

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

*Aistear: the Early Childhood
Curriculum Framework and the
Primary School Curriculum*

Audit: Similarities and differences

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Contents

Introduction	4
A framework and a curriculum	4
<i>Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum</i>	4
Level one: Purpose, audience, settings, and children	5
Level two: Components and structure	6
Level three: Aims and principles	13
Level four: Content of children’s learning	17
Conclusion	21
References	22
Tables	
Table 1: Comparison of purpose, children, settings, and audience	5
Table 2: Content of <i>Aistear</i>	7
Table 3: Content of the <i>Primary School Curriculum</i>	7
Table 4: Aims of <i>Aistear</i> and the Curriculum	13
Table 5: Presentation format for <i>Aistear</i> ’s principles	14
Table 6: Presentation format for the Curriculum’s principles	14
Table 7: Principles underpinning <i>Aistear</i> and the Curriculum	15
Table 8: Illustration A of connections between <i>Aistear</i> and the Curriculum	17
Table 9: Illustration B of connections between <i>Aistear</i> and the Curriculum	18
Table 10: Illustration C of connections between <i>Aistear</i> and the Curriculum	19
Figures	
Figure 1: Structure of the themes in <i>Aistear</i>	8
Figure 2: Structure of the subjects in the <i>Primary School Curriculum</i>	9
Figure 3: <i>Primary School Curriculum</i> —presenting learning through areas and subjects	10

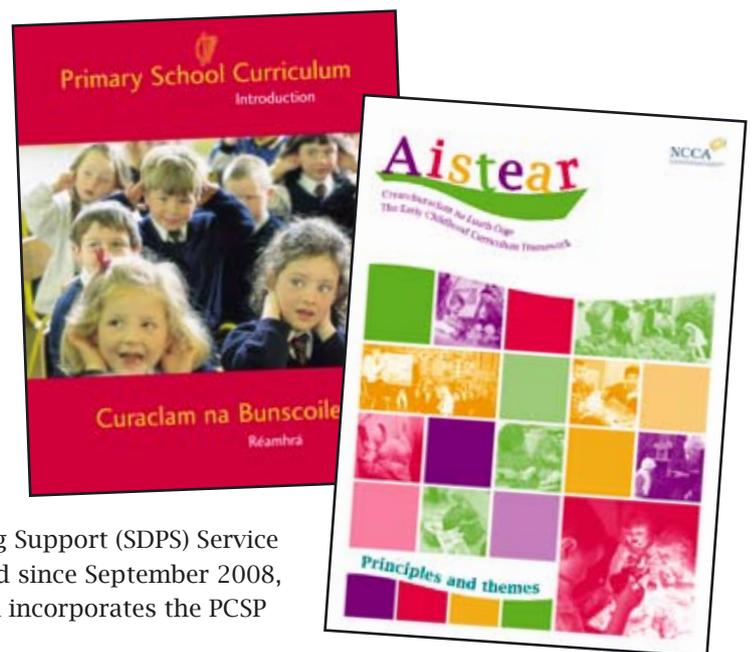
Introduction

This document presents an audit of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*¹ (2009) and the *Primary School Curriculum*² (1999). This is one of two audits with the other focusing on *Aistear and Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006).

The audit highlights similarities and differences between *Aistear* and the *Primary School Curriculum*. This helps to show how the two can be used together by teachers in primary schools in planning for, teaching, assessing, and reviewing their work with junior and senior infants.

A framework and a curriculum

The *Primary School Curriculum* developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was launched in Dublin Castle in 1999. Commenting on the historic event, an Irish Times correspondent described the launch as *euphoric* in her article, *Primary Curriculum: Time for a change. Hundreds of educators and representatives of the social partners (including parents' organisations), who had been involved in various ways for a decade or more in the curriculum's development, were out in force to cheer* (Healy, 1999). Since then, teachers have been provided with ongoing support in implementing the Curriculum through national support services—the Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP), the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) Service and the Special Education Support Service (SESS), and since September 2008, the Primary Professional Development Service which incorporates the PCSP and the SDPS.



The NCCA published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in October 2009. The Framework is an outcome of the Council's work in partnership with practitioners, childminders, parents, children, researchers, training and education institutions, and relevant agencies and government departments. Like *Síolta*, the publication of *Aistear* is an important milestone in the development of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

Aistear and the *Primary School Curriculum*

The comparison between *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary School Curriculum* takes place at a number of levels. Level one focuses on the purpose of each noting the ages of the children concerned, the relevant early years settings and audience. Level two explores the components and structure of each. Level three looks at the aims and underlying principles while level four looks in greater depth at the content of children's learning and development.

At the outset, it is important to clarify the focus of the audit. The *Primary School Curriculum* supports children's learning from four to twelve years. This audit relates to the Curriculum for junior and senior infant classes only. Equally it is important to bear in mind that *Aistear* is a curriculum framework rather than a

¹ Throughout this audit, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* is often referred to as *Aistear* or the Framework for ease of reference.

² Likewise, the *Primary School Curriculum* is referred to as the Curriculum.

curriculum. *Aistear* defines a framework of this type as *a scaffold or support which helps adults to develop a curriculum for the children in their setting*. It continues by defining curriculum as *all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children's learning and development* (Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 54).

Level one: Purpose, audience, settings, and children

Table 1 compares *Aistear* and the Curriculum in terms of their purpose, the adults who use them, the relevant settings, and children.

Table 1: Comparison of purpose, children, settings, and audience

Document	Purpose	Children	Settings	Audience
<i>Primary School Curriculum</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future (Introduction, p. 6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4-6³ years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> junior and senior infant classes in mainstream and special primary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> primary school teachers who work with junior and senior infants. This includes class, learning support, language, and resource teachers.
<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to enable children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others (Principles and Themes, p. 6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0-6 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all early years settings including children's own homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> parents and practitioners⁴ other professionals who work with children and their families.

Purpose

Celebrating early childhood as a meaningful life-stage and as a time of *being* rather than *becoming*, *Aistear* provides information for adults to help them plan for 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 (Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 6). *Aistear* does this by describing the types of experiences which are important for children and how the adult can use these to help children learn and develop to their full potential. While there is a focus on laying good foundations for later learning, there is also a strong emphasis on providing experiences for children which are relevant and exciting for them in the 'here and now'.

