in their own room and setting, and identifying actions for improvement. This type of action research approach involves a continuous cycle in which the practitioners select an area of practice to investigate (Blenkin and Hutchin, 1998; McNiff, 2010). From their individual- and group-analysis and reflections, they develop new ideas about practice, incorporate these into their daily work and evaluate and monitor the process of change (ibid). This approach recognises the complex web of relationships and events that practitioners encounter on a daily basis and is designed to empower the practitioner personally and professionally to negotiate a way forward. The importance of a mentor in facilitating this reflective and questioning approach to improving practice has been highlighted as follows:

[helping] practitioners find answers to challenging situations, assist with strategies for action in the job role, promote, both nurture and challenge

within the boundaries of the relationship with the practitioner and encourage sustained motivation in the workplace

(Robbins, 2007:9).

Principles underpinning the initiative

Using an action research approach, the initiative was underpinned by three core principles. These were:

1. **a bottom-up approach:** the initiative aimed to work with practitioners to develop their capacity to create their own curriculum within their own services in a way that related to the cultural, structural and resource contexts in which they existed. Central to this was the importance of the starting points for work in the initiative being negotiated between the practitioners and the mentors.

2. **a strengths-based approach:** the initiative sought to build on the strengths of the services and individual staff members and, in turn, to develop their capacity to build on children's interests and strengths and support them in overcoming challenges they may experience in their learning and development.

3. **a partnership approach:** the initiative was a partnership between practitioners, children and their parents, the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland.

The practitioners' work as action researchers in their services was supported by a multi-strand mentoring model that included three elements - CPD[4] cluster/networking meetings, CPD seminars and on-site visits. Two mentors from Early Childhood Ireland and an education officer from NCCA provided direct and on-going support to practitioners through these three strands. Details of each meeting/seminar are set out in Appendix B on page 31. Mentors challenged and supported the practitioners to see the new possibilities for curriculum development that *Aistear* afforded them. Practitioners were given dedicated opportunities to question, analyse and explore developments in their practice. This way of working valued both the learning site as well as self- and group-reflections on practice over time.

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4   Continuing professional development

The practitioners documented children's learning so that they could share it, reflect on it and improve learning experiences and outcomes. The use of technology greatly facilitated this process. Digital camera/recorders, laptops and scanners were provided by the NCCA to enable practitioners and children to capture the interactive, social and dynamic nature of early learning and development. A video clip entitled ICT supporting reflective practice describes one practitioner's story of using the camera to enhance practice. This is available in the Aistear Toolkit. This multi-media documentation supported practitioners' action research as they could critique their practice, identify and plan changes, make these changes, and re-enter the reflective cycle. This reflective and developmental cycle is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Reflective cycle[5]
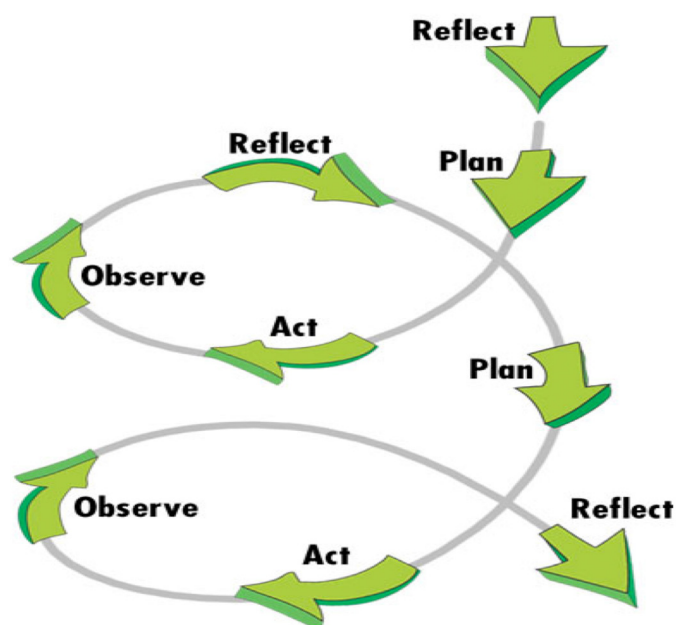
The creation of audio-visual artefacts as documentation also provided evidence of learning that could be shared with children and families as recommended in *Aistear's* guidelines on assessment (NCCA, 2009a). At the same time this documentation informed the NCCA's and Early Childhood Ireland's evolving understanding of the process of local curriculum development using *Aistear*.

In addition to the IT equipment, the NCCA provided each service with a grant of €3,200 (€2,000 in 2012 and €1,200 in 2013). This grant enabled the services to release staff

to work collaboratively on developing their practice and to support staff in preparing materials to share through the Aistear Toolkit. It also helped to purchase some relevant and needed resources such as play props and books for the children and practitioners.

Table 2: Expected outcomes from the initiative

Participating practitioners will	• develop their understanding and practice in supporting children's learning and development using *Aistear* • explore how they can use *Aistear* with their current curriculum • gain experience of documenting and sharing children's (and their own) experiences in a variety of ways • gain insights into other practitioners' practice through group discussions, visits to each other's services and reviewing photographic and video material from each of the services.
Children will	• have improved learning experiences and outcomes.
Parents will	• be more involved in their children's learning.
The wider sector will	• gain access to the services' stories of using *Aistear* to develop a curriculum for their children.
NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland will	• gain access to service-based evidence of the process of affecting change in pre-school practice • gain important insights into the types of supports needed to facilitate the implementation of *Aistear* in pre-school services.

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[5]   Reflective cycle as illustrated by the Centre for Enhanced Learning and Teaching at (Centre for Enhanced Learning and Teaching at http://celt.ust.hk/teaching-resources/action-research).

The action researchers

The seven services involved in the *Aistear in Action* initiative were located in South Tipperary and North Cork reflecting the location of the two mentors from Early Childhood Ireland and the education officer from NCCA. Working with services within a defined geographical area created important opportunities for the practitioners to meet and learn from each other.

Selection of settings took place in autumn 2011 when all services offering the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (Free Preschool) Scheme in the relevant geographical area were invited to an information meeting (one in North Cork and one in South Tipperary). Following the meetings, expressions of interest to participate in the initiative were sought using a specially designed form. (See Appendix A.) In addition to participation in the ECCE Scheme, the criteria used for selecting the services were:

- participating staff qualified to a minimum of FETAC Level 5

- compliance with Pre-school Regulations

- openness to change and a willingness to share practice

- commitment to a two-year initiative which would involve attending monthly cluster meetings and engaging in monthly on-site visits.

Seven pre-school services were chosen:

- Happy Days Childcare Centre, Ballyporeen, Co Tipperary

- Bluebells Playschool, Ayle National School, Co Tipperary

- Lullabies and Laughter Creche, Lisvernane, Co Tipperary

- Cahir Bears Childcare Centre, Cahir, Co Tipperary

- Bansha Pre-school, Bansha, Co Tipperary

- Rathcoole Playschool, Rathcoole, Co Cork

- Boherbue Educare Centre, Boherbue, Co Cork.

With the introduction of the ECCE Scheme a year earlier and the intensity of support needed in the initiative it was decided to involve practitioners working in the pre-school year only. A year later in 2012, the inclusion of *Aistear* in the contracts of services providing the Free Pre-school Year[6] added additional momentum to the work and highlighted further the importance of ensuring that key learning points from the initiative would be shared with practitioners across the sector as well as at a national level.

Access and entry to *Aistear*

The selected services were highly motivated and committed to the initiative. Some were understandably apprehensive about what it would mean for them, especially the prospect of being observed in practice during on-site visits. An analysis of data gathered through the application forms, service documentation including mission statements, curriculum plans and daily routines, provided important baseline insights to the mentors in identifying possible starting points for the practitioners in beginning their work on *Aistear*.

