Title of Dissertation

Exploring primary school infant class teachers' lived experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment

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Centre for Education and Lifelong Learning

Master of Arts in Educational Practice

2022

National College of Ireland

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
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Degree for which thesis is submitted: Master of Educational Practice

Title of Thesis: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' lived experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment

Date: 23/11/2022

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Acknowledgements

I want to pay my special regards to all who made this specialist topic research study possible. First, I express my sincere appreciation to my mentor Dr Meera Oke, whose kindness, guidance and continuous support made the writing process a truly fulfilling experience. I am deeply grateful for your time and the help you offered to successfully support me in completing this specialist topic research.

I want to thank all the lecturers, tutors and support staff from the National College of Ireland who supported, guided and enriched my college experience.

I want to express my greatest gratitude to all the participants who kindly agreed to participate in my research. I truly appreciated you sharing your experiences and thoughts with me. Thank you sincerely for your time and for making this research possible.

I want to thank all of my peers in the program for the enjoyable times and the continuous support.

My utmost thanks to my lovely family, Gabor, Kornel, and Levente, my mother, Jolan, sister Monika, and niece Alexa and indeed all my friends for supporting, encouraging, and believing me even when I was in doubt. I certainly could not have succeeded without all of your support.

Table of Contents

Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore junior and senior infant class primary school teachers' lived experiences with 'Aistear': The Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Explored are the challenges they are encounter, the positive benefits they are experience in their practice since introducing this play-based curriculum and areas of practice that require further development within the Irish primary school environment to improve the implementation of a play-based curriculum. The rationale for the research streams from personal interest in the subject and as an Early Childhood Educator, resent policy developments and proposed curriculum developments in regards to early childhood education and primary school curriculum, and from the lack of relevant research in the Irish context. Using qualitative research design with a phenomenological lens, this research accentuates the importance of gathering data from a personal experiences perspective to echo participants' individual opinions of reality. Semi-structured in-depth interviews of five junior and senior infant class primary school teachers were performed to collect rich and meaningful data. Participants were purposefully selected teachers from rural Ireland primary schools, who had previously experienced the phenomenon in interest, creating an information-rich and knowledgeable group. The collected data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis due to the research small sample size and its interpretation nature to offer answers to the research aim and questions. The study found that teachers' experiences with Aistear vary, influenced by their experience, training, and background. Inadequate training and gaps in knowledge about Aistear contribute to teachers' lack of confidence in making Aistear a predominant part of their practice. According to participants, the biggest challenge is the absence of hands-on training opportunities and the lack of support and clear guidance from the Department of Education. The overload of curriculum and growing requirements for teachers generate anxiety and stress for educators. The findings highlight the need for substantial government support with appropriate and clear guidelines on how to embrace a play-based curriculum as part of the primary school curriculum. Furthermore, it accentuates the need for extensive and suitable training opportunities for primary school teachers and the provision for appropriate resources.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research aims to explore primary school junior and senior infant teachers' experiences with Aistear, the challenges they may have experienced during implementing Aistear in a primary school environment and the practices that need strengthening to best implement a play-based curriculum. This qualitative research design has a phenomenological approach and interpretive philosophical foundations. The instruments used are semi-structured interviews using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2007). During analysis, the following final three superior themes were identified:

Theme One – Who is doing what? Identifying and discussing teachers' experiences and perceptions of the play-based approach

Theme Two – The building blocks to progression. Outlining teachers' experiences with implementing Aistear and discussing the challenges they may have experienced.

Theme Three – The silver lining. Exploring teachers' perceptions of benefits they may have experienced while implementing Aistear.

In this chapter, a background and context for the research will be provided to offer a foundation for the study. Next, the study's rationale is outlined, including the reason for choosing this topic and its significance and contribution to the stakeholders, followed by the research aim, questions, and objectives. Finally, an outline of the dissertation chapter is given to provide an overview of the research and a conclusion of this chapter.

1.2 Background and Context

In the Irish education system, children can be enrolled in junior infant primary school classes once they are over four years of age at the start of the relevant school year. According to research such as French (2007), Kernan (2007), Hayes (2007) and Dunphy (2008), children's development between the ages of 0-6 years is best supported with the use of a play-based curriculum.

A curriculum framework is a document of detailed information for educators to assist in planning learning experiences to enhance children's development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). A play-based curriculum such as Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b) aims to plan and provide these learning experiences through play as a medium (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018).

The primary school curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999), is a child-centred curriculum that aims to provide a holistic education to children. However, it is a heavily structured curriculum that is outcome-based, using formative assessment methods to assess children's development. In comparison, Aistear, the Early Childhood curriculum Framework introduced in 2009 to provide a comprehensive framework for all early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, is a play-based curriculum which likewise aims for children's holistic development. However, the essential element is 'learning through play' (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018), where children's assessment is primarily conducted using observations and reflections.

Recently in 2020, the National Council for curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed a Draft primary curriculum Framework (2020), suggesting the need for a change in approach for the curriculum in primary schools. The NCCA indicates a need to create a continuity between ECCE and primary schools, that assessment should be meaningful, and that the present

curriculum overload should be addressed. Simultaneously, the NCCA published Updating Aistear: Rationale and Process (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2021b), calling for a review and update of the 2009 original framework. While the NCCA suggested and somewhat supported the use of Aistear in primary school settings, such as Information for infant Teachers in primary schools (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009d), engaging with the curriculum was not mandatory.

Play-based curriculum

It is clear from these documents that the NCCA aims to develop and establish a continuum regarding curriculum, approach, and assessment between ECCE and primary schools.

As infant class teachers are one of the main stakeholders and participants of the changes proposed, this study aims to gather information on their experiences with implementing Aistear, learn about their challenges, if any, and successes, and furthermore grasp their perceptions of areas of practice that may need further development to implement changes.

1.3 Rationale for the Study

Aistear's The Early Childhood curriculum for children from 0-6 years was introduced in 2009 (National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, 2009d). While the framework was successfully implemented in early childhood settings, primary schools needed to find a way to adopt Aistear into their existing primary school curriculum. This was proven to create difficulties as Aistear is a play-based, not learning outcome-based curriculum (National Council for curriculum and Assessment, 2009a; National Council for curriculum and Assessment, 2020).

Aistear is a play-based curriculum framework, and as such, it focuses on providing experiences for children that are both beneficial and enjoyable while aiding and supporting their development. Aistear advocates for 'learning through play', the significance of learning

environments and experiences provided for children. Play is defined as a freely chosen activity that is personally directed (National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council, 2000).

2020 saw the development of the Draft primary curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020). While this framework seeks to respond to social and economic changes, it also aims to develop a curriculum that provides for the holistic development of children. This draft framework recognises some of the challenges of the previous curriculum, such as curriculum overload and meaningful assessment, while also recognising the importance of connections and continuity in curricula from preschool to post-primary school (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020).

The rationale of this curriculum is an eerie facsimile to Aistear in many ways. It is proposing to increase curriculum time spent on languages, similar to Aistear Theme: Communication; health and physical education that can be connected to Aistear Theme: Well-being; coding and computational thinking similar to Aistear Theme: Exploring and Thinking; and social and personal, religions and beliefs that resembles Aistear Theme: Identity and Belonging.

The proposed framework that again draws on the success of Aistear views teachers and school leaders as 'curriculum makers' expecting the teachers and school leaders to make use of 'broad learning outcomes' 'alongside the curriculum vision and principles' where the curriculum is 'tailored to an appropriate for the children in their school community (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020).

This new proposed curriculum, Aistear and the Framework for junior Cycle, could truly reform children's educational experiences. However, as with every change, there are inevitable challenges and concerns (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The teachers and school leaders are essential

and crucial participants in the front line of these challenges. Gathering information on their experiences can be vital in developing the final primary school curriculum.

The above discussion on policy development provides part of the rationale for this project. I am also personally invested in this area as an early childhood educator and tutor and a mother. I believe that children learn best through a well-designed, purposeful but child centered play-based curriculum. Children in Ireland start school at the tender age of four. However, this is unusual in many other European countries, including Hungary where I grow up. Children in Hungary start primary school at the age of seven, when they are both physically and cognitively more developed and ready for formal learning. Prior to primary school children attend pre-school services for three consecutive years. Still, many children start school knowing the alphabet, numbers and basic writing skills, knowledge they acquired in pre-school, this is not compulsory. The importance of school readiness is also outlined by UNICEF (UNICEF, 2012, p. 16). School readiness is a broad concept including children's holistic skills, abilities and their attitudes that is necessary to succeed at school. Previous research such as Whitebread (Whitebread et al., 2012) also discussing the benefits of later school starting. I believe that children have the best early experiences with education if it is built on their interest if it is voluntary, delivered in an informal environment that supports and enhances play-based learning.

Furthermore, there is also limited up-to date research available in the Irish context. For example, the most recent research by Woods et al. (2022), that examines not only how educators adapt existing curriculum but also looks at the impact of these changes on the children from the educator's perspective. While the aims and objectives of their research is quite similar to this research, their research was conducted in the Northeast area of Ireland while this research is located in the Midlands area of Ireland where many smaller primary

schools join classes because of the small number of students. The demographic and economic differences of these areas can impact on teachers experiences and perceptions.

Another research by Gray & Ryan's (2016), with similar aims to this research, is now five years old. During these five years many freshly qualified teachers entered the field thus it is important to examine their experiences besides teachers who have had years of previous teaching experience. While their research used multi-method approach using questionnaires and interviews examining training experiences, play-based teaching techniques, and their opinion of Aistear, this research qualitative design allows for a more personal and more in-depth understanding of teachers experiences with the use of semi-structured interviews examining their lived experiences with Aistear, the challenges they may have experienced during implementing Aistear in a primary school environment and the practices that in their perception need strengthening to best implement a play-based curriculum.

1.4 Research Aims and Questions

The study aims to explore and develop an understanding of primary school infant class teachers' experiences with implementing Aistear, to recognise the challenges, if any, and the successes they have encountered while discovering areas that may require further improvement.

In light of the above aims, the following research questions are proposed:

➢ What are junior and senior infant class primary school teachers' experiences with Aistear?

➢ What are the challenges, if any, in implementing a play-based curriculum such as Aistear in a primary school environment?

- What areas of practice would strengthening in teachers perspective in Irish primary school environments to implement a play-based curriculum?

The National Council for curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Department of Education and Skills statutory body, advised the Minister of Education in 2020 on updating 'Aistear': The Early Childhood curriculum Framework. Aistear "is a critical part of the curriculum and assessment infrastructure in the education system". The update aims to create a continuity between the curriculum and assessment from early childhood to the end of post-primary education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2021b, p. 7).

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and develop insights into primary school infant class teachers' past and present experiences with Aistear and inderstand their challenges while looking at areas that require further development. In addition, the study aims to investigate the current practices of Aistear in primary school infant classes.

The Objectives are

1. to gather information on primary school infant class teachers' experiences with Aistear since the introduction of Aistear in 2009
2. to ascertain the main challenges of implementing Aistear in primary schools infant classes
3. to explore primary school infant class teachers' opinions on main points for development and improvement to aid the successful implementation of Aistear in primary schools

1.5 Methodology

This is small-scale qualitative research conducted with a phenomenological lens within the interpretivism paradigm. This research design allows for the discovery of teachers lived

experiences with the studied phenomenon. The ontological positioning is relativism, considering that the reality perceived by participants is subjective and individually created while the epistemological positioning is within subjectivism, realizing that the reality perceived needs to be interpreted to discover true meaning.   The research used a purposeful sampling method, inviting participants with lived experiences with this phenomenon. I used semi-structured interviews as data collection method to collect rich and meaningful data of participants experiences. The data analysis was conducted with the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis to interpret collected data in order to seek answers to the research questions.

1.6 Outline of Dissertation

The Literature Review follows this Introduction chapter to provide a broad academic context for the research. The Methodology chapter outlines the paradigm, philosophical underpinnings, sampling and data analysis, ethical considerations and reflexivity: chapter four, Findings and Discussion, introduces and discusses the findings related to each theme. The final Conclusion chapter discusses the main results through the three themes while also looking at the findings concerning research questions and aims.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will offer and overview of the theory of learning through play, followed by the theoretical framework. Next the theories that advocate for play- based learning are explored followed by some relevant child development theories. Later the curriculum frameworks and the proposed curriculum updates are discussed. Finally, we explore some of the most relevant research in the area.

2.2 Learning through play

The theory of play is comprehensive. In loose terms, play is an activity we do spontaneously and freely. It is not real; it is imaginative; however, it builds on real experiences and has rules, and while it is not considered serious, it is serious and bounded by rules. Children use play to cope with their world (Gray, 2017). According to Aistear, "Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b, p. 11). When children play, they explore their "social, physical and imaginary worlds"; play helps them to "manage their feelings", to enhance their language, cognitive development, social skills and creativity while providing "foundations for becoming effective communicators and leaders" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b, p. 11). Learning through play is one of Aistear's six pillars "highlighting the important role of play in children's lives" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). Vygotsky says play can be characterised as an activity that is 'desired' and "involves imaginary situations" and rules (Vygotsky, 1978).

To learn through play, children will require an environment with rich learning opportunities and appropriate resources, time and support to explore while playing (Woods et al., 2021). During play, children not only enhance the above-outlined skills and qualities, but they also

learn cooperation, sharing, problem-solving and turn-taking. They learn to value others and their opinions, learn about themselves and others and learn how to become a part of society. While researchers recognise the value of play, Catalano (2021) notes that during recent times a "detouring of it, in favour of learning" was observed. UNICEF also reports the neglect of play-based learning for children in early grades of primary school in preference to academic-focused education (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018). Only since the introduction of Aistear did we see that the Irish education system is changing to include play as an essential part of education.

"An important aspect of play is children's agency and control over the experiences", thus children leading the play (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018, p. 7). This means that children not only initiate the play but also choose to participate in it and control the particulars while making decisions. Gray (2013) also suggests that play focuses on the process instead of a result, which is "always voluntary". So, should play-based activities be considered play if adults lead and organise said activities? Adult-led play is planned, structured and managed by the adults in a school environment, and they are also compulsory to participate. While children may or may not have some autonomy, they have effectively not 'volunteered' to play. Adult-led play is also very much goal-oriented, especially in a primary school environment.

As previous research suggests, using Aistear and play-based activities in primary school is a means to meet curriculum goals and expectations (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Walsh et al., 2010; Woods et al., 2022). Gray (2016) discusses a different approach. He outlines that while research proved that academic-based preschools, where teachers are required to spend more time on worksheets and preparation, resulted in children performing worse than in play-based preschools, policymakers still believe that "increased academic instruction is necessary for success in our culture" (Gray, 2016, p. 68). However, to prove his point in this chapter, he

concludes that children learn everything they need in a hunter-gatherer community. These children learn an "enormous amount to become effective adults". In contrast, the "hunter-gatherer adults were extraordinarily non-directive", valuing autonomy and not interfering with children's lives, and "generally unlikely to initiate, direct, or intervene"; thus " hunter-gatherer children educated themselves through their self-directed exploration and play" (Gray, 2016, pp. 72-73). Furthermore, he notes that "adults did not direct children's activities"; they mainly learned by watching, listening taking an active part in all activities.

While this approach's benefits on children and their development cannot be disputed, how could this work in western society? These communities are in remote parts of the Philippines, Malaysia and New Guinea. In western cultures, it is not enough to learn life skills; academics and academic education are highly valued. Not everything can be learned by watching and listening; some things need to be taught, practised and learned. However, the traditional education system controls children and their learning, and society finds it hard to believe that children can teach themselves and play is a significant part of learning.

This research explores teachers' experiences with Aistear, a play-based curriculum. Their understanding and view on play determine their approach and practice. Learning about their views on play, if they differentiate between child-led or adult-led, is a keystone of this study.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework draws on the importance of play and a play-based curriculum in child development, specifically in young school-aged children from 4-6 years old. Child development is a complex theory with varying theoretical approaches and concepts. As Ring et al., (2018) suggest, using multiple ideas while designing a curriculum for the early years (0-6 years) should provide for enhanced learning experiences for children.

While I agree with this view, this study used Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural and zone of proximal development theory as a theoretical framework (Vygotsky, 1978) as it incorporates three crucial elements; social interactions, cultural environment and scaffolding. As this study focuses on participants' lived experiences with Aistear and its implementation in a primary school environment, I felt it was essential to choose a framework that recognises the importance of environment and the active learning process. While Vygotsky's theory is mainly a child development theory, its principles also apply to how adults learn. Our social surroundings are a prominent part of our learning, and each educational setting uses scaffolding to help students acquire new knowledge.

The significance of relationships and support from the environment are fundamental pillars of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural and zone of proximal development theories (van der Veer, 2020).

