



Understanding the Link between Context and Curriculum Change in Early Years Education

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**Understanding the Link between Context and Curriculum Change in
Early Years Education**

Margaret O Donoghue

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
For the Degree of
Doctor of Education**

May 2019

Declaration of Authenticity

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Professional Doctorate, is entirely my own work. I undertook all of the data collection, analysis and wrote the thesis. No material contained in the thesis has been used in any submission for an academic award. I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save, and to the extent that, such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work and bibliography.

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I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I have a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized.

(Ginott, 1972, p. 15)

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To my Mum and Dad, whose absence I have deeply missed throughout this journey.

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Namaste.

Abstract

The role of context in relation to curriculum enactment in early childhood education is generally under-researched and under-theorised. This thesis explores the pedagogical approaches of early childhood education teachers in Ireland. It examines the implications of two policy documents: Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early childhood curriculum framework, and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). The new curriculum has both implicit and explicit links with Aistear. Aistear advocates a pedagogy that involves learning through play and allows the child some autonomy in the learning process. Given the policy recommendation that the principles of Aistear be integrated into enactment of the primary curriculum, this study formulated two research questions:

How do primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear?

How can primary school teachers be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear within their contextual settings?

The study is situated within a social constructivist paradigm and takes an interpretivist approach to the research endeavour. Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select two primary schools as case studies. The research participants were two teachers and the principal from each school. Data was generated primarily through in depth interviewing and classroom observations, although documentary, school website, and photographic data was also considered.

Data analysis identified three key contextual dimensions to be considered in the enactment of policy: teachers' understanding of Aistear and play; pedagogical approach; and, leadership; and these form the structure of the discussion chapter. The study found that the teachers and the principals understood Aistear to be something separate from the curriculum which they described and enacted as "Aistear Hour" or "Aistear Time". A gap was identified between the teachers' descriptions of their pedagogical approaches and the practices observed in their classrooms. While the study participants in both schools acknowledged the importance of play in enhancing children's learning experiences, they doubted that the children were 'really' learning through play and tended to direct the play towards activities that would meet the curriculum objectives.

Aistear and the new curriculum promote the individuality of children's cultural identity and the need for teachers to support and celebrate the language of children for whom English is an additional language. The study found that the teachers did not have the time to get to know these children and their priority was to get the curriculum objectives covered. A predominantly didactic approach was adopted by the teachers in both schools. The children were given very limited choice or voice in guiding their learning, and any choices they were given were teacher-led. The teachers were given limited training on how the principles of Aistear might be integrated into the curriculum, and were afforded limited opportunities for collaborative discussion.

Based on the study findings and informed by learnings and insights gained through the research, I designed a model of practice to serve as a practical tool for teachers in the enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum. This model will also inform future action research projects I intend to undertake.

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List of Abbreviations

- DCYA** – Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- DEIS** – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
- DES** – Department of Education and Science
- DES** - Department of Education and Skills
- DfES** – Department of Education and Skills
- EAL** – English as an Additional Language
- ECE** - Early Childhood Education
- ECEC** - Early Childhood Education and Care
- ECM** – Every Child Matters
- ELEYS** – Effective Leadership in the Early Years Study
- EPPE** – The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education
- ESRC** – Economic and Social Research Council
- INTO** – Irish National Teachers Organisation
- MOE** - Ministry of Education
- NCCA** - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- OECD** - Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
- PDST** – Professional Development for Teachers
- REPEY** – The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years
- SNA** – Special Needs Assistant
- SPEEL** – The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning
- SPHE** – Social Personal and Health Education
- SST** – Sustained Shared Thinking
- UNCRC** - United Nations Conventions of Rights of The Child

Key Terms

Aistear	Ireland's Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children age (0-6 years)
Primary Curriculum (DES, 1999)	Some schools are still working from the primary school curriculum 1999.
New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)	The new primary curriculum was to begin roll out in 2016, beginning with the new language curriculum. However, training is still ongoing, and some schools have not yet moved to the new curriculum.
Te Whariki (MOE, 1996).	New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum
Early Childhood Education	Refers to children aged between four and six years, who attend Junior Infants class.
Junior Infants Class	The first year in which children aged between four and six enter primary school.
DEIS Schools	Launched in 2005 by the Department of Education and Skills, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is the most recent national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities.
Pedagogy	A set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, learning dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and the community). (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 28).

Introduction

In this thesis I present an account of my research study which focused on gaining an understanding of how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the early years primary school classrooms in relation to their contextual settings.