- Four purpose-built community full daycare and three private sessional services took part. Two of the sessional services were located in the grounds of primary schools while the other was attached to a private house.

- All practitioners were qualified to FETAC level 5 while some also had a level 6 qualification. Two had degrees in Early Childhood Studies while a further one was involved in graduate studies.

- All services indicated that they followed a play-based curriculum. However, through on-site visits and discussions, it became apparent that in all services and to varying degrees, many activities were adult-planned and adult-led. There was little time in the daily routine for child-led play.

- Daily routines were predominantly tightly-structured and divided into short 'slots' for activities including free play,

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[6]   Participating service providers will use *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) to provide an appropriate educational and care programme for children in their pre-school year.

structured activity, art and craft, snack-time, outside play, Circle Time and so on. In some cases, this led to frequent transitions throughout the day which some children found challenging. This also meant that there was often little time to become deeply involved in play and in learning.

- Most of the children's time was spent indoors with limited time for outdoor experiences. In addition, there was little engagement with the local community.

- Curriculum planning was predominantly adult-led involving the use of a specific topic and adult-chosen activities with adult-selected ideas. This created little space for children's interests to be identified and used to influence curriculum planning.

- Parents were informed of the services' policies and procedures but remained at a 'distance' in terms of being involved in their children's learning and development in the services.

One service manager summarised this overall approach to curriculum development in the following way:

We worked in a very routine way – providing much the same activities every day. We presumed we knew what interested the children and basically provided toys and equipment to keep them occupied. It never dawned on us that the children might be bored.

(Service manager)

During the two years of the initiative, the managers and practitioners engaged with all the elements of *Aistear*— the principles, the themes and the guidelines for good practice.

The initiative in action: The mentoring model

Each of the three elements in the mentoring model as shown in Figure 2 is explained in detail below.

Figure 2: Elements of the mentoring model

Monthly CPD clusters

A cluster group meeting was held each month typically taking place between 7.00pm and 9.00pm. Initially the cluster meetings involved all services in one central location. Informed by feedback from the practitioners which highlighted challenges in travelling long distances after working long days, these were changed to three small-group clusters which required less travel for most. The practitioners agreed to host the cluster meetings in their own services while large group meetings focusing on training and professional development facilitated by invited guests, continued to be held in hotels and occurred less frequently. This revised arrangement proved more effective in facilitating group discussion and enabled services to visit each other, share ideas and receive affirmation and support from each other in a more supportive and collegial environment.

A total of 30 small and large cluster group meetings took place. Each cluster meeting was planned by the education officer from NCCA and the two mentors from Early Childhood Ireland.

One mentor facilitated meetings in North Cork while the other facilitated the South Tipperary group. The NCCA education officer attended most of the meetings as co-facilitator. The overall focus of the cluster meetings was two-fold:

(i) to support the practitioners in becoming familiar with, and in using, *Aistear* to guide their curriculum development work

(ii) to provide education and training in areas of curriculum practice.

In this way, *Aistear*'s themes and guidelines underpinned all work. During the first year, the meetings focused mainly on:

- building an awareness of, and in time, an understanding of *Aistear*'s principles and themes

- re-valuing play as an important context for early learning and development. This included the need to give sufficient time to child-initiated or child-led play.

- observing to identify children's interests

- connecting curriculum planning with children's interests

- exploring features of high quality interactions

- strengthening partnerships with parents

- improving the physical learning environment indoors and outdoors.

In addition four longer large group CPD seminars took place focusing on aspects such as IT skills, documenting the curriculum and language and literacy through stories. These provided important opportunities for professional development and to learn from others outside the action research group.

The learning environment

Initially, much attention was given to building trust between the practitioners and mentors and across the practitioner group so that they were willing to share their practice and be open to feedback. While *Aistear*'s themes provided an initial starting point, it quickly became apparent that creating a quality learning environment was a more critical and useful starting point to begin to interrogate the concept of a curriculum and what is meant by this. *Aistear* highlights how *the learning environment (inside and outside) influences what and how children learn* (NCCA, 2009a:12). The *pedagogical framing* (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) or the 'behind-the-scenes' work that practitioners do in selecting and providing materials and in arranging the physical space is a key part of practitioners' work in supporting learning and development.

While all services changed their environments in a variety of ways and to varying degrees, the indoor learning environment needed significant work in the case of two services and a large portion of their time during the first year was spent on making improvements to this. The mentors hadn't anticipated that the physical environment in any service would need this level of work and it was decided to develop an [Environmental Audit Tool](#) in collaboration with the practitioners to help them assess the indoor and outdoor environment. All environments became more inviting and welcoming visibly reflecting children's families and cultures as well as their local communities. The environment was also better organised (having more clearly defined interest areas, labelling storage items with pictures and words) and better resourced with much emphasis being placed on open-ended, re-cycled resources, natural resources and those which afforded more flexibility to the children. Additional literacy and numeracy materials were also added. Overall, the learning environments became more stimulating, challenging and empowering. As one practitioner noted:

> *My moment of enlightenment was taking away the plastic equipment and replacing it with real equipment and watching how the children respected the real equipment so much more.*

Lots of work on making improvements to the outdoor space of the services also occurred. Ensuring that the outdoors was used more and that the variety of learning experiences

provided there was increased was a target for all of the services. The [Rethinking the outdoor environment](#) podcast in the Aistear Toolkit explains one service's story of the changes they made to the outdoor area. As with the indoor environment, services introduced more open-ended materials resulting in more creative and enriching play experiences for the children. Also critically all services purchased appropriate weather gear (for adults and children) so that they could go outside daily even when the sun wasn't shining!

The initiative highlighted the potential of the environment as a practical and non-threatening way to begin work with *Aistear*. Working on the environment proved less intimidating than focusing on practitioners becoming familiar with the themes, aims and learning goals of the framework. The work around the environment led to questions about the practitioners' understanding of curriculum and also it required them to question their values:

Why do I provide some materials and opportunities and not others? What kinds of learning am I promoting? Do I value outside play as much as inside? How flexible is our daily routine? Do I provide opportunities for all types of play? How do I support literacy and numeracy? Do I have a focus on the process or product in relation to children's work and play? Who decides the topics and activities? Is the environment inclusive of all children and their families?

While these questions put a direct spotlight on the physical environment, they indirectly and subtly probed values and attitudes which sat at the heart of curriculum and at the heart of work in supporting young children's learning and development. The work on the environment became a critical vehicle for supporting practitioners to become reflective and to wonder about the why and how of their practice.

Planning

While initially many of the services struggled with the concept of curriculum planning based on children's current interests, all services moved away from very adult-led planning involving similar topics and similar activities being used year after year towards building on and developing children's emerging interests and strengths as the basis for curriculum plans. This required support from the mentors in helping the practitioners to observe in a deeper way, to really see children's interests and competences and to explore possibilities for further development, thus engaging children more in their learning. This work helped practitioners to re-engage with the wonder and awe of children's early learning and to ensure that their learning was relevant, meaningful and helpful in their lives as outlined in one of *Aistear*'s principles.

While some recurring topics and events such as festivals, seasons and celebrations continued to be used and pre-planned on an annual- or term-basis, these plans were adapted to respond to the interests of the children. This change in the planning process reflected an inquiry led understanding of curriculum and resulted in more opportunities and time for child-led play and activities that captured children's imagination, motivated and excited them and ultimately enthused them as young learners. To support this approach to curriculum planning, a [short-term planning template](#) was developed with the practitioners and is published in the Aistear Toolkit.