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1993), Vygotsky emphasises the social environment's significance in children's development. However, while in Bronfenbrenner's theory, the immediate social environment is authoritative, Vygotsky places considerably more emphasis on the function of the cultural environment, suggesting that cognitive development varies across cultures. This idea is also the opposite of Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1964) which theorised that cognitive development happens in stages and is universal across cultures.

With the theory of zone of proximal development (ZDP), Vygotsky created a connection between attachment theory and social development theory. The ZDP is the zone "between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve in collaboration with others" (Ring et al., 2018, p. 19). The main idea of the concept suggests that children learn through interactions and through collaborating with a more knowledgeable other (MKO). The more knowledgeable other, however, does not always refer to a teacher or parent; it can also be peers or even

technology with more knowledge of the relevant material as the learner. To optimise learning, the MKO needs to determine the child's prior knowledge and provide quality instructions and structured pathways for development.

Similarly, teachers observe children to explore their strengths and weaknesses and then use this knowledge to plan age-appropriate play activities where the child can develop while expanding their knowledge with the teachers' help. With this, the MKO "scaffolds the child's learning and bridges the gap between what the child can achieve independently and with structured assistance" (Ring et al., 2018, p. 19).

Creating a learning environment that encourages children's learning requires teachers to build on children's existing knowledge and to support them by providing appropriate opportunities and scaffolding to further their development. This requires teachers to understand the significance of the learning environment and culture and to be comfortable and knowledgeable with the scaffolding technique. Furthermore, the theory also can be applied when we consider teachers' experiences with Aistear. The environment and culture of Irish primary schools are decisive, and how they learned about this hands-on approach also determines the quality of practice they developed.

2.4 Theories that advocate for play-based learning

Piaget's theory of play suggest that children's play and cognitive development are interconnected. He emphasises that the play environment should change as children mature (Lillard A. S., 2015). Children intelligence and logical thinking is different than adults, this however does not mean that children are less intelligent. His cognitive development theory suggests that at during the early years children learn best through exploring their environment using their senses. To best support children learning at this stage it is imperative that children

are provided with activities and environment that is stimulating and engaging, where they are involved and active participants of the learning.

Froebel's play theory suggest that the basis for physical, cognitive, social and holistic development of children can be best catered for by child-led play (Ahmetoglu & Ildiz, 2018). He regards play as a vital component to children development when learning about the world. It is also emphasised that children will develop at different rates, and this should be respected and catered for. Similarly, to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development he suggest to focus on children's existing knowledge to enhance learning, while also emphasises the importance of a holistic approach to learning. Furthermore, similarly to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, Froebel recognises the importance of influence of environment, adults and peers have on the child learning.

Dr Maria Montessori who believed that 'play is the work of the child' also advocates for child-led play-based learning. Her child-led play includes developmentally appropriate activities and provisions to best cater for children needs (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). In her approach children have autonomy of their learning while simple rules and structure is also incorporated. She also recognised that children react better to real life play, thus incorporating real-life objects in her practice.

Issacs' approach built on Froebel and Montessori's earlier work also reinforces the importance of play (Murray, 2021). She understood that children who are confident in their abilities and comfortable in their environment engage significantly better in active learning. She also emphasised that play provides for a safe place for children emotional development, helping children to learn and understand, recognise and navigate their feelings better. Similarly, to Vygotsky's social development theory, she also recognises the importance of social interactions and the learning that takes place. Through interacting with peers children learn

communication and social skills that helps them learn how to manage social situations in later life.

2.5 Child Development

During the 1971 primary school curriculum development, developers already recognised the importance of child development when designing educational curricula for children. Understanding how children develop and learn is imperative to designing the most appropriate education for the different age groups. Child development theories can be grouped by theoretical approaches such as maturation, psychodynamic, psychosocial, cognitive, behaviourist, ecological and information processing. While there are many different theories, there is no one universal 'theory of education that all researchers support. It is quite the opposite, where different groups of researchers represent other schools of ideas. Using more than one theory to inform curriculum planning can enrich children's learning experiences (Ring et al., 2018). On a closer look at these theories, we can see how these ideas are essential when designing a primary school curriculum.

The theory of human motivation by Abraham Maslow (1943) is one of the earliest and most widely recognised. In simple terms, Maslow (1943) theorises that people are motivated to achieve specific needs, such as basic, psychological and self-fulfilment needs. Unsurprisingly, motivation is present in every part of human life, so researchers found that it also significantly impacts learning and student success (Murayama et al., 2013). Children are intrinsically motivated to learn, suggesting that individual students' motivation levels largely influence their success and efforts, which are strongly influenced by their interests, goals, needs and beliefs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A more recent self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2000) discussed not only biological but also psychological needs such as autonomy, competence and relatedness. Fulfilling these

psychological needs is the driving force behind intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated students "have a high degree of autonomy and engage in a learning activity willingly, rather than because of some external influence" (Ring et al., 2018, p. 31). Therefore, if educators concentrate on motivating their students and actively engaging them in the learning process, offering choices will support students' individual psychological needs, such as autonomy, enhance motivation and ultimately increase learning and achievement.

Bowlby's attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992) also approaches the importance of autonomy but from a completely different angle. The theory suggests that children are born with a pre-programmed need for attachments to survive. Attachment, however, is not only crucial during the early years; as children grow, they also develop other significant relationships, such as with peers, teachers, and other individuals from their growing social network (Ring et al., 2018). As children spend considerable time in school, it is logical that the teacher-child relationship is powerful and very significant. Developing a close relationship with the teacher and feel valued and connected to others can contribute to emotional security, thus enhancing academic performance and promoting social competence development. This subsequently suggests that the teacher-child secure relationship provides for a safe and reliable foundation for children. They are encouraged to develop their autonomy and competence, and they also become confident in their abilities and are more likely to engage in exploratory behaviours and build meaningful relationships (Bretherton, 1992; Ring et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, Piaget's cognitive development theory (Lefa, 2014) suggests universal developmental stages, in the same order, indifferent to the children's culture or environment. Piaget theorised that a child's intellectual development goes through four stages; the stages are determined by biological maturation and reflect the child's growing complexity of thought. Moreover, his theory about how children learn is also very much relatable to education.

Piaget theorised that we are all born with schemas or 'reflexes' which help babies adapt to the environment (Johnson, 2014). Schemas are the building block of knowledge; to acquire new information, we use existing schemas to understand and expand our knowledge. The process is assimilation when the new information matches existing schemas or accommodation when the new information extends the existing schema. The motivation behind learning and accommodating new information is the desire to reach a balance or equilibrium between the new information and the existing schemas (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

The educator's role is imperative as a facilitator of the learning, providing various learning experiences at the suitable developmental level of the learner. Learning opportunities should include provisions for students to assimilate and accommodate new information while providing hands-on experiences. Learners of different cognitive levels should have the chance to work together, where the more mature students can help the more or less mature students. This is similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory (Lefa, 2014).

The first conspicuous difference between Bronfenbrenner's and some other theorists' ideas is that while many theories were studied in laboratory environments, he believed these environments do not mimic the characteristics of the studied children's environment. While Albert Bandura's social learning theory (Nabavi, 2012) suggests that behaviour is learned by observing others in our environment, and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that children learn through collaborative discourses with a more knowledgeable other, Bronfenbrenner recognised that multiple levels affect the developing child (Mahoney & Ettekal, 2017).

The ecological system theory divides the child's environment into five different systems, from the most immediate environment, the microsystem, to the most distant environment, the chronosystem. There are five systems in total and they are interrelated and organised around

the child in order of the impact they can have on the child. This theory places the child in the central position and understands that each child has a unique ecosystem affected by their development. As advocated by Dewey (Simpson, 2001), the image of the child is a competent and confident learner, while the environment is perceived as the third teacher, as envisioned by Reggio Emilia (Arseven, 2014). Family, school and peers are part of the microsystem suggesting to be the most influential during their development (Mahoney & Ettekal, 2017)

2.6 The curriculum Frameworks

In a loose definition, a curriculum framework refers to a document that gives detailed information to educators to assist them in planning and providing learning experiences that are enjoyable and challenging while helping children's development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). Having a curriculum framework in educational settings is fundamental, as it highlights and explains the importance of each curriculum, while the framework offers a measurable plan and provides a structure for all stakeholders

2.6.1 Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

In 1997 the first child care (pre-school services) regulation came into effect; this was the first time that the government attempted to regulate and standardise the Irish early years' sector, which was and still is highly privatised (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018; Department of Health, 2020). In 2006 ,Siolta's National Quality Framework (Siolta, 2006) was introduced, followed by 'Aistear': The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). The development and implementation of these policies were the foundation for developing a high-standard early childhood education sector in Ireland.

'Aistear': The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b) was introduced in 2009. This document is a meaningful step in creating

and developing quality early childhood education (ECE) in Ireland. The framework resulted from eight years of collaboration and consultation between the National Council for curriculum (NCCA) and the early years sector. Furthermore, it built on four fundamental research papers:

Hayes (2007) Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood. This paper outlines the difficulties caused by a distinct divide between Ireland's education and childcare sectors. It discusses and theorises what 'education' and 'care' means and how these could be balanced to best cater to children's needs while accentuating children's dispositions and psychological needs. Hayes (2007) calls her approach a 'nurturing pedagogy' aptly representing young children's caring and educational needs. She also highlights the importance of applying reflective practices to the adult's key role.

Children's early learning and development by French (2007) emphasises that children need autonomy and the feeling of trust when making decisions and choices about how and what they learn and with whom. The variety of connections they build through this process helps children develop meaningful relationships and helps them learn about the world. French (2007) also highlights the importance of social learning and, thus, social interactions, discussing how a challenging and appealing environment can enhance learning. Social interactions also include quality relationships between the parents and the early years setting, which can further improve learning.

Play as a context for early learning and development by Kernan (2007) explains what play is and discusses the many types of play that children engage in. She discusses the importance of the physical and social environment and its influence on play. Kernan (2007), again similar to Hayes (2017), draws attention to the role of the adults in providing meaningful experiences that supports and extends the students' learning.

Dunphy (2008) states that supporting early learning and development through formative assessment describes the assessment techniques that should be used, outlining the benefits, such as understanding where children are in their learning, or using the information to plan future experiences. In essence, assessment builds a rich picture of the child's learning and experiences, including artwork samples, photographs, notes, and stories.

Aistear draws attention to the importance of children who should benefit from and enjoy their time spent in early childhood. Furthermore, it exemplifies the extent and complexity of children's learning during their early years, the significance of the environment and experiences provided, and the adults' key role during this journey (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b).

Aistear the curriculum framework is a play-based curriculum aimed at children from birth to six years in Ireland, consisting of four themes and twelve principles.

We must define play first to understand a play-based curriculum and its importance. The National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council (as cited in Kernan, 2007, p.5) states:

> Children's play is freely chosen, personally directed behaviour, motivated from within by needs, wants and desires. Play can be fun or serious. Through play, children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing, children learn and develop as individuals and as members of the community.

Play-based curriculums such as Aistear suggest a quality learning program with the essential elements of 'learning through play', or 'playful learning' in the centre of its education (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2018).

Looking at Aistear, we can see that careful considerations and extensive research informed the development of this fundamental framework. Looking at each paper in more detail, it becomes evident that a play-based curriculum is indeed the most suitable choice for educating children during the sensitive early years. Aistear and child development theorists such as Piaget or Vygotsky (Johnson, 2014; Mooney, 2013) suggest that early childhood years span from birth to around six years, where this play-based educational approach yields the most benefits. However, as in Ireland, many children start primary school junior infant class at 4+. This creates a debate and generates a conflict about which curriculum should or is the most suitable for educating children in infant classes.

While it is apparent how Aistear aims to support children's learning, there are also some critiques of it play-based approach. Mannion's research (2019), critically evaluates play-based curriculum Aistear. Here she highlights the importance of clearly understanding Aistear's and play-based learning, the need for government legislations, sufficient training, the presents of knowledgeable workforce for its value to be realised. She also reports early years educators are challenged to deliver curricular programmes that is informed by the principles of Aistear and Siolta. It is also noted that teachers in primary schools have an overwhelming workload expected to implement the primary school curriculum while adhering to Aistear principles. Teachers are also tentative to fully implement Aistear in the absence of defined learning outcomes. Mannion concludes that Aistear cannot be fully implemented until such a time that it is fully supported by the educational system and sufficiently invested in, leaving present pedagogical practice as aspirational and mediocrity.

Pyle et al., (2020), findings somewhat similar, outlining a inconsistency between policy and practice and concern about limited definitions of terminology on play-based learning. Furthermore, it highlights the absence clear guidance how academic learning should be realized in play-based curriculum in practice. However, this study also outlines a concern regarding the academic benefits, as teacher involvement are fundamental in learning it is also fundamental during play to achieve academic learning, however, teachers' involvement in play does not occur in 50% of classroom studies.

Really the critique of Aistear or play-based curriculum is multifaceted. Neither of these papers are specifically critiquing play-based curriculum, the critique is more precisely about how this curriculum is presented to educators. While the primary school curriculum provides clear and defined terminology aims and goals including implementation guidelines, play-based curriculum remains very broad. These critiques show that while policy development is moving to the right direction, it is lacking in many distinct areas. While Aistear is suggested to be made part of the primary school curriculum there is no practical advice on how to do this. Teachers are left for their own devices to interpret and make their own meaning of Aistear and implement its principles as they see it fitting for their own practices. This creates a discontinuity in practice, thus resulting in an possibly imperfect implementation of play-based curriculum and consequently failing reap full benefits of this approach.

2.6.2 Primary School Curriculum Framework

Primary school curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999), similar to Aistear, is also a result of extensive development and planning with the involvement of stakeholders. In 1990 the Report of the Review Body on the primary curriculum was published. This document aimed to provide recommendations for the future implementation of

the new curriculum based on examining the performance of the 1971 New curriculum. This report was significant in leading to additional discussions and the support of the Minister for Education to continue with the primary school curriculum review process (Walsh, 2022).

With the establishment of an Implementation Committee, the Department of Education and Science (DES) provided for a planned phased introduction. Support was made available through the primary curriculum Support Programme and with the development of the primary school curriculum Introduction handbook. The revised curriculum was published in 1999 as a result of years of development and research with twenty-three full-coloured handbooks, two booklets, curriculum content, and teacher guidelines for each of the eleven subjects (Walsh, 2022).

The curriculum accounts for Irish society's educational, economic, social and cultural developments (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 2). It is a child-centred curriculum aiming for holistic education of children, recognising the individuality of each child as this can reflect on their unique way of learning.

The curriculum conveys that while there is a content and outcome requirement, this should be achieved using varied approaches. Furthermore, it suggests "flexibility to the school and the teacher in planning the learning experiences that are useful to the individual child at the various stages of their development" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 10) In fact, many areas of this curriculum appear to be similar and are reflected in Aistear. These similarities are visible, looking at Aistear's 12 Principles, Aistear Themes, primary school curriculum principles and the primary school curriculum areas.

The primary school curriculum is an outcome-based curriculum that assesses learning with formative assessment methods such as "diagnostic tests and standardised tests" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999, p. 18) while using informal tools such

as teachers' observation, classwork, and homework. In comparison, in the Aistear framework, the standardised tests for assessment purposes are not a requirement. Instead, assessment is an essential and integrated part of the curriculum and is mainly conducted through observations and reflections. Furthermore, while both curricula discuss how children learn through language, activity and discovery, and environment, Aistear also discusses how children learn through play, the central point of the curriculum. In contrast, the primary school curriculum fails to mention or recognise the importance of this medium.

In 2011 the Department of Education and Skills publication of Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 altered the antecedences of primary education by advocating for additional time for language and mathematics modules. The strategy also required the NCCA to redevelop the language area of the primary curriculum framework.

As a result, the new primary Language curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile was published in 2019 (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). This curriculum update aimed to improve literacy and numeracy skills by providing more time in the curriculum for language and mathematics. However, the change in the curriculum did not include a re-adjustment of time allocations across the curriculum. This change has significantly strained students and teachers and contributed to a previously established curriculum overload.

These curriculum frameworks are now 13 and 23 years old, respectively. Therefore, in 2020 the National Council for curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) initiated an update for the primary school curriculum, the Draft primary curriculum Framework (2020) and an update for Aistear, Updating Aistear Rationale and process (2021b). Next, these papers are further explored.

2.7 The Proposed Curriculum Updates

2.7.1 The Draft primary curriculum Framework

The developmental process of the Draft Primary Curriculum included research consultation and working closely with 43 schools and stakeholders (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020). The rationale for the update of the framework consists of the changes in Irish society and further information about how children learn and develop. While studies such as Growing Up in Ireland (2021), longitudinal research highlights the social, economic and cultural environment's effect on children's development and how these changes impact their lives. Others, like the NCCA's longitudinal study of Children's school Lives (2021), explicitly explore children's experiences from preschool into primary school and transfer into post-primary, directly supporting the redevelopment and review of the primary school curriculum. Furthermore, the rationale also highlights the need for the curriculum to provide children with learning experiences that are currently relevant and engaging.