Context

Early childhood education (ECE) has experienced a surge in policy attention in recent decades, at a national as well as international level (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009; 2012; 2015; Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development [CECDE] 2006; Right from the Start (2013) Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA]. Within this context, this study focusses on two key policy documents: Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009), which is Ireland's early childhood education curriculum framework, and the New Primary Language Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills, [DES], 2016). Both policy documents advocate for a pedagogical approach that is child-centred and interactive. Aistear (2009) may be defined as a curriculum framework (not a curriculum *per se*) which was originally designed to enhance the learning experiences of children in their early years. In 2016, the publication of the new primary language curriculum, to supersede the 1999 curriculum, draws on the principles of Aistear as a support framework for its implementation. At the time of writing (February 2019) the new primary language curriculum (2016) is still being rolled out, thus during this transitional phase, most teachers are still working from the 1999 curriculum. It is early childhood educators' understandings of Aistear in relation to curricula enactment that is of central concern to this study.

My Professional Background and Rationale for Undertaking the Study

Professionally I have been involved in early childhood education for seventeen years. I worked as an early years educator and ran my own early years Montessori pre-school for fourteen years. In 2012, I began working as a lecturer in ECE. Part of my role as a lecturer involves supervising students who are on practice placement in early years classrooms in primary schools. During my supervisory visits to the students, I became aware of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) being enacted and understood as an "Aistear Hour" or "Aistear Time" by

the ECE teachers. So, rather than being perceived as a curriculum framework to guide the enactment of the early childhood curriculum and enhance children's learning experiences, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) was perceived as a discrete subject and separate from the curriculum.

As an ECE professional, my beliefs on how children should experience learning are strongly rooted in the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Throughout my practice I promote a child-centred rights-based approach to early childhood education believing that the voice of the child matters. The centrality of play and a children's rights perspective are key components of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and I consider both components to be critical to its integration within the enactment of curricula.

A review of the literature identified a dearth of discussion on how ECE teachers' understandings of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) translates in practice and is enacted in the classroom. A study by Dunphy et al., (2014) posits that, as most primary school teachers must teach a prescribed primary school curriculum, their initial teacher training education can tend to focus more on curricular context at the expense of the child's perspective. These findings are supported by Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014, p. 205), who observed that teachers did not receive the necessary support to develop a play pedagogy, suggesting that there is a need for a "play pedagogical toolkit" that could support teachers in making the links between the theoretical and practical perspectives on play.

Rooted in my professional experience and in view of research findings, my research rationale may best be described as a desire to develop a model of practice to support teachers in implementing Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within the enactment of the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). A model that might, to use the words of Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014), equip teachers with a "play pedagogical toolkit" for integrating the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) into their everyday practices in early years classrooms.

Role of the Pilot Study

In 2014, as part of my EdD, I was required to undertake a pilot study in an area of personal interest. I took this opportunity to explore an aspect of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) in relation to early childhood education in primary schools. The initial research focus was on exploring how Aistear (NCCA, 2009) could support early childhood educators and

primary school teachers to provide continuity for children in their learning experiences as they transition from pre-school to primary school. Crucial to providing this continuity was an exploration of how early childhood primary school teachers understood Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early childhood curriculum framework which supports the primary school curriculum.

Findings from the pilot study highlighted the complexities the teachers experienced on a daily basis in trying to enact a primary curriculum within the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) framework. The findings suggested that there was a consensus among the teachers on the important role of play in early childhood education, however, despite their espoused views on the role of play, the language used by the teachers suggested a mainly didactic approach that left little choice to the children in directing their own learning through play. The findings also pointed to a mismatch between what the teachers articulated as their beliefs regarding a child-centred curriculum and the classroom practices I observed. Furthermore, the findings suggested that the teachers understood Aistear (NCCA, 2009) to mean learning through play; however, rather than play being integrated throughout their classroom practice, play was understood to mean something peripheral to the curriculum objectives. Play was introduced in a limited way, with just thirty to forty-five minutes a day allocated to Aistear, which was regularly referred to as “Aistear Time”. Moreover, there was little evidence that play was linked to the aims and learning goals of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) or to the underlying principle of the primary school curriculum in relation to “the child being an active agent in their own learning” (DES, 1999, p. 26). The findings also highlighted that the teachers worked in different environments with different constraints and realities that impose and impact on their day-to-day practice. Prior to carrying out the pilot study, this was not something I had considered.

The findings from the pilot study shifted my original research position of interest from exploring how Aistear (NCCA, 2009) could support early childhood educators and primary school teachers to provide continuity for children in their learning experiences as they transition from pre-school to primary school, to a need to understand the contextual realities teachers experience in enacting curricula in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The findings from the pilot study guided the research aims for this study.

The Study Aims and Research Questions

Given the policy recommendation that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) should be weaved throughout the enactment of the entire primary curriculum (DES, 1999; 2016), the study aims were identified as follows:

- To develop a model of practice that supports primary school teachers to implement the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within a new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016).
- To establish a basis for understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the early years classroom.
- To add to the literature on policy enactment in relation to early childhood curricula, and on the role of context in implementing changes in relation to practice.