The purpose of the *Primary School Curriculum* is to *enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future* (Introduction, p. 6). The Curriculum sets out learning experiences for four to six-year-olds and describes strategies which the teacher might use in planning for, organising and supporting that learning. Like *Aistear*, there is a strong focus on both the present and the future.

³ Approximately 50% of 4-year olds are enrolled in junior infants each school year. This means that many children begin junior infants at age five years. As a result, children in junior and senior infants can range in age from four to seven years.

⁴ Throughout this audit, the term *practitioners* is used to refer to all those who work in a specialised manner with children from birth to six years. This includes childminders and primary school teachers.

Audience and settings

Aistear is relevant to all those who care for and educate children from birth to six years—parents and practitioners. This means the Framework can be used in

- children's own homes
- childminding settings
- full and part-time daycare settings
- sessional services
- infants classes in primary schools.

The Curriculum for four to six-year-olds is used mainly by junior and senior infant teachers in primary schools.

Children

As its title suggests, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* addresses learning from birth to six years and the *Primary School Curriculum* for infants focuses specifically on children aged four to six years. While this audit concentrates on the infant section of the Curriculum, it is important to keep in mind that this is part of a national curriculum developed for children from four to twelve years. This fact gives rise to a number of differences between *Aistear* and the Curriculum for infants. These differences are discussed in detail later in this audit.

Level two: Components and structure

Aistear has four elements:

- *Principles and Themes*
- *Guidelines for Good Practice*
- *User Guide*
- *Key Messages from the Research Papers.*

The Curriculum consists of 23 books—an introduction, and a curriculum statement and set of guidelines for each of 11 subjects. In addition to these, a number of guidelines supporting and extending the *Primary School Curriculum* have been disseminated to schools since 1999. These include:

- *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools (2007)*
- *The ICT Framework (2007)*
- *Exceptionally Able Students: Draft Guidelines for Teachers (2007)*
- *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities (2007)*
- *English Additional Support Material: Structure of the English Curriculum (2005)*
- *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools (2005).*

Tables 2 and 3 outline, in more detail, the respective content of *Aistear* and the Curriculum.

Table 2: Content of *Aistear*

Principles and Themes	Guidelines for Good Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduction ■ Principles ■ Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → <i>Well-being</i> → <i>Identity and Belonging</i> → <i>Communicating</i> → <i>Exploring and Thinking</i> 	<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
User Guide	
Key Messages from the Research Papers	

Table 3: Content of the *Primary School Curriculum*

Introduction	Curriculum Statements	Teacher Guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aims ■ Principles ■ Features ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ English ■ Gaelige ■ Mathematics ■ History ■ Geography ■ Science ■ Visual Arts ■ Music ■ Drama ■ Physical Education ■ Social, Personal and Health Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ English ■ Gaelige ■ Mathematics ■ History ■ Geography ■ Science ■ Visual Arts ■ Music ■ Drama ■ Physical Education ■ Social, Personal and Health Education

Presenting learning

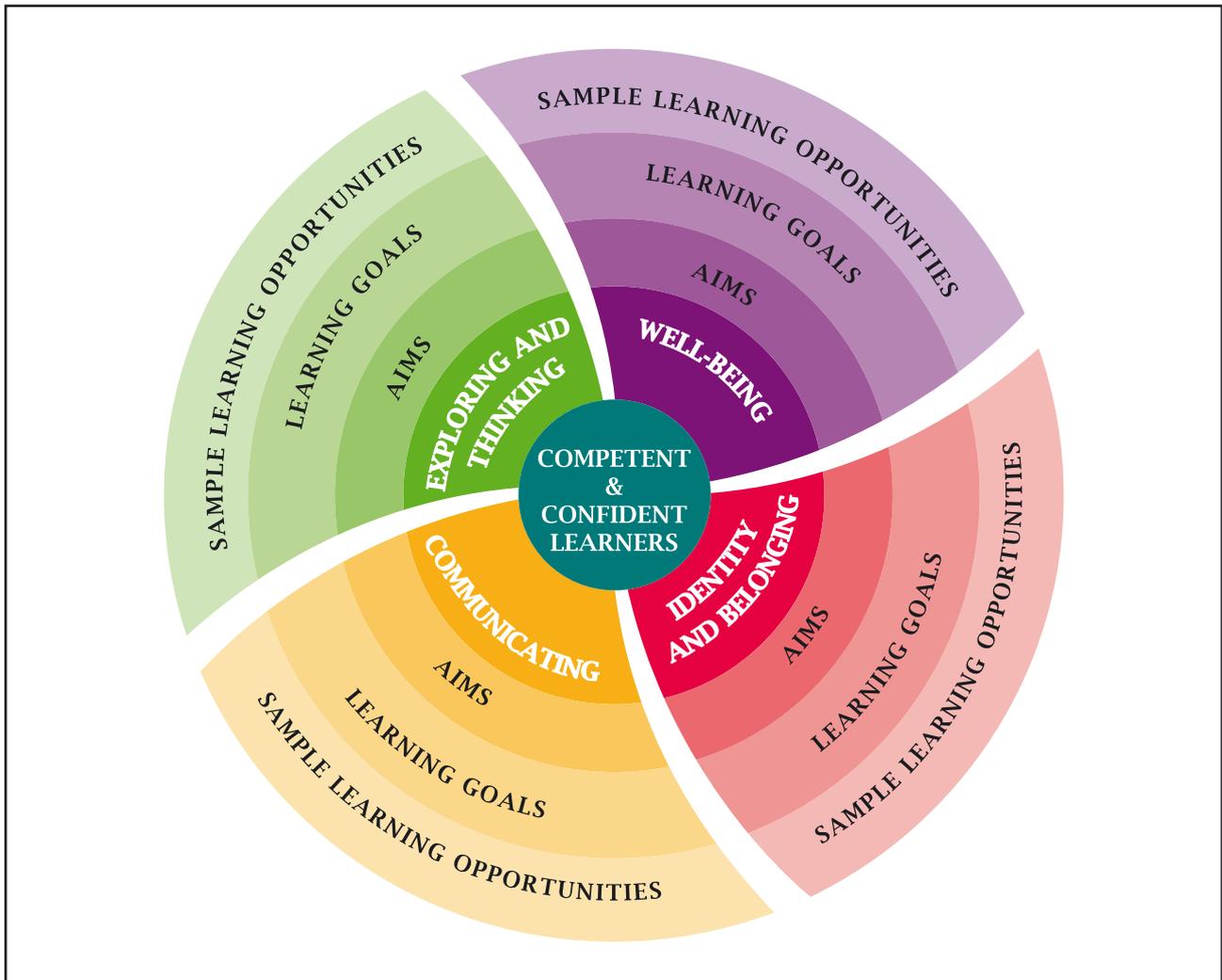
One of the most significant structural differences between *Aistear* and the Curriculum concerns **how** the content of children's learning is presented. The former defines content as *dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding* (Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 6). The Curriculum likewise prioritises the *acquisition of a wide range of knowledge and the development of a variety of concepts, skills and attitudes appropriate to children of different ages and stages of development in the primary school* (Introduction, 1999, p. 34). It makes little explicit reference to developing children's dispositions highlighting an important difference between *Aistear* and the Curriculum. Dispositions have been defined as *habits of mind* (Katz, 1999). Elaborating on this, Claxton and Carr refer to attitudes, values and habits in early childhood education as being **ready, willing and able** to engage profitably in learning (authors' own emphasis) (2004, p. 87).

