National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative
Final report: Evaluation of *Aistear* Workshops
and Coaching Pilot

For discussion

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Introduction

The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative

The *National Síolta Aistear Initiative* (NSAI) was established in 2016 to support the coordinated rollout of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) and *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education[1] [CECDE], 2006). It is being funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is being developed in collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative is overseen by a steering committee, chaired by the DES, with members from the DCYA, DES and the NCCA.

Aistear Workshops and Coaching Pilot

As part of this national initiative, the NCCA was asked by the DES to develop and pilot 10-hours of workshops based on the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide (see the Action Plan for Education [2016, p.34] for further details. See also www.aistearsiolta.ie). Materials were developed in the context of the *Aistear* strand of the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative to facilitate early childhood practitioners to access ten hours of workshops, plus four hours of coaching support. The aim of these draft materials was to support practitioners' understanding of the two frameworks through the use of the Practice Guide, in order to improve the quality of experiences for children from birth to six years. In advance of a national roll out, the NSAI steering committee decided to pilot the workshops and coaching model, and the associated materials to evaluate their effectiveness and suitability.

The *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching Pilot was facilitated by 27 *Síolta Aistear* mentors, nominated by City and County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and Area Based Childhood projects, in various locations throughout Ireland during the first six months of 2017. 400 practitioners from 162 early childhood settings took part in the pilot. Mentors were released from their organisations for 109 hours to facilitate the pilot, and their positions were backfilled. It should be noted that the model used to access and release mentors is not a focus of this evaluation.

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[1] The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education was closed in 2009 and its remit was subsumed into the Department of Education and Skills. Responsibility for *Síolta* and the associated Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) now rests with the Early Years Education Policy Unit, co-located in the DES and the DCYA.

Pilot Evaluation

The *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching Pilot has now been evaluated to assess its impact and appropriateness. A variety of data collection methods was used in order to:

- Enhance the reliability of the data
- Ensure that the voice of the participants[2] would be prioritised through multiple channels.

An independent researcher was commissioned to analyse the data collected. Evaluation data was collected through four methods from practitioners: through

1. an online questionnaire and
2. a series of four focus groups.
3. *Síolta Aistear* mentors provided evaluation data through feedback templates and
4. documentation gathered through evaluation events in April and July 2017.

The research questions for the evaluation are as follows;

1. What **benefits**, if any, were associated with:
   a. the Workshops?
   b. the Coaching sessions?
2. What **challenges**, if any, were associated with:
   a. the Workshops?
   b. The Coaching sessions?
3. What **changes** did the respondents suggest for:
   a. the Workshops?
   b. the Coaching sessions?
4. What **changes**, if any, did the respondents suggest for the **CPD process as a whole?**

The data sets have been thematically analysed in order to identify emerging patterns in response to the research questions. The findings for each data set will be presented in stand-alone sections, followed by a synthesis of the overall findings.

- [2] 'Participant' is used to denote those who took part in workshops and coaching and refers to practitioners and setting managers.
- 'Mentor' denotes *Síolta Aistear* mentors who facilitated workshops and acted as a coach
- 'Respondent' is used throughout the document to describe those who responded to questionnaires, took part in focus groups and provided evaluation data.

Practitioner Questionnaires

Following the completion of the pilot, a Survey Monkey questionnaire was distributed to practitioners via *Síolta Aistear* Mentors (See appendix 1 for the questionnaire).

All practitioners (N=400) were invited to participate in this aspect of data collection. 70 responses were received by the cut-off date of the 30th June, giving a response rate of 17.5%. The low response rate could be attributed to the time of the year, as many preschool settings close for the summer months and staff holidays typically commence at the end of June. In addition, practitioners have frequently noted the time pressure they experience when completing tasks during 'non-contact' time. Whilst a low response rate can be common with self-administered questionnaires, a response rate of 60-70% is desirable to ensure the data is valid (Sierles, 2003; Rubenfeld, 2004). Therefore, it should be noted the responses reported below are not presented as stand-alone findings but must be understood in combination with focus group and mentor evaluation data.

Participant background information

Mentors were asked to identify 14 participants from up to 7 settings within their catchment area to take part in the pilot. Data gathered in the *Expression of interest form* (see appendix 2 for further details) was used to assist mentors to select practitioners and settings, using criteria outlined by the NSAI[3]. Mentors were asked, where possible, to select settings who had no previous engagement with significant quality improvement initiatives such as Better Start or the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme.

Table 1.1 below demonstrates the majority of respondents, 65% (n=45), have worked in Early Childhood Education for more than 10 years. Of the remaining 35%, 17% (n=12) have been working in Early Childhood Education for 7-9 years, 12% (n=8) for 4-6 years, 4% (n=3) for 1-3 years and 2% (n=1) for less than 1 year.

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[3] All participants were required to take part in the Practice Guide Introductory Workshop before applying for the pilot. In addition, priority was given to settings that had not previously engaged with significant quality improvement initiative in the past three years, and settings where a member of management and/or a practitioner in a leadership role is also taking part in the initiative.

Table 1.1- Length of time working in Early Childhood Education

Length of Time working in Early Childhood Education	Percentage of Respondents
Less than 1 year	2%
1-3 years	4%
4-6 years	12%
7-9 years	17%
10+ years	65%

Table 1.2 indicates the highest level of qualification of the majority of respondents, 65% (n= 45), is FETAC level 6. A further 20% (n=14) hold a level 8 qualification and 10% (n=7) of respondents' highest level of qualification is level 7. Level 5 is the highest level of qualification for 5% (n=3) of participants.

Table 1.2 – Highest level of qualification

What is your highest level of qualification?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Level 5	5%
Level 6	65%
Level 7	10%
Level 8	20%
Level 9+	0%
No qualification	0%

Of the practitioners who completed a questionnaire, 58% (n=40) work in a sessional setting. A further 32% (n=22) work in full day care, 8% (n=6) in a naíonra and 2% (n=1) in part-time day care.

Table 1.3 – Setting types

What type of setting do you currently work in?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Full day care	32%
Sessional	58%
Naoínra	8%
Early Start	0%
Other (please specify)	2%

Table 1.4 demonstrates a large majority of respondents, 80% (n=55), currently work with preschool children aged 3-4 years. A smaller percentage of respondents work with children under 3 years, with 29% (n=20) working with 2-3 year olds, 17% (n=12) with 1-2 year olds and 9% (n=6) with babies under 1 year. A further 32% (n=22) work with children who are 5 years or older. Of the respondents who

selected 'other', 12% (n=8), 2 reported working with all age groups in their setting, 1 worked with school-aged children, 1 with children up to school age, 1 with children from 2 years 10 months to 5 years, 1 with children from 2-6 years and 1 reported being a manager of the setting. Please note that respondents could choose one or more options for this question.

Table 1.4- Age group

What age group do you currently work with?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Birth-1 year	9%
1-2 years	17%
2-3 years	29%
3-4 years	80%
5+ years	32%
Other (please specify)	12%

The majority of settings, 52% (n=36) involved in the pilot had 2 staff members participating in the workshops and coaching. One quarter, 25% (n=17), of settings had 3 staff members participating in the workshops and coaching and a further 12% (n=8) had 4 practitioners involved. A smaller percentage of settings, 3% (n=2), each reported 1 and 5 staff members attending the workshops and coaching pilot. Of those that selected other, 6% (n=4), 3 reported 6 staff members attending both aspects of the training and 1 stated *2 attended the 5 workshops but 5 attended onsite training*. Therefore, the mean number of staff members participating in the workshops and coaching pilot was 2.7.

Table 1.5- Number of practitioners per setting

How many people from your setting, including yourself, participated in the workshops and coaching pilot?	
Answer Choices	Responses
1	3%
2	52%
3	25%
4	12%
5	3%
Other (please specify)	6%

According to the largest percentage of respondents, 30% (n=21), 50-74% of their staff team participated in the pilot. A further 23% (n=16) reported 100% of their staff team participated in the workshops and coaching sessions. Both 1-24% and 75-99% of staff members participating was

reported by 16% (n=11) of respondents and slightly fewer, 15% (n=10), reported between a quarter and a half, 24-49%, of their staff team participated in the pilot.

Table 1.6- Percentage of staff represented per setting

What percentage of the staff team is this?	
Answer Choices	Responses
1-24%	16%
25-49%	15%
50-74%	30%
75-99%	16%
100%	23%

According to the majority of respondents, 81% (n=56), their setting manager participated in the workshops and coaching.

Table 1.7- Participation of setting managers

Did the setting manager participate in the workshops and coaching pilot?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	81%
No	19%

Overall, attendance in the initiative was high with 92% (n=61) of respondents reporting they attended all 4 coaching sessions and 79% (n=54) participating in all 5 workshops. A further 18% (n=12) of respondents attended 4 workshops and 8% (n=5) attended 3 coaching sessions. A smaller percentage of respondents, 2% (n=1), reported attending 3 workshops. The same percentage also attended only 1 workshop.

Table 1.8-Attendance

How many workshops and coaching sessions did you participate in?[4]		
Answer Choices	Workshops	Coaching Sessions
5	79%	N/A
4	18%	92%
3	2%	8%
2	0%	0%
1	2%	0%

[4] Participants could attend a maximum of 5 workshops of 2 hours duration each, and a maximum of 4 coaching sessions of 1 hour per session.

Benefits and challenges

Respondents were asked to rate the workshops under a number of headings. Based on a scale of 1 indicating poor, 2 average, 3 good, 4 very good and 5 excellent, the overall mean score for the content of the workshops was 4.19, indicating respondents thought the content was 'very good'. 'Relevance to your work' had the highest average score of 4.36, followed by 'ease of understanding' with an average score of 4.3. 'Pitched at the correct level' and 'Paced at the correct speed' had slightly lower average scores of 4.14 and 3.97 respectively.

Figure 1.1-Rating workshop content
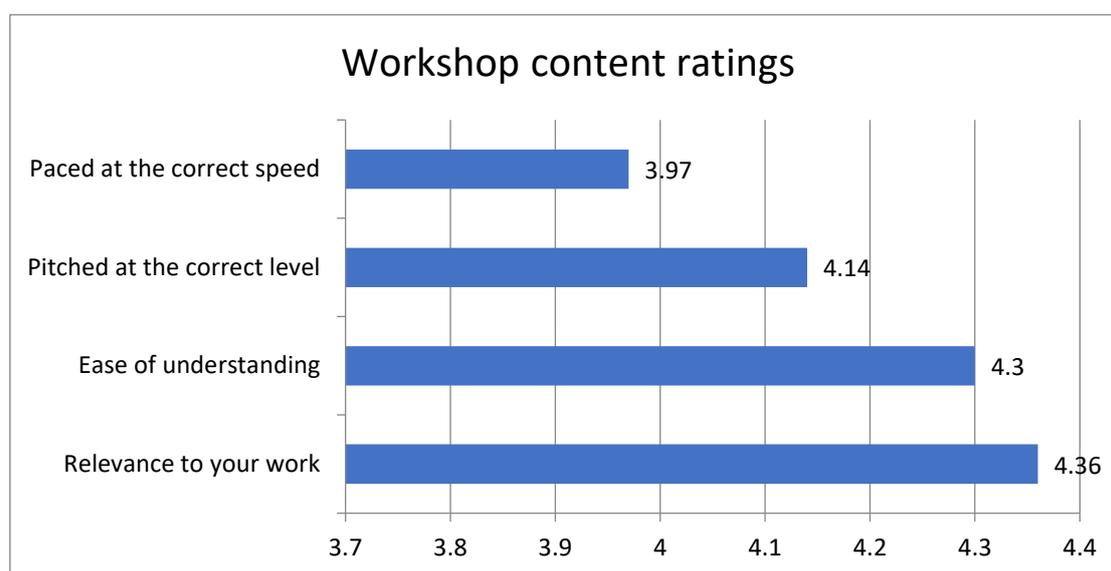
More specifically, figure 1.2 demonstrates the majority of respondents thought the pace/speed of the workshops was excellent or very good, 42% (n=28) and 26% (n=17) respectively. A further 20% (n=13) found the pace to be good. A smaller percentage of respondents reported the pace of the workshops to be average or poor, 11% (n=7) and 2% (n=1) respectively.