In order to meet these aims, two research question were formulated as follows:

How do primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009)?

How can primary school teachers be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early childhood curriculum framework, within their contextual settings?

The contexts within which teachers implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is not discussed in the literature, and, taking a qualitative approach, this study explores such contexts in order to generate new insights and learnings leading to the development of a new model of practice to support teachers in the integration of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within the curriculum.

The Study Sample

Purposive sampling procedures were employed to identify and select two primary schools. Both schools are located on the North side of Dublin in an area that is socially deprived. The research participants were two teachers and the principal from each of the primary schools.

Data Collection

The study sits within a social constructivist paradigm, believing that all we know is determined by the intersection of our biographies, our individual lives, values, religious beliefs, and ideologies (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 24). The study adopted a qualitative approach, which involves the interpretive understanding of human interaction, guided by the understanding that meaning is constructed through social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Bruner, 1990; Denzin, 1994; Geertz 1973; Patton, 2015). In line with my ontological and epistemological position, the study adopted a case study approach as the method of data collection. This approach enabled the use of diverse methods of data generation which included: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, documents, and photographic data, each of which provide an account of the teachers' practice situated in time and space.

Ethical principles and procedures were followed including the participants being comprehensively informed about the purposes of the research, its outcomes and dissemination, and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was guided by Miles et al., (2014), whose approach involves many of what they refer to as “iterative cycles” of induction and deduction, summarising and distilling the data to develop manageable codes. At the end of this process, codes were then organised into a final framework or storyboard from which the researcher wrote up the study findings. In the write-up, the researcher supports the findings with extracts from the narratives of the study participants and other data sets. The findings from qualitative case studies are contextual and are not generalizable to a wider population, rather, the reader is invited to consider the relevance of the findings to their particular circumstances.

Thesis Overview

The thesis is presented in six chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Background Context to the Study. In outlining the background context to the study, this chapter considers the role of play in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the role of play in early childhood education. It discusses Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016), the policy documents that are central to this study. It charts the historical development of policy and curriculum design in Ireland, and offers a comparative analysis of the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016), in terms of their potential for alignment to Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

Chapter 2: Literature Review. This chapter critically reviews the literature pertinent to the research focus which is to gain an understanding of how curriculum changes are enacted and managed within the early years primary school classroom. The chapter begins by providing an account of how the literature review was carried out. The subsequent sections explore understandings of curriculum and its associated concepts, review the literature relating to pedagogical approaches to curriculum within an Irish context, and explore how ideas derived from socio-cultural perspectives influence curriculum reform. The final section discusses curriculum reform and the role of context and leadership.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. This chapter discusses the research approach adopted in this study. It explains how, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) and Braun et al., (2011), the researcher created a conceptual model to serve as a heuristic device to guide analysis of the data. It situates the study within a social constructivist paradigm that takes an interpretivist approach to the research endeavour. It discusses the reasoning behind the choice of a two-case study approach and describes the processes of purposive sampling and defining the boundaries of the cases. Data was generated primarily, though not exclusively, through in-depth interviewing and non-participant observations and these methods are described and discussed. Over the course of the study, the process of data analysis comprised two overarching stages, each of which encompassed a number of steps, and these are explained in detail. The researcher's reflective stance and ethical issues are also considered.

Chapter 4: The Research Findings. This chapter presents the study findings from School A and School B under the four key themes identified in the final stage of data analysis, namely: pedagogy; curriculum; understandings of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting a new primary language curriculum.

Chapter 5: Discussion. This chapter considers the implications of the study findings. It discusses how a new model of practice, designed by the researcher, can support teachers to integrate Aistear within the new primary language curriculum. The model identifies three key contexts that have emerged from the study, namely: teachers' understanding of Aistear and play; pedagogical approach; and, leadership. Each of these contexts are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion. This chapter brings the thesis to a close. It addresses the two research questions the study set out to answer. It discusses how the new conceptual model contributes to knowledge and practice. It identifies the study limitations and points to areas for further research. The chapter concludes by explaining how I plan to take the learnings and insights gained in the study forward.

Chapter 1: Background Context to the Study

1. Introduction

This chapter considers the role of play in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the role of play in early childhood education. It discusses two policy documents that are central to this study, namely, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). It charts the historical development of policy and curriculum design in Ireland, and offers a comparative analysis of the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016), in terms of their potential for alignment to Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

1.1 The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989)

General Comment No. 17 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) provides the following definition of play:

Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. ...The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, Paragraph 14c)

The UNCRC (1989) sets out the special rights of children, including their right to participate in a democracy in ways that reflect their age and maturity. Article 3 highlights that “the best interests of the child” must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children. Article 12 outlines how the child's views must be considered and taken into account in “all matters” affecting her/him (UNCRC, 1989). Ensuring that these rights are met places responsibility on those working in ECE to enable children to exercise choice, and to use their own initiative as an active participant and partner in their learning and development. The UNCRC (1989) emphasises the role of play in providing children with opportunities for the expression of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and for the development of physical, social, cognitive, and emotional strength and skills (Lansdown, 1995). Lansdown (1995) argues that play is a key dimension of education and is necessary to achieve the best possible health, integral to the child's optimum development.