One practitioner explained the changes to planning in her service in a short article for Barnardos Childlinks Magazine, Issue 2, 2013:10:

We no longer choose the topics in advance that form our curriculum. Instead we listen to the children and incorporate materials, resources and activities that follow on from their interests...For example, we invited a parent who is a nurse, to visit because one of the children had been to the hospital… Farming related issues are nearly always of interest, depending on the time of year we can have baby lambs being born, vets doing caesarean sections, silage harvesting or milking parlours that are fully operational. This year we also focused a lot on babies because I was pregnant!

Making children's learning visible

During the second year *Aistear*'s themes and guidelines continued to underpin all work. There was an on-going focus on documenting the day-to-day curriculum to make children's learning more visible. Practitioners shared their stories of children's experiences. This peer sharing served to motivate and energise and to broaden the range of possibilities for curriculum. They used a *Curriculum in Action* portfolio developed by Early Childhood Ireland and which is linked to *Aistear*'s themes. These journals were populated with photos, drawings and children's and practitioners' words to document what children were curious about and how that curiosity and exploration were scaffolded and supported in the pre-school. They also included completed learning record templates. Many services also used a personal portfolio for each child designed to illustrate and build on their identities as competent and powerful learners. The children played an active part in these assessments, identifying their own achievements and strengths and selecting photos and comments to be included. This kind of documentation builds on the 'Reggio' approach (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001) and the 'Learning Stories' approach in New Zealand (Carr, 2001). Enhancing literacy and numeracy experiences, developing opportunities for children's outdoor experiences and enhancing interactions were also the focus of the second year. One service explained the changes in documenting children's learning in their service in a short article in Barnardos Childlinks Magazine, Issue 2, 2013:11.

We document children's learning and development differently. We have a group learning journal in which we collaborate with the children to include photos, pieces of their work and captions of what they said. Parents love looking at this and can see what we are doing every week linked to Aistear's themes. We also have an individual portfolio for each child which includes photos of themselves/things they have made. It also includes their drawings, writings and quotes of things they said. They love looking at this and often take it home to share with parents.

On-site visits

On-site visits took place monthly with a total of 120 visits between the seven services across the initiative. Each visit involved the mentor spending approximately three hours in the pre-school room, observing, participating, modelling, recording video evidence and taking photos. Following the session the mentor and practitioners sat together, discussed significant moments during the session, looked at video, reflected on aspects of practice that were particularly effective and identified possible developments and actions to be implemented.

It took time to build a trusting relationship with the mentor and to value their input as both a critical friend and someone who could help the practitioners to reflect on the impact of their actions and to find alternative approaches using *Aistear*. Their role during on-site visits was to help the practitioners to see the value in what children were doing and thinking so that they could respond to them reflectively and supportively.

The theory of *Aistear* outlined during the monthly cluster meetings came to life in everyday practice. The mentors helped the practitioners to see the value in the children's everyday experiences, to make the familiar strange and the ordinary extraordinary (Bruner, 1996) and to observe and value children's competences, dispositions and interests. As one practitioner reflected:

Because we record so much of what is happening on a daily basis, I found that I could look back at situations, see how I handled them and had a chance to reflect on how I may or may not have handled it differently. A lot of the time you are in the moment and act/react accordingly. By giving yourself the time to look back over recordings you learn a lot about yourself. By being able to look back through pictures and videos I also realised how much can happen within a session that I may have missed. As a result I have become more observant in general throughout the sessions, especially in relation to group dynamics.

While the visible changes in practice were often small, major shifts in thinking were required including reviewing the image of the child and moving from seeing him/her

as being helpless and needing lots of adult support to viewing children, as *Aistear* does, as active, confident and competent. As one practitioner noted, *we don't give children enough credit!* A rethinking of the role of the adult also occurred with this altered view of the child.

Aistear (2009a:9) outlines a particular role for the adult stating that:

> *Early learning takes place through a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child – sometimes the adult leads the learning and sometimes the child leads. The adult enhances learning through a respectful understanding of the child's uniqueness. He/she alters the type and amount of support as the child grows in confidence and competence, and achieves new things.*

In the case of many of the services, practice changed from using a directive, adult-led pre-planned curriculum to seeing the adult's role as that of facilitating and supporting a more child-led, emergent curriculum.

> *Prior to Aistear in Action we had a very structured programme, with a lot of prepared work, which included worksheets and templates with all the children doing the same work at the same time. We began to see the value of small group activities, where children's interests and ideas were listened to and incorporated into the planning of the playschool's curriculum.*

Jones and Reynolds (1992) describe this as a curriculum evolving to respond to the interests and competences of the particular learning group or community, diverging along new paths as choices and connections are made, and being always open to new possibilities. The on-site mentor could support these insights and developments in the moment, when they were most obvious and meaningful.

The mentors helped the practitioners identify what was good about their practice and then probed a bit deeper by asking questions like, *have you tried...I wonder what would happen if… when I saw you do x it reminded me of…* They also modelled

interactions and strategies to encourage the practitioners to use more supportive interactions and strategies themselves. In some of the services initially there was some resistance and anxiety about what was involved in the mentoring part of the initiative but over time all services came to value the support provided through the initiative. As all this happened children became more engaged, and as practitioners became more reflective they could see this engagement and involvement and this in turn led to more involvement and engagement and reflection. This did not always happen at the first attempt and many discussions, reassurances and trial-runs were needed and supported. The ability to observe and listen and see the significance of what was happening for children not only resulted in practitioners being able to respond supportively, but meant they had multiple learning stories to share with each other at cluster meetings.

The role of the Early Childhood Ireland mentors

Within the initiative the two Early Childhood Ireland mentors acted as co-researchers, critical friends, change agents and practice specialists, providing motivation, feedback, expertise, support and training. Drawing on their post-graduate studies, their own experience as early childhood practitioners and on their specialist training in a variety of curriculum approaches, they helped practitioners to build the skills for reflective practice. This enabled the mentors to bring both a theoretical and practice-based perspective to the initiative. Furthermore, the long-established relationship between Early Childhood Ireland and its members and the organisation's record in training and in mediating policy for the sector, supported the building of trust and confidence between participants and the mentors. See Appendix C on page 32 for a more detailed overview of the mentors' skills-set and expertise.

The role of the NCCA education officer

Drawing on experience in developing *Aistear* with a range of partners as well as post-graduate studies in the field of early childhood care and education, the NCCA education officer co-facilitated the cluster and professional development meetings. In addition, she co-led the work of the initiative and managed the development of tools and resources for the Aistear Toolkit. A wide variety of these have now been prepared for publication in the Toolkit. See Appendix D on page 33 for a list of the resources that are available from the initiative so far. A strong working relationship developed between the education officer, the mentors and the seven services.

Reflections on the initiative

On-going review and follow-on action were a key part of the design of the initiative. In addition to this, a final review involving the practitioners, parents and children was carried out at the end of the two-year period using the following strategies:

- practitioners – online survey (in June 2012 and again in June 2013), video-recorded small-group discussions and interviews

- children – video-recorded conversations

- parents – a questionnaire and video-recorded conversations.

The mentors, through their own on-going reflections and observations during onsite visits, also contributed to the findings from the initiative. The following section provides a brief overview of the key findings from each of the participant groups. This is followed by an outline of the most significant changes in curriculum practice during the two years.

Practitioners

In June 2012, the practitioners completed an online survey on their experiences in the first year of the initiative. In particular, they noted the value of the on-site mentor visits and the email and phone support between visits. In elaborating on this, they identified the tailored aspect of the visits as being critical. Through these, they had ring-fenced time and opportunities to be guided in a supportive way to look in-depth at their own practice and to critique it in a trusting and professional manner. As one participant noted, it is *the mentor visits that set this initiative apart*. The on-site visits proved hugely important for the mentors in helping them to better understand the practitioners' work in context and to identify areas of practice for follow-up and support during both the cluster meetings and the training seminars. The practitioners also rated the CPD cluster meetings and the CPD seminars highly and drew particular attention to the opportunity these gave for discussion, collegiality and peer learning. Some practitioners noted how much they enjoyed visits to each other's services and benefited from seeing a range of approaches to supporting children's learning and development, as well as gathering ideas and suggestions for organising, resourcing and planning the learning environment.