Similarly, the majority of respondents reported the level/pitch of the workshops to be excellent or very good, 47% (n=31) and 29% (n=19) respectively. A further 15% (n=10) stated the pitch/level was good and 9% (n=6) suggested it was average.

With regards to ease of understanding, 46% (n=30) found it to be excellent, 41% (n=27) very good and 12% (n=8) good. 2% (n=1) said the workshops were average in terms of ease of understanding.

Likewise, 55% (n=37) of respondents selected excellent when asked how relevant the workshops were to their work. A further 27% (n=18) selected very good and 16% (n=11) good. One participant, 2%, found the workshops to be average with regards to relevance to work.

Figure 1.2- Rating of workshop content (b)
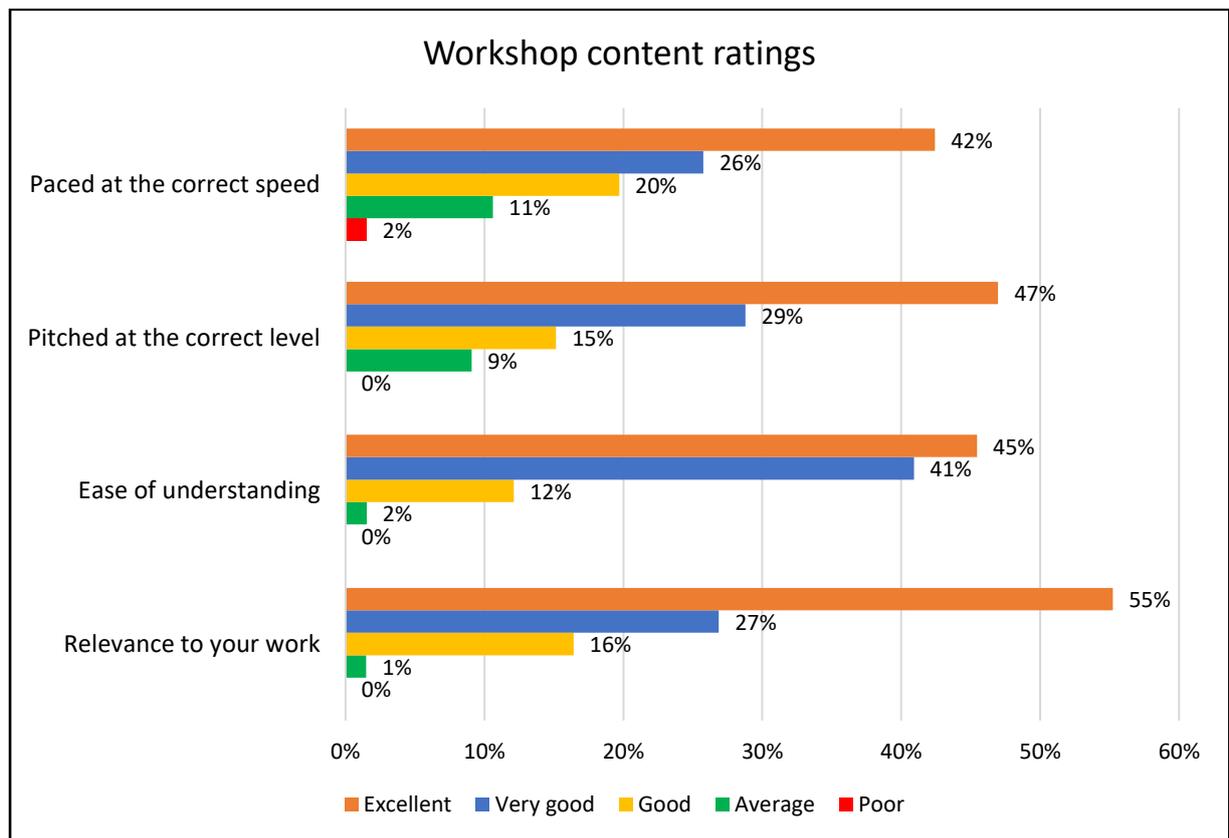
Figure 1.3 indicates workshop 3, 'Thinking about Documentation', and workshop 4, 'Thinking about planning', had the greatest impact on learning, being selected by 54% (n=36) and 48% (n=32) of respondents respectively. Workshop 2, 'Using and Emergent Curriculum', was selected by 30% (n=20) of respondents and Workshop 5, 'Curriculum Statement', by 33% (n=22). A smaller percentage of respondents, 6% (n=4), selected the introductory session. Please note that respondents could choose one or more options for this question.

Figure 1.3- Impact of workshops on learning

Impact of workshops

Workshop	Percentage
Workshop 5 - Curriculum Statement	33%
Workshop 4 - Thinking about Planning	48%
Workshop 3 - Thinking about Documentation	54%
Workshop 2 - Using an Emergent Curriculum	30%
Workshop 1 - An Introduction to Aistear, Síolta and the Practice Guide	6%
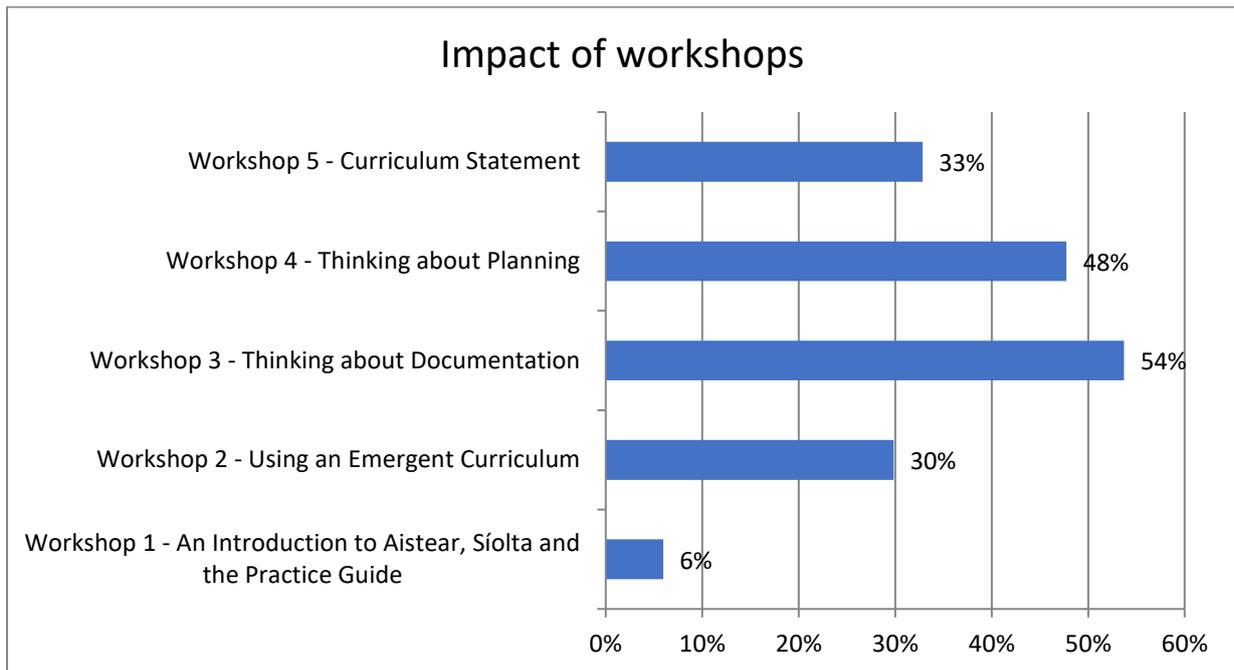
Figure 1.4 provides an overview of practitioners' responses relating to key learning and changes made to practice following participation in the workshops. The most frequent response related to changes in documentation, particularly observation records and planning.

Figure 1.4- Key learning and changes to practice following participation in workshops

Documentation	Curriculum	Practice
- Approach to observation - Approach to planning	- Development of curriculum statement - Implementation of emergent curriculum	- Increase in child-led practice - Increased focus on play - Re-introduction of key worker system

Overall, respondents implied they have simplified their approach to observation, carrying out shorter observations more frequently and have extended their approach to planning by including the voice of the child and ensuring short-, medium- and long-term plans are in place. For example, one practitioner stated:

We have changed how we carry out observations (ours were previously too long winded and wordy) and we have implemented short-, medium- and long-term plans which will be of huge benefit to us going forward.

Others commented:

We now document everything little and often. As children mention ideas (we) record and try to plan around these.

Less is more in relation to observations and folders.

Respondents also reported developing a curriculum statement and endeavouring to implement an emergent curriculum. For example, with regards to their key learning from the workshops participants stated:

The emergent curriculum and how it can grow and grow with individual children's input. It will make the subject choice more interesting for the children because it is enhanced by themselves and they choose where we will go with it next.

The curriculum comes from listening attentively to the children's interests and emergent interests.

Another said:

I am a lot more relaxed. I enjoy learning from the children instead of trying to always deliver a fully planned & detailed monthly theme. I am more flexible and allow the emerging curriculum to play a bigger role in our setting.

Adopting an increasingly child-led practice was reported by a number of other practitioners, alongside placing a greater focus on play and reintroducing the key worker system. For example:

We have gone to more a child-led room and less structured.

Stand back. Watch and listen. Get to fully know ALL the children attending the setting.

Play has taken the main place in our setting.

Key worker system- we had tried it a few years ago but it had not worked for us. We tried it again, with some ideas from others at workshop and it had benefits.

Practitioners were asked to rate the coaching sessions under a number of headings. Based on a scale of 1 indicating poor, 2 average, 3 good, 4 very good and 5 excellent, the overall mean score for the coaching sessions was 4.42, indicating respondents thought they were 'very good'. More specifically, 'feeling supported' had the highest average rating of 4.63, followed by 'applying theory to practice' with an average score of 4.38. 'Relevance to your work' had an average rating of 4.36 and 'pitched at the right level' 4.32.

Figure 1.5- Rating of coaching sessions
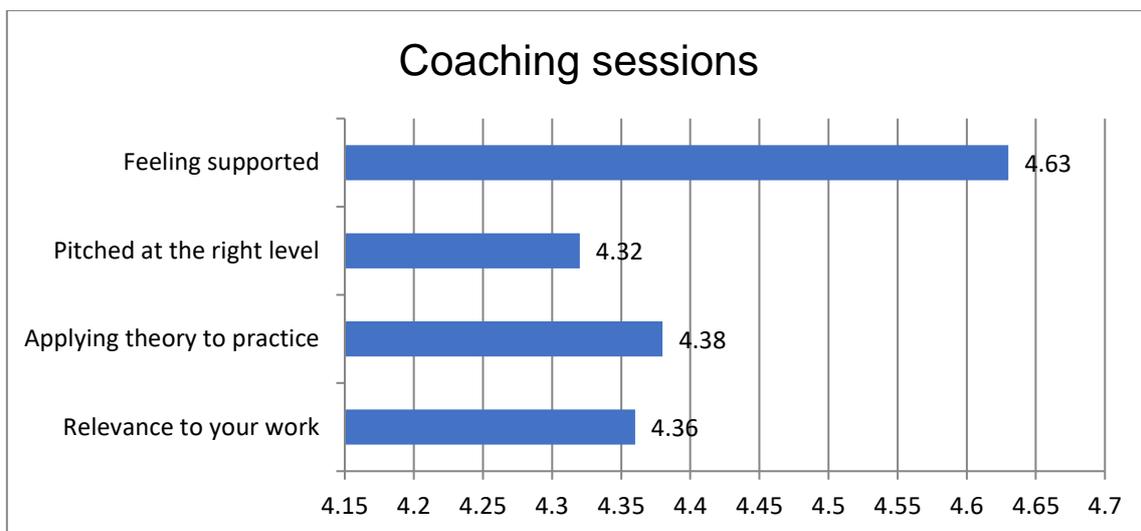
Figure 1.6 demonstrates almost three quarters, 74% (n=48), of respondents rated the support from the coaching sessions as excellent. A further 18% (n=12) said it was very good and 5% (n=3) selected good. A final 3% (n=2) selected average.