In addition, she posits that children require appropriate time and space, access to natural environments, material resources, and other children. They also need, she suggests, key adults around them to recognise the importance and legitimacy of play and support them in their play activities. Play in ECE provides an important opportunity to facilitate teachers to engage in active participation in partnership with children. In the early years of primary school, playful experiences are an important part of language development (DES, 2016). When children play or are involved in playful activities, they are engaged in meaningful communication (DES, 2016). The new primary language curriculum highlights that “an engaging environment encourages and helps all children to explore, make discoveries, solve problems, express themselves and interact with others” (DES, 2016, p.20). Play is recognised as an important element of early childhood education. However, Irish research (Hunter & Walsh, 2013; O’Kane, 2007; Gray & Ryan, 2016) and international research (Moyle, 2010; McInness et al, 2011; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Stephen, 2012; Wood, 2013) shows that play in practice within ECE has been found to be highly challenging and problematic. Walsh et al., (2010) and Hunter and Walsh (2013) emphasise the need for those working in ECE to engage in professional development and purposeful reflection to develop their understanding of play as a critical component of pedagogy in the early years classroom.

To understand how curricula changes are implemented and managed within the early years primary school classroom, there is a need to know the background to the context of early childhood education in Ireland, which is now discussed.

1.2 Background Context to ECE in Ireland

This section traces the historical development of early childhood education policy and curriculum design in Ireland. It gives an account of the OECD (2006) recommendations for ECE in Ireland. It examines the ECE curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). It compares the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) with the new curriculum (DES, 2016) in terms of their potential for alignment to Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

1.2.1 The Context of Early Childhood Education in Ireland

Early childhood education in Ireland operates under a split model system in which the childcare and education sectors function independently. In practice there are two separate systems: ECE in pre-schools for children aged between three and four years is the

responsibility of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), while the responsibility for children in early years primary school aged four to six years rest with the Department of Education and Science (DES). For the purpose of this study, ECE refers to children aged between four and six years who attend junior infants (the first year) in primary school. Children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of four until twelve years of age. The compulsory age at which children attend school in Ireland is six years. However, statistics show that sixty-five percent of all four-year-olds and most five-year-olds attend primary school entering at junior infant level and progressing to senior infant level at six years of age (Education in Ireland, 2011).

1.2.2 Development of a Common ECE Curriculum

Internationally, pre-schools and primary schools have developed very much as separate entities and vary in several ways in terms of their objectives and approaches to ECE resulting in differences in pedagogy and curricula (Perry et al., 2012; Dunlop, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2013; Fabian, 2013; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2013). Defining goals and alignment of curricula for continuous child development from 3-6 years of age were identified as common challenges that countries faced in relation to enhancing quality in ECE curricula in a review of ECE across twenty countries carried out by the OECD (2006). Concerning Ireland, the report suggested that the development of a common ECE curriculum linking pre-school to primary school, similar to that of countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Portugal, could provide continuity between pre-school and primary (OECD, 2006). As explained in the introduction to this thesis, in 2016 the Department of Education and Science (DES) launched the language strand of a new primary school curriculum. This is the first strand to be rolled out, and, to date (February 2019), training in its implementation is ongoing, with most schools continuing to work from the 1999 primary curriculum. In 2009 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) launched Ireland's first early childhood curriculum framework called Aistear (pronounced Ash-ter), and the section to follow offers a detailed account of this framework.

1.3 Aistear

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland and, as such, encompasses the junior and senior infant stage of primary schooling for children aged between four and six years of age. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) sought to complement and extend the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999; 2016) by supporting children to grow and develop socially, physically, creatively, cognitively, and linguistically in a way which is natural, meaningful, and enjoyable for children (NCCA, 2012).

The development of Aistear was strongly influenced by the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland Report (2004). The review was highly critical of the experience of play in junior infant classes in schools in Ireland. The report described a pedagogical approach to teaching that was didactic, whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables where play was often used as a means of delivering a curricular goal or a pre-academic skill. The authors drew attention to the large class sizes and the absence of specific regulations for the training of teachers of the younger children, as well as for classroom design, organisation and equipment (OECD, 2004). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) promotes a shift from an approach that was dominated by individualistic developmental explanations for learning and development to a holistic approach that is “enhanced by theories that foreground the culturally and socially constructed nature of learning” (NCCA, 2009). This view stems from an understanding of children as social actors who actively participate in and co-construct their knowledge, identity, and culture with peers and adults (James & James, 2004). As a curriculum framework, it promotes the child as a competent learner from birth and as an active agent in their learning and development through their interactions with the world (NCCA, 2007, p. 7).