Aims, goals and objectives

Each of *Aistear's* themes contains four aims and each aim has six broad learning goals. These goals are relevant from birth to six years. Each theme also includes sample learning opportunities (Figure 1). These *give you ideas about the many different types of experiences you might provide for children to help them learn and develop across Aistear's aims and learning goals* (User Guide, 2009, p. 5). The sample learning opportunities are presented in three overlapping age groups—babies (birth to eighteen months), toddlers (twelve months to three years), and young children (two and a half to six years).



Figure 1: Structure of the themes in Aistear

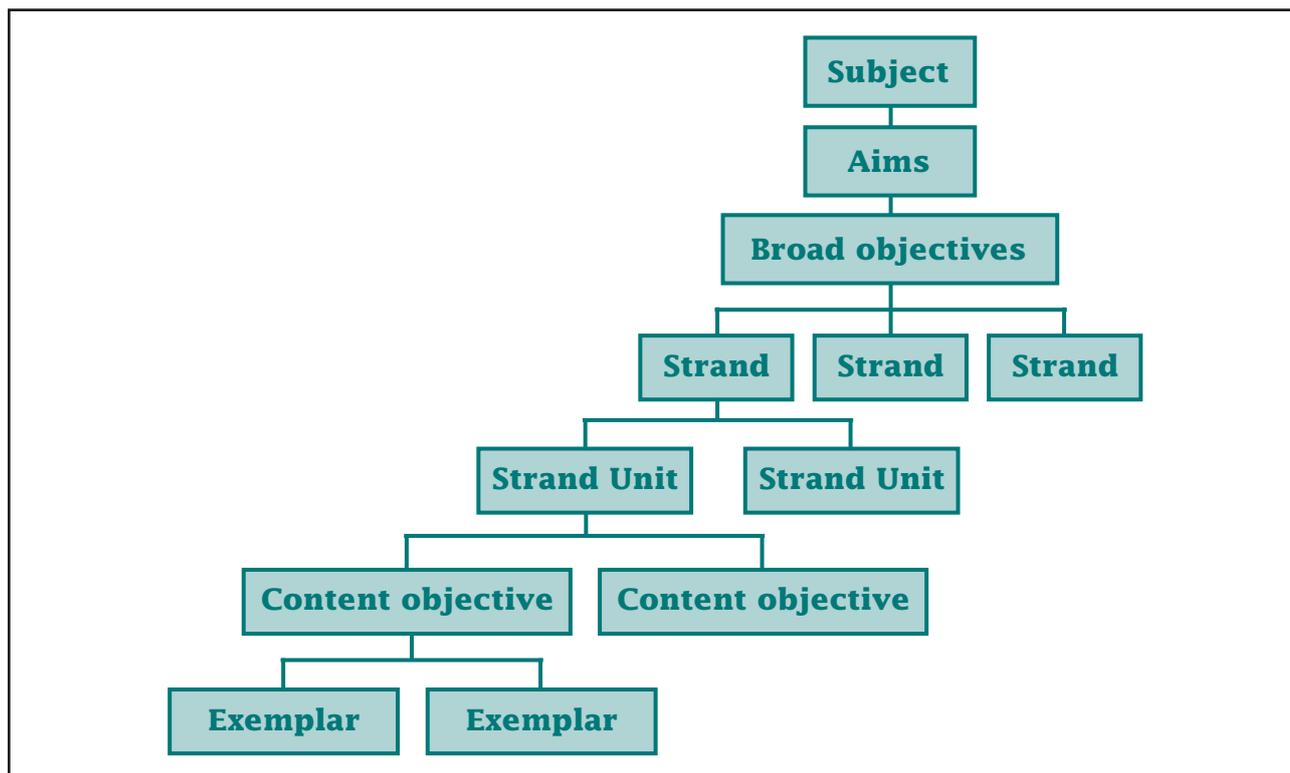


By comparison, each subject in the *Primary School Curriculum* is based on a set of aims and broad objectives specific to that subject. Informed by these, the content of children’s learning is presented through a series of strands. Each strand is in turn divided into a number of strand units (Figure 2):

The strand unit is a subdivision of the strand and focuses on the more specific areas of learning that will achieve the developmental goals of the strand. Each strand incorporates detailed content objectives. These encompass the learning experiences and the activities that enable the child to acquire and develop the knowledge and understanding that the strands and strand units address.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 41)

The number of strands, strand units and content objectives varies from subject to subject. Like *Aistear*, the Curriculum offers prompts and ideas for learning experiences for children. These are referred to as *exemplars* and are intended to help teachers in planning their work based on various content objectives.