With regards to the pitch/level of the coaching sessions, 52% (n=34) selected excellent, 29% (n=19) very good and 17% (n=11) good. The final 2% (n=1) selected average.

Similarly, 52% (n=34) of respondents thought the coaching sessions provided excellent support for applying theory to practice. A further 36% (n=23) selected very good, 11% (n=7) good and 2% (n=1) average.

Likewise, over half of the respondents, 56% (n=37), reported the coaching sessions were excellent in relation to relevance. Also relating to relevance, 29% (n=19) rated very good, 11% (n=7) good and 5% (n=3) average.

Figure 1.6- Rating coaching sessions (b)
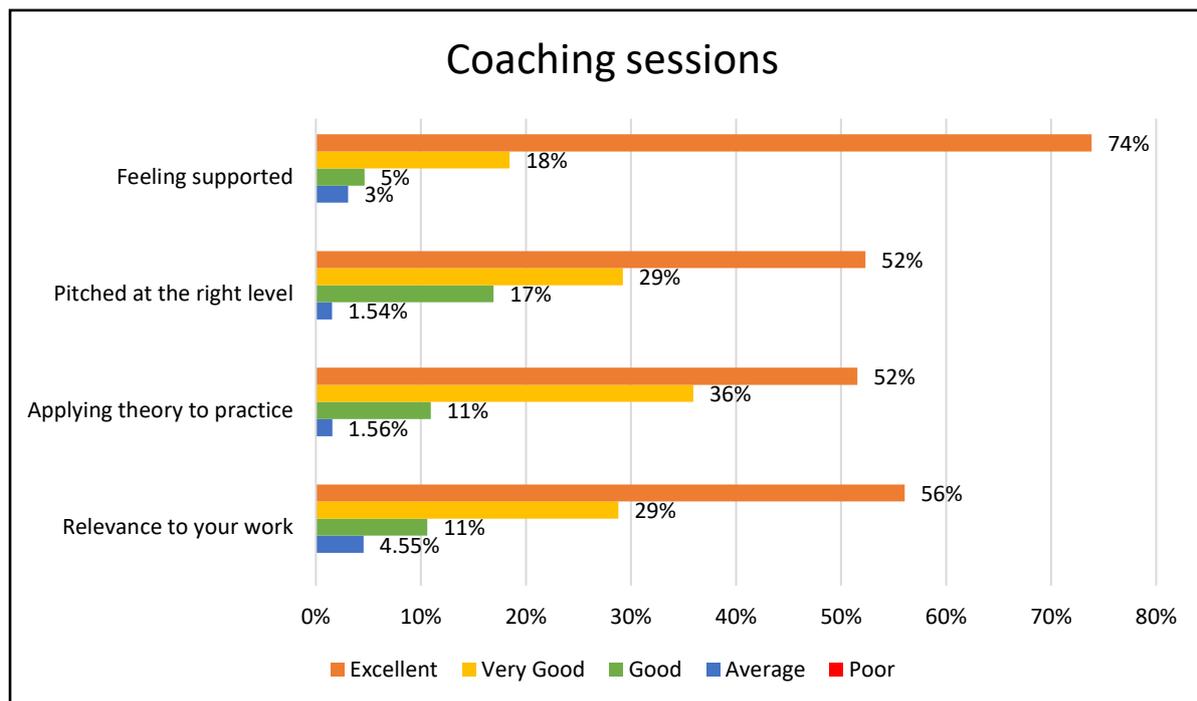
Coaching sessions

Almost two thirds of respondents, 63% (n=41), found the coaching sessions to be extremely beneficial. A further 28% (n=18) found them to be beneficial. A smaller number of respondents reported finding them to be somewhat beneficial or not beneficial at all, 8% (n=5) and 2% (n=1) respectively.

Figure 1.7-Benefit of coaching sessions

How beneficial were the coaching sessions?
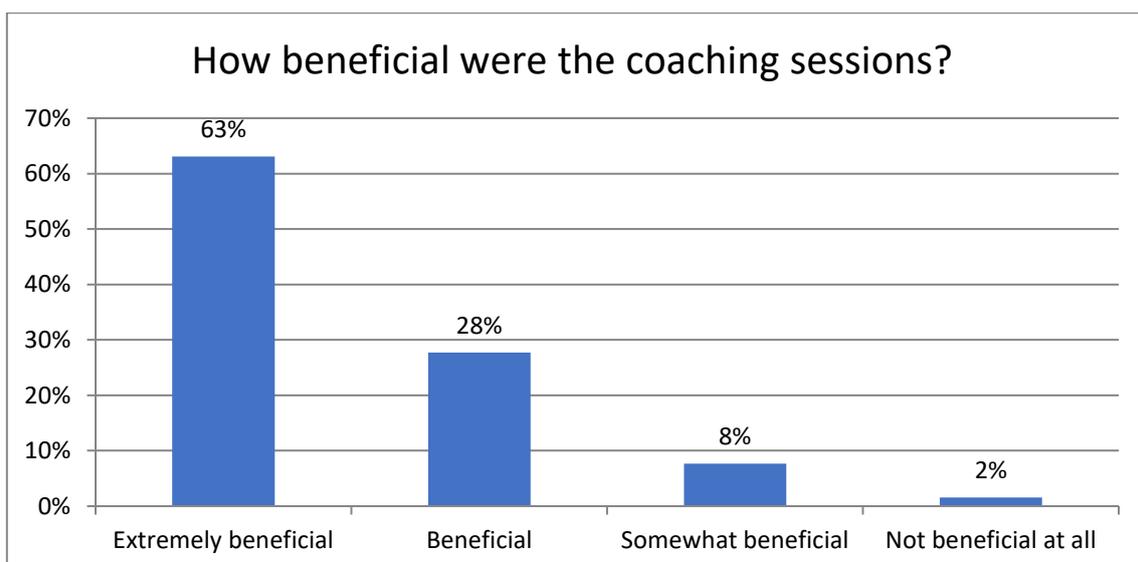
In addressing the detail of how the coaching sessions were beneficial, a large number of participants commented that they provided individualised support and generated ideas. For example:

> *I felt the coaching was like having a knowledgeable mentor in setting that actively listened but also gave areas for improvement and other ideas to improve interaction & relationships with staff, children and parents- it helped to bring all together as a group.*

> *Every session was very beneficial. (Coach) had lots of supportive advice for quality practice. I felt empowered after all sessions!*

> *It was great to have the opportunity to talk through real experiences during the coaching visits. The visits created a good harmony between the workshops. I think they have had a positive impact on my own personal and professional development.*

Others commented on how coaching sessions influenced their practice:

> *(Coaching sessions) Changed how I interact with the children and focusing on the positives.*

> *Gave great advice for layout of classrooms to give better areas for the children.*

Those respondents who characterised the coaching sessions as 'somewhat beneficial' raised issues of repetitiveness, resourcing and time commitment:

> *Regarding paperwork, it was beneficial. Other than that, I found it an inconvenience trying to get cover for staff while the coach was here. 1 hour per participant is extremely long and the same thing was being spoken to with both staff members where one person could have dealt with this relaying the information to the other practitioners. Not so many coaching sessions was necessary either, maybe one or two*

> *It is very important all members of staff attend. The message is always diluted by the time it reaches non-attending members, also it is difficult to remember everything that was said.*

A large majority of respondents, 91% (n=60), said the addition of coaching made this continuing professional development initiative 'better than other programmes'. A further 8% (n=5) said the addition of coaching made this initiative 'equal to other programmes' and 2% (n=1) selected 'worse than other programmes'.

Figure 1.8- Impact of coaching sessions

Do you think the addition of coaching makes the initiative...

better than other programmes	91%
worse than other programmes	2%
equal to other programmes	8%
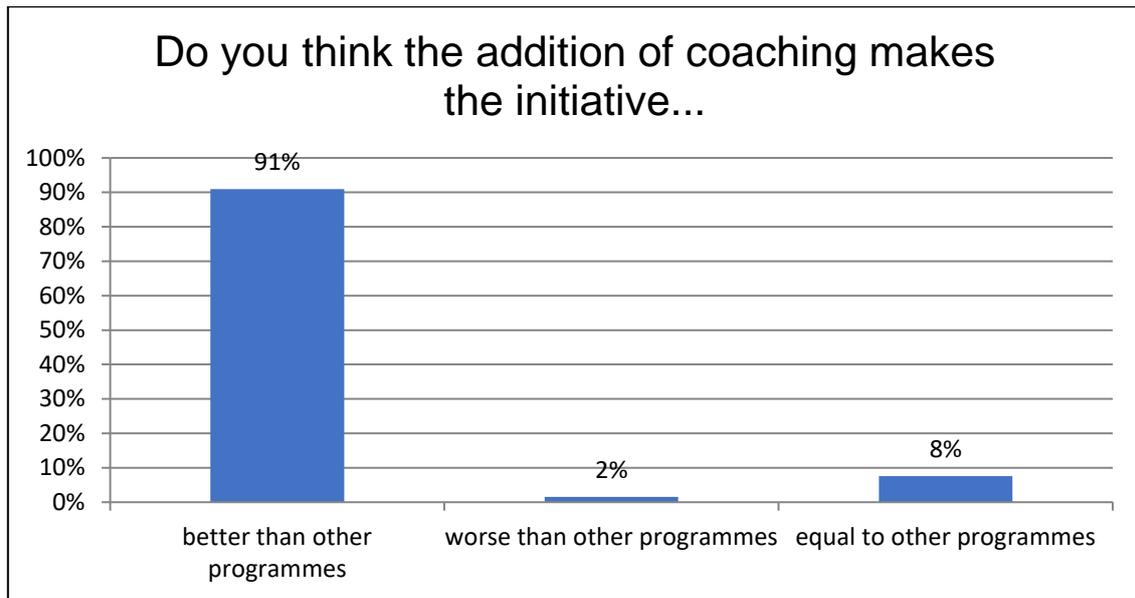
Additional comments made by practitioners offered some rationale for these responses. The majority of respondents commented on the usefulness of the coaching sessions, with some requesting additional availability. For example:

> *Coaching visits definitely makes the training programme more valuable and complete.*
>
> *I feel that there should be more of them. It should be ongoing, especially as this is the first time there has been any formal training in Aistear.*
>
> *The coaching sessions are key to the success of this initiative. I would suggest that coaching sessions might be done on an ongoing basis annually to support educators going forward to implement Aistear and Síolta.*

Two practitioners made recommendations for improvement, specifically:

> *The course was spaced out too long and carried out over a long period of time making you forget what was discussed in the previous session. Closer dates would be better in my opinion.*
>
> *Someone with Irish should deal with Naíonraí. The coach was helpful, but in order to spend time with staff in Naíonra while working you need the working language of the Naíonra.*

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Recommendations

Approximately three quarters of respondents, 77% (n=49), reported they would participate in an additional 10 hours of workshops and four hours of coaching if they were available.