In addition, the document examines both the success, such as the increased use of active learning methodologies, improved maths, science and language development and the challenges, such as curriculum overload and how subjects are presented, catering for individual needs or using assessment in a meaningful way (Irish National Teacher's Organisation, 2019; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020). Besides the apparent need to address the curriculum challenges and incorporate the new research findings in response to national priorities and social issues, it voices a need for increasing time allocation for social, personal health and physical education, besides incorporating new curricula such as coding and computational thinking, education about religions and beliefs and ethics, modern foreign languages, and to place a greater emphasis on wellbeing.' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020, p. 2).

The increased social diversity is also reflected in primary school classrooms, where teachers must be prepared and adequately equipped to respond to student needs. The redeveloped primary school curriculum will support schools and educators in responding to this diversity while supporting "children to feel respected, valued and engaged in learning through appropriately tailored experiences and through positive interactions within the school community" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020, p. 3).

As a result of the extensive research, consultation, networks and deliberation, a need for a curriculum framework with "a clear a vision and principles – what's important in primary education and why - description, in broad terms, of what should be prioritised in children's learning" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020, p. 4). The principles, competencies, and attributes of each key competency's criticality outlined in the document show a remarkable resemblance to Aistear.

Also, the discussion on inclusive education and diversity, placing the child in the centre of the curriculum, offering a variety of assessment methods, and highlighting the critical role of the educator in supporting children's learning.

2.7.2 Updating Aistear: Rationale and Process

In 2021 the National Council for curriculum and Assessment published a document Updating Aistear: Rationale and Process (2021b), calling for a review and update of the 2009 Aistear framework. This document outlines the plans for an update, including a brief about the changes that occurred during the last years, provides a rationale for the update notes the national developments in early childhood education. Finally, it gives an overview of the proposed updating process.

Similar to the Draft primary school curriculum, Updating Aistear also considers the changes, developments, policies and strategies and the changes in Irish society. Policy development such

as the development and implementation of the early childhood education (ECCE) (Department of Children, Equality Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021) programme, the establishment of Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service, the establishment of early-years education inspections and also the improvement of qualified workforce representation in the sector are all significant changes and contributed to the rationale for updating Aistear.

The paper proposes a discontinuity between early childhood education and primary education that needs to be addressed – "one of the priorities for the NCCA is synergy, consistency and continuity across its curriculum and assessment development work from early childhood to the end of post-primary education" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2021b, p. 7). Furthermore, the document states that "Aistear is a critical part of the curriculum and assessment infrastructure in education" and that "it will be vital to consider how curriculum and assessment continuity is conceptualised, articulated and achieved" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2021b, p. 7). Finally, it suggests that the two previously very much autonomous curricula, Aistear and the primary school curriculum, in their updated form, will intertwine, creating curriculums that will provide consistency and collaboration to best cater to children's education.

The update is proposed in two phases, where phase one includes the stakeholders' feedback about Aistear, as this will be used as a foundation for developing the initial proposal. During phase two, the proposal will be shared with stakeholders to collect feedback before finalising the updated Aistear framework. To continue with the success of the previous portraiture study (during the development of Aistear in 2009), the NCCA issued a tender for a proposal of consultation with children to gather feedback about their experiences in the education setting (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2021b).

The NCCA views this update as an opportunity for consultation and collaboration with stakeholders to strengthen the view that children are at the centre of Aistear while focusing on their lives in the current climate, recognising the changes in the early childhood education sector while reflecting on the past to improve further quality and provision of children's learning and development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020).

2.8 Previous research

2.8.1 Aistear vis-à-vis the primary curriculum: the experiences of early years teachers in Ireland

Gray & Ryan's research aimed to explore teachers "experiences of implementing Aistear alongside the primary curriculum" (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 2). Moreover, it aims to offer an insight into how the two curricula (Aistear and The primary school curriculum) work beside each other in reality. During the introduction, the authors clearly state some essential information, such as Aistear "sought to complement and extend the primary school curriculum (PSC) in infant class level" and that the Aistear age span "was purposefully selected to include children in their first two years of primary school" (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 2). The proposed idea of the two curricula working together, however, is very optimistic and noble. As it became prominent from the research later, junior and senior infant teachers were overwhelmed with the demands of applying these different policies in everyday teaching and felt inadequately trained for planning and applying play-based learning opportunities (Gray & Ryan, 2016).

The study embraced a multi-method approach using questionnaires (n= 104), one-to-one interviews (n= 6) and classroom observations (n= 6) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic (n= participants sample size) (Gray & Ryan, 2016).

The questionnaires included information on the demographic cohort of the participants and inquired about teachers' roles and education levels. Views on play-based curriculum and

opinions on the impact of Aistear were also investigated. Lastly, teachers' beliefs and 'experiences of play-based approaches to learning, and the implementation of dual pedagogical approach' was explored (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 6). In addition, the interviews included 12 semi-structured questions examining "teachers' training experiences with play-based teaching techniques and their opinion of the Aistear Early Childhood curriculum Framework" (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 6). Follow-up classroom observations were then conducted to "identify the types of play available to children, whether the activities were child-led or teacher-led, the amount of time spent on each activity, and the time of the day when they were carried out" (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 6).

Unexpectedly, many of the findings of this research covenant with O Donoghue's (2019) and O'Kane's (2016) findings; teachers are not confident in implementing a play-based curriculum approach such as Aistear, mainly due to concerns about personal abilities in teaching the primary school curricula through the method of play. The research reveals that "play is afforded peripheral status"; it is perceived as the recreational time before 'real' work (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 14). Moreover, as barriers, the paper mentions large pupil numbers, a need for significant physical space, and the issue of curricula overload as teachers are expected to conjoin Aistear with the primary school curriculum objectives. However, interestingly the issue of assessment was not revealed as an area of concern.

In comparison, the subsequent research examines the implementation of Aistear by Early Years educators and primary school teachers in pre-schools and infant classes.

2.8.2 Implementing Aistear – The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework across varied settings: Experiences of early years educators and infant primary school teachers in the Irish context

Woods et al. (2022) published one of the most recent research studies exploring primary school teachers' and early years educators' views about implementing Aistear. Similar to Grey & Ryan's research (2016), this too searches for answers on how "educators adapt their existing curriculum and daily routine" (Woods et al., 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, the research also examines the impact of these changes on the children from the educators' perspective.

The researchers used an inductive qualitative approach, searching for patterns in the data collected through semi-structured interviews to develop explanations and theories for those patterns. It was a small-scale study with six early years educators and seven primary school teachers as participants. The study's findings are presented in five key themes and several sub-themes.

The first main finding is the difference in perception of Aistear between the participants. Again, similar to Gray & Ryan (2016), this research also confirmed the issue of curriculum overload, child-teacher ratio and adequate training and lack of resources to support educators in primary school settings while highlighting teachers' positive experiences such as enhanced social and language skills development. However, interestingly, but not surprisingly, early childhood educators had somewhat varying responses. While primary school teachers discuss 'Aistear time' with five teacher-led activities that the children can experience in rotation, like O Donoghue (2019), early years educators talk about daily activities based on children's interests and are child-led. Essentially Aistear is weaned through the day in an early childhood setting; teachers are more comfortable and knowledgeable about how to use and how to implement and plan learning opportunities; for them, it is not an extra curriculum that needs to be fitted into the already busy day, it is the basis of how they plan the day.

Early years educators also conduct assessments such as observations to document children's learning and to plan for future learning experiences. In contrast, for primary school teachers, the assessment includes formal assessment techniques such as "diagnostic tests and standardised tests" as outlined in the primary curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999). While Aistear Siolta's practice guide (2022) provides assessment tools, examples and resources specifically catered for assessing children learning and development, teachers feel that there is a need for a formal assessment to satisfy the primary school curriculum expectations (Woods et al., 2022).

The fundamental differences in primary school teachers' and early years educators' understanding of a play-based curriculum also manifest as a result of differences in educational training during their professional development and the characteristic differences between the two curricula. As Gray & Ryan (2016, p. 15) points out, changing mindsets "requires a pedagogical shift from the 'teachiny', traditional didactic approach to the one that fully embraces the wider learning context".

2.8.3 Implementing a play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum in Northern Ireland primary schools: What lessons have we learned?

This third paper evaluates a two-year pilot program in Northern Ireland. The Enriched curriculum (EC) was initially introduced in 2000 in six primary schools, but by the end of the two-year lead time, one hundred and twenty schools participated. The pilot program aimed to "ease the transition of four- to five-year-old children from pre-school or home to compulsory schooling". Besides aiming to ease the transition, the program also anticipated to "remove the early experience of persistent failure and to promote children's sense of self-competence and self-esteem" (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 55). The outlined teaching model emphasises the use of

activity-based teaching methods hoping to engage and inspire children's creativity and enhance social development.

The initial cohort of participants received extensive training, while the study notes that participants who joined the program at a later date received less training and support for implementation. The evaluation strategy was designed to gather information from four different perspectives such as classroom observations to evaluate teachers' adjustment to their practices, to quantifiably measure children's learning outcomes, to congregate parents' and teachers' perceptions about the curriculum and children's progress, interview school principals on the impact of EC, and children's view on the transition process (Walsh et al., 2010).

Lessons learned are also grouped into four main areas; three will be discussed for this review. The first is the value and the meaning of a play-based curriculum conferring how teachers found the new EC rewarding, how it has increased interactions with the children and how they were able to maintain a 'playful tone' during structured activities. Classroom observations also confirmed a substantial shift in teaching practices, and most parents were pleased with the changes. The analysis also indicated a definite improvement in social, emotional and dispositional qualities, outperforming traditional classes' results. It also highlights some extent of scepticism towards the new curriculum both from parents and educators. Also, it emphasises the critical role of teachers and the need for adequate training in delivering a play-based curriculum in order to reap the most benefits.

The second is the importance of teachers' confidence and knowledge. As mentioned in other papers, teachers need to be knowledgeable, prepared and confident to implement a play-based curriculum effectively. While this study finds that nearly all teachers in Year 1 and 2 classes (junior classes) had sound professional knowledge, it also highlights the need to address teachers' understanding of "developmentally appropriate practice and how these can impact

pedagogy" and addresses the increased "weight to the role of the adult in the learning process" (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 59).

Easing transitions in a play-based curriculum, specifically from a play-based curriculum to formal practice, is also being discussed. While the key aim of EC was easing the transition from preschool to Year 1, it also showed improvement from Year 2 to Year 3. Creating continuity helps children to settle easier, be enthusiastic and generally enjoy learning while being prepared and excited for challenges. However, interestingly the paper suggests providing continuity. At the same time, it is essential, may not be as important as teaching and supporting children on how to deal with discontinuity, as this will help them in adulthood to tackle uncertainties and challenges (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988; Walsh et al., 2010).

The paper concludes that a developmentally appropriate play-based curriculum provides more quality learning experiences than the traditional approach. Children's dispositions and social and cognitive developments flourished, and the transition times were less stressful. However, it also voices the unease and uncertainty of some teachers regarding how to develop an effective, developmentally appropriate curriculum that simultaneously guarantees educational value while maintaining children's interests. These findings call for a clarification of play-based pedagogy to create a balanced, integrated curriculum valuing both teacher and child-led activities and building a continuum between play and curriculum (Walsh et al., 2010).

2.9 Conclusions

In these short examinations of these research papers, it becomes apparent why there is a need to update both Aistear and the primary school curriculum frameworks. It is also evident that findings relate to each other and show consistency. As infant primary school teachers are at the centre of this change, their understanding and belief in the success and appropriateness of

Aistear are crucial to accomplish cooperation during the implementation of the planned new primary school curriculum.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Research is a process of organised, systematic methods following scientific procedures to study or make inquiries in a social context of a specific phenomenon, as Creswell (Creswell J. W., 2012b) defines, "a process of steps used to collect and analyse information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue". The researcher decides on the theoretical and philosophical foundations to justify the research design during the research design. In this chapter, the research design will be outlined in detail, providing the rationale of the choices made and how these formulated the overall research. First the research design and rationale will be discussed followed by methods of data collection, participant selection and sampling. Next, the data analysis method is outlined subsequently discussing the ethical considerations, quality and rigour, and research positionality.

3.2 Paradigm/Philosophical Underpinnings /Research Rationale

This is a small-scale qualitative study conducted with a phenomenological lens and Interpretivism paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A qualitative research design was chosen as this approach is appropriate for exploring and understanding participants' views on the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As this research aims to understand teachers' experiences, a qualitative over quantitative design is ideal. A research design with a mixed-method exploratory sequential design where the initial stage follows qualitative while the second part of the research follows a quantitative research design would provide more information and a possibility to generalise the findings for the greater teacher community. However, once the research questions were formulated, this

research design was not justified as the questions concentrated on personal experiences solely, therefore not requiring a mixed-method approach (Farrow et al., 2020).

While the strengths of qualitative research are founded on gathering data from personal experiences, it also presents some limitations. Some of the main limitations include; lack of objectivity as the collected data is interpreted by the researcher; lack of reliability; for example, is the result replicable?; lack of generalizability in the absence of quantitative data; for example, are the result applicable to the larger population; lack of validity does the final research present coherent findings with the research aim and questions (Grossoehme, 2014). To address these limitations, the researcher aims to deliver a systematic and transparent design emphasising the methodology and rigour of data analysis, particularly in interpreting results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Meyrick, 2006).

A phenomenological study accentuates the importance of personal perspective, interpretations, values, and the participants' individual opinions of reality. Phenomenological lens was applied during this study as why it examines participants lived experiences and interpretations, during the analysis process it was I who interpreted participants experiences. While this study concentrates on one group - primary school infant teachers- in a similar social setting -primary school- regarding the same issue -experiences with the Aistear Curriculum- the individuals develop wide-ranging and various individual meanings about the proposed research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). This extensive personal information will provide for a rich and meaningful research.

A research paradigm is a framework of the thought process and beliefs showing how the researcher believes knowledge is developed. It refers to the process of creating the design of the research. It is a "basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in

choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" as explained by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105).

The topic of this study is to explore teachers lived experiences with Aistear. These experiences are personal and varied, thus, the collected data will be subjective or from a unique perspective. Collecting data from a unique view should also provide deep and meaningful information. Guided by the nature of the topic, the supremacy of the chosen paradigm, interpretivism, started to emerge.   To investigate the participants' views and individual experiences, the paradigm of interpretivism was applied in the research design to provide a deep, meaningful, and complex picture of the presented phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ontology is concerned with the question of "what constitutes reality, while epistemology is concerned with how we will acquire the knowledge to learn about reality" (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). A positivistic ontology would suggest that the questions explored in this research could have a dichotomous answer; the same responses would be collected regardless of the researcher using the same research questions (Scotland, 2012). However, as discussed earlier, this research applies the interpretivism paradigm to study a phenomenon focused on individual lived experiences. I believe that our reality, what we constitute as reality, is affected and formed depending on experiences and our perception of the world. Teachers' answers will depend on many factors such as experience, training, support available, knowledge and personal perceptions. Therefore, the ontological positioning of this research is within relativism, viewing reality as subjective and individually created (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The epistemological positioning of this study is within subjectivism, understanding that reality perceived by others needs to be interpreted to discover true meaning. This positioning suggests the understanding that even if we are studying the same phenomenon, each participant may construct their meaning differently, and knowledge is a compromise formed by the

collaborators (Scotland, 2012). As reality and knowledge are formulated during "interaction between humans and their world and are developed and transmitted in a social context" consequently, we can only understand the social world if our research participants are individuals who are participating in it.

