

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Audit: Similarities and differences

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Introduction

This document provides an audit of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*¹ and *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. The audit was carried out jointly by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) which developed *Síolta* on behalf of the Department of Education and Science. The CECDE closed in November 2008 and responsibility for the implementation of *Síolta* now lies with the Department of Education and Science.

The audit will support the sector in using *Aistear* and *Síolta* together to support the development of early childhood practice across the variety of settings in Ireland. It does this by

- identifying links between the principles underpinning each framework
- outlining the different emphases of *Aistear* and *Síolta*
- showing how using the two frameworks together can enrich children's experiences.

A second audit focuses on *Aistear* and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999).

Two frameworks

The CECDE and the NCCA worked collaboratively on the development of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The CECDE launched *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* in 2006 and prior to its closure in November 2008, concentrated on disseminating *Síolta* and raising awareness amongst the sector. Under the Education Act (1998) the NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools. The NCCA published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* online at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning in October 2009. Both Frameworks are important milestones in the development of early childhood care and education in Ireland and both play a role in helping practitioners improve the quality of children's early experiences. However, the two frameworks have different aims and purposes as outlined below.

Cross-referencing the frameworks

The audit looks at the two frameworks at different levels. Level One of the cross-referencing exercise explores the general purpose of each framework, the ages of the children concerned, the targeted early years settings, and the audience for which each framework is relevant. Level Two explores the underlying principles of the two frameworks. Level Three looks at the structure while Level Four takes a more in-depth look at the frameworks' contents.

Level One: Purpose, audience and children

The initial review of the general purpose and target audience illustrated synergy between the two frameworks (see Table 1).

¹ *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was formerly known as the *Framework for Early Learning*.

Each framework has a clear and specific purpose. *Síolta* focuses on all facets of quality within ECCE settings including learning and development while *Aistear* helps adults provide appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children from birth to six years. In fulfilling these purposes, each framework plays a role in promoting and enhancing quality provision on a national level. In this way, the frameworks complement and support each other.

With regard to the targeted age range, both frameworks focus on children aged birth to six years and both distinguish the age groups within this range similarly:

- babies - birth to 18 months;
- toddlers - 12 to 36 months;
- young children - 2½ - 6 years.

Both frameworks are directed at practitioners² who have responsibility for the care and education of children within the age range birth to six and both can be used in all early years services. *Aistear* also supports parents in their role as educators.

Table 1: Comparison of *Síolta* and *Aistear*: Purpose, audience and children

Framework	Purpose	Age	Early years settings	Audience
<i>Síolta</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ to improve the overall quality of early childhood services for children and families. ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Birth-6 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ all early years settings including infant classes in primary school. ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ practitioners who care for and educate children from birth to six years. ■ other professionals who work with children and their families.
<i>Aistear</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Birth-6 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ all early years settings including children’s own homes and infant classes in primary school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ all adults who care for and educate children from birth to six years—parents and practitioners. ■ other professionals who work with children and their families.

² Throughout the audit the term ‘practitioner’ is used to refer to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings including primary schools and childminding settings. Practitioners have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.

Level Two: Underpinning principles

The next part of the audit involves looking at the principles underlying both frameworks. (See Table 2.) Although the two frameworks share the majority of the principles, some principles vary slightly in wording or are unique to one framework. For example, *Communication* and *Language* is not a principle in *Síolta*. In contrast, *Aistear* focuses exclusively on learning and development where communication and language is an important element. As *Síolta* focuses more broadly on quality, it doesn't single out particular aspects of learning and development like communication. In other principles the wording varies while the sentiments behind them are similar. For example, *Aistear* has a single principle on *Equality and Diversity* while *Síolta* has two separate principles: one relating to *Equality* and another relating to *Diversity*. Some principles are presented a number of times in the table illustrating the extent to which the two sets overlap.