Figure1.9- Interest in additional workshops and coaching

Would you be interested in additional workshops and coaching?

23%

77%

■ Yes ■ No

Comments from those interested in additional workshops and coaching included:

> *I felt at times the course was rushed as there was a lot to cover - we needed more time for group discussions as we can learn a lot from each other.*

> *The workshops were extremely interesting and I learnt a great deal from them. However, if I were to criticise any element of it, it would be that there was a vast amount of information passed on in a short space of time at each workshop. It would have been better if there were 1 or 2 extra workshops added rather than try to cram everything into the 5 workshops.*

> *Yes because I have learned more from the workshops and coaching sessions than I have learned from any other courses I have ever done before as everything was clearly explained.*

Those not interested in additional workshops and coaching said:

> *Personally, I think the hours we have done was enough and if there were any more hours allocated it just would have been dragged out.*

I feel we covered what we need from the five workshops.

I would prefer if the coach came back at the end of next year's playgroup to re-assess the changes to see if they are working.

The most frequent response when asked what additional series of workshops should focus on was 'Learning Environments', selected by 29% (n=18) of practitioners. 'Curriculum Foundations' was selected by 16% (n=10) of respondents and 'Transitions' and 'Partnership with Parents' were each chosen by 13% (n=8) of respondents. 'Interactions' and 'Play' were selected by 10% (n=6) and 8% (n=5) of respondents respectively. Respondents made additional suggestions for areas of focus in the workshops, including inspection requirements, outdoor play, behaviour management and leadership.

Figure 1.10- Recommendations for the focus of additional workshops
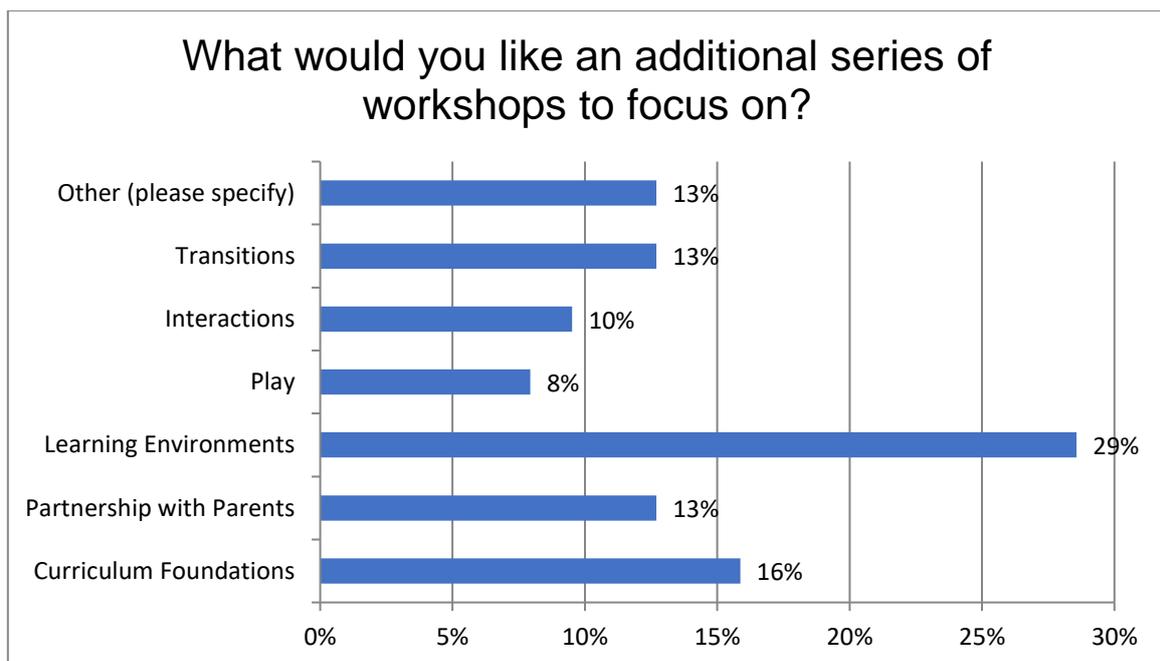
Final recommendations made by respondents were requests for the training to be more broadly available and suggestions for workshops to be delivered in a shorter time span. Practitioners said:

It was excellent but further support is vital for practitioners in this…I feel that Aistear training should be ongoing and coaching and mentoring should be readily available to support staff.

> *It is a great scheme although I feel that it should be offered to all the people in a setting at the same time so everyone would have the same level of understanding.*

Finally, with regards to the facilitation of the pilot, participants said:

> *Maybe one month apart is quite far away and also recapping on each session takes up too much time as there is so much material to cover.*

> *I enjoyed each workshop. I think it would have suited better if the workshops were closer together. Each workshop was very informative and had a positive impact on our service.*

Practitioner Focus Groups

Following the completion of the *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching Pilot a number of practitioners were invited to provide additional feedback via focus groups. *Síolta Aistear* mentors identified workshops and coaching participants willing to take part in the focus groups. Participants from a variety of setting types (full and part-time daycare and sessional settings including naíonraí) and a combination of rural and urban settings were invited to take part. Focus groups were carried out in 4 areas, Dublin, Tipperary, Galway and Monaghan and included participants from 14 settings. Each focus group was conducted by an independent (i.e. not associated with the NSAI) facilitator with between 8 and 14 participants. Focus groups lasted between 30-45 minutes. The facilitator asked open-ended questions under four broad areas: key outcomes, strengths and weaknesses of the initiative, role of the mentor and systemic issues. Focus groups were audio recorded and, while key material was transcribed for use in this report, the analysis was based on the original data in the recordings (Coates and Thornberry, 1999).

Benefits associated with the *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching Pilot

Figure 2.1 demonstrates the five prevailing outcomes of participating in the pilot, as reported by focus group participants. 'Increase in Child-Centred Practice', 'Approach to Documentation' and 'Increase in Professional Confidence' were reported by a majority of practitioners, whereas 'Enhanced Engagement with Parents' and 'Enhanced Professional/Team Relationships' were reported by a smaller number of practitioners.

Figure 2.1-Reported outcomes of participating in the pilot
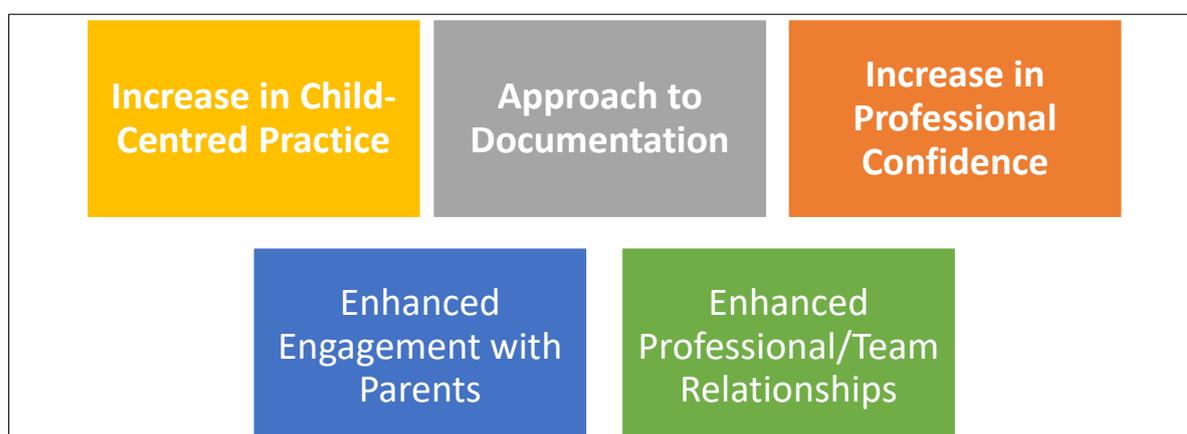
With regards to 'Increase in Child-Centred Practice' practitioners commented on how the workshops, and particularly the coaching sessions, had reinforced their play-based approach and further encouraged them to ensure the children were central to every aspect of service delivery. As a result, practitioners reported the children in their settings had greater ownership, more of a 'voice' and were increasingly independent. One practitioner commented:

> I've learnt to put everything out and let the children choose more. The children get more engrossed. The room is actually quieter, the children manage their own behaviour when they choose their own activities.

Another stated:

> The children know now that we listen to them. The children used to be talked to but now we talk with them.

Overall, practitioners reported this change was a result of simplifying their practice. One participant stated:

> Realising the magic of the ordinary.

Practitioners referred to *scaling back; doing less but with more value*; and becoming aware; *we didn't have to be so structured*.

A simplified, child-centred approach was also the primary change reported in relation to documentation. Practitioners reported planning and observation were previously burdensome, time consuming tasks, carried out separately from their interactions with the children. As a result of taking part in the pilot, practitioners reported adopting a simplified 'post-it note' system for observations and integrating this with their daily practice and planning process. One practitioner said:

> I thought documentation was separate but now we do it in the moment and with the children, it's quicker and more effective. It's now part of our daily routine.

Practitioners also reported becoming confident in trying new, creative ways of using their documentation, including journals, learning records and room posters. One practitioner, who worked

in an infant room, said that as a result of taking part in the pilot, she printed and laminated photos of the babies during play and stuck them to the floor to maximise visibility for the infants.

A broader increase in professional confidence was another key outcome reported by a large number of practitioners. Practitioners indicated that this increase in confidence was largely a result of the mentor's role in affirming positive aspects of existing practice and supporting change in other areas, particularly the previously mentioned approach to documentation and child-led practice.

A smaller number of practitioners also reported an increase in their confidence and ability to engage parents. Practical steps reported included involving parents in curriculum development, creating a parents' noticeboard, increasing the number of interactions and uploading photos taken within the setting to an online space for parents to access. Practitioners reported positive feedback from parents, indicating they benefited from being more involved in their child's setting.

A final outcome reported by some practitioners was improvements in professional and team relationships, both in relation to working relationships within a setting and broader connections to other practitioners in their local area. One practitioner said:

> *We felt supported as a group. Our team is more bonded and we work together better as a result of discussing the training and receiving the coaching.*

Strengths of the pilot

The foremost strength of the workshops and coaching pilot, as reported by the majority of participants, was the model. More specifically, participants found the combination of workshops and coaching to be highly effective and beneficial.