In June 2013, the practitioners completed a final online survey. Again, feedback was hugely positive. One practitioner's reflections sum up the feeling of many of those involved:

I think Aistear works a lot better than a day filled with routine and adult-led activities. It gives all the children, especially the quieter children a chance to stand up and make their own decisions on what they would like to learn about. I found it really helped the quieter child to gain confidence and take part in activities because they were doing something they had an interest in and were not being made to take part in activities that didn't interest them.

Another said:

I was very pleased to see a little girl open up as she spoke about her Granda. This child was very quiet and at that moment I felt we had a 'gem' moment as she just seemed to shine when we listened to her story. I feel I have learned to slow down and appreciate each individual child more.

Many practitioners reiterated the importance of the mentoring support stating that *unless a supportive person is there to help, the training alone is pointless.* Another said:

I am very glad to have been part of the initiative, the parents using my service have definitely seen the benefits of using Aistear. Being part of it made sense of Aistear as a curriculum in a way that just reading the book would never have done.

This reflection highlighted the importance of the multi-strand mentoring model designed and used within the initiative. In addition, it highlighted the success of the mentoring in re-activating learning that had already taken place as part of accredited training completed by the practitioners. When asked about some of the most significant impacts the initiative had on their curriculum practice, the practitioners referred to themselves being more reflective and having a new-found respect for themselves and their profession. They credited the process

of documenting their curriculum and sharing children's learning stories with each other with developing their ability to actively see and understand children's interests, motivations and strengths in their learning. As one respondent explained: *This initiative has allowed me to slow things down, value the time I have with the children, listen more and realise I can learn more by observing and listening to them.* Another practitioner explained:

For me, the main success of the initiative was the experience the children attending our preschool encountered leading to them becoming independent in doing things for themselves and working things out for themselves. This in turn led to children helping their peers and became more noticeable as the year developed. Also the variety of activities the children experienced by our expanding their interests, in as many areas as we could. By using the Aistear framework the children became extremely independent, articulate and confident. All of this was reinforced by the parents who were very aware of how much their children had accomplished during their time with us. They totally understood what we were trying to aim for by using the Aistear framework and appreciated and acknowledged what their children achieved during their time with us.

The practitioners articulated a **renewed excitement** among children, parents and their peer group alike about their work. As one of the services explained, *Children left playschool more socially confident rather than based on what they have achieved from an academic perspective. Their ideas and knowledge are listened to and appreciated as children are developing and learning throughout the year.*

Another service talked about the *confidence and independence the children gained* and the staff talked about the satisfaction they got from *seeing the joy on children's faces when they jumped in puddles!*

Another practitioner explained how their whole way of dealing with children had changed for the better. *I learned it's OK to slow down and listen and not everything has to be completed today, or indeed in the same way for each child.*

When asked to rate the elements of the mentoring model (onsite visits, cluster meetings, training and CPD clusters as well as the provision of IT equipment and a grant), the **on-site mentoring** was prioritised with Cluster CPD rating a close second. The practitioners recommended that all those working in services with children **including children younger** than those in the ECCE Scheme, should have access to similar support so that all children could benefit from enhanced experiences.

Parents

At the end of the initiative, all parents were invited to respond to the following two questions:

1. What did your child enjoy most and benefit from during their time in pre-school?

2. What, if anything, would you like to change about your child's learning experience in pre-school?

Most parents simply wanted to say, *well done and thank you for a wonderful year and my child really enjoyed the experience.* Some parents highlighted particular things that their child liked including staff who were friendly and trustworthy. They valued the opportunity their children had to **play**, to dress up and play outside, to **create things** through art and crafts and to simply be with **friends**. In reflecting further, some parents noted the **growth in confidence** evident in their children and they accorded this to being in the early childhood services and having opportunities to make friends, to do things for themselves, to experience the local community through walks, and visits to the shop, post-office and playground. Some parents also commented on their children enjoying meeting and learning from people and animals visiting their service including fire-fighters, vets, nurses, army reservists, Gardaí, physiotherapists, gardeners and pilots as well as dogs, cats, tortoises, hens and lambs! One parent shared the following reflection on her child's year in pre-school:

My older child attended a regular traditional playschool, which was an excellent fun and learning experience for her. However, I do strongly feel that the benefits of this pre-school being a part of the Aistear initiative are hugely noticeable and advantageous to the children's lives.It significantly helps in their development as confident individuals, and so I would very much hope to see it continue in the future.

In responding to the second question, most parents said they **wouldn't change anything**. They particularly appreciated the work the services did in documenting their dynamic curriculum and in sharing this through learning stories and portfolios. The parents appreciated access to this material as a way of keeping them informed about their children's experiences. The comment below from one of the parents, encapsulates the feelings of all those who responded to this question.

It was a fabulous experience for me as a parent and for my daughter. I would not change a thing. It was a wonderful school with enthusiastic staff. My child loved her time in playschool.

Some parents provided feedback through short video-recordings. These are published in the Toolkit in a video clip entitled: [What parents think about their children's experiences in pre-school.](#)

Children

Since the main aim of the initiative was to enhance children's experiences, children were asked, as part of the final review, what they liked about their pre-school year. A number of similarities emerged in their responses as outlined below. The children liked

- **Playing inside**: with the kitchen and the babies being mentioned frequently. Imaginative and socio-dramatic play featured strongly with the children enjoying having tea-parties and weddings, building with blocks and 'doing' farming. Some of their comments included: *I like playing in the kitchen and I make dinner for my friends. We're goin' to a weddin' and we're getting married. I like building with the blocks; you can stack 'em up in a big tower up to the ceiling.*

- **Playing outside:** with farming, sand and the climbing frame being mentioned a number of times. *I like playing farm; you can milk the cows and mow the field.*

- **Field-trips:** these featured in some of the children's comments with specific references being made to a visit to the train station and a trip to a donkey sanctuary: *[I like] rubbing the donkeys.*

- **Friends:** playing and sharing with friends featured in many of the children's reflections. Often specific friends were named highlighting how important friends are to children of this age. As one child responded very simply, *I love my friends.*

- **Practitioners:** some children referred to their practitioners highlighting how much they valued the relationships and support provided.

- **Portfolios:** some children talked about working on their curriculum/personal portfolios and sharing these with their parents: *I like looking at my special book, see this is my family.* These types of curriculum and assessment documentation seemed hugely important to the children in terms of their own identity and belonging and also their feelings of achievement and mastery of new skills and new knowledge.

The children's responses connect directly with *Aistear*'s principles about play and hands-on experiences, relationships, assessment, and partnership with family and community. Through the *Aistear in Action* initiative the children experienced a more child-led and holistic curriculum that respected and built upon their own interests and connected with their communities. Their responses reflected this experience.

A small sample of boys and girls were invited to take part in video-recorded conversations as they talked about what they enjoyed in pre-school. Their responses are published in the Toolkit in a clip called, [Children's Voices: What do you like about pre-school?](#)

Impact on practice

Aistear describes learning and development using four themes and offers practical ideas, suggestions and examples for building partnerships with parents, developing high quality interactions, and supporting learning through play and through assessment. Work in the initiative focused on children's holistic learning and development (one of *Aistear*'s principles) using the four interconnected themes and the four aspects of practice. This section of the report provides an overview of the key changes in practice through the initiative as noted in the final review and by the practitioners in conversations at cluster meetings and on-site visits, and as observed by the mentors. The changes are grouped under five main headings.

Holistic learning and development

Over time, *Aistear*'s principles underpinned children's experiences to a greater extent. The following three examples show how this was especially evident.