Table 2: Underlying principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta*

<i>Aistear</i>	<i>Síolta</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equality and diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equality ▪ Diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relationships ▪ Role of the adult ▪ Teamwork
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents, family and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents ▪ Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The adult's role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role of the adult ▪ Teamwork ▪ Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The child's uniqueness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The value of early childhood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children as citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Children first
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Play and hands-on experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Play
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The learning environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication and language 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Holistic learning and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Welfare ▪ Children first ▪ Pedagogy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relevant and meaningful experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pedagogy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pedagogy ▪ Play ▪ Children first



Level Three: Structure of the Frameworks

While both frameworks are underlined by similar principles of early learning and development the structure of the two frameworks is different as outlined in Tables 3 and 4, and in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 3: Contents of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

Principles and Themes	Guidelines for Good Practice
Introduction 12 Principles of early learning and development Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Well-being</i> ■ <i>Identity and Belonging</i> ■ <i>Communicating</i> ■ <i>Exploring and Thinking</i> Glossary	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Building partnerships between parents and practitioners ■ Learning and developing through interactions ■ Learning and developing through play ■ Supporting learning and development through assessment Appendix 1: Resources for play Appendix 2: Legislation, regulation and assessment
User guide	
Key messages from the research papers	

Table 4: Contents of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*

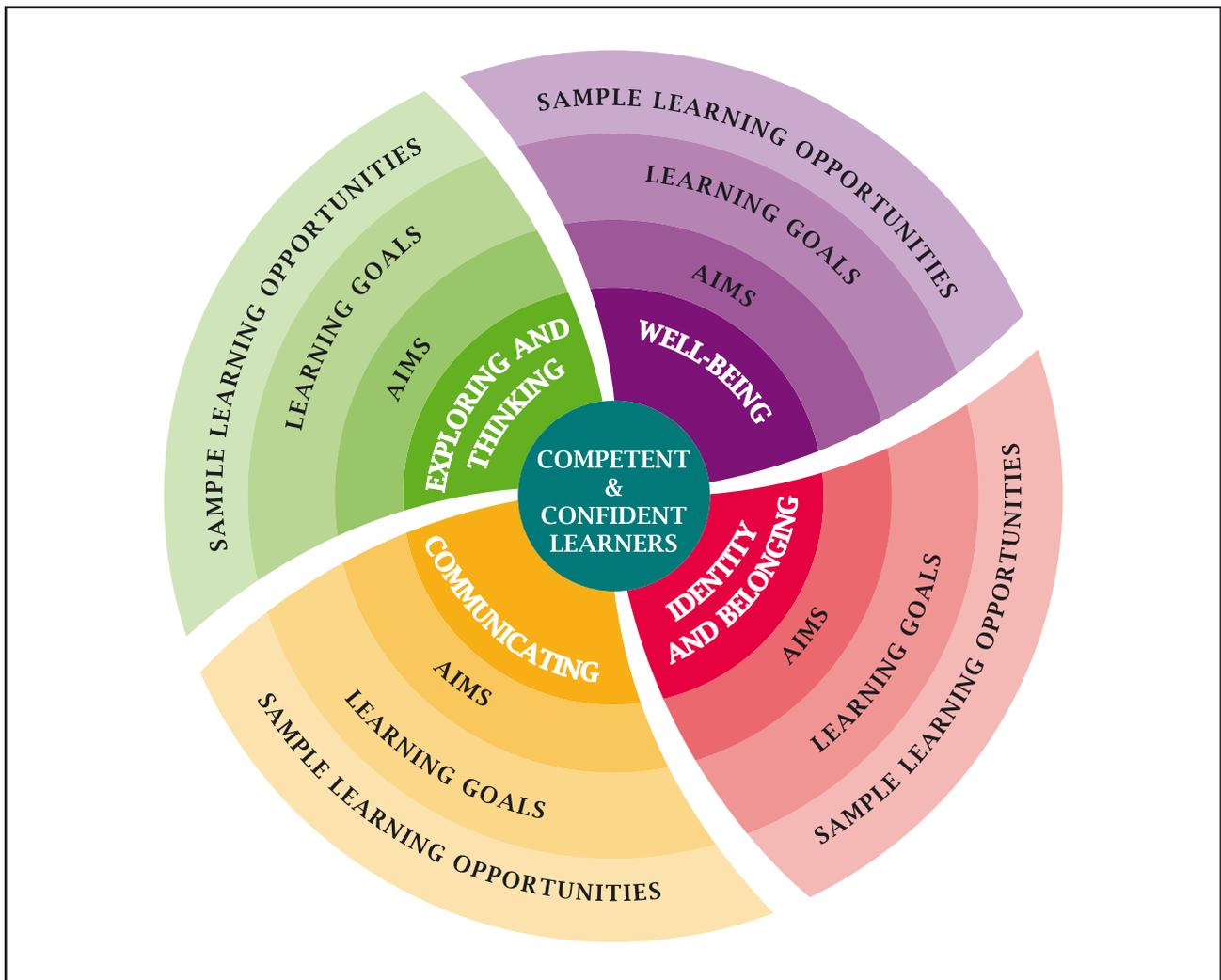
Handbook	User manuals (one for each type of setting)	Supporting documentation
Background information Contextual information Developmental process Characteristics of <i>Síolta</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Contents ■ Introduction ■ Principles (12) ■ Standards (16) ■ Components (75) ■ Signposts for reflection and ‘Think abouts’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overview of proposed assessment processes and supporting review of literature and practice ■ Assessment instruments and templates <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Portfolio guide and templates 2. Self-assessment guide and instrument 3. Validation guide and instruments