A major strength of Aistear is that it draws on international policy, most notably the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Article 12 of the (UNCRC, 1989) proposes that where adults make decisions that affect children, children have the right to have their opinions and views taken into account and respected. As an early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) promotes the rights of each child to guide their own learning through playful and engaging interaction. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) promotes a curriculum that builds on children's interests. It promotes the concept that curiosity, wonder, resilience, and playfulness should be at the centre of what and how children learn (NCCA, 2012). A further function of Aistear is to support the ECE teacher to gather information about the children's learning (NCCA, 2009). Aistear is also an assessment tool that allows teachers to build a picture over time of a child's learning progress across the primary curriculum. Teachers can use different ways to gather evidence about how and what the child learns on an ongoing basis. This information can then be used to celebrate the child's current learning, and to help make decisions about their next steps for future learning (NCCA, 2009).

1.3.1 Aistear in Pre-schools

Children in Ireland are entitled to two free years of ECE under the Early Childhood Education and Care Scheme (DCYA, 2010). The Government pays a capitation fee directly to participating pre-schools who, in return, provide a pre-school service free of charge to all children aged over three years and not older than five-and-a-half years. Participating pre-schools are required to sign a contract which sets out that:

The Registered Provider must provide an appropriate educational programme for children in their pre-school year which adheres to ... Aistear, the 'Early Childhood Curriculum Framework'. The Registered Provider will be supported in meeting this requirement through the assistance of the 'National Early Years Quality Support Service' quality development service mentors.

(DCYA, 2016, p. 10).

The enactment of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within pre-school continues to be supported by the provision of training on how to implement the framework. While Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is required and inspected in pre-school settings, it is important to point out that it is not statutory.

1.3.2 Aistear in Primary Schools

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is not a requirement in primary schools and teacher training in Aistear is not obligatory and is undertaken on a voluntary basis. Aistear is not part of the curriculum evaluation process in primary schools. Primary schools in Ireland are subject to curriculum evaluations on average every four years. The evaluation focuses on a particular subject of the primary school curriculum and evaluates three main aspects of the school's provision for that subject: the quality of the pupils' learning in the subject, how the school supports pupils' learning in that subject and how the schools plan for that subject. Curriculum evaluations generally take between one and two days and during the evaluation the inspector visits classrooms, interacts with pupils, examines aspects of their work, meets with some teachers and reviews a limited number of relevant school documents. Inspectors report on the quality of provision using the Inspectorate's quality continuum (DES) under the following five levels: very good; good; satisfactory; and weak. On completion of the evaluation, the school receive oral feedback and a written report, to which they can then reply to. Both the report and the school's reply are then published on the DES website. The children in junior infant classes do not undergo standardised testing and there are no rating scales for schools in Ireland.

How Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is enacted within primary schools is dependent on the extent to which individual schools wish to engage in its enactment. Aistear's guidelines focus on supporting children's learning through four key areas: partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment. This research study focused on three of these principles: interactions, play, and assessment, and these are discussed in the relevant chapters. While the role of partnership with parents is an important area, time did not permit its inclusion in the study.

The new Primary language Curriculum (DES, 2016) has both implicit and explicit links with Aistear and supports a unitary approach to ECE between pre-school and primary school. Professional development for teachers in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is voluntary and, as such, is at odds with the rhetoric of the importance of the new primary language curriculum and its alignment with Aistear promoted by the NCCA. It is important to remember that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is a curriculum framework rather than a curriculum *per se*. How teachers understand Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is closely linked to how they view and understand children, both as individuals and as learners. Moyles, Adams, and

Musgrove (2002) explain that crucial to effective pedagogy is how those working in ECE understand children's learning and developmental theories, how that knowledge is applied in practice but also how the practice is informed by teachers' values, beliefs, and understandings (Nutbrown, 2018).

The guiding philosophy of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) as an early childhood curriculum framework has parallels with New Zealand's early childhood curriculum Te Whariki (Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Whariki has four broad principles: empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships (MOE, 2006). Additionally, Te Whariki has five interwoven strands: wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration, which are interweaved through the curriculum. A similar concept of interweaving relates to Aistear's (NCCA, 2009) four themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking. These themes provide a flexible framework for ECE and "convey the integrated and holistic development" of children (NCCA, 2004, p. 22). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) suggests that developmental domains such as cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical should not be separated out and that subjects such as mathematics, science and art should be integrated (NCCA, 2004).