Figure 2.2- Strengths of the pilot
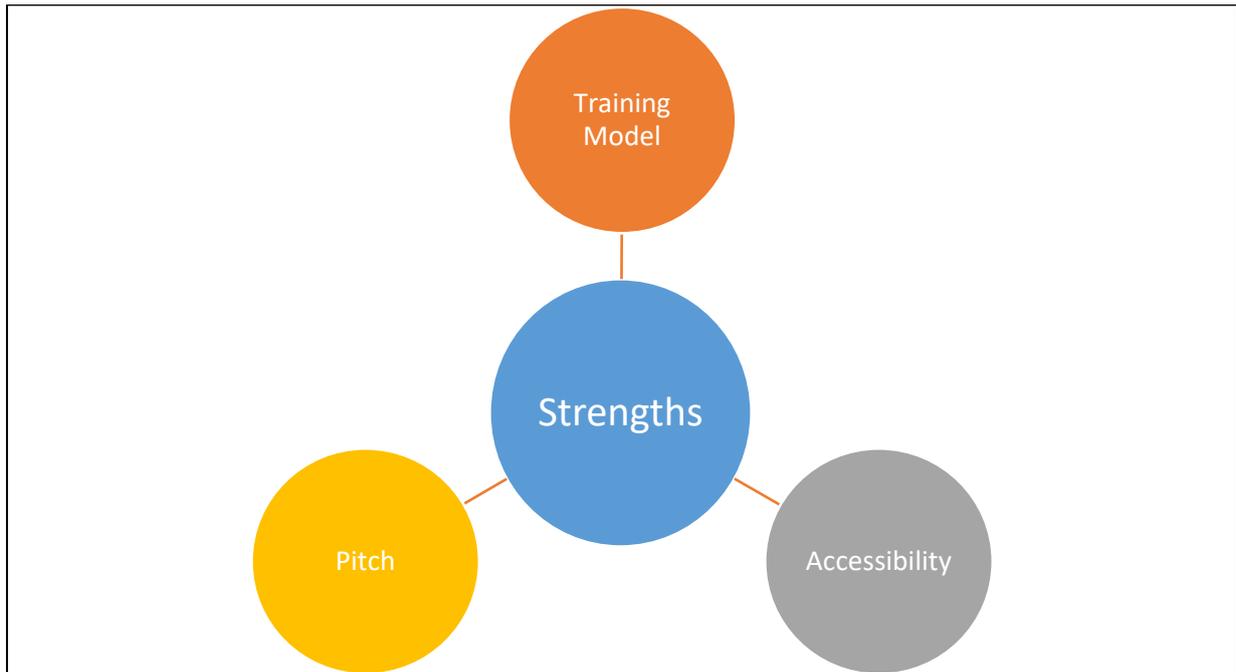
Practitioners stated:

> T*he combination of the workshops and coaching was fantastic- the coaching helped to clarify and solidify learning from the workshops and encouraged reflection.*

> *The model of the workshop and coaching was brilliant- having someone come and see your setting was excellent, it made it more personal*.

All groups echoed the benefit of the coaching for reinforcing and personalising the learning from the workshops. Practitioners also reported benefiting from the opportunity to meet with other professionals during the workshops. One practitioner shared:

> *It was very interesting to hear the various experiences of the different types of facilities*.

Another said:

> *The group size was a strength - it was a manageable size, good for discussion but not overwhelming*

The supportive, non-judgemental approach of the mentors was also identified as a strength of the pilot during the focus group sessions. In addition, practitioners reported the pitch and level of the workshops was appropriate and beneficial. A further strength reported by focus group participants was the effort made to make the training accessible. Comments were made in relation to location, timing, language and number of participating staff. For example:

> *A strength was that it was local. This is a big consideration. After a day at work a two-hour commute to and from a course is off putting.*

> *A significant fact was that the participants were from the same geographical area. We are all in the same sector. Sometimes children spend a year in one type setting and then move to another. We share the same client base and we should have much more communication between us but we usually have no forum for this.*

> *Much praise for making things available as Gaeilge. This has generally become problematic of late again. Particular praise for facilitating the feedback session as Gaeilge.*

One practitioner reported all staff in their setting were able to take part in the pilot and stated this was a particular strength from her perspective. However, this was not the case for the majority of participants.

Challenges associated with the pilot

Figure 2.3- Challenges of the pilot
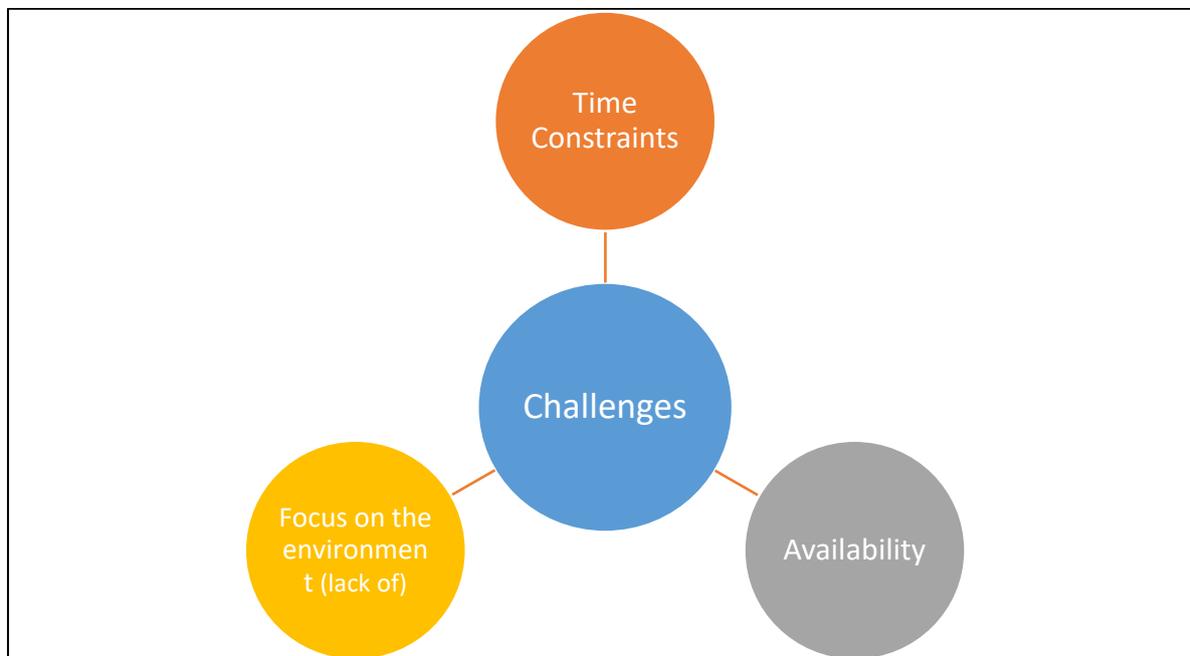
Whilst focus group participants were overwhelmingly positive about the pilot, a number of challenges and weaknesses were reported. The most notable of these was time constraints. The majority of practitioners reported feeling the volume of content in the workshops was overwhelming for the amount of time that was available. For example, one practitioner said:

> It wasn't long enough- it was straight from one thing to the next with no time to consider what you had heard. Even another 30 minutes for each workshop would help.

Similarly, another added:

> More time for thinking, discussion and group work would be valuable. It was a bit overwhelming at times.

Importantly, practitioners felt all included material was of value. One stated:

> There wasn't unnecessary material- especially as there were different levels of understanding and different age groups- but there just wasn't enough time.

Practitioners also felt the lack of time during the workshops impacted the value of the coaching sessions. One participant suggested:

If the workshops were longer and clarification could take place there then the coaching could be used to move forward more.

Some practitioners also thought the process would be strengthened if a coaching session took place prior to the first workshop, for example:

There was a marked difference in course delivery and structure after the coaching visit. She knew us, how we do things and what we are about. A pre-course qualifier visit would be beneficial.

Overall, focus group participants were very satisfied with the content of the workshops and coaching sessions. However, a small number of practitioners suggested they would benefit from further input on the environment, particularly the outdoors. One practitioner said:

More focus on the outdoor environment would be helpful.

Another added:

I thought they could make more recommendations on the environment and interactions when they come to visit- I think that could be strengthened.

A final challenge resulted from limitations in the number of staff per setting who could participate in the initiative. Whilst this number varied considerably, those who had a small percentage of their staff team participating experienced difficulties in implementing changes in their settings. For example:

It's very hard to relay the information to staff who didn't attend. I've a new sense of vision and excitement but it can be hard to get others on board. The coaching helped but overall it was very frustrating. If it could be done with whole settings that would be beneficial.

This challenge was particularly felt when the setting manager was not among the staff participating in the workshops and coaching. Participants said:

In bigger settings where a small number of staff had to try to bring the message back to the rest of the staff was challenging. Our manager didn't attend and was resistant to the idea of free play. Although the coaching helped to bring her round- without that it would have been difficult to implement anything.

Managers have to be on board and should probably be involved in the training.

Role of the mentor

There was a strong consensus among the groups with regards to the importance of the role of the mentor and key skills needed to successfully fulfil the role. One participant said:

The role of the mentor is very important. She really took time to build a relationship with us and really understood each of the rooms. I think that made a huge difference- she was able to speak to us on a personal level.

Figure 2.4- Key skills for the role of mentor
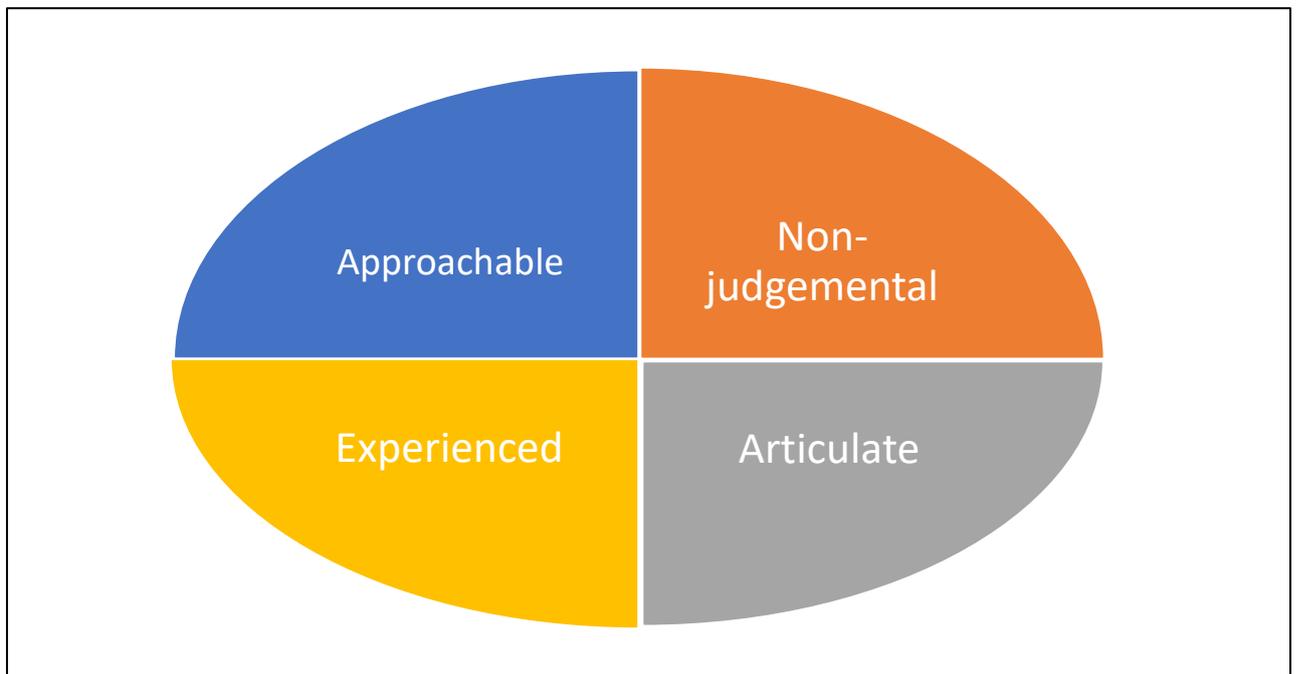
As demonstrated in figure 2.4, participants valued mentors who were approachable, non-judgemental, experienced and articulate. One group shared:

Mentors need to be good communicators, approachable, patient, calm, supportive, non-judgemental and have a background in childcare.

Participants also said an important role for the mentor was to make the learning from the workshops more personal and therefore the mentor needs to adopt an open and supportive disposition. One participant said:

It *is wonderful to have someone coming in to our setting observing without the tension of assessment and marks.*

Whilst participants were clear they did not want to feel their practice was being assessed, they were very open to suggestions with regards to areas for improvement and therefore felt it was vital all mentors were expert within the field, both academically and in practice. Further, participants highlighted the need for mentors to be able to communicate this expertise effectively - both in coaching sessions and during the workshop presentations. One participant commented:

The mentor needs to be good at presenting information- the sessions are long enough in the evening, it has to be someone who is easy to listen to.

