

Developing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking

Guidelines for good practice: Supporting learning and development through assessment (pp.72-102)

Síolta Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

6: Play, C6.7

7: Curriculum, C7.2, 7.6

Research Digests linked to the above Standards

What is an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum?

Aistear and *Síolta* advocate the development of an **emergent and inquiry-based curriculum**. This type of curriculum is **called emergent because it evolves as choices and connections are made by the children¹ as they discover the world around them**. There is an emphasis on child-led learning. The practitioner shares control with the children; and their actions, thoughts, play, ideas, and conversations guide the curriculum. This type of curriculum uses children's and practitioners' interests, questions and experiences as starting points for curriculum planning. At times, topics emerge from children's interests. At other times, practitioners introduce specific topics to support children's learning and development linked to *Aistear*'s themes.

In partnership with children, practitioners identify ideas or inquiries that become the focus for learning. Children's engagement with people, materials, ideas and events triggers their curiosity and motivation to learn. Observant, skilled and supportive practitioners harness child-initiated interest and inquiry. They also know when it is appropriate and helpful to provide new opportunities and topics for children to explore or when to use adult interests as a stimulus for learning to create a relevant, meaningful and stimulating curriculum for all children.

¹When we refer to children we are using it as a general term to describe babies, toddlers and young children (Birth-6 years).

Children can only be interested in what they have already experienced and this could be limiting. The observant practitioner builds on children's interests, as well as using their own knowledge to introduce potential interests to the children to see if this sparks their curiosity. The focus is on where the interest leads rather than its source.

What does emergent mean in a curriculum?

Emergent means the curriculum evolves from the children and their experiences in their particular context. This responsive curriculum emerges when skilled practitioners use and build on children's ideas and current interests and experiences as starting points for curriculum planning. The opportunities for learning in the local community are crucially important in this type of curriculum. While settings in Ireland use *Aistear* and *Síolta* to underpin their practice, the curriculum experiences provided in an emergent curriculum for children living in a rural area of Tipperary will be quite different to those provided for children living in inner city Dublin! This type of curriculum is very inclusive and is responsive to all children and their different interests, backgrounds and cultures.

[Listen to Professor Nimmo as he explains the term emergent curriculum.](#)

What does inquiry-based mean in a curriculum?

An inquiry-based curriculum supports children to investigate their ideas and interests through many experiences, conversations and/or activities. In an inquiry-based curriculum, each child is a researcher, participating in the investigative process. These inquiries can last for days or even weeks or can die out quickly as a new line of inquiry is sparked and may or may not re-emerge!

[Listen to Professor Nimmo as he explains the term inquiry-based curriculum](#)

Building an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

While interests that emerge from the children help with planning, the inquiry-based approach is a way of enacting or progressing these interests. Put simply, an emergent curriculum is about **WHAT children will be doing**, and an inquiry-based approach explains **HOW children will do this**. 'Inquiry' is one of the ways in which the adult is able to support children's learning journey in response to an initial interest demonstrated by them.

An emergent, inquiry-based curriculum will help all children to learn and develop in a meaningful way. Observant practitioners design babies' and toddlers' curricula around a combination of nurturing relationships, caring routines and the environment. The adult notes what infants and toddlers are doing, their interests, their skills, abilities and dispositions. Interactions are always in the context of

nurturing relationships which often involves caring routines such as feeding, sleeping or welcoming a baby on arrival. They are capable communicators, imparting their messages though their body language, use of sounds and non-verbal cues. As they grow and develop their increasing mobility allows for more physical explorations, climbing, lifting, jumping and mark-making. They explore their environments by manipulating open-ended resources and investigating sensory textures and materials. As infants grow into toddlers they become more aware of others in their surroundings, they like to imitate things they have seen other people do and need the opportunity to repeat experiences again and again. They will also start forming friendships. All of these relationships, care routines, experiences, increasing skills and social awareness are the foundations on which a skilled practitioner develops an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum.

As toddlers grow into young children their increasing skills and abilities allow for more focused explorations. Areas of interest, conversations, questions, observations, provocations/stimuli and spontaneous incidents provide potential inquiries that may be explored further.

Children **need to be enabled to investigate their inquiries** to the full without time restrictions. For children, some of their explorations and projects will be short-lived -minutes, while others can last for weeks or even months. Whether it's digging for worms, going on a trip to the local supermarket or exploring gravity as cars roll down a ramp, each experience is important and is often made even better when an enthusiastic and skilled practitioner works with the children to find out more. Sometimes, children's ideas will need to be clarified or challenged; for example, their understanding, as observed during play, that boys can't go in the home area or that girls can't be pilots! Here the practitioner will have a particular role in helping children discover and understand more. This type of curriculum

is flexible and uses children's responses to experiences including learning from their misconceptions. However, it's also important to ensure that inquiries don't become practitioner-directed or overly structured.