The four themes of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) bridge the developmental and subject domains that are set out in the new primary language curriculum and are a move towards a more integrated approach to learning and development in the early years (NCCA, 2009). As an early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) highlights the importance of play, relationships, and language for young children's learning. The critical role of play in ECE is emphasised across a growing body of international evidence that supports a play-based approach to learning (Wood, 2013; Hunter & Walsh, 2013). Aistear (NCCA, 2009, p. 26) describes the child as "an active, capable and competent learner, learning through play, relationships and language, and every day experiences". In this context, the role of the teacher is to interact with children as co-learners who negotiate, challenge, and guide. This represents a move away from the didactic approach of the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999) which is still being used in schools (DES, 2005; O Donoghue, 2016). Evidence for this didactic approach is provided by Churchill, Dower, French, Rogers, and Sandbrook (2013) who found that the primary curriculum (1999) gives prominence to formal learning and emphasises the teacher's role as the child's instructor. These findings are highlighted further in the recommendations put forward by the DES:

The curriculum recommends that pupils develop the skills of listening attentively, taking turns to speak, offering the information most essential to the listener, and making comments and responses that are appropriate.

(DES, 2005, p.14)

While Aistear (NCCA, 2009) encompasses both pre-school and primary school systems, O’Kane (2007) argues that in practice there is no shared understanding between pre-schools and primary schools of how the framework is understood or implemented. Moreover, a recent study by Gray and Ryan (2016, p. 201) which looked at the practice of teachers delivering the primary curriculum (DES, 1999), suggested that teachers have “little or no awareness of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and that they would welcome further information on its role”. The teachers indicated that they found it difficult to implement the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009) due to large class sizes, a focus on the curriculum content, pupil behaviour, and a lack of adequate resource materials (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Gray and Ryan (2016) conclude that there is little evidence to suggest that the introduction of Aistear has transformed classroom practice and that the practice of weaving Aistear throughout the primary curriculum is not visible. Furthermore, they argue that “teachers delivering the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) lack the knowledge and training necessary to transform their practice in relation to Aistear” (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p. 202).

The launch of the new primary language curriculum in 2016 provided an opportunity to explore teachers’ understandings of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and their interpretations of how it is linked to the new curriculum as they teach within their contextual settings. The section to follow discusses the role of the teacher in implementing the primary language curriculum.

1.4 The New Primary Language Curriculum

Drawing on international research the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) draws on a socio-cultural model of learning (OECD, 2006; McGettigan and Gray, 2012; Hunter et al., 2014; Moss, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, 2013) It highlights the critical role of adult-child and child-child interactions and suggests that these interactions are essential for language teaching and learning. Furthermore, DES (2016) suggests that language is co-constructed between the teacher and child through joint attention, mutual interest and enjoyment. While Ireland has a centrally devised primary school curriculum (DES, 1999; 2016), there is a strong emphasis on individual school and classroom planning, much of

this planning is left to the individual teachers. At the school level, the character of the school makes a vital contribution to shaping the curriculum in classrooms (NCCA, 2016). Adaptation of the curriculum to suit the individual school is achieved through the preparation and continuous updating of the school curriculum plan (NCCA, 2016) which is carried out by the teaching staff and principal of each school. The selection of text books and classroom resources to support the implementation of the curriculum plan is made by the individual schools, rather than the DES or the NCCA. The fact that principals and teachers play such a key role in how the new primary language curriculum is implemented is significant as it suggests that the contexts within which they understand Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) will influence how these policy documents are enacted. How those working in ECE understand early childhood, understand how children learn, and the values they place on children, are important contexts that need to be considered in the study of how curricula policy is enacted both collectively and individually.

The new primary language curriculum has four interconnected components, and these are set out in Table 1

Table 1: The Four Interconnected Components of the New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

Learning Outcomes	Progression Continua
Describe the expected language learning and development for children at the end of a two-year period. Stage 1 learning outcomes refer to the ECE classes	Describes in broad terms, milestones and steps in a child's journey in his/her language learning and development
Support Material	Examples
Includes practical advice for teachers, illustrated with videos and photos to inform their teaching of oral language, reading and writing, in the school's first and second languages	Developed by teachers and children, show children's language learning and development across the three strands and across a range of contexts.

Source: The Four Interconnected Components of the New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

The new primary language curriculum uses language that is very outcome focused in describing the learning objectives and how they might be achieved. While some of the language is supportive as to how teachers might achieve the outcomes, the policy document provides minimal information as to how the curriculum might be enacted in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Curriculum enactment refers to “the teachers’ interpretation and implementation of the written curriculum” (Barrett-Tatum & Dooley, 2015, p. 258). Building on this, Fives and Buehl (2016, p. 118) posit that teachers’ enacted curricula, and the decisions they make during planning, instruction, and assessment activities, reflects their underlying beliefs about the nature of learning, knowledge, and student abilities. The language used in the new primary language curriculum is very broad in its suggestions, and therefore leaves its enactment dependant on the subjective views of the teachers. The implications of this, on the positive side, is that teachers have the autonomy to interpret and deliver Aistear (NCCA, 2009) as they will; however, on the negative side, it can lead to children having very different experiences based on the individual beliefs and understandings of their teachers in relation to how and what children should learn.