Figure 2: Structure of the subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum***Integration**

Aistear emphasises holistic and integrated learning: *Children learn many different things at the same time. What they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn* (Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 10). As such, the Framework presents children’s learning through four interconnected themes (Figure 1) rather than developmental domains (for example emotional, social and physical development) or subjects (for example Physical Education, Music and English) (Figure 3).

The Curriculum presents the content of children’s learning through seven curriculum areas³. Some curriculum areas are further divided into subjects (Figure 3). Like *Aistear*, the Curriculum is founded on the principle of the integration of learning:

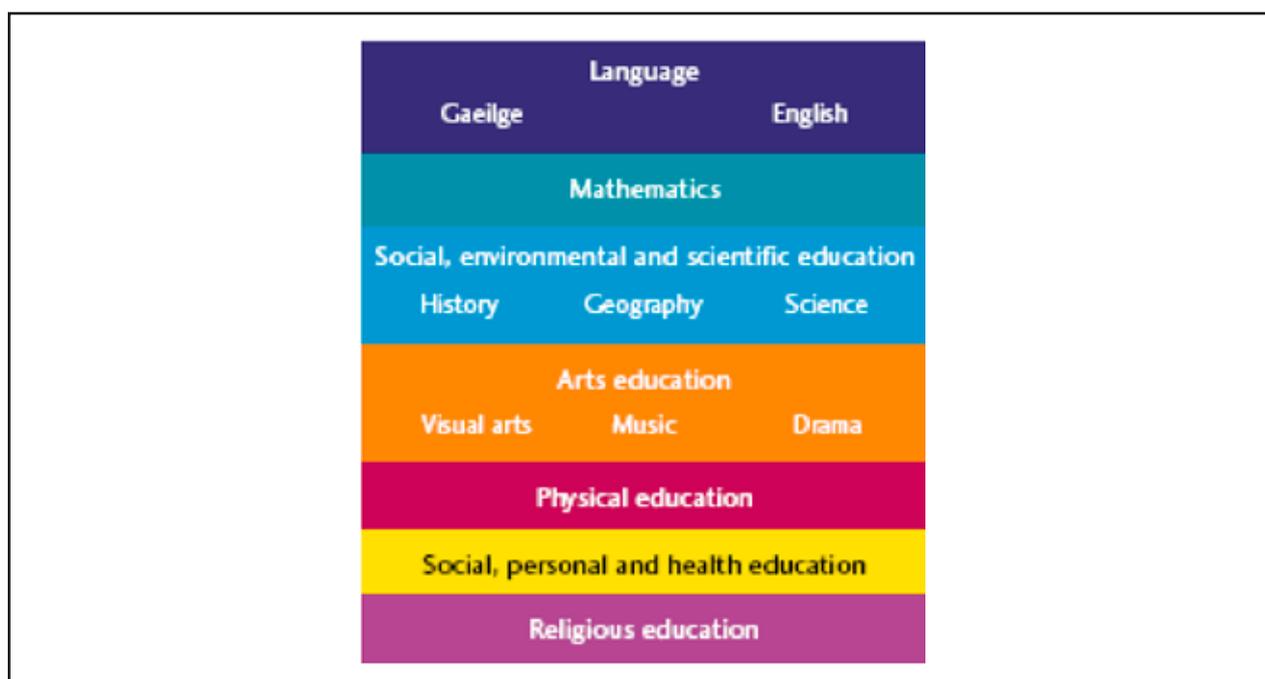
For the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant: what is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements. It is important, therefore, to make connections between learning in different subjects.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 16)

In supporting teachers’ use of integration in their classroom practice, the Curriculum provides exemplars of theme-based units of work across the various subjects. This approach to integration involves a teacher using a theme arising from children’s interests or from the Curriculum itself, and anchoring children’s learning across subjects to it. By contrast, *Aistear* does not offer this level of support.

During Phase 1 (NCCA, 2005) and Phase 2 (NCCA, 2008) of the review of the *Primary School Curriculum* teachers including those of junior and senior infants, highlighted the challenge they experienced in integrating children’s learning across subjects. Teachers’ understanding and use of integration focused to a greater extent on knowledge and concepts across subjects rather than on skills, values and attitudes, and dispositions. This may reflect the type and amount of information and support the Curriculum itself provides for teachers on integration, and especially on integrated learning rather than integrated subjects (NCCA, 2008).

³ The development of the curriculum for one of these areas—Religious education—is the responsibility of the different church authorities.

Figure 3: Primary School Curriculum—presenting learning through areas and subjects**Supporting practice**

Both *Aistear* and the Curriculum contain guidelines on practice. In the case of the former, there are four sets which provide information on interacting with children, learning through play, building partnerships with parents and families, and supporting learning and development through assessment. The guidelines have three common elements:

- features of good practice
- examples from practice
- reflections on teaching and learning.

The examples from practice reflect different types of settings and involve children of different ages. They are used to illustrate how key points of information in the guidelines might translate into practice. These examples are referred to as *learning experiences*. *Aistear* describes learning experiences as:

detailed accounts of children learning through particular activities or events, in collaboration with other children and adults, while using various objects, play props or materials. They describe what the children say, do and make in the course of the activities or events. They also show the adult's important role in supporting and extending the children's learning and development.

(User Guide, 2009, p. 6)

The *Primary School Curriculum* contains a set of guidelines for each subject. These act as *an aid and resource for teachers and schools as they encounter the curriculum and begin to implement its recommendations* (Introduction, 1999, p. 66). The 11 sets of guidelines share a common structure:

- introduction to the curriculum
- exploration of content
- school planning for the subject
- classroom planning for the subject
- approaches and methodologies.

The guidelines provide many *exemplars* of good practice in individual subjects at infant level. These together with information and ideas focused on working with children aged 4-6 years, help infant teachers develop their early years practice.