- [Listen to Professor Nimmo as he describes how to develop an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum for babies and toddlers \(Birth to 3 years\).](#)
- [Listen to Professor Nimmo as he describes how to develop an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum for young children \(3-6 years\).](#)
- [Listen to Professor Nimmo as he describes how to use an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum with other curriculum philosophies.](#)

Key features of an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum

- Getting to know each child/family/ community well.
- Understanding children have different interests, abilities, knowledge, dispositions.
- Listening to children, especially their questions and conversations. Understanding children's non-verbal communications, reading their body language.
- Identifying a child's/children's interest/ inquiry and responding to and building on it.
- Finding out what the child/children already know and think—through observations and asking open-ended questions.

- Encouraging children to represent their interest/inquiry, for example, to build, tell, mark-make, photograph.
- Preparing the physical environment so it has lots of open-ended and loose materials.
- Valuing play and relationships.
- Working to deepen children's level of understanding and finding answers to their questions. For example, researching books or the internet to discover more; inviting guests in to learn about their work; planning a trip; providing a wide variety of resources that allow the child to communicate their developing understanding.
- Using the child's interests to support their learning and development.
- Using *Aistear's* learning goals to identify on-the-spot opportunities to extend learning; for example, introducing a challenge to the play, making a note of a child who might need extra support or sharing a new word.
- Recording new interests as they occur, making plans and adapting existing plans, staying flexible as interests change.
- Documenting and using information gathered.
- Reflecting on and talking with children about what they have discovered.
- Sharing the curriculum with others and working in partnership with parents.

Following children's interests

It is impossible to plan for and respond to every child's interests. A skilled practitioner will identify and select interests that can be extended and shared with others to maximise all children's learning and development. To acknowledge children's individual interest there are a number of useful responses:

- note the interest or acknowledge it with a comment, question or photograph.
- provide additional resources to extend what is happening; for example, if a child is interested in planes you could provide toy planes, books about planes (fiction and non-fiction), binoculars, or posters with various types of planes illustrated. It is also useful to research the interest together and to introduce new language associated with it e.g. wings, tail, engine, pilot, cabin crew, departures and arrivals.
- the interest might be the start of a bigger inquiry-based learning experience, involving a group as inquiry is a useful way of enacting or progressing an emergent curriculum. This initial interest might result in several different lines of inquiry. There are endless possibilities!

When picking an interest/idea to be followed up in more detail think about:

- What learning potential has the interest/idea?
- Might it have appeal to other children or indeed the whole group?
- How does it link to other learning experiences being offered?
- How might it consolidate children's previous learning or extend their current learning?
- How might it link to *Aistear's* themes, aims and learning goals?

The adults' role in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

The spontaneity and responsiveness of the practitioner is key to an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. The adult is ready to respond when opportunities to build on children's interests and inquiries arise. The practitioner acts as a facilitator, noticing **what**

the child is curious about and enabling the child to discover more.

A thorough **knowledge and understanding of *Aistear's* themes, aims and learning goals** enables the practitioner to identify on-the-spot opportunities to extend a conversation, introduce a new idea, delve deeper into a problem being solved, or share a new and intriguing word. The practitioner's professional knowledge and pedagogical skill are key to enabling him/her to do this for each child in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. **The children can make meaning of the experiences with the practitioner's guidance and their play can become more complex and inclusive.**

The practitioner **models positive learning dispositions** such as a sense of inquiry and curiosity, encourages the use of imagination and provides a variety of learning contexts – individual opportunities, in pairs, and in small and to a lesser extent in large groups. As children develop, collaborative group work in pairs and small groups is encouraged and children have the opportunity to talk, critique, question, compare, negotiate and problem-solve. Children's interests and language can be expanded through stories and discussion, and introducing them to mathematical and scientific concepts such as number, shape, measure and so on is important. These are likely to be far more meaningful if they can be related to something the children are already interested in or have experienced.

[Listen to Professor Nimmo talk about the adult's role in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum.](#)

Where does child-led play fit with this type of curriculum?

Play is central to an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. To be truly child-initiated, experiences have to be genuinely chosen and organised by the children. Children find questions and problems to solve in their play, especially in child-led or free play. Here children can choose what they wish to do and learn at their own pace. **Time is a key issue here** as children need significant periods of uninterrupted time to develop their play. Whether children are outside experimenting with mud or inside playing in the small world, water, sand, art or pretend area, they are following their interests and making inquiries about how the world works.