- The **image of children** as young learners evolved from being one of seeing children in terms of their needs to conceptualising them as being active, competent and confident learners. As one practitioner said: *Let the children lead the learning.*

- The children had opportunities to **engage in a richer, more democratic, engaging, challenging and interesting play-based curriculum** which supported their development of dispositions, skills, attitudes and values as well as knowledge and understanding across the four themes. One practitioner commented:

Towards the end of the final term I was looking around the room at all the activities that were going on. One group of children were painting, others doing puzzles, others in the quiet corner looking at their folders and showing them to each other. There was water play going on and children playing on the floor building a farm with a lift for animals, others doing role play. A child wanted to do painting and when he was having trouble putting on his painting apron another child helped him. They were switching between activities, going from one area of the room to the other. Everyone taking turns. I just thought to myself, "This is Aistear". If there was ever a picture to capture the essence of Aistear, this was it!

- Using *Aistear* as a guide, the **curriculum** was planned **based on children's interests** and **competences**. The curriculum became less crowded and hurried with time and space being given to enable children to become involved in projects emerging from their own interests, stories and experiences. As one practitioner explained: *we started by extending the child-initiated playtime to one and a half hours. For the children this meant they had time to settle in to the session and really develop whatever play they were engaged in. It also gave children more autonomy in their learning.*
In all services the daily routine became more flexible which led to increased independence as children had freedom to try out new ideas, to think about problems and find their own solutions. In planning and using a curriculum in this way, the children's views were listened to and responded to with respect. Many learning experiences have been gathered from across the network of services. These are available in the themes' section of the Aistear Toolkit.

Partnership with parents

- Engagement with parents improved greatly over the two years of the initiative. As the practitioners' confidence in talking about their curriculum practice grew, they **shared more information** with parents about what the children were doing. Much of this sharing took place through short, informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up times and by having their curriculum documentation including children's individual learning journals, available to parents to browse and discuss with their children. This proved a very effective way of explaining *Aistear*'s four themes to the parents.

- Parents **developed a deeper understanding** of the **importance of play** for their children's learning and development. In turn, they became more involved in their children's early learning experiences in pre-school and at home. In some services information sessions on play were held and the *Aistear* tip sheet on play was disseminated. Parents looked at the curriculum-in-action portfolios and knew more about what was going on in the service. They talked to the children about these topics and built on the learning at home, for example,

by making trips to the library to access books on topics being explored in the service or by talking to staff about things that children were interested in at home. Many parents accompanied children and staff on the various trips and in some cases, organised the trips when services were having difficulty meeting children's special requests. An example of this included arranging a trip at Christmas to meet Rudolf!

- Practitioners used a range of strategies from *Aistear*'s guidelines to make parents **feel more welcome in the services** and to encourage them to **play a more active role in the life of the services**. For example, some parents visited to talk about their job, to bring young farm animals and pets to the service, to garden, play a musical instrument and to share information that linked with the children's interests and emerging skills. This work extended beyond parents with grandparents, foster parents and uncles involved!

- One or two services encountered some challenges from a small number of parents whose older children had experienced a more structured, adult-led curriculum. These parents needed **reassurance that their children were still learning albeit in a different way**. As part of their strategies to support the parents, one service asked their mentor to attend a parents' meeting to help inform parents about *Aistear* and the *Aistear in Action* initiative. Another service made a special effort to regularly update parents on their children's progress. These efforts did help reassure parents as did the **provision of individual learning portfolios which illustrated the children's progress during the year** through photographs, samples of children's work (named and dated) and learning records (observations). This documentation showed parents how children's dispositions, values and attitudes, knowledge and skills were being developed and enhanced through their play opportunities in a more meaningful way than through templates and workbooks.

Interactions

In addition to building better relationships with parents, the initiative placed a strong emphasis on developing high-quality interactions between the practitioners and the children, another of the 12 principles underpinning *Aistear*.

- The practitioners developed a deeper understanding of how children's learning and development could be supported and extended using everyday moments and interactions. They developed an expanded repertoire of strategies for interacting with the children. Many of these focused on **building rich conversations** with the children and moving away from a dominance of 'yes/no' questions as starting points for conversations. This enabled the practitioners to become involved in longer, more in-depth and probing conversations in which **children were encouraged to think for themselves and to offer solutions and ideas**. In the final review one respondent talked about a moment of great satisfaction when she saw a child figure out a problem for herself.

I had been trying to encourage the children to think, to figure out, using the formula of 'I wonder' 'what if' and after much effort on the child's part she said, 'oh! I've got it!

- Practitioners became more aware of the **importance of relationships** for nurturing all aspects of children's learning and development and in particular for their well-being and their sense of identity and belonging.

- The practitioners came to realise the importance of supporting **all aspects of children's communication**—the emotional, non-verbal and verbal aspects. As part of their work on language, the practitioners began to use more sophisticated language when interacting with the children by introducing new words and phrases. Sometimes these new words and phrases came from the children themselves such as *palaeontologist* as introduced by one little boy following a visit to a museum. An extensive project on dinosaurs followed shortly afterwards much to the children's delight!

Play and the learning environment

- Practitioners became **more knowledgeable and skilled** in supporting children's holistic development through **play**. They tuned in to children more by taking time to observe them more closely, by slowing the pace of activities down and by giving children more time and opportunity to become engrossed in their play. This resulted in fewer transitions for children in the daily routine leading to deeper engagement and learning. As one service explained:

We have come to see the true value in an emergent curriculum; we have become more reflective in our practice and are looking at what we are doing to see the true value for the children in it, that it is no longer just an activity to tick the box. We are really listening to the children to identify their interests. We see the true value in the play the children engage in and how to build on their interests. We have learned to step back, slow things down, our structure has become less regimented and we now go with the flow as much as we possibly can.

- Using *Aistear*'s guidance, the **learning environment** in the services underwent transformations as already outlined on pages 11 to 12. These transformations facilitated children to **make choices** from a variety of accessible resources and materials both indoor and outdoor. Work on the **learning environment** prompted work on **other areas of practice** including the daily routine, interactions, observing, assessing and planning for children's learning and development.

Assessment and documentation

- Over time, **observation**, **discussion** and **documentation** became key components of the curriculum development process in the services. Children were more involved in planning, making decisions about their own learning and development and in creating this curriculum documentation as already outlined.

- Practitioners focussed on children's **interests** and **competences** as the **basis for the curriculum work**. They allowed time and space for children to share their ideas and they afforded more opportunities to identify projects, problems and solutions and in general, to be more independent in their thinking and in their actions.

- Practitioners drew on **children's knowledge** and **experience** and offered them opportunities to share this through their play. For example, one practitioner introduced a newspaper to the home area. Through their play, the children demonstrated what they already knew about newspapers from reading the news to the sports page to doing the crossword. Practitioners could see the importance of play in giving children an opportunity to share their knowledge and experience and develop it further.

- Practitioners supported children in developing **important skills** such as oral language, literacy, mathematical ideas, music, art and movement. Through their new prioritisation of observation, they became more aware of the range of skills and dispositions being developed and were more conscious of ensuring a broad range of experiences to develop these.

- As already outlined on page 12, all services in the initiative moved away from static planning[7] and focused instead on introducing **greater flexibility** into their planning linked to children's interests.

In addition many practitioners stated they had more job satisfaction and benefited from visiting other services, having peer support and having the support of a mentor they could trust.

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[7]   Planning that was carried over from year to year, term to term.