Interactions

Comparing the two suites of guidelines (those as part of *Aistear* and those as part of the Curriculum), a number of similarities and differences emerge. Both suites place great emphasis on adult-child interactions by providing practical information on a number of strategies which the adult may use in his/her work with children. While these strategies span many areas of the adult's role such as planning the physical environment, organising resources, providing for collaborative learning, and working directly with children, the range of strategies is more extensive in the case of *Aistear*. In addition, the Framework presents the strategies in an early childhood context exclusively. In the case of the Curriculum, specific attention is given to adult-child interactions at infant level in certain aspects of learning, for example, in supporting emergent reading.

Assessment

Both *Aistear* and the Curriculum define assessment as a process involving a number of activities such as collecting information, documenting, interpreting, sharing, and using it for the benefit of children. *Aistear* is premised on the interconnectedness of learning, assessing, reviewing, and planning. It contains a set of guidelines which focuses exclusively on assessment during early childhood—its purpose, its methods and its uses. *Aistear* shows assessment as being key to children having relevant and meaningful experiences to progress in their learning:

Relevant and meaningful experiences make learning more enjoyable and positive for children. On-going assessment of what children do, say and make, and reflection on these experiences helps practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This also enables them to improve their practice. Assessment is about building a picture of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development.

(Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 11)

The Curriculum likewise places high importance on assessment:

Assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and it encompasses the diverse aspects of learning: the cognitive, the creative, the affective, the physical and the social. In addition to the products of learning, the strategies, procedures and stages in the process of learning are assessed.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 18)

While the *Primary School Curriculum* outlines **why** assessment is important in supporting children's learning, it provides little information for teachers about **how** they can use assessment to make learning more interesting and motivating for children at infant level. Following Phase 1 of a review of the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 2005) in which teachers requested more information and support for their assessment practice, the NCCA developed the resource, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (2007). This development is particularly significant in terms of the interface between *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary School Curriculum*. The guidelines for primary schools provide practical information for teachers on using assessment as part of everyday interactions in classrooms, with most of this focused on children from 1st to 6th classes. The planned relative absence of information on using assessment with 4-6 year olds is addressed by *Aistear's* guidelines. The two sets of assessment guidelines represent important milestones towards developing a continuum of assessment practice from early childhood through primary and on to post-primary which takes account of how children learn and develop in different ways as they get older.

Partnerships

Partnerships with parents, family and community is a key principle of *Aistear*:

Parents are the most important people in children's lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play.

(Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 9)

Showing how this principle can translate into practice, *Aistear* provides guidelines on strategies to nurture partnerships with parents and families. The Curriculum likewise highlights the role of parents in their children's education:

Parents are the child's primary educators, and the life of the home is the most potent factor in his or her development during the primary school years. ... Close co-operation between the home and the school is essential, therefore, if children are to receive the maximum benefit from the curriculum.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 21)

Since the Curriculum was launched, the NCCA has developed a DVD for parents, *The What, Why and How of children's learning in the primary school* (2006) and a number of information leaflets⁴ to help them support their children's learning.

Planning

The Curriculum emphasises the importance of planning for children's learning:

The curriculum envisages an integrated learning experience for children. In order to achieve this, strong emphasis is placed on planning ... the curriculum assumes that schools, in the process of planning its implementation, will adapt and interpret the curriculum where necessary to meet their unique requirements.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 11)

In helping teachers develop their plans, the guidelines for each of the 11 subjects provide practical advice on how to plan at school and classroom levels, and how through planning, to ensure that children have a rich learning experience as they move from one class level to another. *Aistear* likewise highlights the importance of planning and in particular an open and flexible approach to planning:

Good plans are flexible, allowing children's changing interests and responses to learning to be incorporated over time. This type of planning takes time and comes from knowing children well—their interests, needs, cultures, backgrounds, and abilities. Assessment information is, therefore, at the heart of planning.

(User Guide, 2009, p. 12)

This approach to planning highlights the importance of involving children in the planning process and especially in short-term planning in order to make curriculum experiences meaningful for them. *Aistear* provides practical examples of short-term planning across a variety of setting types including infant classes.

Play

Aistear has a set of guidelines on learning through play while the Curriculum gives limited attention to this aspect of practice. This is discussed in more detail on p. 16.

⁴ The DVD for parents and the information leaflets are available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/parents.

Level three: Aims and principles

The next part of the audit looks at the aims and principles underlying *Aistear* and the Curriculum (these are the same as those across the curriculum for children older than six years).

Table 4: Aims of *Aistear* and the Curriculum

<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>The Primary School Curriculum</i>
<p><i>Aistear</i> has two broad aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ to help all children develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others, recognising that each child is unique with his/her own set of strengths, abilities, interests, and needs. ■ to celebrate early childhood as a meaningful life-stage and as a time of being rather than becoming. 	<p>The Curriculum has three broad aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ to enable the child to live as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual. ■ to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society. ■ to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning.

As shown in Table 4, both *Aistear* and the Curriculum express a vision of early learning which celebrates the uniqueness of children as young learners and the importance of providing them with experiences which are relevant and meaningful to them. Both also recognise the concept of lifelong learning and the contribution early learning makes to this. As mentioned earlier, the Curriculum places importance on the 'next' stage of learning in a child's life and the importance of laying foundations for that learning. While *Aistear's* aims do not draw attention to this outcome of early learning, its introduction clearly emphasises it:

Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning and development. In these early years children learn through loving, trusting and respectful relationships, and through discussion, exploration and play. They learn about languages and how and when to use them; they learn to think and to interact with others and the environment. They learn to be creative and adventurous, to develop working theories about their world, and to make important decisions about themselves as learners ... This early learning also lays important foundations for later learning.

(Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 6)

Principles

Aistear has 12 principles and the Curriculum has 14. In addition to principles, the Curriculum also has defining features. A number of these are especially relevant in a comparison of principles. These include references to a relevant curriculum and a broad and balanced curriculum.