***Aistear’s* contents**

Aistear can be used by all adults who support children’s learning and development from birth to six years regardless of where that learning takes place. *Aistear* outlines the content of children’s learning and development using the four themes of *Well-being*, *Identity and Belonging*, *Communicating*, and *Exploring and Thinking*. Within each theme, aims and learning goals are presented followed by sample learning opportunities (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The structure of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Guidelines on good practice are also provided. These focus on:

- building partnerships between parents and families
- learning and developing through interactions
- learning and developing through play
- supporting learning and development through assessment.

The guidelines use *learning experiences* to illustrate key points in action across the three age groups (babies, toddlers and young children) and across five different types of settings; children’s own homes and the four setting types outlined in *Síolta* – childminding settings, full and part-time daycare settings, sessional services³, and infant classes in primary schools. *Thinking about my practice* questions are offered to encourage reflective practice. A user guide explains key elements of Aistear and answers frequently asked questions. The guide provides sample plans to help adults in different types of settings begin to use *Síolta*, Aistear and where relevant, the *Primary School Curriculum* together.

³ These include services that run for 3.5 hours or less.

The NCCA commissioned four research papers to set out the theory trail behind *Aistear*. These papers, available on the NCCA website, are:

- Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood (Hayes, 2007);
- Children’s early learning and development (French, 2007);
- Play as a context for early learning and development (Kernan, 2007);
- Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment (Dunphy, 2008).

A summary of the key messages from these papers is also available on the website at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning.

Síolta’s contents

Síolta provides a handbook and four user manuals for four different types of settings:

- full-time and part-time day care;
- sessional services;
- childminding;
- infant classes in primary school.

The handbook provides background information on the rationale and development of *Síolta*. The user manuals outline the 12 principles underlying *Síolta*, the 16 standards of quality and the 75 components subsumed within the standards. The principles are thematic and act as the overarching philosophy or vision of the framework. The standards translate the vision into practice while the components act as the indicators of quality. The signposts for reflection and ‘think abouts’ subsumed within the components are prompts for reflective practice. The signposts for reflection are mediated for the three overlapping age groups as appropriate to each setting type:

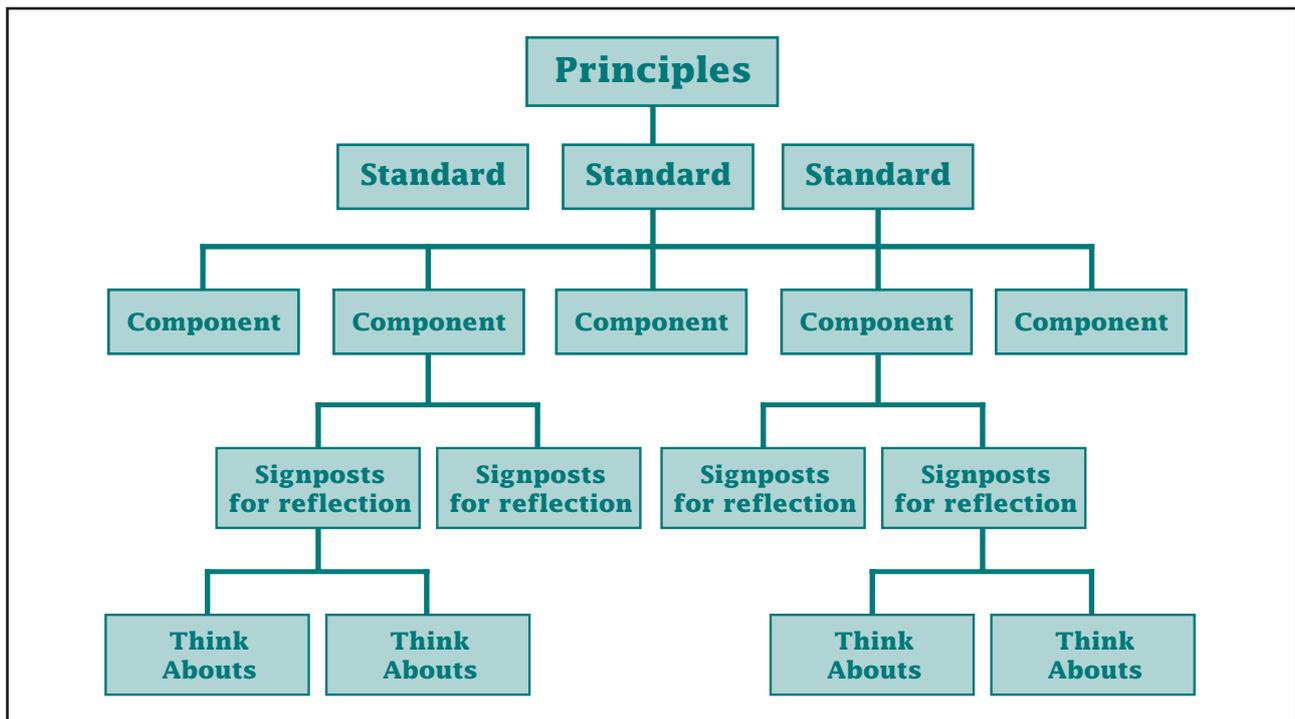
- birth to 18 months
- 12 to 36 months
- 2 ½ to 6 years as appropriate to each setting type.

The signposts are further broken down into ‘think-about’s’, prompts to support reflection on the part of the adult regarding his/her own practice in relation to a specific standard and component. Changes are made in each of the manuals in *Síolta* to reflect the different dynamics of each distinctive early childhood setting. For example, the childminding manual refers to the childminder and family home while the infant class manual refers to the classroom teacher and classroom. However, the principles, standards and components are the same for all four setting types.

The third element of *Síolta* involves the quality assurance and developmental processes. A *Síolta* Implementation Toolkit has been developed which includes a range of materials, including guidelines and templates to support a proposed three-stage assessment process associated with the national quality assurance system (i.e. Stage 1: Registration, Stage 2: Baseline Assessment and Evidence Collection and Stage 3: Validation). A *Síolta* Coordinator Manual, a Resource Guide, a Portfolio Building Guide, an overview of the Quality Assurance Process, and a Self-assessment User guide and Tool are included.



Figure 2: The structure of *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Education



Level Four: Frameworks’ elements

We now move to the fourth level of the audit where we compare the standards of *Síolta* with the themes and guidelines in *Aistear* (see Table 5). In the case of the latter, the most relevant themes and sets of guidelines are referenced beside each standard in *Síolta*. Tables 6-10 show more specific connections between some of the components and standards in *Síolta* and the contents of *Aistear*.