Celebrating and sharing achievement

An important aim of this initiative centred on gathering the services' stories of curriculum development and change. This work had many ripple effects. As stories were shared, written and edited for the Aistear Toolkit, practitioners experienced a growing sense of the importance of their work and a pride in, and celebration of, their achievements with *Aistear*. Further recognition and celebration followed. On June 18th 2013, a local celebration was held in Mitchelstown where practitioners shared their work from the initiative with peers, trainers and lecturers, local pre-school inspectors, childcare committees and teachers from feeder primary schools. Practitioners presented some of the learning that had been documented in the form of videos, art-work, portfolios, and crafts by the children. They also spoke about their own learning journeys. The event was a great success and in his closing comments on the day, the Deputy Chairperson of the NCCA described the event as being *draíochtúil (magical)*. Some of the services were also invited by the Early Years Education Policy Unit to share their work with an EU visiting group and subsequently were invited by Early Childhood Ireland to take part in a session with politicians in the Dáil AV room. Happy Days Childcare Service won an Early Childhood Ireland Innovation Award 2013 for a submission describing their learning journey and their new reflective skills and demonstrating both with a learning story from the children. Local media coverage followed which added to their sense of achievement. All the services have participated in one of three workshops to share the learning with practitioners locally and the feedback from these workshops has been extremely positive. The practitioners have become advocates for *Aistear* sharing their learning and recommending that all practitioners are provided with the opportunity to grow professionally as they have done through the *Aistear in Action* initiative.

A national invitational seminar entitled, *Aistear in Action*: *Pathways to Quality* took place in Dublin on October 4th 2013 at which practitioners had further opportunities to share their work this time with a policy-making audience that included two international key note speaker speakers, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education along with 150 representatives from across the early childhood sector. Recordings of the keynote podcasts and the panel discussion can be accessed at www.ncca.ie/aistearinaction

Key messages and implications for the sector

The insights gained and knowledge generated through the *Aistear in Action* initiative about curriculum practice and the process of change provide important signposts for supporting early childhood practitioners across the sector in their work with *Aistear*. Such lessons have particular relevance for the design of a national implementation plan for the curriculum framework. The following section sets out these signposts and highlights their significance for quality improvement and ultimately, for better outcomes for children.

Aistear as a lever for change and quality improvement

The initiative highlighted what's possible in curriculum development informed by *Aistear* when practitioners have access to appropriate support to enable them to

(i)   engage with the framework's principles, themes and guidelines

(ii)   revisit and reflect on their own philosophies and practices

(iii)   develop a curriculum based on *Aistear*'s 12 principles and four themes and that builds on children's interests and competences.

Work on the learning environment proved particularly critical as a starting point for this work with *Aistear*. This focus provided a practical and non-threatening entry point to the curriculum framework and one that ultimately led practitioners to ask some fundamental questions about their practice.

The importance of a multi-strand mentoring model to enable change

The multi-strand mentoring model of on-site visits, CPD cluster group meetings and CPD seminars was key to the success of the initiative. Each of these contributed to enabling the practitioners to step back from their practice, to question it and to identify changes they could make to bring about better outcomes for children. While the on-site visits by mentors created opportunities for practitioners to explore and interrogate their own practice within a trusting and professional context, the cluster group CPD and CPD seminars supported learning across the group and offered the practitioners

frequent opportunities to meet, to network and to learn further from each other and from the mentors. The complementarity of the three strands proved critical in scaffolding and facilitating practitioners' work with *Aistear*.

The Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit) now contains a number of tools and resources developed through the initiative. These can be used by other practitioners working in the ECCE Scheme as well as by those who work as early childhood trainers/educators, lecturers and those who work in support services providing guidance on curriculum development. Engagement with these resources can be a key to unlocking the potential of *Aistear* to shape practice at local level. These will be key resources for the new national mentoring support service. Similar tools and resources are also now needed to support those working with children under three years of age.

The change process

It takes time to achieve deep change (NCCA, 2009:14). Initially progress in the initiative appeared to be slow perhaps because of unrealistic expectations on the part of all those involved. Sometimes change occurred and then practices reverted requiring further support and reflection to embed the change more meaningfully. Change proved to be cumulative and resulted in a transformation of perspective and philosophy as well as curriculum practice. Getting to a place where practitioners moved beyond fearing criticism to valuing feedback and support involved an intensive period of relationship- and confidence-building, a process that cannot be rushed. Action research proved to be more than a method but a particular approach to experiencing change which enabled the practitioners to see themselves as enablers and owners of change. During the initiative, the mentors worked with services to negotiate the ebb and flow of change, the uncertainty of the new and the discomfort of the unfamiliar. Documentation served as a reflection tool and a record of the journey that services could share with each other in the action research cycle.

One service shared some insights on this in the final review:

Change is never easy and sometimes it takes a while to embrace it. We made changes that worked and some that didn't and it takes patience to work through the changes needed and to see what really works in your service.

Commitment to change

The commitment of the practitioners and the service managers was immense and this contributed hugely to the final outcomes of the initiative. In joining the initiative, each of the 24 practitioners made the personal and professional commitment to reflect on and change their practice. The services and practitioners all brought different strengths to the work and all faced different challenges in grappling with new curriculum ideas. Each service needed, valued and benefitted from the supports provided through the initiative in order to change and grow. *Realising this kind of profound change involves professionals grappling with fundamental beliefs, dispositions and habits and altering practice on the basis of experience* (NCCA, 2009:14).

The power of stories

Witherell and Noddings (1991:280) describe how stories *provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems… They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and to what effect.* Developing this idea further, Wilson (2011) writes about the power of stories in allowing individuals to identify emotionally with ideas and people they might otherwise see as 'outsiders'. Professional stories from inside early childhood services served as a key mechanism for connecting theory and practice throughout the initiative. Sharing examples of these stories enabled the practitioners to develop their observation, listening and analytical skills and to see the possibilities for changing 'how they did things' and the potential impact of these on them as professionals and on the children as young learners. As they discussed and shared their experiences and challenges, they developed a shared understanding of the complexity of their work with children and were thus motivated to engage with them in more meaningful and sophisticated ways. The stories of the seven services are available in the Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit). (See appendix D on page 33.)

Inspection, standards and quality- a coherent system

During the initiative and in particular, the first year, practitioners expressed concern about a mismatch between their curriculum development work with *Aistear* and the requirements of the external inspection system as they perceived them. With a focus on children's learning, development and well-being now embedded in the Revised Pre-school Regulations (2006), it is important that, over time, there is a greater alignment between the national practice frameworks and the external inspection system.

Regulations can establish minimum standards and ensure that children are safe, well cared for and engaged in appropriate activities. Developing an early care and education system that respects children's competences and aims for continual quality improvement requires more. It takes reflective practitioners who are committed to their work, motivated and enabled to innovate and ready to engage in exciting work with children, their families and communities. This requires investment in a mentoring model complemented by an inspection system aligned with *Aistear* (and *Síolta*) thereby enabling the continuing development of the early childhood care and education system.

Sustaining reflective practice

The mentors worked with the practitioners to develop a new, reflective approach to practice and to engage in new and alternative ways of supporting teaching and learning. How can this momentum be sustained? On-going support is vital to enable the practitioners to sustain their innovative curriculum work and their reflective practice. While tools developed during the initiative such as the environmental audit, examples of learning experiences, learning record sheet and the short-term planning template will help, more is needed. Sustaining momentum, whereby services already innovating in the curriculum development space need to be inspired and supported to go further, is important. Opportunities for continuing professional development is a key aspect of this. This reflects the idea of journeying along the continuum of quality. On-going support is vital to enable the services to remain motivated and engaged.

Early Childhood Ireland plans to offer these services the opportunity to be mentored through the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme. As the services now have a well-developed curriculum in place and are experienced in the reflective practice approach, they are well positioned to undertake the self-assessment process of *Síolta*. Early Childhood Ireland will facilitate a series of six CPD cluster sessions with the seven services towards reviewing and improving the services against the 16 standards of *Síolta* and supporting each service to complete the self-assessment and evidence portfolios. These services will then submit for *Síolta* validation. This approach of first engaging with *Aistear* and then continuing towards *Síolta* validation offers a potential model for other services going forward.