Before auditing the two sets of principles, it is interesting to note a difference in how the principles are articulated. *Aistear* uses a practice-oriented approach whereby each principle is presented using a theoretical or philosophical statement followed by a detailed interpretation from the child's perspective, of what this requires of the adult in practice. In contrast, the Curriculum uses a more theoretical-oriented approach to articulate its principles with little support for the teacher in interpreting these (NCCA, 2008). This difference in presentation is best demonstrated in an example as shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Presentation format for Aistear’s principles

<p>Communication and language</p>	<p>The ability to communicate is at the heart of early learning and development. Communication helps children learn to think about and make sense of their world. They communicate from birth using many different ways of giving and receiving information. Each of these ways is important in its own right. Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped by two main factors: children’s own ability and their environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support me to communicate to the best of my ability from the earliest age possible. Watch out in case I have any communication and/or language delays or difficulties, since the earlier I get help the better it is for me. ■ Remember that I give and receive information in many different ways. I can communicate using words, sign language, Braille, rhythm, number, movement, gesture, drama, art, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). When I am ready, support me in my writing and reading in a way that suits my needs best, but don’t rush me. ■ You have a key role in supporting my communication and language skills. Talk to me, listen to me, respond to me, interpret what I say, and provide a place for me where I get the opportunity to share my experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others in all the ways that I can. Model communication and language skills for me. ■ My parents will be keen for me to learn English and/or Irish if I have a different home language. Remember to tell my parents that it is important for me to maintain my home language too. Reassure them that I can learn English and/or Irish as well as keeping my home language. <p>(Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 12)</p>
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Table 6: Presentation format for the Curriculum’s principles

<p>Learning through language</p>	<p>Language has a vital role to play in children’s development. Much learning takes place through the interaction of language and experience. Language helps the child to clarify and interpret experience, to acquire new concepts, and to add depth to concepts already grasped. In view of this crucial relationship between language and learning the curriculum incorporates the use of talk and discussion as a central learning strategy in every curriculum area. This facilitates the exploration of ideas, emotions and reactions through increasingly complex language, thus deepening the child’s understanding of the world.</p> <p>(Introduction, 1999, p. 15)</p>
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Table 7 presents the principles from Aistear and the Curriculum. An initial analysis highlights many similarities in the philosophy informing both demonstrating a high level of synergy between the two. Alongside these, there are a number of differences. These differences focus mainly on **how** children are conceptualised as young learners, and **how** learning happens and can be supported in early childhood. As such, they represent extensions or an enrichment of the principles underpinning the Curriculum.

Table 7: Principles underpinning *Aistear* and the Curriculum

<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>The Primary School Curriculum</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Uniqueness of the child ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity ■ The child's knowledge and experience as a base for learning ■ A relevant curriculum (feature)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children as citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The European and global dimensions (key issue) ■ A relevant curriculum (feature)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Equality and diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Taking account of individual difference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Relationships ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learning through guided activity and discovery ■ Collaborative learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The adult's role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learning through guided activity and discovery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Parents and family ■ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Taking account of individual difference ■ The child's knowledge and experience as a base for learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Holistic learning and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The integration of learning ■ The transfer of learning ■ The aesthetic dimension ■ The social and emotional dimensions of learning ■ Higher-order thinking and problem-solving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Active learning ■ Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The child as an active agent in his or her learning ■ Collaborative learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Play and first-hand experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learning through guided activity and discovery ■ Environment-based learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Relevant and meaningful experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The developmental nature of learning ■ The child's knowledge and experience as a base for learning ■ A broad and balanced curriculum (feature)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communication and language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learning through language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The learning environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Environment-based learning

(Some principles in the Curriculum are presented a number of times as they link with more than one principle in *Aistear*.)

The following discussion focuses on some key differences between the two sets of principles.

Citizenship

Aistear is premised on the understanding that all children from birth are citizens with rights and responsibilities. It emphasises the importance of children having opportunities to participate in making decisions about matters which affect them. This principle is foundational in the National Children's Strategy (2000). While the *Primary School Curriculum* doesn't have a principle regarding citizenship, it is based on a vision of education which involves enabling *the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society* (Introduction, 1999, p. 7). In discussing key issues in education, the Curriculum

acknowledges the importance of a balanced and informed awareness of the diversity of peoples and environments in the world. Such an awareness helps children to understand the world and contributes to their personal and social development as citizens of a global community.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 27)

Aistear focuses on children as young citizens in Ireland from birth while the Curriculum appears to emphasise the process of becoming citizens in a global context.

This difference may reflect the fact that the Curriculum was developed during the 1990s before the National Children's Strategy was developed. The understanding of children as a social group in modern Ireland has also changed in the last decade. In addition, children in infant classrooms are from an increasingly diverse range of cultures, a factor which has influenced the development of *Aistear* to a significantly greater extent than the Curriculum.

Play

Aistear endorses the centrality of play and activity in children's early learning. This is evident in the underlining principles and in the guidelines which give information and suggestions to help adults develop their use of a variety of types of play.

Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners.
(Principles and Themes, 2009, p. 11)

In addition, throughout *Aistear*, *learning experiences* intended to show aspects of early years practice in different settings and with different ages of children, promote the use of a variety of types of play to support children's learning across the four themes.

The Curriculum espouses learning by doing and states that the *child should be an active agent in his or her own learning* (Introduction, 1999, p. 14). It also highlights the importance of play as a way of enabling young children to be active in their learning:

The curriculum for infants ... is, in the first place, based on the uniqueness of the child and the particular needs of individual children at this stage of development. The informality of the learning experience inherent in it, and the emphasis it gives to the element of play, are particularly suited to the learning needs of young children.
(Introduction, 1999, p. 30)

Other references to play are confined mainly to specific content objectives within certain subjects, for example:

The child should be enabled to play with language to develop an awareness of sounds.
(English, Strand: Receptiveness to language, Strand unit: Reading)

The child should be enabled to use language to create and sustain imaginary situations in play.
(English, Strand: Emotional and imaginative development through language, Strand unit: Oral language).

In exploring a range of teaching approaches and methodologies to be used in infant classrooms, the guidelines across the Curriculum's 11 subjects refer little to play and as a result the Curriculum gives limited examples of how play can be used at infant level to support young children's learning and development. This may in part, be due to the fact that the Curriculum supports children's learning from four to twelve years rather than children from four to six years. In addition, research in the last ten to fifteen years has created greater understanding of the importance of play in children's learning and development. At the same time, changes in family and social patterns have resulted in less time for play in the home thereby further increasing the importance of play opportunities in out-of-home settings. Focusing exclusively on the early childhood period, *Aistear* has benefited from the vast body of literature on the importance of play for children.