Table 5: Comparative analysis of the frameworks’ elements

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
Standard 1: Rights of the Child	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging</i> Guidelines: Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 2: Environments	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Interactions, Play
Standard 3: Parents and Families	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Assessment
Standard 4: Consultation	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Assessment
Standard 5: Interactions	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 6: Play	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
Standard 7: Curriculum	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation	Guidelines: Partnerships, Assessment
Standard 9: Health and Welfare	Themes: <i>Well-being</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 10: Organisation	Guidelines: Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 11: Professional Practice	Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 12: Communication	Guidelines: Partnerships, Assessment
Standard 13: Transitions	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 14: Identity and Belonging	Themes: <i>Identity and Belonging</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Interactions, Play, Assessment
Standard 15: Legislation and Regulation	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Partnerships, Assessment
Standard 16: Community Involvement	Themes: <i>Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking</i> Guidelines: Partnerships

While *Aistear* can support adults to implement many, if not all, the *Síolta* standards it gives particular support in the case of the standards related to the Rights of the Child, Environments, Parents and Families, Interactions, Play, Curriculum, and Identity and Belonging. Tables 6 to 10 illustrate this by taking one component of a *Síolta* standard and highlighting the relevant connecting pieces in *Aistear*.

Table 6: Illustration of connection between *Aistear* and Standard 7 of *Síolta*

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
<p>Standard 7: Curriculum Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.</p> <p>Component 7.2 There is a well-referenced curriculum or programme in operation, based on established and verifiable principles of child development.</p>	<p><i>Aistear</i> is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others.</p> <p>(Principles and Themes)</p> <p><i>Aistear</i> is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ children and their lives in early childhood ■ children's connections to others ■ how children learn and develop. <p>(Principles and Themes)</p>

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
	<p><i>Aistear</i> uses 4 interconnected themes to describe children’s learning and development. These themes are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Well-being ■ Identity and Belonging ■ Communicating ■ Exploring and Thinking. <p>Each theme includes aims and broad learning goals for all children from birth to six years. The aims and goals outline the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding that the adult nurtures in children to help them learn and develop. Each theme has a set of sample learning opportunities. These give ideas about the many different types of experiences that might be provided for children to help them learn and develop across <i>Aistear’s</i> aims and learning goals.</p> <p>(User Guide)</p> <p>Four sets of guidelines focus on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ building partnerships between parents and practitioners ■ learning and developing through interactions ■ learning and developing through play ■ supporting learning and development through assessment. <p>These describe good practice and include learning experiences to show the guidelines in action. ‘Thinking about my practice’ questions encourage reflective practice.</p> <p>(User Guide)</p>

Table 7: Illustration of connection between *Aistear* and Standard 2 of *Síolta*

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
<p>Standard 2: Environments</p> <p>Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well-maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a wide variety of challenging and stimulating experiences</p> <p>Components 2.1 to 2.8</p> <p>Component 2.1</p> <p>The indoor and outdoor environment is well planned and laid out to accommodate the needs of all children and adults in the setting.</p>	<p>Principle: The learning environment</p> <p>The learning environment (inside and outside) influences what and how children learn. An inviting environment encourages and helps children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure and challenge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I learn best in a place which is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → warm and inviting, acknowledges my family background and makes me feel welcome and safe → well-kept, accessible, adaptable and safe, → well-resourced and well-organised, → stimulating, challenging and empowering. <p>Create this environment for me.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The place where I learn and develop should support my developing sense of who I am and how I belong to my group, my family and my community. Make sure I can see and experience lots of real and accurate reflections of my culture and identity as well as that of all the children who are with me - songs and stories, pictures and words, play and games. ■ Set up and arrange the place where I play and learn so that it allows me to express myself, to interact with others, to make choices, to test ideas and materials, to create, to develop and practice skills, to stimulate curiosity, to foster empathy and independence, to explore and make discoveries, to problem-solve and to persevere in the face of difficulties and uncertainties. <p>(Principles and Themes)</p>