The impact of systemic issues

Focus group participants were given the opportunity to comment on broader, systemic issues that impact their practice. Similar issues were raised by all of the groups. The first related to *Síolta* and *Aistear* specifically and the latter to working in the early childhood sector more generally.

With regards to *Síolta* and *Aistear*, participants reported a need for a more co-ordinated, joined up approach to CPD across settings, particularly in relation to primary schools. One participant said:

There is a detachment between what we do with Aistear and what happens in primary schools - it's disconnected and a big jump for children. Making more of a link and having more consistency between what Aistear looks like in preschool settings and primary schools would be beneficial.

More generally, when asked about systemic issues, practitioners unanimously commented on a lack of funding for training, disparities in qualifications within the sector and a general lack of recognition, reflected in salaries, for the profession. For example:

> *Funding for training would be beneficial- practitioners have to train on their own time and it can be burdensome. As a sector, we don't get any funding for training.*

> *We lose wonderful people, highly qualified and very experienced because we close during school holidays. Although no one works in this sector (early child education) and particularly in naíonraí for the money the weeks of non-payment has to change.*

> *I think there is a need for more recognition for the profession. This should be reflected in pay salaries and everything. We are very undervalued as a profession.*

Additional comments

When given the opportunity to make any final comments, focus group participants reflected favourably on their experience of taking part in the pilot and made recommendations for the workshops and coaching model to be made available across the sector. For example:

> *It would be great if every service got a chance to receive training, at least on curriculum planning and assessment.*

They also suggested an annual refresher workshop or coaching session would be beneficial. One participant said:

> *This shouldn't be the end of it. Some kind of follow up or refresher course would be beneficial.*

Mentor Evaluations

Mentors were provided with an evaluation template for completion following each workshop and coaching session, to support their own self-reflection and help them to plan for their next workshop and/or coaching session. See Appendix 3 for the *Mentor workshop evaluation form* and Appendix 4 for the *Mentor coaching evaluation form*.

Participants were also asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of each workshop (see Appendix 5), from which it was intended mentors would complete a reporting template at two points during the pilot, based on the collated feedback of the group (see Appendix 5).

In total, 27 mentors facilitated workshops and coaching as part of the pilot, and 22 returned evaluation data. However, it should be noted in a significant number of cases the evaluation forms were incomplete and/or not completed in the requested format (as per the template provided). Data relating to the coaching sessions was particularly sparse. As a result, the intended approach to analysis could not be implemented as it was not possible to quantify any of the return data. However, eight mentor evaluations were randomly selected for thematic analysis. Following the thematic analysis, findings were verified against the remaining 14 mentor evaluations to ensure the emerging issues were representative.

In addition, all mentors were invited to attend two feedback events, one at the mid-way point and one after the completion of the pilot. Mentors provided written feedback in small groups during the events, the findings of which are also included in this analysis.

Benefits associated with the workshops

Based on feedback from participants, collated by mentors, and using a scale of 1 indicating poor, 2 average, 3 good, 4 very good and 5 excellent, figure 3.1 indicates all workshops were rated as being between very good and excellent. More specifically, workshops 4 and 5 had the highest average rating, 4.8, closely followed by workshops 2 and 3, which had an average rating of 4.7. Workshop 1's average rating was slightly lower, 4.6.

Figure 3.1- Average rating of workshops

Average ratings of workshops

Workshop	Rating
Workshop 5	4.8
Workshop 4	4.8
Workshop 3	4.7
Workshop 2	4.7
Workshop 1	4.6
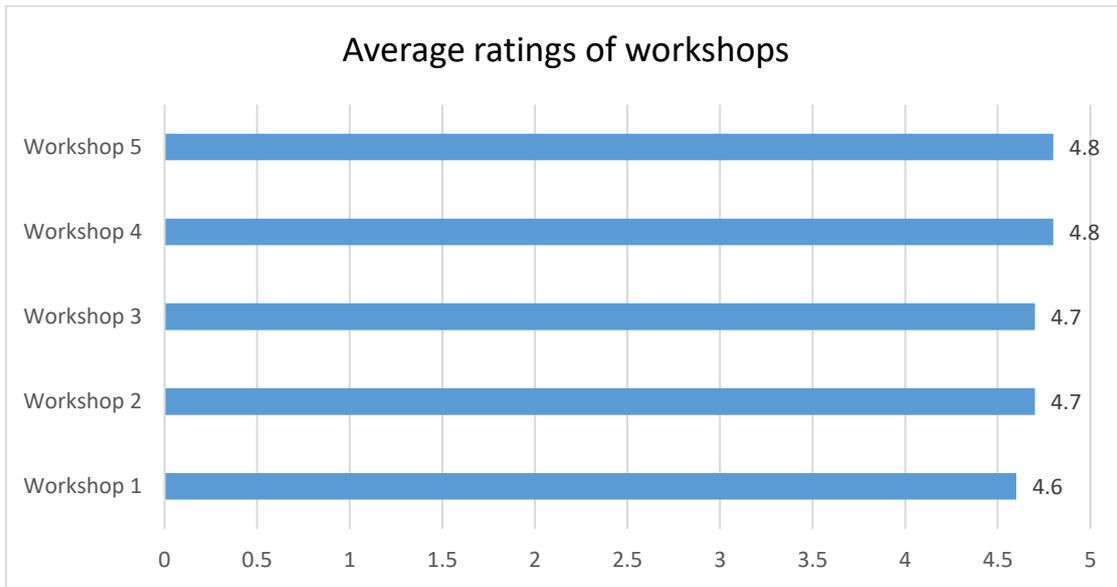
Feedback from practitioners, and collated by the mentors, indicated the workshops provided a number of positive outcomes, as demonstrated in figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2- Benefits of participating in workshops

Confidence in Professional Role

Confidence in Engaging Parents

Understanding of *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Implementation of Child Centred Practice

Approach to Documentation
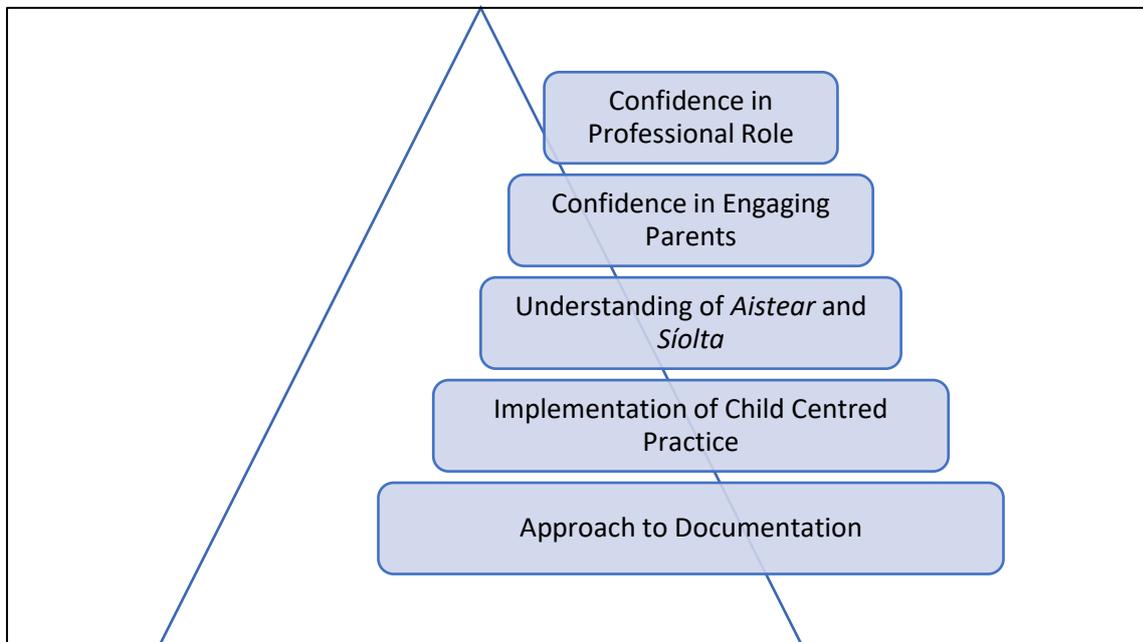
Figure 3.2 demonstrates the benefits of participating in the workshops. Approach to documentation was referenced by the largest number of practitioners and included in the collated feedback from every mentor.

Mentors reported practitioners becoming more effective in their observations and planning by simplifying their approach and adopting new methods, including spider diagrams, post-it notes, photographs and learning journals. One mentor commented:

> *Participants were new to the idea that observations can be simple and carried out on a daily basis and still be meaningful and informative*.

Another said:

> *Participants learnt the importance of taking time to observe, to keep things simple; to document more simply, more often*.

The majority of mentors also reported practitioners becoming more confident in implementing child-centred practice as a result of the workshops. Mentors recorded that practitioners felt more able to attune to the children, facilitate their independence and include them in the planning process. Mentors also reported practitioners felt more comfortable and confident with increasing the amount of free play time in their settings. When asked to collate feedback on what practitioners had learnt, mentors commented:

> *They learnt to tune into what the child is doing and saying and to allow the children to be more independent.*
>
> *The idea of including children in planning was new to some participants who are now looking forward to bringing this into their practice.*
>
> *Participants learnt about the importance of free play, about the value of allowing children enough time to develop their concepts through play*.

Most mentors also reported practitioners developed a better understanding of *Aistear* and *Síolta* as a result of taking part in the workshops. More specifically, mentors reported they learnt *the difference between Aistear and Síolta*; *how the Practice Guide relates to both* and; *how to link the two with everyday practice and with emerging themes*.

A smaller number of references were made to practitioners becoming more confident in their ability to engage parents and in their role as a professional. One mentor commented:

> (*They learnt) the possibilities of using Aistear themes to share learning with the parents.*

In response to the most useful thing learnt during workshop 2, another mentor said:

Thinking about how to include the parent's voice…and sharing the interests of children with parents in a meaningful way.

With regards to increasing confidence in their professional role, mentors reported practitioners became more reflective, clearer about the adult's role in play and adapted how they communicated with the children. Further feedback from mentors indicated practitioners also valued the opportunity to meet with other professionals and benefitted from seeing examples of documentation from other settings. For example:

Participants enjoyed sharing ideas with each other within their service and between services and appreciated the space to reflect offered by the workshop.

Another mentor commented:

The parts that worked best were the opportunities to share examples from practice and to reflect together.

Challenges associated with the workshops

Five workshops were included as part of the pilot, focusing on different aspects relating to the *planning and assessing* pillar of the Practice Guide; an introduction to Aistear, Síolta and the Practice Guide; Using an emergent curriculum; Thinking about documentation; Thinking about planning, and; Devising a curriculum statement.