The adult's role

In a review of early childhood care and education in Ireland in 2004, a team from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) drew particular attention to the adult's role. The team was critical of practice observed in a range of settings for children from birth to six years. In the case of infant classrooms for children aged four to six years, the team concluded that practice

appeared to be directive and formal compared to practices observed and theoretically underpinned in various other countries, where more explicit emphasis is placed on exploratory learning and self-initiated, hands-on (as opposed to table-top) activities.

(OECD, 2004, pp. 58-59)

Both *Aistear* and the Curriculum emphasise the crucial role the adult plays in extending and enriching children’s learning and development. However, the intended adult-child relationship differs between the two. *Aistear* highlights the importance of reciprocity in adult-child 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.

(Guidelines for Good Practice, 2009, p. 28)

By comparison, the *Primary School Curriculum* emphasises the teacher’s role to a greater extent than the child’s role in guiding learning whereby the adult identifies *particular stages of development in the child’s understanding and then choose the sequence of activities that will be most effective in advancing the child’s learning* (Introduction, 1999, p. 15).

In exploring these differences, it is important to consider that much has been learned about how children learn and develop in early childhood since the *Primary School Curriculum* was developed. In particular, socio-cultural theories of learning now dominate much thinking in early childhood literature compared to constructivist theories in past decades. Secondly, as noted earlier, the Curriculum’s focus on children from four to twelve years needs to be kept in mind.

Level four: Content of children’s learning

We now move to the final level of comparison in the audit. This involves looking at the content of children’s learning and development as expressed in *Aistear*’s themes and the Curriculum’s subjects.

Aistear’s themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking* are highly interconnected and as such do not map neatly to individual curriculum areas or subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum*. Instead, aspects of the 11 subjects in the Curriculum are identifiable to varying degrees in each of the four themes. Tables 8, 9 and 10 provide illustrations of some of these connections.

Table 8: Illustration A of connections between *Aistear* and the Curriculum

<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>The Primary School Curriculum</i>
<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ make healthy choices and demonstrate positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise, and routine. <p>(<i>Well-being, A2, LG6</i>)</p>	<p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ recognise and practise basic hygiene skills ■ become aware of the importance of food for growth and development ■ discuss food preferences and their role in a balanced diet. <p>(<i>SPHE, S: Myself, SU: Taking care of my body</i>)</p> <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ talk about movement and ask and answer questions about it. <p>(<i>PE, S: Athletics, SU: Understanding and appreciation of athletics</i>)</p>

Table 9: Illustration B of connections between *Aistear* and the Curriculum

<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>The Primary School Curriculum</i>
<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences. <p><i>(Exploring and Thinking, A3, LG5)</i></p>	<p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ write and draw frequently. <p><i>(English, S: Writing, SU: Receptiveness to language)</i></p> <p>Ba chóir go gcuirfí ar chumas an pháiste</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ scríobh faoi phictiúr ■ pictiúir a tharraingt a léiríonn mothúcháin agus na céadfaí agus lipéid a chur orthu. <p><i>(Gaeilge, S: Scríbhneoireacht, SA: Ag úsáid teanga)</i></p> <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ reflect on and talk about a wide range of everyday experience and feelings. <p><i>(English, S: Oral language, SU: Developing cognitive abilities through language)</i></p> <p>Ba chóir go gcuirfí ar chumas an pháiste</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ taithí a fháil ar an bhfocal scríofa sa timpeallacht, go háirithe sa seomra ranga, agus a thuiscint go bhfuil brí leis. <p><i>(Gaeilge T₁, S: Léitheoireacht, SA: Ag cothú fonn léitheoireachta)</i></p> <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ recall and talk about significant events and details in stories ■ respond to characters, situations and story details, relating them to personal experience. <p><i>(English, S: Reading, SU: Developing cognitive abilities through language; Emotional and imaginative development through language)</i></p> <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ discuss and explain mathematical activities ■ discuss problems presented concretely, pictorially or orally. <p><i>(Mathematics, S: Skills development)</i></p> <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ develop an understanding of the concept of length/weight/capacity/ time through exploration, discussion, and use of appropriate vocabulary. <p><i>(Mathematics, S: Measures; SU: Length, Weight, Capacity, Time)</i></p>

Table 10: Illustration C of connections between *Aistear* and the Curriculum

<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>The Primary School Curriculum</i>
<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ recognise patterns and make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know. <p>(<i>Exploring and Thinking</i>, A2, LG1)</p>	<p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ identify, copy and extend patterns in colour, shape and size. (<i>Mathematics</i>, S: Algebra, SU: Extending patterns) <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ compare photographs, clothes worn or toys used at different ages, noting development and things which have stayed the same. (<i>History</i>, S: Myself and my family, SU: Myself) <p>The child shall be enabled to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ observe characteristics such as the shape, size, colour, pattern, texture, sound and smell of familiar things in the local environment. (<i>Science</i>, Skills development: Observing)

As is evident in Tables 8, 9 and 10, *Aistear* and the Curriculum differ in the level of detail each provides. The former prioritises less detail and is descriptive in nature. The Curriculum provides more detail in terms of what children should be enabled to learn and the types of activities in which they might participate as part of this learning. Due to this difference in level of detail, individual learning goals from *Aistear* do not connect neatly to single content objectives in the Curriculum as shown in the three illustrations.

The difference in approach to expressing the content of children’s early learning possibly puts a spotlight on the adult and how he/she is conceptualised as a professional. In the case of *Aistear*, the descriptive nature of the four themes expressed through a total of 96 broad learning goals necessitates a high level of expertise on the part of the adult. He/she is required to draw on an in-depth and up-to-date knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop in their early childhood, and an expansive repertoire of skills to nurture learning appropriately. *Aistear* offers a high degree of flexibility and autonomy as a professional to the adult in deciding on the types of experiences he/she may provide for the children in working towards the various learning goals in a way which motivates and challenges each child. This approach demands a knowledgeable and highly skilled professional who engages in reflective practice in partnership with colleagues, a vision shared by *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006).