	<p>Guidelines: Learning and developing through interactions Structuring the environment both indoors and outdoors is important, in order to ensure that it supports children’s learning and development across <i>Aistear’s</i> four themes. Through planning, organising, resourcing, and evaluating the adult continually makes decisions about equipment, materials and people in the environment.</p> <p>Guidelines: Learning and developing through play The environment influences how and what children play. Well-resourced, well-planned and predictable indoor and outdoor spaces help children to see the opportunities that are available for play.</p> <p>(Guidelines on Good Practice)</p>
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Table 8: Illustration of connection between *Aistear* and Standard 1 of *Síolta*

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
<p>Standard 1: Rights of the child Ensuring that each child’s rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own learning and development</p> <p>Component 1. 2 Each child has opportunities and is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems.</p>	<p>Principle: Active learning Active learning involves children learning by doing things. They use their senses to explore and work with the objects and materials around them and they interact enthusiastically with the adults and other children that they meet. Through these experiences, children develop the dispositions, skills, knowledge and understanding, attitudes, and values that will help them to grow as confident and competent learners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Let me explore, try out, make mistakes, discover and create my own theories about how things work and why, so that I can be independent and self-reliant and can learn about the world I live in. <p>(Principles and Themes)</p> <p>Guidelines: Learning and developing through interactions During early childhood it is important that children have opportunities to lead learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and to be involved in decisions about what they do. At other times, the adult leads through planned and guided activities and increases or lessens the amount and type of support as children grow in confidence and competence.</p> <p>(Guidelines on Good Practice)</p>

Table 9: Illustration of connection between *Aistear* and Standard 5 of *Síolta*

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>				
<p>Standard 5: Interactions Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.</p> <p>Component 5.4 The adult interactive style is focused on process as opposed to outcomes. It is balanced between talking and listening, offers the child a choice of responses and encourages expanded use of language. It follows the child's lead and interests, and challenges the child appropriately.</p>	<p>Guidelines: Learning and developing through interactions Relationships are at the very heart of learning and development. Good adult/child interactions are respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling and rewarding.</p> <p>These guidelines focus on four strategies.</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Building relationships</td> <td>Facilitating</td> <td>Organising</td> <td>Directing</td> </tr> </table> <p>Children learn and develop by interacting with others. Adults who are respectful listeners and keen observers, who are prepared to negotiate, who change their practice, and who make meaning with children are those who are most responsive to them. They know the children well, are sensitive to their current level of understanding, know their interests and intentions, and pitch activities and experiences which are just beyond what they can currently do and understand so that they can extend their learning. Their interactions promote children's learning and development and help children to reach their potential.</p> <p>(Guidelines on Good Practice)</p>	Building relationships	Facilitating	Organising	Directing
Building relationships	Facilitating	Organising	Directing		

Table 10: Illustration of connection between *Aistear* and Standard 14 of *Síolta*

<i>Síolta</i>	<i>Aistear</i>
<p>Standard 14: Identity and Belonging Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group-identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.</p> <p>Component 14.2 The setting promotes a confident self- and group-identity through the provision of an appropriate environment, experiences and interactions within the setting.</p>	<p>Theme: Identity and Belonging Aim 1: Children will develop strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.</p> <p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ build respectful relationships with others ■ appreciate the features that make a person special and unique ■ understand that as individuals they are separate from others and have their own needs, interests and abilities ■ have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities ■ feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment ■ express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency. <p>(Principles and Themes)</p> <p>Theme: Identity and Belonging Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.</p> <p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ feel that they have a place and a right to belong ■ know that members of their family and community are positively acknowledged and welcomed ■ be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds ■ understand and take part in routines, customs, festivals, and celebrations ■ see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people ■ understand the different roles of people in the community. <p>(Principles and Themes)</p>



Conclusion

This audit has reviewed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. The development of each of these frameworks is an important milestone in early childhood care and education in Ireland. As outlined, the purpose of *Síolta* is to enhance all elements of early years practice while *Aistear* focuses exclusively on children's early learning and development. Used together and supported by appropriate resources, *Síolta* and *Aistear* present significant potential to support the development of practice for all adults who care for and educate children from birth to six years in Ireland, and to ultimately benefit children.

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