System-level challenges

The initiative shed light on a number of system-level challenges to innovative and engaging curriculum work. Two warrant particular attention. The absence of paid non-contact time posed difficulties for curriculum planning and working collaboratively with colleagues. While the grant provided through the initiative helped practitioners to overcome some of this, most of the planning and documenting work on the curriculum was carried out in the practitioners' own time, often after a day's work finished at 6.00pm. Curriculum development must be seen as an integral part of practitioners' work and facilitated and remunerated appropriately.

Multiple perspectives on the purpose of the pre-school year emerged as a further significant challenge. Parents' perceptions of the pre-school year as preparation for primary school were often misaligned with practitioners' new and evolving conceptualisation of the year as an important stage in its own right for children's learning and development—a tension between future and present; between preparation for what's to come and enjoyment of the here and now. Working in partnership with parents and ensuring that they understand and value the experience of the pre-school year in its own right is an important part of the practitioners' work. In addition, a wider public awareness campaign about the purpose of the pre-school year may also be warranted.

Conclusion

The *Aistear in Action* initiative has been hugely successful in enabling the 24 practitioners across the seven services to use *Aistear* to help them develop an exciting and engaging curriculum based on children's interests and their inquiries about the world around them. The initiative has also proved successful in illuminating key lessons and directions for building capacity in curriculum development towards better outcomes for all children. The action research approach and the mentoring model used placed *Aistear* and the practitioners at the very heart of the work. The approach recognised the importance of starting with the practitioners' own curriculum development priorities and through mentoring, supporting them to translate the framework into practice. The level of engagement throughout the initiative demonstrated the practitioners' high levels of professionalism, dedication and commitment when given opportunity and relevant tools.

Seeing the effects of practical changes, for example, the impact of modifications to the physical learning environment on children's learning, were a major persuader for the practitioners in implementing *Aistear*. While these changes are documented in the form of practical resources, tools and professional stories and published in the Aistear Toolkit, the initiative highlighted the need for hands-on help for practitioners to make changes. Drawing on these resources, a qualified and skilled mentor is well-placed to support and encourage professional reflection, dialogue and action. In this way, a mentoring model can enable practitioners to become action researchers themselves so that they can evaluate and improve their own work and ask themselves, *how can I improve what I am doing, why and how am I doing it?* The €2.5 million allocated in the budget for a national support service in 2014 is a step on the road to enhancing quality and in supporting the ECCE sector to engage with *Aistear*.

Early childhood care and education is now firmly on the political agenda. As we move closer to the publication of Ireland's first early years strategy, we have a new opportunity to act strategically in the interests of young children. The research is irrefutable—early childhood is a critical time for learning and development. The strategy creates a real opportunity for change and for quality improvement. *Aistear* as the national curriculum framework can make an important contribution to this quality agenda.

However, this can only happen in the context of a national, co-ordinated implementation plan focused on improving learning experiences for children through a mentoring approach which provides development opportunities for practitioners. This mentoring system, in turn, must be complemented by an inspection system that embraces both practice frameworks.

In closing, the practitioners and children in Rathcoole Playschool wrote their own song about *Aistear*. The four short lines capture the spirit and philosophy of the framework and their journey with it:

We are the Aistear kids
We journey on our way
We are the Aistear kids
We grow and learn through play.

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Appendix A: Application form and information sheet

Aistear in-action

A collaborative project between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Early Childhood Ireland and Pre-school Practitioners

NCCA
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

APPLICATION FORM

This application form is for a new project supported by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Early Childhood Ireland (formerly IPPA and NCNA). The project aims to explore ways of developing and enriching the early childhood curriculum in pre-school settings using *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* Please ensure that you have read the information leaflet for the project and understand the criteria for participation before completing the form. Please return the completed form by post or email by **5.00pm** on **30th September 2011** to:

Carmel Brennan, IPPA, Unit 4, Broomhill Business Complex, Greenhills Road, Dublin 24 or **cbrennan@ippa.ie**.
(For further information please contact Lillian Joyce at **ljoyce@ippa.ie**.)

Please complete the following:

Service name

Service address

Contact details

Contact name: Work phone:

Email: Mobile:

Type of service

(Please tick all relevant boxes.)
- ☐ Sessional
- ☐ Part-time daycare
- ☐ Full daycare
- ☐ Community
- ☐ Private
- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Rural

Number and age range of children in the PRE-SCHOOL ROOM

Number: _____ Age-range of group: _____

Number of children in ECCE Scheme

Number: _____

Identifier number for ECCE Scheme

Number: _____

Number of staff in the pre-school room

Number: _____

Qualifications and experience of staff

Staff name	Qualification	Number of years of experience
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____

Commitment

Will all staff in the pre-school room participate in the project?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   If no, how many staff will be involved? _____

Type of curriculum

☐ Play-based   ☐ Steiner   ☐ Naíonra

☐ HighScope   ☐ Montessori   ☐ Other

Approach to curriculum

Briefly describe your approach to curriculum *(daily routine, planning, observing, documenting, etc. – max of 250 words).*

Facilities

Briefly describe your pre-school room *(size, layout, areas, resources, etc. – max of 80 words).*

Briefly describe your outdoor facilities *(size, areas, surface, etc. – max of 80 words).*

Participation in the project

Why should your service be selected? *(Explain what your setting can offer the project – max of 250 words.)*

Signatures

I, _____ agree to the details of the project (Pre-school room leader).

Date:_____

I, _____ agree to the details of the project (Management).

Date:_____

Aistear in-action

A collaborative project between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Early Childhood Ireland and Pre-school Practitioners

With the start of another new and exciting pre-school year, you might be planning to begin using *Aistear* in your setting or perhaps you are already using it and are wondering how you might use it to a greater extent. If so, this might be the project for you.

This leaflet provides information about a new project supported by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) [formerly IPPA and NCNA]. The project will explore ways of developing and enriching the curriculum in pre-school settings using *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.* This exciting work will take place over two years beginning in October 2011 and will involve practitioners from six services.

What is '*Aistear* in-action'?

The project, '*Aistear* in-action' will support you as an early childhood practitioner to

(i) reflect and 'step back' from your daily work in order to think about your practice, to identify changes you would like to make and to see how you can bring these about using *Aistear*.

(ii) explore how you can use *Aistear* along with your current curriculum.

What would the project involve for my pre-school service?

By participating, your service would commit to:

■ a **two-year project** – October 2011 to June 2013.
■ **monthly workshops** in which you will have opportunities to meet and work with practitioners in the other services in the project. (The times and venues for these meetings will be agreed with the practitioners involved.)
■ **monthly on-site support visits** from an Early Childhood Specialist from Early Childhood Ireland (supported by NCCA) with the possibility of more frequent visits in the early stages of the project.
■ **documenting and sharing children's experiences and your reflections.** This will help you to reflect on what you are doing with the children and how this impacts on their learning and development.

What other supports would be available for my service in the project?

In addition to the opportunities to meet and work with practitioners in the other services and to have on-site visits, each service will receive a **small annual grant** to help cover expenses which may arise during the project such as travel to the workshops, and to purchase specific resources that you think might be helpful to you in developing your practice during the project.

Given the importance of documenting both children's experiences and reflections shared by you and the other practitioners, each service will receive **IT equipment** such as a video recorder, scanner and laptop. Some **training** in using these items will also be provided.

What are the expected outcomes of this project?

Early childhood marks the beginning of children's life-long learning journeys. Fun, rich and challenging experiences supported by adults who reflect on their practice and plan for new learning based on what they know about children and their development, are key to ensuring children reach their full potential. This project aims to enhance children's and practitioners' experiences and learning through using *Aistear*.

■ The services participating in this project will develop their practice in supporting children's learning and development across *Aistear*'s four themes.