With this in mind, the research was designed to investigate a social phenomenon, using a purposeful sampling method to invite participants who have experience with this social phenomenon. It was decided to use semi-structured interviews to collect individuals' experiences and knowledge and a thematic analysis method to interpret data to form an answer to the research questions *(Figure 12)*.
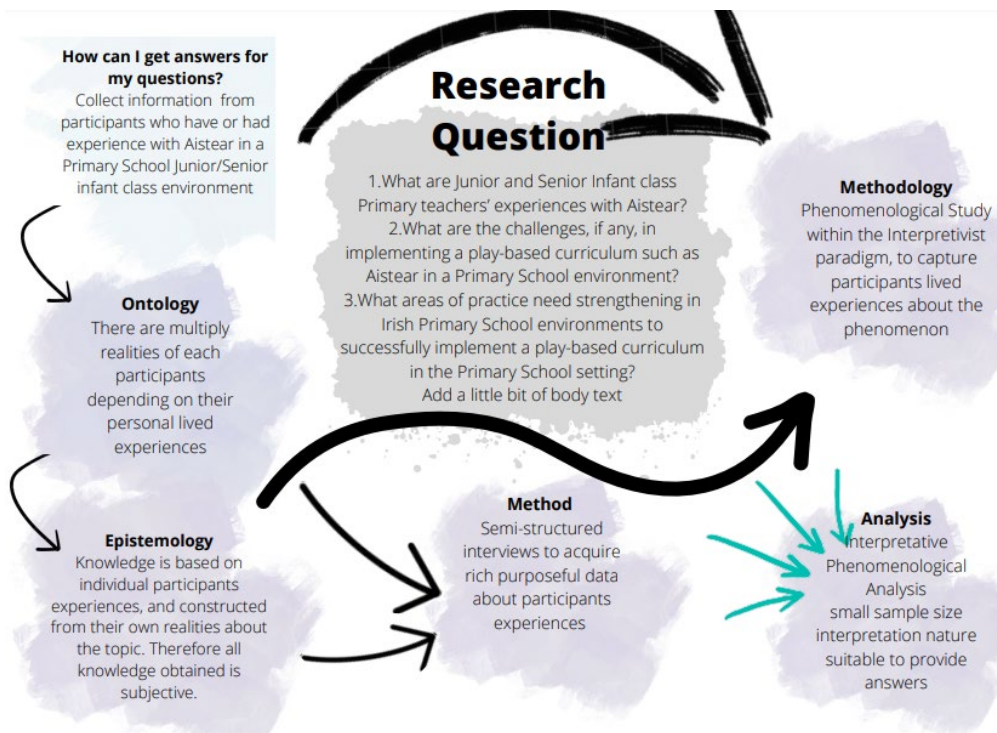
Figure 12: Zolei, 2022

While this design may be the most suitable for the current research, it also yields some limitations, such as its limited transferability or subjectivity, that prevent the generalisation of the results. Furthermore, the pre-existing bias, traditions, and prejudices that influence our behaviour and understanding, both for participants and the researcher, need to be accounted for

3.3 Methods / Data collection

To collect rich, meaningful data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore participants' perspectives on the research topic. Interviews are the most prevalent data collection method used in phenomenological research to learn about how a phenomenon is experienced individually by each participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Six semi-structured individual interviews were conducted during April and May 2022, including one pilot. Semi-structured interviews are a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions; this combination provides opportunities for both the researcher and the participants to discuss and elaborate on specific interview topics in more detail (Adams, 2015). Establishing rapport is an essential part of the interview process to create a trusting, safe and relaxed environment where the interviewee shares their experiences freely and comfortably (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The interview schedule contained a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. This approach provides prospects to establish a relationship while collecting general and demographic information about participants. Furthermore, it offers opportunities to discuss and elaborate on specific topics in detail (Adams, 2015).

The initial structured interview questions concentrated on gathering demographic information about the interviewee. In contrast, the broad, open-ended questions were aimed to encourage participants to share their experiences and thoughts on the subject. To further extend the open-ended questions during the interview, I used prompts to encourage the participants to think about the questions further and probes to encourage the interviewee to elaborate on the questions further (Fox, 2009).

The interview schedule was pre-approved by my research supervisor before the pilot interview. The pilot interview was conducted using a convenience sample, an infant primary school

teacher who was not participating in the research. The pilot interview allows one to practice semi-structured interviewing and try the interview questions and schedule. The piloting is a crucial element of the research as it "refers to a mini version of a full-scale study" (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Following the pilot interview, some questions were removed as they were deemed irrelevant to the study, and some were rephrased to be more precise and explicit using simple language. I have also decided to mould some of the more minor questions into one comprehensive question where the previously used questions become prompts and probes to create more conversation around a particular subject.

The sample size for the interviews is four to six participants. Four primary schools from the Midlands of Ireland were approached with the research information and consent forms. Due to Covid19 restrictions, a research information document and consent forms were left with the school secretary, who addressed them to the relevant teachers and the principal. I followed up with each school secretary in the four schools where teachers agreed to participate in the study and we organised the date and time of the interviews, with the secretary acting as moderator.

The interviews were in-person between April and May 2022, depending on each participant's circumstances. All interviews were carried out in the participant's natural working environment, in their classrooms, and lasted between 35 - 60 minutes. Consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. The interviews were audio recorded with a password-protected personal smartphone. The recorded data was transcribed and anonymised and stored on a password-protected personal computer in a password-protected file. Participants were provided with the transcribed data for verification purposes.

3.4 Participants Selection / Sampling

This research study seeks answers to specific questions regarding Aistear in primary schools, as this type of information is only held by particular members of the community; a purposeful sampling technique was implemented.

Purposeful sampling is a technique where participants are identified and selected to create an information-rich and knowledgeable group of individuals who previously experienced the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2013). Creating a good correspondence between the research question and selected sampling is essential to collecting the most comprehensive data. The purposeful sampling technique used widely in qualitative research refers to the process of recruiting a specific niche of the population or a group of people who are experienced and familiar with the research phenomenon, thus, expected to provide thorough information.

While the researcher acknowledges that other primary school educators are also competent and concerned with the topic, this research concentrates on primary school infant teachers' experiences as Aistear is the proposed curriculum framework from birth to six years (Creswell, 2013). Children in Ireland can enrol in primary school or junior infant classes at four (at the start of the school year). Therefore, children's education in junior and Senior infant classes should be guided by the Primary School Curriculum Framework and Aistear (Murphy, 2014; Citizens Information, 2019). In this regard, teachers of the above classes are the most significantly affected. These teachers create the most appropriate target group for this research (Bryman, 2008).

The process starts with defining the qualities the informants should have while also defining qualities that result from exclusion from the study; this process is guided by and greatly influenced by the interpretivist nature of the study (Tongco, 2007). The research study focuses on gathering information on infant class teachers' experiences in primary school settings; thus,

the target group is Irish primary school infant class teachers who are currently or in the past used Aistear in their practices. Teachers from classes first to sixth and teachers who did not or do not use Aistear in their practices were excluded from this study. This resulted in a target group of key persons with extensive information streaming from personal experiences about the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Next, the target group was identified, followed by a selection of individuals from this target group. During selecting participants, their experience, knowledge, interest, availability and willingness to participate were also considered (Palinkas et al., 2013).

This is a small-scale study with six participants; this decision was also influenced by the interpretivist nature of the research study and the chosen interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Initially, I approached four primary schools in the Midlands with the research information form personally addressed to each junior and senior infant teacher, a copy of the information form and a consent form for the principal. Three out of the four schools took part in the study, four teachers from one school, two junior and two senior infant teachers, and one junior infant teacher from each of the other two schools. The small sample size allows for the analysis of each interview in great detail. While this provides limited transferability, it is suggested by Creswell (2013) that authenticity is achieved by gathering meaningful quality data from the participants instead of the quantity of the data.

3.5 Data Analysis

IPA, or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007), was chosen as the data analysis method. It was deemed the most appropriate for this research because of the small sample size, its interpretation nature embedded in the research paradigm and its suitability to provide answers to the research aim and questions. IPA, integrating four philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, "seeks to understand the lived experience"

(Tuffour, 2017, p. 3). While Husserl theorises that the participant's experiences can be studied by setting aside the researchers's prior knowledge, Heidegger's theory that 'there is a phenomenon out there ready to be explored but requiring the detective work of the researcher to bring it to light using their prior experience, assumptions or preconceptions to make sense of the experience is more appealing to me. This theoretical underpinning of IPA is hermeneutics, referred to as the "art and science of interpretation and meaning" (Tuffour, 2017, p. 3).

While I do not have extensive experience in primary school teaching and implementing the Primary School Curriculum, as a qualified early childhood educator, I have pre-existing knowledge about Aistear and how this curriculum framework should be implemented to best support children's development. It would be difficult to disregard this knowledge. Instead, I use this knowledge to help make sense of participants' experiences and create a more complex and dynamic analysis. The 'double hermeneutic' phrase refers to the practice of me making sense of the participant's sense-making, which is also a critical part of the analysis process (Tuffour, 2017). IPA is also devoted to providing a thorough illustrative analysis of the phenomenon, examining each participant's data with great care and depth before cross-referencing to merge and differentiate the data.

 While it has excellent potential to create data that interpret and understand people's experiences, as with all theories, this also has its limitations. One of the many limitations is connected to the use of language, in particular, "whether both the participants and researchers have the requisite communication skills to communicate the nuances of experiences successfully" (Tuffour, 2017, p. 4). However, this limitation is minimised with the participants and me having a similar educational background and the use of language during the interview was worded clearly without using language specifically used in either of the professions.

Furthermore, if an answer contained any language whose meanings were not evident, further questions were asked of the participant to explain what they meant by that.

Furthermore, it is critiqued that IPA focuses on the lived experiences of participants. However, it fails to explore why these experiences occur. Trustworthy researchers will explore the experiences and investigate the circumstances that initiate the phenomenon (Tuffour, 2017).

The IPA analysis aims to "try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 66). To obtain the most comprehensive data, I followed Smith & Osborn's step-by-step approach and continuously engaged with collected data during the process of interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Step 1 -   I have uploaded each interview to MAXQDA to transcribe each interview and while listening to them. This process helped me to familiarise myself with the data collected. Next, I printed and re-read the transcripts again while making comments about interesting or significant response on the printouts.

Step 2 -   While rereading the transcript, I started to create initial themes in MAXQDA, and created emerging theme titles that captured the quality of the response.

Step 3 -   Once the initial themes were created, I re-read each initial theme to further break done the data creating sub-themes. Using MAXQDA I than started to organise these sub-themes looking for connection, merging some of the sub-themes or creating emergent themes with superior concepts in cluster themes. (Appendices 7/8/9)

Step 4 -   In MAXQDA and on my printouts I have crosschecked themes and participant actual answers to validate the connection.

Step 5 -   As a final step I produced coherent themes, cluster themes named superior

themes, and all superior themes listed, including the themes that make up the

relevant superior theme. Themes were identified to aid the organisation of

analysis and to help with including the original source of data.   Some themes

were cut depending on the structure or richness of data – Table of themes.

Step 6 -   The same method is applied to all data collected. Once each interview transcript

had a table of themes, the themes were crosschecked, and Step 5 was repeated

to create the superior master table of themes for the group.

Step 7 -   At the write up stage, I used a narrative approach using the participant's own

words to interpret the meaning while I discussed the links of each superior

theme.

Step 8 -   Write up of conclusion of the findings

(Smith & Osborn, 2007, pp. 66-78)

3.6 Ethics

The ethical considerations follow the guidelines of the National College of Ireland's Ethical

Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants. The study was

conducted with the National College of Ireland ethics committee's approval.

A qualitative study's ethical considerations are delicate compared to quantitative research. This

is due to its nature, where the focus is on exploring and describing participants' experiences in

their environment. However, ethics in research not only applies to interaction with participants;

it also includes the "appropriateness of the research design, the methodological design…as well

as behaviours in reporting data" (Orb et al., 2000, p. 93).

According to Ramos (1989), three main areas affect the ethics of qualitative studies: the relationship between researcher and participant, the data analysis that relies on the researcher's subjective interpretation, and the overall research design. All knowledge generated in this research is co-produced by the participants and me, as while they offer their interpretation, I interpret this during the analysis process, thus generating the overall knowledge (Orb et al., 2000).

In qualitative studies, the aim is to describe a phenomenon using the participants' voices, which the researcher interprets; this process is defined as an insider perspective. Accepting this stance, I recognise that all participants are autonomous individuals who take part and share information voluntarily. Participants are recognised as unique individuals and treated equally without prejudice, regardless of their social and cultural backgrounds. Participants were treated with the highest ethical standards. Participants are provided with detailed information about their study involvement before agreeing to participate. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time or to refuse to discuss or answer questions that they are not prepared to do so. With this in mind, informed consent was obtained from each participant, and verbal consent was received at the beginning of each interview when participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Pseudonyms assured participants anonymity from the moment of recording. Furthermore, I have decided not to name the primary schools where participants practised. This could have resulted in recognising participants, as the schools were small rural schools in the Midlands. Protecting participants' well-being, both physical and mental, is vital. Thus I ensured that no physical or psychological harm came to them.

Following the interview sought confirmation on the use of material. If they felt satisfied with the process, I also advised each participant that I would be providing them with the transcripts for verification purposes and the final submitted study would be shared with them.

Data collected during the study is treated as sensitive information, and as such, it is collected and kept on my password-protected technology devices. Data collected is anonymised, and data is only accessible by the researcher and the research supervisor. All collected data is stored and kept for five years in line with the National College of Ireland requirements, then destroyed.

3.7 Quality / Rigour/ Trustworthiness / Validity and Reliability

Producing quality and rigour in research is essential for creating a meaningful and trustworthy study. Some of the main concerns with qualitative research are validity, reliability, generalisability, and objectivity. While reliability and validity are rooted in the positivist perspective, to use these in realistic approaches, they need to be redefined to reflect the various ways of establishing truth (Golafshani, 2003).

Reliability in quantitative research refers to the consistency or replicability of the results and that it accurately represents the study population (Golafshani, 2003). In quantitative research, reliability is concerned with evaluating the quality of the research, while in contrast, reliability in qualitative study concentrates on "generating understanding" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). Traditionally, validity in quantitative research ascertains if research essentially measures what it aimed to measure (Golafshani, 2003).

However, according to Lincoln & Guba (1985), reliability in qualitative research could be replaced by 'dependability' and validity with 'credibility'. They suggest that "there can be no validity without reliability" and thus "no credibility without dependability", demonstrating credibility is necessary to establish dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Trustworthiness refers to the notion of how the researcher can thus convince the audiences that the research results and findings are worth recognising and accounting for. The validity or trustworthiness of the research will be enhanced using the participants' own 'voice' during the data analysis method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and a clear description of all the steps of the research project (Sousa, 2014). The member checking technique was applied by providing the participant with the transcripts for validation.

Credibility refers to the notion of establishing certainty that the results are accurate and credible; the strategies that I employed during the research to achieve credibility were a detailed design of the interviews, including interview scheduling, conducting a pilot interview, use of credible references and sources, member checking and peer debriefing and critical conversations with peers and research supervisor were used to maintain credibility.

Transferability refers to the generalisation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I applied the purposeful sampling method to form a specific niche group with extensive lived experience of the studied phenomena. As the external validity cannot be specified to provide transferability, I attempted to provide thick descriptions of the research process to provide the necessary "database that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Dependability suggests that the study's result is replicable using the same research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To support dependability, I provided a detailed research design outlining the steps of participant selection, interview schedule, data collection and analysis methods used.

Confirmability and transferability are also categories to create trustworthiness, as created by Lincoln & Guba (1985). Conformity refers to the extent to which the findings could be proved or authenticated by others. To support confirmability, I have used an audit trail detailing each

step of the data analysis process and used participant 'voice' during the analysis process to accurately portray participants' responses.

While quantitative research offers both 'internal and external' generalisations, qualitative research urges information on the meanings and experiences of the 'whole' person or a specific group. However, the research proposes purposeful sampling and provides information and rationale for the target group. Therefore, the result of the study will be generalisable to an extent similar to a quantitative result where a mean average score does not represent "any of the numbers of which it is an average" (Winter, 2000).

3.8 Research Positionality / Reflexivity

Research positionality refers to the description of my worldview as a researcher, my values and beliefs, and the position I have adopted during the research. It 'reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study, and it also "influences both how research is conducted, its outcomes, and results"(Rowe as cited in Holmes, 2020, p.2), furthermore "it influences what a researcher has chosen to investigate" (Maltrud; Gris as cited in Holmes, 2020, p. 2). My worldviews have affected my choices during the planning and designing of this study. My beliefs about what constitutes reality influenced my choice of ontological assumptions, and how I view the nature of knowledge affected my choice of epistemological assumptions; in fact, everything I did during this research, from planning to competition, bears my mark.

Holmes (2020) suggests a reflection on positions taken in three areas: my position within the study, my position about the participants, and finally, my position concerning the research context.

I am a professional educator with an early childhood education background and a qualified further education teacher. I am also a foreigner who, while I came to Ireland 22 years ago and completed all my higher education here, still retains some of the values and beliefs about education that I experienced during my childhood in my home country had been retained. I am also a mother with two school-aged children who experienced early childhood and primary school education processes in Ireland. I have a reasonable amount of knowledge and understanding of the research topic from more than one angle: the child, the mother, and the teacher. However, while this knowledge was unquestionably invaluable, I needed more solid and professional expertise from the primary school point of view. Generating my literature review helped me somewhat overcome this shortcoming; I have thoroughly researched and educated myself about the primary school curriculum and its developmental process, learning about the draft primary school curriculum and engaging with literature about the process of updating Aistear and other relevant research in the subject. This helped me to create a holistic view of the research topic.

