

# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

**Supporting early learning and  
development through formative  
assessment: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

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Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

# Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment

## An executive summary

The paper *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* describes the theory, research and practice contexts which help inform the assessment guidelines in the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>. The paper begins by exploring the interrelatedness of teaching, learning and assessment, and by describing the practice and legislative landscape in which assessment takes place in Ireland. The paper outlines the characteristics and complexity of early learning and identifies key implications for assessment. Informed by this discussion, the paper then responds to the question – *what should we assess and how?* Finally, the paper maps the way forward in developing assessment practice by identifying the importance of professional development opportunities.

Six themes emerge across the paper. These are synthesised in this executive summary.

### 1. Characteristics and complexities of early learning

Early learning is highly complex and it is recognised that finding ways to assess this learning which adequately convey this complexity is challenging. For instance, the child's home experiences and culture are relevant when assessing the child's learning since these are the social and cultural context in which much early learning takes place. Also, it is imperative to take into account the child's home language and to consider issues related to this when assessing learning and development. Some possibilities for assessing and documenting early learning and development have been developed in recent times. These are mainly in the area of authentic assessment. As far as possible, assessments should be carried out in the context of everyday activities that are meaningful and relevant to the child and using tasks that make sense to the child. They should be carried out over time, using a range of methods and in a variety of contexts.

Assessment which supports early learning is informed by understandings of the characteristics and dynamics of early learning.

### 2. Centrality of relationships

Whether through observing or interacting with a baby; through observing a toddler engaged in everyday activity; through interviewing a child about some aspect of learning; through documenting children's reactions to specific events or experiences, the practitioner develops increased understanding of what and how the child is learning by interacting with the child. This in turn can promote an increase in learning and development by both the practitioner and the child.

Parents/guardians, because of the nature of their unique relationship with children, have a very important contribution to make to the process of assessment.

Relationships are central to the assessment of early learning and development.

<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

### 3. Interactive processes

Assessment of early learning and development is often an interactive process that involves the practitioner in interacting with the child in order to understand his/her learning and development. Watching, listening, talking to, and empathising with children are central to good assessment practices in early childhood education. Recent theories have stressed the active nature of the learner and the key role to be played by the adult in assisting children to display their learning and development to the full. Assessments of early learning are interactive, informal and often embedded in everyday activities. The interactions between practitioners and learners are central to effective pedagogy in early childhood education. Children's engagement with peers is also important for highlighting the learning processes.

Assessment of early learning and development depends to a large extent on interactive processes.

### 4. Assessing what is valued

In *Towards a framework for early learning: A consultative document* (NCCA, 2004) a set of values for early learning and development was articulated. Such aspects of early learning can be challenging for practitioners to assess. They require a range of assessment methodologies that focus on holistic learning and development while at the same time ascertaining information on children's learning and development in the areas of learning that are prioritised in the curricula that apply to the setting.

Assessments are holistic in nature. The breadth and complexity of children's learning is recognised in the assessment of that learning. They cover all aspects of a child's development and are concerned with dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understandings. Assessment focuses on strengths and also on aspects of learning that need further development.

Assessing what is valued in terms of early learning and development must be a core principle.

### 5. Authentic assessment

Assessment of early learning and development is informal, carried out over time, and in the context of the child's interactions with materials, objects and other people. It is most effective when it is authentic in the sense that it takes place in real-life contexts where it is embedded in tasks that children see as significant, meaningful and worthwhile. Play is a key part of children's learning and development and thus an important part of the assessment process. Informal assessments, carried out as children engage in experiences they see as relevant and meaningful, are likely to produce the best and most comprehensive picture of early learning and development.

Authentic assessment, where children are assessed when involved in everyday activity in early education settings, is a key approach for assessing early learning and development.

### 6. Professional development for assessment

The theory and practice divide in assessing early learning and development is difficult to bridge. This is essentially a question of professional knowledge and of the extent to which practitioners understand and appreciate the issues relating to assessment of early learning and development. Research indicates that while teachers of four to six year old children in primary schools are open to the idea of new practices, they are still very much of the mindset that assessment and teaching are separate practices. There is also evidence that they are unsure about aspects of assessment practice, for example how to focus their observations and how to use the information gleaned to plan future learning (NCCA, 2005). Indeed, assessment policy and practice

are areas identified by the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2005) as areas of provision that require considerable attention in primary schools.

Early childhood practitioners need to think differently about the relationship between teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment. Only then are they likely to appreciate that assessment is not something that happens after learning but rather something that happens in learning. Education and development is required to ensure that early years practitioners are equipped to carry out assessments that adhere to principles of good practice, that are conducted in a skilled and informed way, and that do justice to children. This education and development must take place initially at pre-service level and be refined and supported in the settings in which they practice. Without these opportunities practitioners are unlikely to embrace new practices. Indeed, there is evidence that early childhood practitioners resist new forms of assessment when they don't see assessment as a prime activity of teaching.

Practitioners need extensive education and development in the area of assessment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a central concern arising from the paper is supporting practitioners to approach assessment of early learning with enthusiasm and confidence in order to make sound judgements about children's learning and to identify ways to support and extend that learning. Professional preparation and development as part of pre-service and in-service training is fundamental to helping practitioners develop the skills and understandings they need to competently assess early learning on a day-to-day basis. Appropriate contextual supports such as adequate time and opportunity to meet with colleagues are also essential. The guidelines on assessment as part of the *Framework for Early Learning* will also provide support in enabling practitioners to meet the challenges presented in relation to the assessment of early learning.

## References

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