■ Early Childhood Ireland and the NCCA will share materials and experiences from the project with other practitioners. This will be done using photos, video and/or audio clips, samples of children's play and work (for example, play stories and early mark-making), and samples of practitioners' resources (for example, plans, notes, reflections) on their websites, in publications and/or at training events.

How can my service get involved in the project?

If you are interested in finding out more about this new project on *Aistear*, please join us at an information evening on one of the following dates:

> **20th September** in Hibernian Hotel, Mallow
> from 7.30pm – 9.00pm
> *facilitated by Lucy Connolly*
>
> **22nd September** in Kilcoran Lodge Hotel, Cahir
> from 7.30pm – 9.00pm
> *facilitated by Máire Corbett*

A total of **six services** including community and private, and urban and rural, will be selected to take part. The following criteria will be used in the selection process. Services will

■ be located in the **North County Cork/South Tipperary** area

■ deliver a **pre-school session** as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (either as a sessional service or as part of a part-time or full daycare service)

■ be **compliant** with the **Pre-school Regulations** including Garda vetting

■ have **all** staff in the pre-school room qualified to at least **FETAC Level 5**

■ commit over a **two-year** period to participate in
  → **monthly workshops** (all staff in the pre-school room)
  → **monthly on-site visits** by an ECI staff member

■ **document and share** children's and practitioners' experiences

■ have the capacity to commit **time, energy** and **enthusiasm** to the project.

If you are interested in taking part in the project, please complete the application form and return it to: Carmel Brennan, IPPA, Unit 4, Broomhill Business Complex, Greenhills Road, Dublin 24 or **cbrennan@ippa.ie** by **5.00pm** on **30th September, 2011**.

For further information contact Lillian Joyce, email: **ljoyce@ippa.ie**.

Appendix B: Multi-strand mentoring model

As outlined already in the report, the multi-strand mentoring model used in the initiative involved cluster meetings, on-site visits and training and CPD seminars. Details of the focus of each cluster meeting and training seminar are outlined below in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Table 3: Overview of small CPD cluster meetings in Year 1

Date	CPD Cluster Workshop Focus
January 2012	1. Reflecting on the mission and values of the service. 2. Planning experiences based on children's interests and linked to *Aistear's* principles and themes. 3. Using video as a tool to observe and track children's play and learning. 4. Identifying areas of practice for development.
March 2012	1. Gathering baseline data. 2. Children's pretend play, and the role of the adult in play. 3. Interactions that support learning and development.
April 2012	1. Interactions that support learning and development (continued). 2. Using documentation, video and photos to review and learn about children's play. 3. Communicating with parents especially in relation to learning through play.

Table 4: Overview of small CPD cluster meetings in Year 2

Date	CPD Cluster Workshop Focus
November 2012	1. Interactions that support learning and development (continued). 2. Planning and documenting children's learning with particular focus on emergent interests and recurring topics such as the seasons, festivals and events.
January 2013	1. Outdoor Play.
February 2013	1. Creating a richer outdoor environment for children. 2. Documenting and sharing children's outdoor experiences. 3. Supporting children's emerging numeracy both indoors and outdoors. 4. Uploading video clips and photos to Vimeo and Flikr.
April 2013	**Transition to Primary School** Questions for group discussion 1. What are you doing at present? 2. Changes that each service might try? 3. What does the teacher need to know?
May 2013	**Identity and Belonging** 1. Connecting with parents about *Aistear* and children's portfolios. 2. Using documentation with children and parents to build children's identities as enthusiastic and competent learners.

In addition four longer large group CPD seminars took place.

Table 5: Overview of CPD seminars

Date	Focus
February 2012	Developing technological skills for documenting – John Moriarty, NCCA
September 2012	I.T. skills for sharing learning – John Moriarty, NCCA
October 2012	Documentation: *Documenting children's Learning* - Carol Duffy, Early Childhood Ireland
March 2013	Literacy: *Thinking and Talking about Picture Books* - Dr. Mary Roche, St Patrick'sCollege, Thurles

Appendix C: Qualifications of mentors/education officer

The two Early Childhood Ireland mentors brought the following expertise and qualifications to their work in the initiative:

- Levels 7 and 9 on the national qualifications framework

- extensive training in adult education

- specialist training in a cross section of curriculum approaches including the play-based curriculum, Montessori, High Scope (both IHA and Endorsed Trainer), the Reggio approach

- specialist training in Marte Meo interaction skills and interactive analysis.

In addition to academic qualifications, the two mentors were

- experienced early childhood practitioners

- experienced trainers and educators in the early childhood sector

- trained as *Síolta* mentors and in developing and delivering Early Childhood Ireland quality improvement programmes

- informed by curriculum development work carried out by Early Childhood Ireland, supported by a learning community within the organisation that included other early childhood specialists, management and national and international partners.

In addition, the NCCA education officer had worked in the early childhood sector in a number of different capacities over the previous 12 years. She was qualified to level 10 on the national qualifications framework. She worked on the development of *Aistear* since 2006 and was involved in developing materials and in supporting practitioners and those in training roles to use the framework since its publication in 2009.

Appendix D: Resources developed through the *Aistear in Action* Initiative

The online Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit) provides practical resources to help practitioners become familiar with *Aistear* and to use it to develop an exciting and engaging curriculum. Table 6 below gives an overview of the tools and resources developed through the *Aistear in Action* initiative for practitioners working with children in the ECCE scheme.

Table 6: *Aistear in Action* resources

Resource	Purpose
Toolkit button: Using the themes	
Young children's voices	Short podcast containing interviews with children explaining what they like in pre-school.
Photo presentation: Well-being *Learning experience booklets* • Glengarra wood trip • Personal books and welcome poster • Shadows • Wraps • Warm day • Hospital	Photo presentation and learning experience booklets showing the theme of ***Well-being*** in action in pre-school and full daycare settings.
Photo presentation: Identity and Belonging *Learning experience booklets* • Nurse's visit • Army reservist's visit	Photo presentation and learning experience booklets showing the theme of ***Identity and Belonging*** in action in pre-school and daycare settings.
Photo presentation: Communicating *Learning experience booklets* • Babies • Dinosaurs • Posting letters • Making passports *Video clip* • Describing my picture	Photo presentations, video clips and learning experience booklets showing the theme of ***Communicating*** in action in pre-school and daycare settings.
Photo presentation: Exploring and Thinking *Learning experience booklets* • Trains • Feeding the birds • The Builders • Hen visit • Water play • Ice • Donkey sanctuary visit • Visiting Rudolf • Sunflowers • Fire, fire *Video clip* • Washing the bike	Photo presentations, video clips and learning experience booklets showing the theme of ***Exploring and Thinking*** in action in pre-school and daycare settings.

Table 6: *Aistear in Action* resources

Toolkit button: Working with parents	
Podcast: Parents' views on the pre-school year	Short interviews with parents outlining the benefits their children got from their pre-school year in the AiA services.
Photo presentation: Building partnerships during the pre-school year	Photo presentation showing the different ways the seven AiA worked to strengthen partnerships with parents.
Podcast: Practitioner interview on building partnerships with parents in AiA	Interview with a manager from one of the AiA services explaining how the service's relationship with parents changed during the initiative.
Toolkit button: Planning and documenting	
Planning sheet sample Planning sheet template	Planning sheet helping to plan around children's interests.
Learning record sample Learning record template	Learning record helping to see how children are progressing and to plan based on that information.
Toolkit button: The learning environment	
Podcast: ICT supporting reflective practice	Practitioner interview showing how using the camera helped her to become more reflective
Indoor and outdoor environmental audit document	Audit document helping to improve your environment inside and out.
Rethinking the outdoor learning environment	Podcast with interview and photos showing the changes one services made to the outdoor learning environment.