Primary school education in Ireland was always valued and highly regarded, whereas early childhood education is still fighting for the acknowledgement it deserves. This made me wary of the general assumption that primary school teachers undervalue early childhood educators and their work. This assumption has its roots in how people, in general, historically undervalue childcare educators. This assumption initially made me a little nervous talking to the teachers. To overcome this, I have thoroughly researched the primary school curriculum and the history of the development of the primary school curriculum. It also helped to remind me that I have to put my pre-existing beliefs, views, and assumptions aside, as these should not influence the research. While I know that I cannot entirely abolish my bias, instead, I acknowledge these traits. I used this opportunity to learn about myself, grow as a person, and understand how these will impact my research.

I noticed that the teachers were also anxious about the interview, specifically about how much they knew about Aistear and the play-based curriculum. This was very interesting and reminded me that most people worry about failing or making mistakes. I am genuine and easy-going, and the interview's professional but conversational style helped me connect well with each participant. A shift in the atmosphere was detectable shortly after the initial few minutes of the interviews. With every interview, I have become more confident in my knowledge and demeanour, which has undoubtedly improved the quality of the interviews. The interviews went very smoothly; the teachers were highly engaged and enthusiastic, and with some of them had interesting conversations following the interview. Strangely, I felt that they had more respect for me and possibly for my profession after the interview.

To stay reflexive during the process, I have engaged regularly with friends from this course, friends I know from early childhood education and some friends who are also primary school teachers. These persons acted as critical friends with whom I could discuss my ideas, thoughts and concerns and receive vital and honest valuable feedback. Furthermore, regular de-briefing sessions were also held with my dissertation supervisor during the course of the project.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this study. The research is a small-scale phenomenological study with an Interpretivism paradigm. The choice of ontological and epistemological positioning, participant selection, and interpretative phenomenological analysis were all informed by the research approach and paradigm while representing my views and beliefs regarding the study. Throughout the entire process of this research, ethical considerations were prioritised to safeguard all participants.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents themes from participants' interviews regarding the lived experiences of primary school teachers using the National curriculum Framework 'Aistear' (a play-based postmodern curriculum). These themes are related to the understanding of 'Aistear' and lived experiences related to everyday practice. This chapter reports participants' experiences and discusses the findings with embedded discussion from the participants to demonstrate their perceptions of the study's phenomena. The themes and sub-themes that emerged through the data analysis process, discuss and address the studies research questions. First a short introduction of the themes is presented followed by analyzation of each theme and sub-themes subsequently closing with a conclusion.

4.2 Demographic of participants

Demographic of Participants

Participant 1
Female, Aged 46
7 years of childcare experience
20 years of teaching experience
20 years of experience teaching infant classes
3-year college degree

Participant 2
Female, Aged 41
20 years of teaching experience
18 years of teaching infant classes
3-year college degree

Participant 3
Female, Aged 34
11 years of teaching experience
3 years of teaching in infant classes
3-year college degree

Participant 4
Female, Aged 35
14 years of teaching experience
9 years of teaching in infant classes
3-year college degree

Participant 5
Female, Aged 40
7 years of experience as a Special Educational Needs teacher
1st year in teaching infant class
3-year college degree

4.3. Themes

What does Aistear mean? 'Perceptions on terminology'

This first theme identifies and discusses teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of play-based learning and what participants consider child-led, adult-led, free or structured play. As 'Aistear' is a play-based curriculum, it is essential to gain knowledge of teachers' perceptions of these terms. Understanding teachers' views in light of their lived experiences since incorporating Aistear, a play-based curriculum into their primary school curriculum, helps us gain knowledge about what they consider to be their role when including play in the classroom. During the interview process, each teacher referred to the above terms somewhat differently, suggesting that their understanding of them is slightly different, thus seeing their role also slightly inversely too.

The sub-themes of this master theme are: Why play? What is Aistear? Child-led play is:, Adult led or Structured play?

Experiences of encountering a play-based curriculum – 'Aistear.'

This theme outlines teachers' lived experiences with implementing Aistear, discussing their challenges and the support they received. It highlights participants the need for more support in areas such as training, resources, and time allocation as expressed by participants. The level of support received, and teachers' previous experiences appear to be connected to the challenges teachers experienced and affect their practices.

The sub-themes of this master theme are: Why do teachers need support?, What support do teachers need from the government?, The importance of supportive environment, Everyday challenges with the curriculum, Time, personnel and resources – is there ever enough?

The joys 'The silver lining'

This theme explores teachers' perceptions of the positive benefits they have experienced since implementing Aistear in their practice. The theme discusses the teachers' positive experiences and perceptions of children's positive experiences with a play-based curriculum.

The sub-themes of this master theme are: Learning from who? What do children get out of it? – Teacher's perspective, For teachers – connection with children – meeting children's needs – how teachers perceive their role.
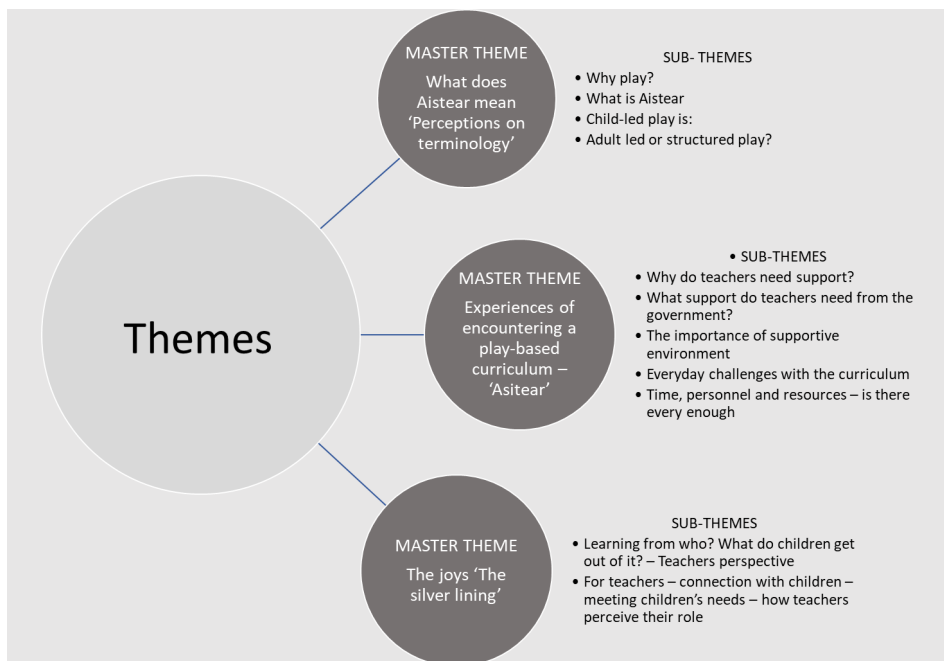
Figure 14: Zolei, 2022b

4.4. What does Aistear mean – 'Perceptions on terminology'

Why play?

Play and the importance of providing play opportunities have been recognised not only in child development theories but also by organisations and governments all over the globe (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009a). According to Gray (2013), a research professor from Boston College whose research and writing focus on how children learn naturally and the lifelong value of play, the descriptions of play by theorists and scholars can be described in five main points or characteristics. These are "(1) self-chosen and self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) guided by mental rules; (4) imaginative; and (5) conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind" (Gray, 2013). Aistear, The Early Childhood curriculum Framework, has a very similar, although a bit more detailed characteristic list for play.

So why is it essential to provide opportunities for play for children between the ages of 0-6 years? Plato encouraged free play to support physical development and to gain life skills, while Aristotle valued physical activities and play to support children's overall development (Catalano, 2021).

What is Aistear?

Aistear is a play-based curriculum for children from 0-6 years. Teachers' perceptions and understanding of Aistear are diverse;

> you're kind of learning in a hands-on, concrete way. And as you're learning to play, and that it's all sweet, playful'. . . 'it's how they learn.'. . . ' I've tried to view it as an approach and approach to learning.' … 'kind of marrying it in with our curriculum, and, you know, ensuring that my teaching and learning experiences for the kids are

playful and hands-on and has those kinds of Aistear values at the heart of it. - Participant 5

Participant 5 also sees Aistear as 'more of an approach to learning as opposed to, you know, delivering the Aistear curriculum'. While Participant 5 talks about integrating Aistear as an approach to her practice, Participant 6 sees Aistear as a variety of teacher-guided 'sessions' where while children appear to be having fun and enjoyment, they are 'continuously following instructions reading visual' she also talks about reinforcing vocabulary through Aistear within the monthly teams and 'following directions'. Similarly, Participant 1 describes Aistear as 'purposeful play, it's where children have a purpose for doing this type of play. It's where they're engaging in orders.'

Previous research like Woods et al., (2022) and O Donoghue (2019) also noted that teachers are referring to Aistear similar to a subject that they include in their curriculum. 'Doing Aistear' or 'Aistear hour' also echoes in some of the participants' answers. For example, Participant 3 mentions that it is an 'important part of the day', and if it is left out due to time limitations, children will remind them that 'we didn't do Aistear today'. While Participant 4 says, 'just slotted into our timetable every, you know, every day'. She also talks about how they had workstations before Aistear 'that wasn't officially called Aistear'. Viewing Aistear as a 'subject' that needs to be 'fitted into' their existing curriculum is alarming, suggesting that many teachers' understanding and use of the Aistear curriculum is still not in line with Aistear's philosophy. The Information for infant teachers in primary schools created by the National Council for curriculum and Assessment suggests that Aistear "can work as a guide for primary schools and teachers in planning practical programmes for children" and that this way, teachers "can use Aistear together with the infant curriculum" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009d, p. 1). It is visible how this philosophy and intended implementation suggestion has failed (in some cases) to manifest in teachers' practice.

The most remarkable difference in how Aistear is suggested to be implemented in primary school and how teachers implement it is even more conspicuous when we look at the sample plan for primary schools presented in Aistear's User Guide (Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. User guide., 2009c, pp. 17-18). While this is only a sample, it is an excellent example of how Aistear philosophy can be woven into the primary school curriculum through every subject. If teachers would look at and implement Aistear the way it is suggested, they would feel less pressure to 'fit it into the day' or to create 'stations' or 'Aistear hour'. Aistear could simply inform their planning and seamlessly be interwoven through their everyday practice.

One of the most significant differences between primary school curriculum and Aistear is play and the impact of the play. To put teachers' experiences into perspective, we need to examine their understanding and knowledge about what play is and the difference between free play and adult-led play. All participants clearly represent the value of play; however, their views of play vary, providing various experiences. The study participants voiced the importance of providing opportunities for play:

> a time for children to kind of let themselves go. For now, I think there's so much more to it; there's way more to it. They're learning the whole time and don't realise they're learning. And even if it's not Aistear, or it's not structured pay, even if it's just play in the yard, it's one of the most important parts of the day for them because that's where they make their friends and interact with peers, solve if they have arrived with their friend in the yard, the solution to the row, it sets them up for life, to know interact and in play because it sets them up for when they go out into the big bad world - Participant 3

The above statement shows the teacher's understanding of children's need for play and how it holistically benefits them. She notes the importance of freely chosen play activities and the need for structural play opportunities. The teacher shows a sensibility for children's social interactions, which is the foundation of social development and how this positively affects their development and has a long-term effect on their lives. Similarly, Participant 1 asks, 'if you didn't have a play, how could you get children to engage with each other?'.

Another participant mentions the importance of imaginative play, commenting on how during play, children practice or act out their experiences and learn from them all in a safe and supporting environment where there is room for trial and error.

> I mean, it's preparation for life. I mean, you know, like, a child, I suppose, they this play, they act out what they see. And, you know, it's preparation for, later on, they usually have to see it, you know, before they can be it, I suppose, is kind of will be my kind of trial. It is like a trial run and practising; it's a safe place to practice things they have encountered and learned. And it's a safe, like; I'm such a fan of like, you know, what, it's just doing it - Participant 5

The value of enabling "the child to explore, to be creative and to use her/his previous learning to make new meanings" is also presented in Siolta Standard 6 Play (Centre for Early Childhood Development & Education, 2007), also in Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b) where they state that through play and hands-on experiences "children explore social, physical and imaginary words."

While Participant 4 goes as far as saying play '100% has everything to do with their development and how they work out things, how they just, speech, everything to do with it.' This thought suggests understanding how play covers all areas of child development. That cognitive, social and physical development can be enhanced through the medium of play. The

significance of speech and 'working out things' also echoes Vygotsky's theory about two crucial elements of child development the development of language and the development of self-regulation skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

Child-led play is:

Child-led or free play refers to voluntary play, freely chosen by the child regarding what and how they will play (Gray, 2017). What we might see as 'no structure' or 'absolutely crazy just running from one side of the room to the other', as voiced by Participant 3, these activities may still have structure and rules in the children's minds. This thought is also accentuated in Vygotsky's (1978) work, where he argues that during these activities, children learn to accept and learn about social rules that are acceptable by society (Gray, 2017). As it is also observed by Participant 3:

> It tells you a lot about a child to watching them play and watching the way they play that there's a lot to be gained from it kind of gives you an insight into the way they perceive the world, and they perceive the environment around them.

Here the participant recognises the importance of gaining knowledge and understanding of the child's personality, as they displayed naturally during play (Catalano, 2021).

Other participants also noted the importance of providing opportunities for free play. For example, Participant 6 says it is 'more on a Friday, we build up our stars, and there will sometimes be on Friday afternoon, it will be open play, or they might bring in toys'. While Participant 4 talked about how free-play opportunities are built into her daily practice

> So like, early finishers, if you're doing an activity and already finished, or like, go down and play with sand, or they'll never be, oh, just sit there, it'll be take out something and

play with the sand, or there's I might every now and again, set up the water station for them to play with.

Also, commenting on the Fridays when planned free play takes place

Like, yeah, it would be Friday, as I find playtime on Friday, not an actual structured lesson; it's them for 20 minutes at the end of the day when they come back in after a big lunch. They're just playing with a toy that they brought in themselves.

While free play takes up a significant amount of time in preschool, this time is significantly reduced in primary school settings. As Participant 5 notes:

I suppose once you leave preschool and come into primary, and that is necessary, and I suppose we can't do every lesson, can't be full-on play till lunch, you know, sometimes we have to kind of do the boring stuff, I suppose as well.

The need to fulfil curriculum requirements and perhaps the general belief that free play is trivial with no purpose contributes to the decreased time allowance for free play. Still, as Grey (2017, p. 221) points out, "The enormous educational power of play lies in its triviality". Grey (2017) suggests that one of the most valued characteristics of play is that it is not aimed at achieving major real-world goals; its pure function is to practice new skills without real-world consequences. Catalano (2021) also argues that while teacher-planned learning activities might include play and provide some degree of freedom, they still do not qualify as free play as their aim and objectives are driven by the curriculum. So, while Participant 4 says 'play would be huge', there is a distinct difference between child-led free play and what some may consider as providing opportunities for free play, such as Participant 3 'There's free play within. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So, like when we let them run with that, you know, so long as the main theme of the day is they're still at the airport.'

Adult-led or Structured play?

Compared to child-led play, adult-let play, or structured play, is where adults organise and plan activities that are intervened with play or play-based. These activities, however, have objectives and aim to cater to the curriculum's content (Catalano, 2021).

Participant 3 provides an example of how structured play is incorporated into her practice while also noting how these activities are different to 'regular play':

> The first week is all about teaching them the oral language they're going to need to use at the stations, when they're playing the different the either the social dramatic, or whether the construction area or whatever they're at. So, I suppose that's how it differs from just regular play.

She also goes on to explain how children provided some autonomy during structured play while still meeting the objectives:

> So, if let's say if you say I'm at the construction table, I want you to build me an airport today with blocks. And then if they go off then and decide to walk over to the other side of the room and get an actual car or a fire engine and bring it over to the table and say, but the airport is on fire now, and the fire engines come, and you run with that, you don't go, no, I just taught him to build the airport. Today, we're not talking, we're not doing fire engines, or we're not doing fire. It's all about the airport today. So, you just kind of let them run with their imagination at each station. You give them a foundation where they, yeah, we get them a starting point for each station. And they have the language from hearing it the week before in their readers in the poster for the oral language and all of that. So, they have all the buzzwords that they might have. It's just let of play with the blocks. So, I suppose you're linking to a team like they're not building a farm, vet surgery, or castle. They're thinking about the airport as the play

because that was a team for the month, but they're still allowed to run with their imagination with this.

While children are given a frame to play, it is quite extraordinary to see how they still include imaginary play inspired by real-life experiences by translating their personal experiences into play. However, by structuring the play, children lose the freedom to quit, which is the fundamental of play's voluntary nature, and the need for role-making and negotiation during play; thus, Grey (2017, p. 221) suggests that "the real lessons of play are lost". This loss of freedom is clearly voiced by Participant 4:

> I suppose when the children know and what they know what to expect, I put a timer on the board. And they know, once that timer goes off, they stop what they're doing. And then they move on to the next station. So, it's not manic; it's not like it's well structured.