- [Listen to Professor Wood talk about making adequate time for play.](#)
- [Listen to Professor Nimmo talk about play and the emergent, inquiry-based curriculum](#)
- [Listen to Professor Wood talk about supporting progression in play](#)
- The opportunity to experience risky, adventurous play outdoors is also critical to an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum. The practitioner observes, listens to and documents different aspects of children's play (inside and out) and hands-on experiences and might (or might not) help the children develop their inquiry into a long-term project or investigation. For example
- After reading a storybook about ducks and investigating them through non-fiction books, a trip to the park to feed the ducks could be organised.
- The children may also develop their play linked to a project or activity organised by the practitioner; for example, a tooth brushing activity in preparation for the dentist's visit could develop in to role play around the dentist's surgery or the application of a plaster to a little scrape may be the stimulus for a variety of play activities involving plasters. Consider giving toddlers plasters to explore for themselves or sticking them on a doll and wait to see what happens.
- [Check out the self-evaluation tool on play for babies and toddlers \(birth-3 years\) and young children \(3-6 years\) to help you support children's play.](#)

What does the learning environment look like in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum?

The environment has an important role to play in children's learning and development. Children's curiosity is likely to be heightened in **an environment that is rich in images, conversations, experiences, provocations and possibilities**. There are interesting and stimulating objects and activities but also opportunities for quiet and reflection. The environment is tailored to meet the interests and needs of the children.

The practitioner **takes an active role in designing and preparing an environment** to stimulate children to think about new interests and provoke new inquiries. The environment is arranged into a number of different areas and children can choose from materials which are accessible at their level. It includes lots of open-ended or loose materials that children can choose how to use. For example, adding materials like stones, wood and small-world people to the construction area can provoke children's thinking and extend opportunities for more complex play.

The **natural outdoor environment** is key to the emergent, inquiry-based curriculum. There are so many opportunities in puddles, mud, rocks and twigs to interest and engage children. If you don't have these in your outdoor spaces already think about ways to introduce them and perhaps consider planning trips regularly to the local forest/park so that children can interact with nature.

Providing different and interesting stimuli/provocations, experiences and opportunities is a good way of widening children's interests. **Stimuli/provocations are things which spark the child's curiosity and inspire new ideas, connections and actions**. Stimuli can be in the form of **open-ended materials** that may be displayed in an inviting, orderly way to provoke interest. For example

- For babies and toddlers (birth-3 years) appropriate stimuli/provocations could be materials and objects that facilitate sensory experiences, for example, toddlers

exploring ice cubes/frost/snow; adding smell to pieces of material such as orange, lemon, almond, vanilla and peppermint essence; chop up a number of citrus fruits, lemon, orange, grapefruit, lime, satsuma to explore; or displaying different textured, shaped, coloured and patterned natural materials for babies such as stones and wooden objects in treasure baskets. For more information see the treasure basket video [here](#) and get the tip sheet [here](#).

- For young children (3-6 years) a stimulus or provocation could be as simple as a photo of a local castle with some construction materials in a basket beside it. This photo can provoke children to discuss the castle, where it is and might inspire them to start building their own. More complex provocations could involve light and shadow exploration through lightboxes. For more information see the video on provocations [here](#).

[Listen to Professor Nimmo talk about other sources of the emergent and inquiry-based curriculum.](#)

Check out the self-evaluation tool on the learning environment indoors and outdoor for [babies and toddlers \(birth-3 years\)](#) and [young children \(3-6 years\)](#).

Planning and assessing in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

To create an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum, the practitioner needs to **spend time observing and documenting** what the children's interests, inquiries and theories are and to use this information for planning.

Time is balanced between planning learning opportunities and documenting what children have been doing and learning as evidence of learning, and both processes are connected. Documenting can also help children to reflect on their learning and can be shared with others including parents and other team members.

Planning for play and learning is important but it is also critical to have flexibility around plans and to respond to the children's interests and inquiries. Planning is respectful of the uncertainty that is an integral part of children's interests and play. For the staff team, it's important to **brainstorm potential learning opportunities that are open-ended** using a [medium-term planning template](#) and to have an idea of where things might go, so that instead of the practitioner providing all the answers she/he acts as a guide to help the children find their own answers. This type of curriculum doesn't mean there is no planning. Everything you do in terms of supporting children's interests, questions and ideas is intentional. The environment that you provide with lots of open-ended, interesting materials, the open-ended questions and problems you pose, the documentation that you share with children to revisit their ideas enables children to learn how to learn and to develop positive learning dispositions.

[Listen to Professor Nimmo discuss planning, documenting and using information gathered in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum](#)

Check out some of the other resources on the Practice Guide to support planning and documenting by clicking the links below or by logging on to www.aistearsiolta.ie

- [Documenting children's learning and development tip sheet](#)
- [Information Booklet: Planning and assessing for children's learning and development \(Birth-6 years\)](#)
- [Short-term planning sheet template](#)
- [Learning record template with samples for babies, toddlers and young children.](#)