Figure 3.3- Challenges associated with the workshops
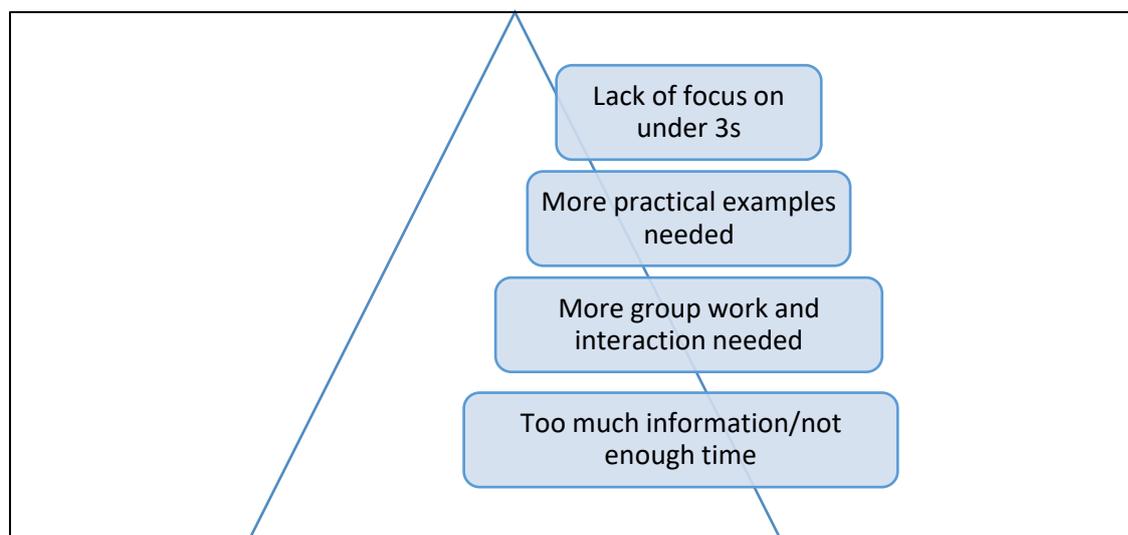
Despite feedback on the workshops being overwhelmingly positive, a number of challenges were identified by the mentors. Too much information in the allocated time was the challenge reported most frequently and by the majority of mentors. Referring to all five workshops, mentors reported a need to condense the materials and/or extend the duration of the workshops. One mentor stated:

There needs to be more time to cover the content of the workshop.

Another reported a practitioner saying:

(The session would have been better if) it was about 30 minutes longer because it was so interesting and there is so much to learn.

Importantly, mentors did not feel any of the existing material should be removed. One said:

Condense materials but don't remove.

The majority of mentors also reported the need for workshops to be more interactive. They suggested practitioners would benefit from more group work, fewer PowerPoint slides and additional videos. With regards to the first workshop, one mentor said:

> *I felt as if I was the only voice until slide 24…(if I was facilitating the workshop again) I would try to get the participatory parts earlier, perhaps by spreading out the videos.*

According to another mentor, practitioners said:

> *(The session would have been better if) we could share templates and ideas from settings to see what works best. More group work helps us learn more*.

In addition to wanting more interaction and group work, a number of mentors suggested the workshops would be enhanced if more practical examples were available. In relation to the first workshop, mentors reported practitioners needing more examples of *Síolta* and *concrete examples of what we need to show DES and how Aistear looks in the classroom.*

With regards to workshop 4, participants suggested the session would have been better if *there was examples of long, medium and short-term plans from other services.* Similarly, according to the mentors participants felt workshop 5 would have been more beneficial if an example of a curriculum statement had been available. Mentors noted additional practical examples relating to babies and toddlers under three would have been particularly beneficial. For example, in relation to workshop three one mentor said:

> *Supporting children's language of self-assessment needs to include examples of what this looks like for babies (verbal/non-verbal) and toddlers.*

Similarly, referring to workshop 4, another mentor said:

> *It is important to clarify that medium-term planning for babies is based on experiences rather than topics.*

Finally, some operational challenges were identified by a small number of mentors. Two mentors stated that they found it challenging to schedule all workshops and coaching outside of holiday times and still allow for sufficient time between these sessions. Mentors also reported a small number of participants requesting the workshops to be held during the day or on a Saturday due to difficulty

attending training in an evening, after work. Two mentors also reported some IT issues, particularly getting videos to work directly from PowerPoint and not always having internet access in the training venues.

Benefits associated with the coaching sessions

Coaching was viewed highly by the mentors, with the majority of them stating the three benefits outlined in figure 3.4. With regards to the perspective that coaching provides the opportunity to address individual concerns, one mentor stated:

> *On site coaching is essential to this training. You need to get a feel for each service and tailor coaching to their specific needs.*

Another said:

> *Coaching is very useful as it gives the opportunity to discuss individual concerns and clarify understanding at different levels.*

Figure 3.4-Benefits associated with coaching sessions

Benefits of coaching		
Individualised support	Translate theory to practice	Increased professional confidence

The majority of mentors also reported the coaching sessions supported practitioners to translate their learning from the workshops into practice. For example, one mentor said:

> I *find that coaching sessions really support services to translate theory to practice and make content applicable to their individual context. I can really see how these sessions support practitioners to enhance practice and apply what they have learned during the workshops.*

Similarly, another said:

> *All participants are very keen for knowledge and feel that the coaching is very beneficial in enabling them to apply Aistear / Síolta theory- to- practice within their settings.*

A final benefit of the coaching as reported by the mentors was an increase in professional confidence. One mentor said:

Participants maintain the coaching visits are very effective in reassuring them that 'they are on the right track'. They feel they have come away from courses in the past and try to apply theory to practice from what they have learned but do not know if they are doing things in a right or wrong manner. However, with the Síolta Aistear Initiative they feel much more confident within their role following the coaching sessions.

Challenges associated with the coaching sessions

Overall, feedback relating to the coaching sessions was overwhelmingly positive with few challenges or concerns emerging. One issue mentioned by a number of mentors was the need to tailor materials to under threes, as also noted in challenges associated with the workshops. Mentors reported practitioners working with this age group faced particular challenges in implementing *Síolta* and *Aistear* and require different, but equal, support to those working with children aged 3-5 years. For example, following the first coaching session one mentor said:

It is important to tailor the materials more for those working with babies. There should be specific videos and resources for these practitioners.

When asked what they would do differently following the final coaching session another mentor said:

I'd have more examples of completed learning stories and planning templates for those working with the baby and toddler age groups.

Another challenge identified by a minority of mentors was tensions with regards to delivering coaching 'one to one' or to small groups of staff at the same time. One mentor said:

It is much easier to talk to two practitioners working in the same room together. It saves time and promotes them as working in a team.

Another reported:

In two services managers are reluctant to allow 1 to 1 sessions, they would prefer groups. It's challenging as staff want 1 to 1.

A small number of mentors also felt additional time was required for coaching throughout. For example:

> *An hour can feel like a very short period of time and often, not enough, particularly on initial visits when we are getting to know each other, it can feel rushed.*

However, other mentors suggested this could be addressed by allowing more flexibility in relation to how the coaching sessions are organised. One mentor said:

> *More flexibility around the allocation of coaching hours would be beneficial. For example, perhaps a half an hour after one workshop and an hour and a half after another at the discretion of the mentor.*

Another agreed:

> *More flexibility is required- 4 hours delivered over the course of the pilot would be better.*

Finally, mentors suggested participants would benefit from follow-up coaching sessions, either in the form of coaching or workshops. One suggested:

> *Coaching after workshop 5 is needed- perhaps in lieu of coaching between workshop 2 and 3.*

Others added:

> *Participants are interested in accessing support into the future. Some would welcome support in September as they start out the new year. Many feel they would benefit from ongoing workshops.*

> *A follow up session in a few months would be useful.*

Aistear Workshops and Coaching Evaluation Pilot – Overview

This document has outlined the findings from data collected about the *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching pilot. The evaluation was designed to assess the pilot's impact and appropriateness by addressing the research questions listed below;

1. What **benefits**, if any, were associated with:
    a. the Workshops?
    b. the Coaching sessions?
2. What **challenges**, if any, were associated with:
    a. the Workshops?
    b. The Coaching sessions?
3. What **changes** did the respondents suggest for:
    a. the Workshops?
    b. the Coaching sessions?
4. What **changes**, if any, did the respondents suggest for the **CPD process as a whole**?

This section will provide a synthesis of the findings, drawing on findings from each of the data sets outlined in the previous sections.

Benefits associated with workshops and coaching sessions

Based on a scale of 1 indicating poor, 2 average, 3 good, 4 very good and 5 excellent, findings from the participants and mentors indicated the workshops were between very good and excellent. The overall mean rating for the workshops according to questionnaire respondents was 4.19. Evaluations collated by the mentors provided a slightly higher overall mean of 4.72. Findings from the four data sets were quite consistent with regards to the key benefits associated with participating in the workshops. Respondents reported adopting a simplified approach to documentation, in which they carry out shorter observations more frequently using post it notes and other creative techniques. Participants also reported increased clarity regarding short-, medium- and long-term planning and stated they have extended their approach to planning by including the voice of the child more frequently and effectively. Other indicators of increases in child-centred practice were also reported, including extended free-play time within settings and providing the children with more opportunities

for choice and independence. The majority of mentors and participants also reported the workshops benefited the practitioners' confidence, particularly in relation to engaging with parents and implementing *Aistear* and *Síolta* in practice.

Based on a scale of 1 indicating poor, 2 average, 3 good, 4 very good and 5 excellent, participants report the overall mean score for the coaching sessions was 4.42, indicating the majority respondents thought they were very good or excellent. Almost three quarters, 74% (n=48), of participants rated the support from the coaching sessions as excellent and almost two thirds of participants, 63% (n=41), found the coaching sessions to be extremely beneficial. Furthermore, a large majority of respondents, 91% (n=60), said the addition of coaching made the workshops and coaching pilot 'better than other programmes'. This was also reflected in data from the focus groups in which the foremost strength of the initiative was reported as being the model, specifically the combination of workshops and coaching. One participant stated:

> *Having a coaching session allowed us to think about what we had learnt during the workshop and apply that learning to our work with the knowledge that if we encountered any difficulties, we could ask our mentor when she came out. Being in our workplace with the mentor meant that she could see what we were doing and discuss the workshops in more detail. Having the coaching session in our setting made the training more relevant to us.*

> *.*

The benefit of coaching for reinforcing and personalising learning from the workshops and increasing professional confidence was apparent in all four data sets. The supportive, non-judgemental approach of the coaches was also identified as a strength of the initiative.

Challenges associated with workshops and coaching sessions

Whilst participants were overwhelmingly positive about the initiative, a number of challenges were reported. With regards to the workshops, the most notable challenge was that of time constraints. The majority of mentors and participants reported feeling the volume of content in the workshops was overwhelming for the amount of time that was available.

The limited time for the workshops resulted in participants feeling overwhelmed by information and reduced the opportunities for reflection, interaction and group work. In addition to wanting more interaction and group work, a number of mentors suggested the workshops would be enhanced if more practical examples, particularly relating to babies and toddlers, were available.

A further challenge associated with the workshops related to the number of staff per setting who could participate in the pilot. Whilst this number varied considerably, those who had a small percentage of their staff team participating and/or those whose manager did not attend, experienced difficulties in implementing changes in their settings.

Finally, a small number of participants and mentors also reported some operational challenges with the workshops. Two mentors found it challenging to schedule all workshops and coaching outside of holiday times, whilst still allowing sufficient time between sessions. In addition, a small number of participants suggested workshops should be held during the day or on a Saturday due to difficulty attending training in an evening, after work.

Overall, feedback relating to the coaching sessions was overwhelmingly positive with few challenges or concerns emerging, particularly from participant questionnaires and focus groups. However, one issue mentioned by a number of mentors was the need to tailor coaching materials more to under threes. Mentors reported practitioners working with babies and toddlers faced particular challenges in implementing *Síolta* and *Aistear* and require different support from those working with 3-5 year olds.

Another challenge identified by a minority of mentors related to coaching arrangements in individual settings. This was particularly challenging when staff teams and setting managers did not agree on the approach i.e. whether to organise coaching one-on-one or to offer it to small groups of practitioners from one setting at the same time. Clarity around coaching structures and confirmation of buy-in from setting managers prior to participating in the workshops and coaching was requested. Mentors also felt additional time and/or flexibility was required for coaching throughout. Finally, mentors and participants suggested a follow up coaching session after the 5th workshop, or a refresher visit a few months later, would be beneficial to ensure learning had been effectively embedded into practice.