With this in mind, it is understandable that teachers often get unsure about how to describe an activity; play; structured play; or guided, structured play:

> So, it might be like they're following direction, following directions like it might be. Make the monkey's tail long and put ears on the elephant, so they have to read. So, and then they're building with their hands. It's fine motor as well. So that is play, but we are really essentially, we are guiding the play. It's kind of like a structured, guided play. Yes. Structure-guided play. - Participant 6

It is apparent from these experiences that each participant is thoughtful about play and plans various play opportunities for the students. However, it is also noticeable that while some teachers are comfortable providing free play opportunities, some feel pressured to try and fit these into their practice: 'I think I am not doing it enough. I think I am going to have to relook at my timetable next year and try new ways to incorporate it.' 'I feel they are not getting enough play' - Participant 6.

According to UNICEF (2018), at the centre of learning through play is merging children's various life domains like home, school, community and the wider world to create continuity and connections with the learning. It also stresses the critical role of the adult as facilitators of this continuity and connectedness by providing an opportunity to free play while moving towards a more structured play. This continuum was evident, as demonstrated before, where participants provided examples of structured play that still allowed children with the prospect to alter parts of the activity freely.

Key insights from these sub-themes

Teachers' perception and understanding of Aistear are diverse, this suggests a need to clarify definitions of the characteristics of play-based learning. As Aistear is a curriculum framework, by clarifying and defining the characteristics of play-based learning in the Irish context will allow for teachers' to adopt Aistears principles as it is suitable for their practice while still maintain and developing a unified foundation. There is also a need to clarify and define the differences and characteristics of child-led, adult-led and structured play thus teachers can plan play-based curriculum accordingly.

4.5. The challenges – 'The building blocks of progression'

Why do teachers need support?

The World Bank (2021) draws attention to the increased demands placed on teachers and the complexity of their job in light of the recent pandemic. While Aistear has been around for years before the pandemic, one of the points the document highlights is to provide high-quality professional development which is valid not only in times of a pandemic but indefinitely.

> Teacher support needs to follow evidence-based principles of high-quality professional development. First, high-quality in-service professional development must be tailored to teachers' needs. Just as effective teaching should include adjusting to student learning needs, effective professional development should be targeted to the areas where teachers need the most support (World Bank, 2021, p. 2).

What support do teachers need from the Government?

While early childhood educators have extensive training on Aistear and play-based learning, the current training opportunities for teachers are still very limited; this is also documented in Woods et al., research article (2022). The participants also voiced that training is mainly available online, while most participants noted that they would prefer a face-to-face training option.

> I tried every summer to get a course wasn't to be gosh, I really want to do a face-to-face course. Eventually, I think some of the online providers of summer courses, they did whatever they ran an online one. So, I did that. - Participant 5.

Of the five participants, only one had a six-week face-to-face training over ten years ago. Her experience was truly positive, highlighting that the hands-on training provided her with knowledge and understanding that she still recalls to this day:

Actually, it was very, very good training. Because you know, the way most of these courses now it's, you're watching the board. But they actually treated like children, for hands-on. We were at the stations, we were, you know, and that always still comes back into my head. When I'm organising the stations for the moment, I think back to the stations dotted around the hall, you know, for that particular team. So, it was good training because we were treated like children, and your one was going around facilitating or, let's do, an Aistear. So, it was good training, because then you remember that when you came back to do it in your own classroom. Easier to remember. - Participant 3

The World Bank also notes the importance of active learning strategies involving hands-on application, resulting in improved learning and retention (World Bank, 2021). Participant 5 also highlights that learning and reading about a new approach is beneficial but not enough. Learning about a hands-on approach is best done with a hands-on approach, where teachers get to see and experience how they can or could integrate this into their existing practice.

We learn by seeing, we learn by doing and, you know, while there was a manual, and you can read all the things, all the objectives, but how was it? How are we actually going to do it? In reality, what was your playroom, what you're going to look like, how are you going to integrate, you know, those practical things, and sometimes you just need to talk to friends. - Participant 5

Adequate training is not only hard to come by, but participants also noted the absence of support from the Department of Education and the government 'I don't think there's enough help from the government for it like, and I think there should be more for you know, it could be even hard to find information' - Participant 1; 'training days, 100% There should be more training,' - Participant 4, 'adding professional development we do is usually off our own back

and paid for by us, the department happened, like, they wouldn't be particularly engaging in the sense.' - Participant 5.

> There has to be some sort of basic provider to exactly yeah; every year has been like you get a budget for arts and crafts. So there has to be every year budget for your natural resources. - Participant 4

The importance of supportive environment

However, while teachers feel idle about government support, all participants commented on a good supporting environment within their schools from principals, colleagues and friends from their professional circles: 'she might go into my room, and I or we might ask her altogether, and I watch her, and she watches me. And it's funny; we nearly learn different things from each other.' - Participant 4; 'in the beginning, like, we had teachers from other schools come here to see our roster.' - Participant 1.

Partnership with parents is a crucial part of the Aistear curriculum; early childhood settings provide information and a learning journal for each child to document their development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009a). However, while parents appear to understand the need for play during preschool, participants felt that not all parents support play or play-based learning in primary school.

> I suppose the parents have very little to do with it, you know, during the day, but like, I feel supported by the majority of the parents, and you know, like, no, no, no, I think they trust us, and then they know what we're doing. - Participant 3.

> Even to this day in 2022, are still afraid no, so that it only looks like they're playing or down in the ground playing or not doing anything. - Participant 1.

Participants perceived this as a result of parents' personal experiences in primary school.

Like, as I said, parents probably look back at their own experience in school. And they're like, right, I did. Well, I did, okay. And I got English and Irish maths drilled into me, I looked at a book, I learned what I was supposed to do. And I didn't do too bad if they feel that, as you said, they need to have the knowledge and they need to have the information in front of them that this is proven to be successful. - Participant 4.

This lack of support, however, could be altered with a more open approach to building quality partnerships with parents. While Participant 6 says, 'I wouldn't have any communication. Really, unless there's a problem.' Participant 1 seems to have overcome this simply by inviting parents into her classroom to experience and learn about the Aistear curriculum first-hand:

We used to bring in the parents in the beginning before we bring it into parents, say in October, November, and let them see what it is because children was a proponent of the Aistear play. But you had to kind of press into parents; it's not just Aistear, let them off into the room to play with energy. And this is why we're doing this. This is what I'm doing here. I'm doing maths here with them. I'm doing Irish here with them, but they don't even know. So, parents needed to know as well what you were doing and why you were doing it.- Participant 1

Everyday challenges with the curriculum

It is not only the absence of support that teachers voice; it is also the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. The primary school curriculum has become more extensive, extended, and congested than ever. Teachers struggled to fit the required elements into the infant days on top of the extra time they needed to organise and deliver play-based 'fun' experiences. As Participant 3 explains

There seems to be so much curriculum to cover that the biggest challenges that you would, the biggest challenge I have is how, like, we have so much curriculum to cover

with all these new programs, which are brilliant, because I feel if we have to complete all these workbooks, I feel it's not allowing lots of scope for more stations and more fun time.

While Early Childhood Educators plan play-based activities on children's interests, teachers are required to prepare the activities to meet the goal of the primary school curriculum. As mentioned earlier, the training and experience of early childhood educators and primary school teachers are very different. As I know from personal experience teaching in preschool is all about 'fun' activities that the children enjoy and are interested in. Through these 'fun' activities, assessment consists mainly of observations. While we have specific learning goals or outcomes in mind, these are flexible and based on children's interests. All activities aim to meet children's needs and further their holistic development. In comparison, the primary school teacher concentrates on 'teaching, methodologies and the goals you need to aim for in the curriculum. The two of them work parallel alongside each other the whole time' Participant 3, to achieve these, first plans traditional learning methods where they introduce the language and other concepts that will be included in the 'fun' activities later:

Setting up the stations and making sure you have all the resources for the stations there the planning beforehand because all your language lessons, your oral language lessons and your reading lessons all have to link into the team. Yeah, so we'll say our team this month now we're just starting a new theme is the airport. So that means everything is centralised around that team, not just the area of Aistear. - Participant 3

They also must fulfil their obligations for completing traditional tests and assessments 'in the program itself, you've got four weeks of thematic learning, and then you have this really comprehensive assessment alongside it' and use formal observations as it is a 'huge part,

whether you use it formally, and you're taking boxes on a sheet of paper or 'constantly watching them informally' - Participant 3.

Time, personnel and resources – is there ever enough?

Naturally, teachers feel 'challenged' and 'constrained' by the 'demands' to 'marry all those things' required. Participants also mention the need for 'manpower', 'time', 'resources' and 'little less textbooks' as they feel that 'most of your resources are geared towards the text and testing children'; they would welcome the option to 'a little bit more of an opportunity to kind of play and learn in a playful way', 'healthy budget' as 'Aistear is so broad' so they do not 'depend on donations' from parents, better training opportunities as 'training has been a little bit light' and 'more guidance from the department'. The following array of statements echoes all these findings:

> Time management is a huge factor. And the resources because where is the money for the resource is going to come from? When we started to do Aistear, we depended on parents donating all the toys. - Participant 3

'Is the need to reduce down, and we need to prioritise what is important to be assessing. Do you know what I mean? I just think there's far too much assessment in the overall in the English curriculum' Participant 6

> Planning is the hardest part; I would say because you have to get all the stuff ready for it. It's just the lack of, I suppose, support in the area is given to you for Aistear schools, like you kind of come up with different ideas yourself. You're just kind of let off. And there are different stations that you can do the construction or, like, all the different station's role play, but you're left then to your own devices with. - Participant 4

And I suppose it's not always easy to make every lesson as playful as you'd like it to be . . . I suppose, again, it's trying to find that time and try it in a practical kind of way, when you're trying to cover the curriculum, and have enough space for everything, make sure we're kind of reaching all areas, that's partly a source of the challenge. - Participant 5

Just a little less textbooks, a little less, you know, workbooks and a little bit more of an opportunity to kind of play and to learn in a playful way. And just that every lesson doesn't necessarily need to have an activity page, you know, that there doesn't always need to be like a written account of every lesson - Participant 5

Like it's very hard to take on an Aistear if you don't understand the fundamentals of it and why you do this, you know, but if we have no guidance from anybody, it is like, blind leading the blind, and you're just feeling around the dark? - Participant 1

The school as a whole, basic Aistear training needs to be given to all . . . that's key like they you can't do anything unless you're some way trained - Participant 4

These challenges and differences between how early childhood educators and primary school teachers experience and how they implement Aistear are also echoed in Woods et al. (2022). The study highlights how educators from these sectors approach the implementation of Aistear. Early childhood educators frequently mention a child-led curriculum, while primary school teachers "appear to adopt a more structured approach to Aistear" (Woods et al., 2022). Participants in this research also voiced the need for more 'on-the-job training' and quality 'workshops' and 'advice', which is again in line with this study's findings (Woods et al., 2022).

Key insights from these sub-themes

Teachers require support from all the stakeholders including the general public including parents, the government, from their settings and colleagues. The supports required are multifaceted including clarification and terminology, training, assistance in implementation, designated funding to create suitable environment, support from colleagues and schools, support with how to meet curriculum requirements while incorporating play-based curriculum.

4.6. The joys – 'The silver lining'

Learning from who? What do children get out of it? – Teachers' perspective

In this theme, I would like to demonstrate teachers' experiences and perceptions of the play-based approach's benefits on children and how the learning environment further enhances this.

Teachers' experiences and challenges with integrating a play-based curriculum have been quite similar. This is also true regarding their perception of play-based approaches benefitting children. All participants talked about their observations of children's positive responses to Aistear. Participant 4 observed 'a huge improvement in their vocabulary'. At the same time, Participant 3 says it is one of the most enjoyable for her students and explains that while children are still learning, they 'do not realise they are learning.' As Vygotsky also noted "the play does not mean that the child himself understands the motives that give rise to a game or that he plays consciously. He plays without realising the motives of the play activity. In this, play differs substantially from work and other types of activity" (Vygotsky, 2016). So, if children perceive these structured play-based activities as play, does it truly matter if it is structured? Teachers who provide structured play opportunities to stay on track to their curriculum goals but also allow some degree of freedom seem to find a good balance where children unconsciously learn while playing. The following statements confirm these:

> But they say that's their favourite part of the day. And if you don't get around to it, they will let you know at the end of the day; we didn't do Aistear, they say. . . but it's probably the most favourable and most crucial part of the child's day. They love it the most because they're out of their seats. They're rotating around, going to different stations, and getting so much fun out of it and don't realise they're learning. – Participant 3

Participant 3 also notes that while children are learning and 'doing Aistear', they do not perceive this as learning. They perceive this time as 'play' while building on their vocabulary. As Participant 4 says, 'you see a huge, like improvement in their vocabulary' and also enhancing their social skills when learning not only from the teacher but also from each other.

Learning from peers or a more knowledgeable other is also a cornerstone of Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (ZDP) (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky advocated for the importance of social learning and learning from anyone who has more knowledge about a particular area or subject than the learner. Scaffolding is the term coined by Jerome Bruner (Wood et al., 1976) that is used in conjunction with ZDP, referring to a notion where a more knowledgeable person supports another person's learning. While teachers may or may not be familiar with the theory, most of them describe not only their role when it comes to children but also recognise the critical learning that takes place between children themselves like:

> If you ask the child, did you learn an Aistear today, they'd say, no, I was playing. They don't; they don't see what they're learning because they've been given the tools to play from learning the week before. And they're building on those tools and then impinging on that vocabulary and their peer learning because one of the children at the table might use a bigger word about the airport they haven't heard yet. And they're learning from each other, but they never realise they're learning. - Participant 3

This participant also recognises the significance of using children's existing knowledge and 'strengths' to 'help improve on their weaknesses', also known as scaffolding their learning in the ZDP.

> From the minute they come into the classroom, you're observing them as little infants; they've just come from preschool; you're seeing what they know, what they don't know, where they need to get, you're constantly screening them, and you're observing them

the whole time, not just in the curriculum. . . there are play their social interaction with their peers; you're constantly looking to see to see that they're, going where you need them to go. So that's always in your mind, and you're always tracking them. So, I think your teaching, methodologies and the goals you need to aim for in the curriculum - Participant 3

Teachers perceive their role as a facilitator of learning, providing a safe and stimulating environment and tools for children to use in an otherwise structured play opportunity where children can explore their ideas somewhat freely and learn from each other under the teacher's guidance. During play, children observe others and their interactions, learn from them, and embrace these in their behaviour. These interactions also enhance children's spoken language, as observed by the study participants.

With others, it's getting them to listen to each other and to value each other's opinions. And to know that you might think this, I'm allowed to think this way as well, you know, that we're both entitled to our own opinions, and they're not really going to get that unless they're actually playing on the ground, or, you know, with each other at the table. You know, that's a very important skill that they need all the way along - Participant 1

Another area teachers mentioned when discussing children benefiting from the use of Aistear in their practices is the environment they create for the children and how it impacts their learning and personal self-development; the importance of the learning environment is also emphasised by Bronfenbrenner, as discussed earlier. Children's immediate environment profoundly affects their holistic development, and teachers of the study appear to be very sensitive to this critical area. As participants pointed out, it is necessary to cater for all types of learners as 'there are different types of learners, auditory learners, visual learners actual, like they need to touch sensory learners. You need to incorporate all those different things'

Participant 4; or noting the critical element of children to 'feel more valued' in a 'nice learning environment.' - Participant 1.

Participants also recognised the value of showing children work in their environment not only for their own benefit but also as a way of communication for peers, parents and other stakeholders. This notion of taking ownership and pride resonates with Aistear's theme of identity and belonging, which is the cornerstone of holistic development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). The artworks create conversations enhancing children's sense of belonging, pride in their achievements and   building their confidence:

> Every morning I hear them when they're gone past saying to the older brothers or sisters, you just see your stained-glass butterflies, and they're beautiful. And you know, if I didn't have them up there, they wouldn't be able to say that's mine. I feel it's conversations. Yes. Yeah. And pride and then walking past the older children and saying that's ours and older children. . . there are times for parents to see butterflies open the window - Participant 1

'They also need to get to see their own work, their own withdrawal marks valued, and put up on the wall and that they're proud of their learning. And they're engaged by what's around them.' - Participant 5

> It has a huge impact on the children having their own colourful, bright, easy to move around, giving them a sense of independence. . . Like they actually run the room when I'm out for a day, and they show the teacher where everything is that comes in to replace me for the day. So, you know, they, I think they take ownership of the room, if they like it, if it's colourful, if it's bright if they liked the stuff that's in it, they take ownership first, you know, keep it tidy and keep it - Participant 3

For teachers – connection with children – meeting children's needs - how teachers perceive their role

The interviews showed that teachers feel Aistear changed their practices and approach to play-based activities. This was especially prominent with two participants, one who had face-to-face training and one with a background in early childhood education. Participant 3, the only teacher who had the opportunity to attend face-to-face Aistear training over ten years ago, has been using Aistear and had this to say:

> My perception changed when I saw the advantages to it, and you know what it was doing for children, and then my perception of the way a room should look for an inspector walking into it changed as well. And now, even when I walk around the school, I'm the vice principal here. So, I'm in and out of rooms a lot. And, you know, an old principal might think she's great control in that room, you can hear a pin drop, where is no, I worry when I hear that a room is deadly silent, because I'm thinking children are afraid to speak or to move. . . I feel it has a huge role to play in the day. And I like to fully endorse it. No, no, I think the day would be lost without it. Or the junior infants would be lost if they never got exposed to Aistear at all. - Participant 3

Participant 1, who worked in a private childcare centre for seven years before completing the teacher training, says:

> From working with children for seven or eight years before going back to teaching, I would always have known the importance of play with children. So, when we started to take it on, I knew we will be able to look at it. Like it's just a matter of sitting down and working agitations, working out your resources, but everything is doable.