The Curriculum likewise demands a high level of expertise on the part of the teacher in planning for and providing interesting and enjoyable learning experiences for children. It too highlights the importance of flexibility for schools in planning with the aims and objectives in the various subjects. This flexibility is especially important in order to take account of children’s stages of development, their variations in personality and intellectual and physical ability, and the particular circumstances of the school (Introduction, 1999). The 500 (approximately) content objectives for infants provide significantly more detail and guidance than *Aistear* does for teachers in shaping learning experiences for children in their junior and senior infant classes. This detail is most evident in the areas of literacy and numeracy which the Curriculum prioritises (see the following sub-section).

Literacy and numeracy

As highlighted earlier in this audit, *Aistear* presents children's learning and development using four interconnected themes. It accords equal importance to each theme in ensuring children have appropriately rich and meaningful experiences. The Curriculum likewise emphasises the importance of a broad and balanced learning experience and promotes children's learning across seven curriculum areas. Alongside this, the Curriculum prioritises literacy and numeracy:

Within the context of a broad and relevant curriculum and a commitment to the highest quality of educational provision for all, the particular goals associated with literacy and numeracy are a priority of the curriculum. The acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills is central to effective learning in every area of the curriculum and to the child's social and community life outside school. The successful development of these essential skills during the primary school years will be crucial for educational success in post-primary school and in enabling every individual to realise his or her social and vocational potential.

(Introduction, 1999, p. 26)

As illustrated in the quotation, this prioritisation of literacy and numeracy applies throughout the child's time at primary school. *Aistear* while not prioritising early literacy and numeracy, highlights the importance of helping children to become confident and competent communicators—as speakers, listeners, emergent writers, and readers. This is reflected particularly in the themes, *Communicating* and *Exploring and Thinking*, for example:

In partnership with the adult, children will

- *use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning*
- *become familiar with and use print in an enjoyable and meaningful way*
- *become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages.*

(Theme: *Communicating*)

In partnership with the adult, children will

- *become familiar with and associate symbols (pictures, numbers, letters, and words) with the things they represent*
- *develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying*
- *use books and ICT (software and the internet) for enjoyment and as a source of information.*

(Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*)

Time allocation

The Curriculum provides a suggested minimum time allocation for the various areas of learning. The purpose of this timeframe is to provide an organisational framework to assist teachers in using the Curriculum to provide a broad learning experience for children. In providing the timeframe, the Curriculum recognises the importance of integrated learning for 4-6 year old children: *This requires particular approaches to teaching and learning and will entail a more flexible use of the suggested timeframe* (Introduction, 1999, p. 69).

In light of the extent to which the four themes connect with each other, and the variety of types of settings in which *Aistear* can be used, the Framework does not provide advice on the use of time in planning for children's learning and development across the aims and goals in the themes.

Conclusion

Comparing *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary School Curriculum* for junior and senior infants, this audit highlights many similarities and hence much synergy between the two. Equally, the audit spotlights distinct differences.

Some of these differences relate to approaches to curriculum planning and development. In the background paper, *Early Childhood Framework for Learning* (2001) which was prepared by the NCCA as part of the Council's exploratory work in developing *Aistear*, attention is drawn to two understandings of the curriculum—curriculum as content, and curriculum as process. *Most early childhood curricula embody aspects of both approaches, although some curricula are characterised by one approach more than the other* (2001, p. 18). The audit of *Aistear* and the Curriculum highlights different 'weightings' given to these two curriculum approaches. While both are shaped by the two approaches, the Framework is strongly influenced by what Eisner describes as a 'detailing of principles' and broad learning goals or outcomes. The Curriculum too is founded on a set of principles, and in addition, presents a series of detailed objectives. Recent years have brought new insights to how we conceptualise curriculum. These focus largely on interpreting curriculum as interaction between practitioner and children in real settings—understanding curriculum in terms of what takes places in the daily routines, discussions, actions, and interactions between adults and children, and between children and children. This new way of thinking about curriculum has informed the NCCA's rolling review of the *Primary School Curriculum* (2005; 2008).

Other differences between *Aistear* and the Curriculum relate to underpinning theories of how children learn and develop. These differences largely reflect the 'time gap' between the development of the two and also the different age group of children in question. *Aistear* has benefited from the advances made in the last 15 years in understanding more clearly how adults can work with children to nurture early learning more effectively and in a way which instils a love of learning in children.

The differences highlighted in this audit present opportunities for reviewing, extending and enriching practice in infant classrooms. Viewed in this way, *Aistear* and the Curriculum can complement each other and when used together and supported by appropriate resources, can make a significant contribution to the experiences of both teachers and children in infant classrooms. Nonetheless, a critical question remains to be answered concerning the status of *Aistear* vis-à-vis the Curriculum?

Through two phases of curriculum review (NCCA, 2005 and 2008) infant teachers provided information on their experiences with the *Primary School Curriculum*. As part of this, they highlighted many successes and equally, many challenges. In looking at *Aistear*'s potential to respond to some of these challenges, it may be helpful for the NCCA to explore opportunities to work with infant teachers in using the Framework to support their classroom practice. Current initiatives co-sponsored by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and Atlantic Philantropies and involving teachers using the Curriculum and *Síolta* may provide such opportunities. The Primary School Network established by the NCCA may provide further opportunities to learn from teachers as they use *Aistear* alongside the Curriculum in planning, teaching, assessing, and reviewing their work with junior and senior infants. The NCCA's school based initiative on reporting to parents (2007) resulted in the development of nine reporting templates for schools. One of the contestations arising from this work concerned how assessment information should be reported to parents of junior and senior infants. Teachers identified a tension between a subject-based curriculum and the importance of being 'true' to the integrated and social nature of learning at infant level. Perhaps *Aistear* can offer new ways to conceptualise learning at infant level and in doing so, help to develop practice in sharing information with parents on their children's progress in learning. 'Real' experiences such as these can in time illustrate how *Aistear* and the Curriculum can and should be used to benefit both children's and teachers' experiences in infant classrooms.

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