Suggested changes to the workshops and coaching model

In light of the challenges outlined above, a number of changes to the workshops were suggested by participants and mentors. Questionnaire and focus group participants suggested the workshops should be more broadly available, both across the sector and within individual settings. For example:

> *I would recommend that instead of just letting two staff members attend would an evening workshop in each service for all staff members to attend to ensure everyone knows what Aistear is all about and mentoring would be beneficial in each service.*

Participants also suggested the workshops could be scheduled closer together as recapping after a month could take a considerable amount of workshop time. Reducing time constraints in the workshops overall was the change most frequently suggested by both mentors and participants. It was felt two hours was not a sufficient amount of time for the content of the workshops. Mentors and participants suggested an additional 30 minutes would be beneficial. If time constraints were reduced, mentors and participants also recommended making the workshops more interactive and group orientated.

Finally, approximately three quarters of questionnaire respondents, 77% (n=49), reported interest in an additional 10 hours of workshops. 'Learning Environments', 'Curriculum Foundations' 'Transitions' and 'Partnership with Parents', were the most frequent responses when asked what respondents would like an additional series of workshops to focus on.

Due to the overwhelming positive response to the coaching sessions, a limited number of changes were suggested by the participants and mentors. As highlighted above in relation to the challenges associated with the coaching sessions, mentors suggested changing to a more flexible coaching model, in which the mentors could spread the allocated amount of time at their discretion, in consultation with practitioners. In addition, participants requested an additional coaching session be made available before the first workshop and particularly after the final workshop. Similarly, approximately three quarters of participants, 77% (n=49), suggested they would be interested in participating in an additional four hours of coaching, connected to additional workshops, if it was made available. In addition, a small number of participants also requested that mentors place more focus on the environment, particularly the outdoor environment, during coaching sessions and some mentors

suggested coaching materials should be changed to better support practitioners working with children under three.

Systemic issues identified

Overall, limited information emerged with regards to suggested changes to the general continuous professional development (CPD) process, particularly from mentors and questionnaire respondents. However, focus group participants reported a need for a more co-ordinated, joined-up approach to *Aistear* and S*íolta* training across settings, particularly in relation to primary schools. Participants felt *Aistear* was being used very differently in preschool and primary school settings and that this difference could negatively affect children, particularly during the transition from preschool to primary school. More generally, focus group participants unanimously commented on a lack of funding for training, disparities in qualifications within the sector and a general lack of recognition, reflected in salaries, for the profession. They commented on both the time and financial burden that results from a lack of funded CPD across the early childhood sector and noted how the lack of professional recognition and low salaries impacts settings' ability to employ and retain well-qualified, competent practitioners.

Summary of key findings

A number of key findings have emerged from the evaluation of the pilot. While the low response rate from some of the information-gathering methods should be noted, the findings are consistent with those from similar CPD programmes nationally (NCCA, 2013; O'Dwyer and McCormack, 2014; Hayes and O'Neill, 2017) and internationally (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003; Peeters *et al*, 2014).

- Feedback indicated that engagement in the pilot had a positive impact on practice, both in terms of the practitioners' knowledge and skills, and their pedagogy.

- Participants stated that the combination of workshops and coaching was an effective CPD model.

- Respondents stated that additional coaching sessions (either pre- or post-intervention) would be useful.

- Respondents stated that coaching was particularly useful in supporting the application of learning from workshops, and tailoring ideas to their room/setting.

- Feedback suggested that while the content included in the pilot was appropriate, there was too much information for the time available in workshops.

- Respondents felt that insufficient materials and practical examples were provided for practitioners working with children from birth to three years.

- Respondents indicated that the workshops and coaching model was particularly effective in instances where a high percentage of the staff team and the manager were participating.

- Almost three quarters of respondents indicated an interest in attending a further ten hours of workshops and coaching.

- Respondents welcomed the provision of materials in Irish, but commented that coaching and workshops should be available through the medium of Irish.

Collectively and when viewed in the context of other similar-type CPD initiatives, a number of points for consideration arise which are set out below.

Points for consideration

Arising from the findings of this evaluation, the following points are made for consideration by Council. They relate primarily to revising the focus of the workshops and to incorporating greater flexibility in the coaching process. It is important to note that the evaluation did not focus on the model used in accessing and releasing *Síolta Aistear* Mentors to participate in the pilot.

- Revise the workshop materials to improve the time/content balance, to provide further opportunities for reflection and to address the gaps identified through this evaluation.

- Increase the range of resources available to support practice with the under-3 age cohort. As a consequence of the ECCE programme, practitioners working with babies and toddlers are often those with the lowest level of qualifications[5]. The need for further resources focusing on the birth-

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[5] The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme pays a higher capitation for graduates working in the preschool / ECCE room. Consequently, the most highly qualified staff have been moved from baby and toddler rooms to ECCE rooms.

3 years age range in the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide has previously been identified by the NCCA, Better Start, the Early Years Education Focused Inspectorate (DES) and the wider sector.

- Review the coaching process to increase flexibility of provision and to include an additional follow-on session. This would allow mentors to respond to the specific needs of the wide variety of early childhood settings in the sector, more closely replicating the *Aistear in Action* programme (NCCA, 2013).

- Review selection criteria and consider requiring full staff participation in workshops and coaching, including setting managers/pedagogical leaders. The Better Start National Quality Development Mentoring Service has paved the way in this regard, stipulating that the setting manager/pedagogical leader engages with the mentor to ensure that any change in practice is sustainable.

- CPD modules to be provided for mentors to further enhance the skills identified as crucial to the role. The role of the *Síolta Aistear* mentor is relatively new. Those appointed to this role should have time and space to create a learning community and further develop the skills and knowledge required (Hansford *et al*, 2004; Robins, 2006; Chu, 2014).

- Plan for an additional ten hours of workshops and four/five hours of coaching based on the topics identified by respondents. When the NSAI was established in 2016, the Steering Committee acknowledged that a further set of 10 hours of workshops (and the associated coaching) may be required to support significant and long-lasting positive effects on practice. The evaluation findings would support this thinking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching Pilot was positively reviewed by both practitioners and mentors. The data suggests however, that the materials, and the workshops and coaching model will need some revision in advance of wider implementation.

Several matters emerged throughout the course of the evaluation that merit further consideration. Firstly, the expertise of the mentors was paramount to the success of the pilot. The focus group data in particular drew attention to the skills, knowledge and dispositions of the mentors, and the impact this skillset has on the successful facilitation of workshops and coaching sessions.

Secondly, there were many references to support trí mhean na Ghaeilge (through the medium of Irish). Currently, there is no *Síolta Aistear* mentor who can facilitate a suite of workshops and coaching through Irish. This will need to be addressed in planning for a national roll-out in order to offer appropriate support to T1 Irish settings.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that practitioners identified 'Learning Environments', 'Curriculum Foundations' and to a lesser extent, 'Transitions' and 'Partnership with Parents' as a focus for an additional series of workshops if they were to be developed, especially as almost 75% of practitioners stated that they would attend further workshops if they were available.

A final word of gratitude to all the participants and mentors who took part in the pilot of the *Aistear* Strand of the NSAI. Mentors engaged with enthusiasm and commitment and gave generously of their experience for the improvement of the process. Participants demonstrated their dedication to enhancing the experiences of the children in their care through their attendance and interest at Workshops and Coaching sessions. A further note of thanks to all those respondents who contributed to the data on which this evaluation is based.

This evaluation report was shared with the Early Childhood and Primary Board for discussion on 7th September 2017, and the National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative Steering Group on 14th September 2017, before being presented to Council on the 21st September 2017.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Survey Monkey Questions for Participants

1. How long have you been working in early childhood education?
2. What is your highest level of qualification?
3. What type of setting do you currently work in?
4. What age group do you currently work with? (choose multiple answers where appropriate)
5. How many people from your setting, including yourself, participated in the workshops and coaching pilot?
6. What percentage of the staff team is this?
7. Did the setting manager participate in the workshops and coaching pilot?
8. How many workshops did you participate in?
9. Overall, how would you rate the content of the workshops
10. Which workshop/s had the biggest impact on your learning?
11. What changes have you made to your practice after participating in the workshops?
12. What was your key learning from the workshops?
13. How many coaching sessions did you participate in?
14. Overall, how would you rate the coaching sessions?
15. How beneficial were the coaching sessions?
16. How were the coaching sessions beneficial? How did they impact your thinking and/or practice?
17. Do you think the addition of coaching makes the initiative better/ worse/ equal to other programmes?
18. Have you any further comments about your experience of coaching?
19. If an additional 10 hours of workshops and four hours of coaching was available, would you participate?
20. Please elaborate on your answer from question 19
21. What would you like an additional series of workshops to focus on?
22. Have you any further comments about the Aistear workshops and coaching pilot?

Appendix 2 – Expression of Interest Form

Expression of Interest Form: *Aistear* Workshops and Coaching

The National *Síolta Aistear* Initiative was established in 2016 to support the coordinated roll-out of *Aistear*: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta*, *The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the initiative is a collaboration between DCYA, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). As part of this national initiative, the NCCA has developed workshops based on the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. This *Aistear* strand of the initiative offers early years practitioners ten hours of workshops plus four hours of coaching support. These workshops along with the coaching will be offered initially as part of a pilot phase between February and May 2017.

If you are interested in taking part in the upcoming *Aistear* workshops and coaching, please complete one form **per setting** and return to your local early childhood organisation. For a list of participating organisations please refer to our 'frequently asked questions'. Only forms completed in full and signed by the setting manager and/or owner will be considered. Please read the 'frequently asked questions' carefully before applying.

Setting details
Name of Setting:
Address:
DCYA Reference Number (where applicable):
Phone: Email:
Type of Setting (tick all that are appropriate): Full day-care ☐   Part-time day-care ☐   Sessional ☐ Community: ☐   Privately owned: ☐   Naíonra ☐

Total Number of Children:	Total Number of Rooms:
Total Number Staff in Setting:	Number of Staff applying for workshops and coaching:

Practitioner details

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Name: Position:

Highest qualification: Age range practitioner works with:

Has this person attending the *Aistear Síolta* introductory workshop? Y/N

Final Details

Can your setting support up to an hour of one-on-one time between the mentor and each practitioner during coaching visits?

       Yes ☐   No ☐

Has your setting engaged with any of the following in the past 3 years? (please tick all that are appropriate)

       Síolta Quality Assurance Process (QAP) ☐

       Better Start ☐

       Other quality or curriculum support programme ☐

If you ticked any of the boxes above, briefly describe the type of support provided (including the programme name, organisation name, start and finish dates and the focus of work).

Signed by the Manager	Date
Signed by the Chairperson of the Board / Owner	Date

Appendix 3 - Mentor Evaluation Form for Workshops

What went well during the workshop?

What would I differently if I was facilitating this workshop again?

Further resources or supports I need for this workshop

Specific slides/ sections that need to be changed

Specific activities that need to be changed or edited

Notes …

Appendix 4 - Mentor Evaluation Form for Coaching

What went well during this round of coaching sessions?

What would I differently in the next round of coaching sessions?

Further resources or supports I need for coaching

Feedback to the NCCA

Appendix 5 – Participant Workshop Evaluation Form

I found this session…

1	2	3	4	5
Not Useful		Useful		Very Useful

The most useful thing I learned was…

After this session I plan to work on…

The session would have been better if…

I would also like to say…

Signed

Date

Appendix 6 – Mentor Reporting Template

Safely store the evaluation forms collected from participants at the end of each workshop. Collate the data from the workshops facilitated to date and complete the table below. Mentors are not required to include every comment from participants in the table below. Record general feedback.

Workshop number:	Number of participants:
Number of evaluations collected:	Average rating for this workshop:
The most useful thing I learned was… (general feedback please)	
After this session, I plan to work on… (general feedback please)	
The session would have been better if… (general feedback please)	
I would also like to say… (general feedback please)	