The new primary language curriculum describes children’s language learning along a progression continuum which, it explains, acts as a support for teachers to work with children whose learning and development may progress at different levels to their peers. Each learning outcome is broken down into a number of progression steps across eight milestones along the progression continua. The new primary language curriculum states that:

Learning outcomes help teachers to plan, implement and reflect on their use of appropriate methods for teaching and learning, to use assessment methods that are matched to the intended Learning Outcomes and to provide focused feedback to children and parents.

(NCCA, 2016, p. 46)

Building on this, the learning outcomes set out the skills the children must have on completion of the junior and senior infant stages (children aged between four and seven years). These include letter knowledge and conventions of print, which the curriculum states:

... are essential for mastery in the early years because they are fundamental to children's subsequent learning and development. They are finite skills and, once achieved and demonstrated, they do not appear in Learning Outcomes in subsequent stages in the curriculum.

(NCCA, 2016, p. 46)

The new primary language curriculum has been developed to ensure “greater consistency” with Aistear (NCCA, 2012, p.14). Table 2 sets out how Aistear links to the new primary language curriculum. This “greater consistency” between pre-school and primary school signals a move away from the split system of ECE between pre-school and primary school and allows for the development of a continuum of the curriculum as recommended by the OECD (2006):

Table 2: Linking the Principles of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and the New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

Principles of the Aistear Curriculum Framework	Principles of the New Primary Language Curriculum
Reciprocal adult-child relationships and helps interaction	Enables children to make and explore meaning as well as receiving and creating it.
Playful and meaningful experiences for children's learning and development	Children's homes and communities play a key role in language learning.
Provision of an Environment that Nurtures	
Independence	To make discoveries
Curiosity	To solve problems
Playfulness	To express themselves
Perseverance	To interact with others
Confidence	
Resilience	
Resourcefulness	

Source: Linking the Principles of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and the New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

1.5 Curriculum Change

The last two decades have seen significant changes within the primary school (DES, 2016). Primary school teachers have highlighted the need for a less crowded curriculum with a greater emphasis on practice and on supporting progression in children's language learning and development (NCCA, 2012). The NCCA reviews suggested the need for a new primary language curriculum that would integrate English and Irish and would include all children and the language knowledge and experiences that they bring to school (NCCA, 2012). Primary school teachers argued that there was a need to update the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999) to a curriculum that would enable children to make and explore meaning and would support children to develop positive dispositions toward language and literacy (NCCA, 2012). The structure of the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) differs from the curriculum (DES, 1999) for English and Irish in several respects and these are set out in Table 3:

Table 3: Structural Differences between Primary English Language Curriculum (DES, 1999) and Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

Primary English Curriculum (1999)	New Primary Language Curriculum (2016)
Strand units	Elements
Different strands and strand units for English and Irish	Same strands and elements for English and Irish
Content Objectives 269	Learning Outcomes 94
	Progression Continua
Assessment advice in guidelines	Examples of children's language learning in the Primary Language Toolkit (online)
Guidelines	Support Material for teachers in the Primary Language Toolkit (online)

Source: (DES, 2016, p. 8)

The new primary language curriculum is described as an integrated curriculum (NCCA, 2016). The curriculum has the same structure and strands for English and Irish to support integration across both languages (NCCA, 2016). The primary curriculum (DES, 1999) had a total of 269 content objectives, by comparison the new language curriculum has 94 learning outcomes. As alluded to earlier, the new primary language curriculum for junior and senior infants (children aged four to six years) is aligned with the principles and methodologies of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The next section considers how this alignment applies.

1.6 Aistear and the New Primary Language Curriculum

Aistear and the new primary language curriculum set out clear goals which reflect the current discourse in ECE. Leading theorists in the field of ECE research (Moss, 2012; Rinaldi, Dahlberg & Moss 2006; Anning, Cullen & Fler, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; and Mac Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 1998) have argued that those working with children in the early years need to move towards a socio-cultural approach in their practices. A socio-cultural approach conceives of effective practices as those that are built on the construct of the child as being an active and equal partner in any co-constructed learning that takes place. Within a socio-cultural approach, the child should be at the forefront, and the adult and child are seen as situated in particular social, cultural and historical contexts (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; Mac Naughton et al., 2010).