Both participants saw not only the obstacles that this could mean in their practice but also the benefits not only themselves but the children would gain by saying, ' you know, kind of

holistically shaping the child as opposed to just teaching them. . . if you ask me now, in the last ten years about all the children I have thought I'd be able to give you a rounded view of who they are as a child' – Participant 3. This teacher feels that her role as a teacher has also changed; she is 'much more than just a teacher'; she feels that she is a 'friend', a 'parent', a 'psychologist' and a 'social guide' for them. She explains that to be a good teacher, you cannot just tick the 'boxes'; it is more about teaching them 'how to get on with life and fit into society'.

Participant 3, the school's vice principal with over ten years of experience, changed her perception of her own practice, her expectations of other teachers, and what she constitutes as good classroom management. She clearly emphasises that it is most important for children to enjoy their time in education, feel safe to speak up, and have fun during the day, even if this means having a room that may look like 'this one has no control over her classroom, there is noise everywhere'.

This recognition and change shows how teachers' perspectives changed or are changing from a traditional didactic approach to a more child-friendly approach where children's personalities and unique needs are considered. This approach and the role teachers adopt as a facilitator of learning while reflecting on their practices is also a foundation of Aistear's approach to education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009b). Teachers seem to have moved away from aiming only to teach the curriculum; all participants in this study noted that the most important thing for them is that the children enjoy the learning and leave happy at the end of the day. They feel that teaching is basic, and they need to look further to see what else they can give to children.

> What is it that we can give to the children and the school besides teaching because anyone that comes out of a training college can teach. . . , but what else can you do?. . What will you be remembered for when you leave the school? - Participant 3

These teachers appear to be established a nurturing pedagogy where they do not see themselves only as educators but also as the key person who needs to 'nourish, rear, foster, train and educate the child'; with this positioning, teachers place the children in the centre of their practice (Hayes, 2007).

Key insights from these sub-themes

Teachers recognise their role to facilitate the learning and also recognise the importance of children learning from each other. Teachers also recognising the benefits that the introduction to play-based curriculum presented to their practice. It is also prominent that teachers recognise the positive improvement in children's learning and engagement in the curriculum. On a personal level teachers improved their connections with children and feel a shift in their role from teaching the curriculum to become a facilitator to learning accounting for children individual needs.

4.7. Conclusion

This chapter portrayed the findings and discussed the linked literature regarding the three themes. The findings addressed the research questions by exploring junior and senior infant class primary school teachers' experiences with implementing Aistear while discovering any challenges they may have encountered while implementing the Aistear curriculum. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of areas of practice that require further development to implement a play-based curriculum in primary schools were explored. By exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions on this question, the findings met the objectives and thus provided a portrayal of teachers' general practices. The following final chapter will offer a thorough conclusion on the findings of this research.

Chapter five: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a conclusion to this study based on the research questions

> ➢ What are junior and senior infant class primary school teachers' experiences with Aistear?

> ➢ What are the challenges, if any, in implementing a play-based curriculum such as Aistear in a primary school environment?

> ➢ What areas of practice need strengthening in Irish primary school environments to implement a play-based curriculum?

In the study's conclusion, I will discuss the main finding through the three main themes identified in the previous chapter. Next, the study's limitations will be outlined, followed by recommendations for further research. Finally, the implications of this study to the relevant field will be discussed, followed by a conclusion of this chapter.

5.2 Conclusions of the Study

5.2.1 What are junior and senior infant class primary school teachers' experiences with Aistear?

While using the Aistear approach in your practice in primary school is not mandatory, still, today most school and infant teachers try and merge the primary school curriculum with the Aistear curriculum framework.

The first theme that emerged during the analysis process was *Who is doing what?* In this theme, I have outlined participants' perception and understanding of play, play-based, child-led, adult-led and structured play. Having adequate and solid knowledge and understanding of the different types of play is necessary to comprehend Aistear and best implement the approach in practice. I have found that participants have different views and understanding of types of play, depending on their experience, training, and background. This variety of viewpoints contributes to the variety of experiences with Aistear.

A teacher with previous early childhood experience had a positive experience and was confident to use and implement Aistear. She was also able to find the balance, confidently approach questions with parents and act as a role model or mentor for other practitioners. Another teacher who had the opportunity to attend a face-to-face Aistear course also felt very confident and regularly uses Aistear in her practice. She is also helping her colleagues to adopt the Aistear approach. The other three participants had no training in Aistear to this day. Thus, they lack confidence in some areas; some feel they are 'not doing enough' and feel under pressure to fulfil the requirements. This notion of lack of confidence and knowledge is also echoed in Walsh et al.'s research (2010); considering that this research is now over ten years old and practitioners still feel the same now, is very concerning.

Similar to Gray & Ryan (2016), participants of this study recognised the importance of play in their practice. They experienced the benefits of a play-based approach to children, their practices and personal development. These positive experiences are portrayed in theme three, *The Silver Lining*. Participants explain that children enjoy learning through play-based activities. At the same time, their social and language skills and overall development are also enhanced, similar to the findings of Walsh et al. (2010). While Gray & Ryan's (2016) research found that teachers favoured the traditional teaching method, this study found that teachers appear to be moving away from a conventional didactic form of teaching to a more child-

centred teaching practice where they facilitate the learning, building on children's strengths and interests to enhance learning. Participants noted how they feel their role has changed; they feel that teaching alone is not sufficient anymore. They seem to have adopted a more caring, nurturing role, recognising this age group's sensitivity and particular needs.

5.2.2 What are the challenges, if any, in implementing a play-based curriculum such as Aistear in a primary school environment?

The number of challenges experienced by the participants ranged from personal to professional and environmental. While early childhood settings are set up to best support children's learning through play, primary schools concentrate on achieving the curriculum requirements. While the children are at the centre of both curricula, the approach and educators' training are somewhat different.

The first challenge that all participants voiced was inadequate training and support. Woods et al. (2022) also pointed out that training opportunities for primary school teachers are very limited. Gray & Ryan's research (2016) also confirmed the need for adequate training, where 95% of participants felt that this is one of the main barriers to implementing a play-based curriculum. Most of the training is offered online; while this may be sufficient to learn about the theory behind Aistear, it does not provide hands-on experience in implementing the theory in practice. A play-based curriculum is a very hands-on approach; thus, understandably, teachers feel it should be taught in a face-to-face environment. This type of training would also allow teachers to connect and learn from each other. Teachers also felt that if play-based learning is present in infant classes, all teachers, not only infant teachers, should receive training as teachers often change classes.

Similar to Gray and Ryan's findings (2016), participants of this study also noted that they felt a lack of support and guidance from the Department of Education. This mainly manifests in the overload of the curriculum, the growing amount of paperwork required, assessment requirements and the absence of materials or a specific budget for materials. The concern of how to conjoin the two curricula creates anxiety and stress for teachers trying to fulfil requirements but often feeling they are failing. The lack of resources and funding was not only voiced by our participants but also outlined in Gray & Ryan's research (2016), where 83% of participants noted this as a barrier to successful implementation. Participants of this study used some of their arts & craft budget to buy resources, while some also mentioned depending on parents' donations.

Furthermore, similar to our findings, the overload of curriculum and the large class sizes are discussed in both Woods et al.'s (2022) and Gray & Ryan's research (2016). The overload of curriculum and the absence of resources, however, are not the only barrier; all participants commented on the excessive time required for preparation. They also feel that with the current class size, they would need more 'manpower' to tackle this issue, this would allow them to spend more time with observing children during play-activities, and in turn, this would improve their practice. Regarding assessment, participants feel there is 'far too much assessment'. It should be prioritised what is necessary to be assessed.

While Gray & Ryan's (2016) research found that teachers and parents do not value play, it appears that participants of this research value play; however, there is still a concern about parents' perception and value of play. Participants felt that there was no clear and sufficient information on play-based curricula for parents. While their main concern is the child, they are anxious about what parents may think of the play-based approach. A piece of comprehensive and factual information for parents is a must. However, this also requires competent, well-trained teachers who are confident in their knowledge.

5.2.3 What areas of practice need strengthening in Irish primary school environments to implement a play-based curriculum?

This question is very much connected to the previous question. The first and more crucial area is the question of primary school teachers' training in Aistear and play-based curriculum. The training needs to be comprehensive, covering theory and providing hands-on experiences. The training should be provided for all primary school teachers, followed by regular, continuous professional development courses. This requires the Department of Education's support and guidance. As Woods et al. (2022) notes, training early childhood educator and primary school teachers offers shared learning with good rapport and creates mutual respect. The cross-sector approach to training offered valuable insight to both parties. primary school teachers "had a clear insight into how learning and development occurred in pre-schools through the implementation of Aistear", while early childhood educators "were able to ensure that children were better prepared for the transition" (Woods et al., 2022).

They are updating the primary school curriculum to reflect play-based learning, providing more time and resources for planning and implementation, de-loading the curriculum, emphasising new practices for play-based learning and revisiting assessment strategies and techniques. Smaller class sizes or additional personnel in each room, adequate resources and a budget are also required to aid the implementation process. The Draft primary school curriculum (2020) advocates for these changes and the need for these are also reflected in our findings.

Communication with the parents outlining the benefits of the new approach, providing opportunities for engagement to see a play-based approach in action and creating a better parent-teacher relationship similar to early childhood settings, as also advocated in Aistear (2009a) is an integral part of child development and builds trust and understanding on both sides that in turn positively benefits children's development.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This is a small-scale phenomenological study with a qualitative research design and Interpretivist paradigm. While the strength of Interpretivism and qualitative research is exploring personal experiences, this also presents some limitations. Firstly, the possible lack of objectivity and subjectivity as the collected data is an interpretation of participants' experiences which I, the researcher, then interpret while the backgrounds, traditions, pre-existing biases, behaviours, understanding and prejudices have also influenced the research and its findings. The findings can also present a lack of reliability as these exact results may not be replicable even if the same research design is used. To address this limitation, I have thoroughly described the research process to create a document that makes transferability judgement possible for prospective researchers. Furthermore, I have used an audit trail detailing each step of the data analysis process to aid confirmability and transferability and show authenticity. The study has no quantitative data; therefore, the generalizability of the results could be lacking; thus, the result may not apply to the larger population.

Other limitations were addressed by aiming for trustworthiness, using participants' voices during the analysis, and providing a clear description of all the research project steps. Member checking was also used, allowing participants to validate the transcribed material. I have designed a detailed interview schedule and conducted a pilot interview to provide credibility. I also used credible sources and references and had regular debriefing and critical conversations with peers and my research supervisor.

5.4 Recommendations for Further study

This research provides some valuable information about teachers' experiences with using and integrating Aistear and the challenges they are currently experiencing. The knowledge gathered

provides a much-needed insight into the phenomenon and the five participants' experiences. On a broader level, it includes information for essential improvements that need to be considered in policy development.

However, this study with only five participants does not represent a nationwide cohort of primary school teachers and their experiences.

My recommendation for further study would include a phenomenological survey on a large scale to gain more knowledge about other teachers' experiences. This could provide a more rounded view of their experiences in helping policy developers to best meet their needs. I would also suggest a nationwide quantitative study to solve the more practical concerns that do not require the analysis of personal experiences, such as budget requirements, resources, and training needs.

Moreover, a study exploring in greater detail the different traditions, approaches, theories, values and training of primary school teachers and early childhood educators would be beneficial as it appears that these two cohorts view Aistear differently, thus implementing in their practices differently.

Furthermore, a phenomenological study exploring parents' views on using a play-based approach in primary school settings is recommended. This could aid the development of information material for parents as they are just as much part of this change as children, teachers, and the government.

5.5 Implications of the Study

While the findings of this study may not be generalisable to the broader population of primary school teachers, they are in line with some previous research findings on this subject. The

implications of this study for primary school teacher's practice include the provision for ample training and training opportunities for all primary school teachers. This is fundamental for teachers to build their understanding and professional knowledge of play-based learning to improve their practices.

The recommended training should consist of basic Aistear training, play-based approaches and the theory of play, followed by comprehensive and practical training on implementing Aistear in a primary school environment with hands-on experiences, workshops, and in-service training. The workshops should be arranged for primary school teachers and for early childhood educators, where educators could meet, discuss, share ideas, and learn from each other. I suggest that teaching colleges include professional practice placement opportunities for student teachers in early childhood education settings where they can see Aistear in action and learn from educators who use Aistear daily. This would enhance their learning and understanding of Aistear and provide a foundation for their future development.

Moreover, I recommend developing comprehensive information material for teachers clearly outlining the aims and objectives of Aistear with extensive practical ideas specifically aimed at primary school teachers to use in their practice. Furthermore, a similar information document for parents, where the Aistear framework is explained, outlining its benefits for children. I propose an open day for parents to see Aistear in action on a school day.

The findings of this research point towards a need for new policy to recognise children rights to play, to recognise and respect children's views and their rights to have the appropriate and allowance of time for rest play. These rights are also outlined in the UN Convention on the rights of the child (Unicef, 2019). To aid the integration of play-based curriculum into primary school curriculum there is also a need to reform the primary school curriculum, as most previous research studies highlight the inconsistency and difficulties when teacher's attempt to

adjoin primary school curriculum and play-based curriculum. For this policy and curriculum development bodies needs to accept and recognise the distinct differences between the educational approaches and adopt a new approach that best caters for children needs during junior and senior infant classes.

5.6 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore primary school junior and senior infant teachers' experiences with Aistear, their experiences with implementing Aistear and to explore the challenges they are experiencing. The research was addressed through three objectives and the findings were attained by completing five semi-structured interviews with primary school infant teachers.

1. To gather information on primary school infant class teachers' experiences with Aistear since the introduction of Aistear in 2009
2. To ascertain the main challenges of implementing Aistear in primary schools infant classes
3. To explore primary school infant class teachers' opinions on main points for development and improvement to aid the successful implementation of Aistear in primary schools

The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, where three main themes emerged. The findings and discussion were discussed using relevant literature to support results through the three themes. In this chapter, I have answered the three research questions underpinned by the findings. The findings show that teachers need more government and parental support and extensive training to implement Aistear in their practices. Also found that the existing primary school curriculum requires adjustment to make room for a play-based approach. Funding and resources ought to be made available if the Aistear curriculum is to be made part of the primary school curriculum.

In conclusion it is evident that teachers require a more information on play-based curriculum starting with the a unified general information as a foundation where all theoretical definitions are defined clearly to create a somewhat levelled understanding and use of basic terms. The findings highlight the need for substantial government support with appropriate and clear guidelines on how to embrace a play-based curriculum as part of the primary school curriculum. Furthermore, it accentuates the need for extensive and suitable training opportunities for primary school teachers and the provision for appropriate resources.

This study's knowledge is valuable for creating the new primary school sector regarding teachers' experiences with Aistear within the Primary School Curriculum.

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Appendices

Appendices 1 - Gatekeeper Information Statement

Research Study Title: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment, while identifying areas of practice that require further development to improve practice.

Supervisor: Dr Meera Oke

Researcher: Timea Zolei

                           MA in Educational Practice

                           National College of Ireland

What is the study about?

The main purpose of this study is to explore and develop insights into primary school infant class teachers' past and present experiences with Aistear. Understanding the challenges, if any, and the successes they have encountered while looking at areas that require further development. In addition, the study aims to investigate the current presents of Aistear in primary school infant classes and learn about teachers' perceptions on areas that may require further development to support practice.

Who is carrying out the study?

Timea Zolei is carrying out the study to comply with the MA in Educational Practice award requirements at the National College of Ireland. The supervisor of this study is Dr Meera Oke. The research study proposal follows the National College of Ireland ethical guidelines.

What does the study involve?

With your consent, the researcher will approach junior and Senior infant teachers with the Participants Information Statement in the primary school. All primary school infant teachers will be provided a research information and a consent form prior to participation. Following this, the researcher will be conducting individual in depth interviews at a previously agreed location and time. The dates and place of the individual in-depth interviews will be previously confirmed with each individual participant. The individual in-depth interviews, with the participants consent, will be recorded and transcribed. Recording will be destroyed, and transcripts will be kept in a safe password-protected file for five years following NCI policy when all data will be permanently destroyed. The research finding will be made available for all participants and all participating primary schools.

How much time will the study take?

There will be 4-6 participants in this research, with individual interview sessions. The interview sessions will take approximately 40-90 minutes. Interview sessions will be arranged outside primary school hours. All participants will be provided with the Participants Information Statement; any further queries will be answered prior to or during the interview sessions. The research study will

take approximately nine months to complete, from January 2022 to the final submission date of 11th of September 2022.

What will happen to the information that is collected during the study?

All participants will be advised about their right to anonymity, right to refuse to answer questions, and they right to withdraw from the research at any time. Collected data and study findings will be available for all participants for review and feedback. All information collected will be treated with confidentiality, only disclosed with participants permission, except where it may be required by law. Participants will be labelled as Participant 1, 2 etc. In addition, interview sessions will be transcribed with data anonymized using the same labels. Recordings and transcripts are accessed by the researcher and dissertation supervisor only. Once the recorded data is transcribed all recording will be destroyed.

Audio files and transcriptions will be stored securely on the researchers' password protected computer in a password protected file for five years following NCI policy when all data will be permanently destroyed. The completed dissertation will be publicly available via NCIs research repository norma.ncirl.ie

Will I receive the results of the study?

All findings of this research study will be made available upon request from the researcher. Please contact the researcher on 0877749942 or x16111192@student.ncirl.ie

Can I withdraw from the study?

All participants of this study are voluntary; therefore, all participants have the right to withdraw at any point during the research. However, regretfully after submitting the research study, participants will not be able to withdraw.

Appendices 2 - Gatekeeper Consent Form

Research Study Title: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment, while identifying areas of practice that require further development to improve practice.

Supervisor: Dr Meera Oke

Researcher: Timea Zolei

                              MA in Educational Practice

                              National College of Ireland

- I have read and fully understood the Research Participation Statement.

- I agree for the researcher to approach infant class teachers within the primary school for the purpose of the research.

- I agree to have interviews recorded on a device with consent from the participants.

- I declare that the researcher has answered all questions about the research project, with no further queries remaining.

Name of gatekeeper

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Gatekeeper's signature   Date

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Researcher's signature   Date

Appendices 3 - Participants Information Statement

Research Study Title: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment, while identifying areas of practice that require further development to improve practice.

Supervisor: Dr Meera Oke

Researcher: Timea Zolei

                                           MA in Educational Practice

                                           National College of Ireland

My name is Timea Zolei, and I am a final year student at the National College of Ireland, currently working on my dissertation in order to complete my MA in Educational Practice level 9 degree. My dissertation supervisor is Dr Meera Oke, Lecturer in Childhood Education.

The main purpose of this study is to explore and develop insights into primary school infant class teachers past and present experiences with Aistear. Understanding the challenges, if any, and the successes they have encountered while looking at areas that require further development. In addition, the study aims to investigate the current presents of Aistear in primary school infant classes and learn about teachers' perceptions on areas that may require further development to support practice.

I would be grateful for your participation in this research study. For your information, please find attached a Participants Information Statement that outlines the purpose and the layout of the study. This statement involves all information regarding your involvement in the process. Please take time to read and fully understand all information provided. If you have any additional questions or queries, please contact me and/or my supervisor.

If you satisfied with all the information provided and wish to take part in the research, please sign the consent form.

A copy of the consent form and Participants Information Statement will be provided for each participant.

Kind Regards,

Timea Zolei   Supervisor:
MA in Educational Practice   Dr Meera Oke
National College of Ireland   National College of Ireland
Phone: 0877749942   Phone: (01) 4498712
Email: x16111192@student.ncirl.ie   Email: meera.oke@ncirl.ie

Research Study Title: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment, while identifying areas of practice that require further development to improve practice.

Supervisor: Dr Meera Oke

Researcher: Timea Zolei

                                MA in Educational Practice

                                National College of Ireland

What is the study about?

The main purpose of this study is to explore and develop insights into primary school infant class teachers past and present experiences with Aistear. Understanding the challenges, if any, and the successes they have encountered while looking at areas that require further development. In addition, the study aims to investigate the current presents of Aistear in primary school infant classes and learn about teachers' perceptions on areas that may require further development to support practice.

Who is carrying out the study?

Timea Zolei is carrying out the study to comply with the MA in Educational Practice award requirements at the National College of Ireland. The supervisor of this study is Dr Meera Oke. The research study proposal will be subject to ethical approval from the National College of Ireland.

What does the study involve?

If you agree to participate in this study, we will arrange a suitable time, date, and place for the interview session. The individual in-depth interviews, with your consent, will be recorded. The recorded data will be anonymised and transcribed. The transcripts will be made available to you for verification. Recording will be destroyed, and transcripts will be kept in a safe password-protected file for five years following NCI policy when all data will be permanently destroyed. All information collected will be treated with confidentiality, only disclosed with participants permission, except where it may be required by law. The completed dissertation will be publicly available via NCIs research repository norma.ncirl.ie The finding of the research will be made available for all participants and all participating primary schools.

How much time will the study take?

There will be 4-6 participants in this research, with individual interview sessions. The interview sessions will take approximately 40-90 minutes. Interview sessions will be arranged outside primary school hours. All participants will be provided with the Participants Information Statement; any further queries will be answered prior to or during the interview sessions. The research study will

take approximately nine months to complete, from January 2022 to the final submission date of 11th of September 2022.

What will happen to the information that is collected during the study?

All participants will have the right to anonymity, right to refuse to answer questions, and right to withdraw from the research at any time. Collected data and study findings will be available for all participants for review and feedback. All information collected will be treated with confidentiality, only disclosed with participants permission, except where it may be required by law. Participants will be labelled as Participant 1, 2 etc. In addition, interview sessions will be transcribed with data anonymised using the same labels. Recordings and transcripts are accessed by the researcher and dissertation supervisor only. Once the recorded data is transcribed all recording will be destroyed.

Transcripts will be stored securely on the researchers' password protected computer in a password protected file for five years following NCI policy when all data will be permanently destroyed. The completed dissertation will be publicly available via NCIs research repository norma.ncirl.ie

Will I receive the results of the study?

All findings of this research study will be made available upon request from the researcher. Please contact the researcher on 0877749942 or x16111192@student.ncirl.ie

Can I withdraw from the study?

All participants of this study are voluntary; therefore, all participants have the right to withdraw at any point during the research. However, regretfully after submitting the research study, participants will not be able to withdraw.

Appendices 5 - Participants Consent Form

Research Study Title: Exploring primary school infant class teachers' knowledge, attitudes and experiences of Aistear in a primary school environment, while identifying areas of practice that require further development to improve practice.

Supervisor: Dr Meera Oke

Researcher: Timea Zolei

                         MA in Educational Practice

                         National College of Ireland

- I have read and fully understood the Research Participation Information Statement.

- I consent to have the interview audio recorded on a digital device.

- I consent to the use of direct quotations in the study.

- I understand my right to withdraw from the study at any stage until before the final submission date, 11th of September 2022, if I wish to do so.

- I declare that the researcher has answered all questions about the research project, with no further queries remaining.

- I agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant

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Participant's signature   Date

---   ------------------------------------

Researcher's signature   Date

Appendices 6 - Interview Schedule:

Prior to the interview, I will verbally explain and give information about the research and seek verbal consent from participants (written permission will be collected prior to the interview).

Thank you for taking part in this study. The study's goal is to explore and understand primary school infant class teachers' experiences with implementing Aistear. This interview aims to understand teachers' unique lived experiences relevant to the research study. During this interview, the emphasis is on your individual lived experiences and perceptions, and as such, there are no right or wrong answers. The interview will take approximately forty to sixty minutes. You can ask for a break or stop the interview at any time.

As mentioned in the consent form, with your consent, I will be recording (audio only) this interview session on my password-protected mobile device. This recorded data will be confidential, only shared with the research supervisor. The recording will be transcribed and anonymised, kept securely. All transcripts will be made available for you to confirm the validity of the data collected. To remind you, you have the right to pause, choose not to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time. Have you any further questions? If you are satisfied that all your queries were answered, I will start the recording and begin the interview.

Demographic information

Gender:

Age:

Background and Motivation

1. **Why did you decide to become a primary school teacher?**

2. **How long have you been a teacher?**

   ➢ Where did you qualify to be a teacher?

   ➢ How long have you been teaching infant classes?

   ➢ How long have you been teaching in this school?

3. **What do you most enjoy in your work?**

4. **Can you tell me about your approach to teaching?**

   ➢ How do you integrate curriculum with your teaching approach?

Educator's Role

5. **What is your perception of the role of educator?**

   ➢ What do you consider your primary role as a teacher?

   ➢ What influences your opinion?

6. **Can you tell me what makes you feel fulfilment in your job?**

   ➢ How would you describe success in your profession?

- How do you measure your success as a teacher?

- What makes you feel successful?

- What brings you job satisfaction?

- Do you consider job satisfaction an essential part of your work?

Aistear / Play / curriculum

7. **Are you familiar with Aistear the Early Childhood curriculum?**

   - Can you tell me about your understanding of Aistear?

   - What is it? When was it introduced?

   - What is your perception of a play-based curriculum?

   - How would you describe play?

   - Are there currently opportunities for play in your classroom?

   - Is play a part of your everyday curriculum?

   - Can you tell me about your thoughts on the connection between play and child development?

8. **Are you currently integrating Aistear into your curriculum?**

   - What are your thoughts about following Aistear in primary school?

   - Is it mandated to follow Aistear in your primary school?

   - When did you start using Aistear?

   - Can you tell me about your experiences from when you first started using Aistear until today? Challenges / Successes / Support / training options / personal perceptions and feelings. Did you/ Are you getting support from other staff members?

   - Did you or are you supporting other staff members to use Aistear?

   - Is there adequate support available?

   - If not, what in your perception would be necessary and helpful?

   - If Not: Can you tell me about this decision?

9. **In your view, is Aistear's curriculum different from primary school curriculum?**

   - What differences or similarities can you identify?

   - What are your thoughts on the assessments used?

   - What are the main areas of the curriculum?

   - How is the time allocated to areas of the curriculum?

➢ Should play be part of the primary school curriculum?

➢ What is your perception of the learning environment?

➢ In your experience, does the learning environment a relevant factor in child development/education?

➢ What is your perception of the way the learning environment can support children's development

10. What are your thoughts on integrating Aistear in primary school settings?

➢ In your experience/perception, what could pose the most difficulty?

➢ How do you think these difficulties/challenges can be managed?

Appendices 7 – Code System

Code System	Frequency
Code System	864
other teachers/support	7
going forward	11
environment	24
assessment	26
challenges	60
Training	44
support/resources	66
fear	15
child development	17
what is play?	33
what is play?\play opportunitites	20
what is play?\play- based	33
What is Aistear	38
What is Aistear\Play - Aistear	40
What is Aistear\benefits of Aistear	22
What is Aistear\defining Aistear	2
parental involvement	24
role	31
curriculum/integration/differences/	90
what is important for the children	76
approach	50
enjoyment/job satisfaction	25
enjoyment/job satisfaction\why is job satisfaction important?	5
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction	12
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction\success	6
background	22
Experience	65

Appendices 8 – Coding

Code System	Frequency
Code System	1224
education tendencies	1
other teachers/support	8
other teachers/support\parents supporting school/resources	3
other teachers/support\what else can a teacher give to children?	1
other teachers/support\teachers supporting each other	6
going forward	11
going forward\the essence of time	3
going forward\information for parents	1
going forward\what do we need?	5
going forward\challenges to go forward	7
environment	24
environment\pride	2
environment\learning environment	4
environment\learning environment\visual learning	4
assessment	25
assessment\challenges with assessment	2
assessment\personal approach to assessment	1
assessment\time for assessment	2
assessment\requirements	9
assessment\observations	11
assessment\observations\challenges/ observations	3
challenges	56
challenges\existing challenges	12
challenges\time restrain challenges with implementation of Aistear	9
challenges\professional practice development challenges	2
challenges\challenges with implementing Aistear	21
challenges\personal challenges as IT and public perception of the job	1
challenges\fear	15
challenges\fear\fear of parents perceptions	7

challenges\fear\fear of authority's perception	1
support/resources	43
support/resources\planning and resources	24
support/resources\supporting the children	1
support/resources\supporting the children\less resources- how it affects children?	2
support/resources\contact with parents	1
support/resources\Training	32
support/resources\Training\learning from each other	10
support/resources\Training\what do children benefit of more training?	5
child development	17
child development\what is play?	33
child development\what is play?\play opportunitites	20
child development\what is play?\play- based	33
What is Aistear	29
What is Aistear\Play - Aistear	45
What is Aistear\benefits of Aistear	32
What is Aistear\defining Aistear	19
parental involvement	21
parental involvement\parents' expectations	3
parental involvement\communication	9
parental involvement\parents previous experiences with school	7
parental involvement\providing resources	4
parental involvement\support	1
curriculum	86
curriculum\integration in practice	40
curriculum\need for structure	10
curriculum\overload	7
curriculum\differences in approach	27
curriculum\integration challenges	22
what is important for the children	61
what is important for the children\children need for play	1
what is important for the children\meeting childrens' needs	15
what is important for the children\transition to 1st class	1

what is important for the children\enjoy learning	31
what is important for the children\children evolving	10
what is important for the children\teachers approach to children	31
what is important for the children\boundaries	2
approach	18
approach\role	32
approach\role\good teacher	9
approach\role\connection with children	9
enjoyment/job satisfaction	24
enjoyment/job satisfaction\what is important?	16
enjoyment/job satisfaction\why is job satisfaction important?	6
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction	12
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction\success	10
background	22
Experience	65
Experience\personal development	2
Experience\parents' school experiences	1
Experience\previous experiences	6

Appendices 9 – Coding

Code System	Frequency
Code System	1234
education tendencies	1
other teachers/support	8
other teachers/support\parents supporting school/resources	3
other teachers/support\what else can a teacher give to children?	1
other teachers/support\teachers supporting each other	6
going forward	11
going forward\the essence of time	3
going forward\information for parents	1
going forward\what do we need?	5
going forward\challenges to go forward	7
environment	24
environment\pride	2
environment\learning environment	4
environment\learning environment\visual learning	4
assessment	25
assessment\challenges with assessment	2
assessment\personal approach to assessment	1
assessment\time for assessment	2
assessment\requirements	9
assessment\observations	11
assessment\observations\challenges/ observations	3
challenges	56
challenges\existing challenges	12
challenges\time restrain challenges with implementation of Aistear	9
challenges\professional practice development challenges	2
challenges\challenges with implementing Aistear	21
challenges\personal challenges as IT and public perception of the job	1
challenges\fear	15
challenges\fear\fear of parents perceptions	7

challenges\fear\fear of authority's perception	1
support/resources	43
support/resources\planning and resources	24
support/resources\supporting the children	1
support/resources\supporting the children\less resources- how it affects children?	2
support/resources\contact with parents	1
support/resources\Training	32
support/resources\Training\learning from each other	10
support/resources\Training\what do children benefit from more training?	5
how do children develop?	12
how do children develop?\why play?	5
how do children develop?\observing play- what does it tell you?	3
how do children develop?\what is play looks like?	2
how do children develop?\importance of infant years education	3
how do children develop?\what is play?	35
how do children develop?\what is play?\play opportunitites	20
how do children develop?\what is play?\play- based	33
What is Aistear	29
What is Aistear\Play - Aistear	45
What is Aistear\benefits of Aistear	32
What is Aistear\defining Aistear	19
parental involvement	21
parental involvement\parents' expectations	3
parental involvement\communication	9
parental involvement\parents previous experiences with school	7
parental involvement\providing resources	4
parental involvement\support	1
curriculum	86
curriculum\integration in practice	40
curriculum\need for structure	10
curriculum\overload	7
curriculum\differences in approach	27

curriculum\integration challenges	22
what is important for the children	61
what is important for the children\children need for play	1
what is important for the children\meeting childrens' needs	15
what is important for the children\transition to 1st class	1
what is important for the children\enjoy learning	31
what is important for the children\children evolving	10
what is important for the children\teachers approach to children	31
what is important for the children\boundaries	2
approach	18
approach\role	32
approach\role\good teacher	9
approach\role\connection with children	9
enjoyment/job satisfaction	24
enjoyment/job satisfaction\what is important?	16
enjoyment/job satisfaction\why is job satisfaction important?	6
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction	12
enjoyment/job satisfaction\job satisfaction\success	10
background	22
Experience	65
Experience\personal development	2
Experience\parents' school experiences	1
Experience\previous experiences	6