How a curriculum is defined and enacted is constrained by the beliefs, understandings, artefacts, and practices of the particular context within which the learning is taking place (Anning et al., 2004; Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011; Dunphy, 2008). This is significant in relation to the research questions because how the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) is enacted in relation to the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is dependent on the interrelatedness of the subjective views of the teachers and principals, and how they understand Aistear and the new primary language curriculum, and the contexts within which they teach, as I illustrate in Figure 1:

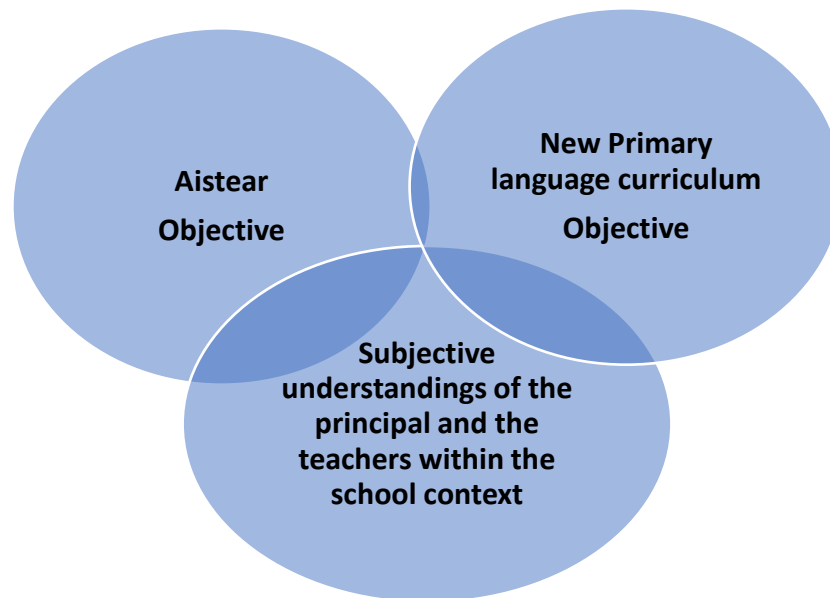


Figure 1: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the New Primary Language Curriculum (DES, 2016)

1.7 Laying the Foundations in ECE

A number of key areas have been identified as important predictors of positive educational outcomes in primary schools. These include: curricula enactment, relationships, and teaching strategies that promote common values and mutual respect (Dunphy et al., 2014; European Commission, 2014). The design and quality of education systems have a strong impact on children's participation and performance (European Commission, 2014). Formal, didactic approaches have been shown to negatively impact on young children's motivation to learn, independence, social interaction, and self-esteem (Walsh et al., 2006). Furthermore, creating positive relationships between teacher and child have been shown to be important in combatting early school leaving (Byrne & Smith, 2010) and increasing the likelihood of positive educational outcomes throughout the education system.

In line with the socio-cultural paradigm which frames this study, my understanding is that children learn what is important within the cultures of the environments in which they operate. They do this, Anning (1999) suggests, through interactions with more experienced members of those cultures or communities. Building on this idea, Bruner (1996) posits that children learn to communicate and understand their worlds through the context of languages, cultural behaviours, beliefs, and values. ECE provides a crucial foundation for children's learning and helps to develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are important for future success (Litjens and Taguma, 2010).

Aistear recognises that it is during early childhood that the foundations for future learning and development are laid down (NCCA, 2009). Research evidence confirms that high quality ECE reaps measurable gains in thinking and social skills for children (Siraj-Blatchford, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002). Neurobiological research by Knudsen et al., (2006) highlights the importance of a child's early years on the brain and behavioural development; both occur mainly during early childhood where development is influenced by the quality of experiences and interactions, and where development occurs at a more rapid pace than in later years (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005; Sylwester, 1995; Greenfield, 2000). This development, which includes language skills and social, cognitive, and motor skills, is now recognised to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, of which the educational environment is a large element (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001). While evidence shows that the extent of the benefits depends on the quality of ECE, there is no consensus on how quality should be defined. Litjens and Taguma (2010) suggest that "process quality" consists of what children experience in their programmes and what happens within the early childhood setting, concluding that the experiences children have in their ECE can have an influence on their wellbeing and development. These findings concur with a report by the Council of European Union (2015) which comments:

The cognitive and non-cognitive skills developed in early childhood education...can help children to unlock their full potential and provide them with the foundations for life and success in school.

(Council of European Union, 2015, p. 9)

Coupled with the above findings and linking to the role of values and beliefs about how children learn, discussed earlier, Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) argue that appropriate class pedagogical skills are primarily determined by the knowledge and understanding of childhood and child development by those who work across ECE. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) defines pedagogy as:

The teacher's full set of instructional techniques and strategies, including the teacher's provision of discovery learning environments.

Siraj-Blatchford (2010, p.150)

A key component of quality ECE, Moyles et al., (2002) argues, relates to the pedagogical practices of ECE teachers. Thus, it may be said, the pedagogical approach of ECE teachers plays an important role in ensuring quality in ECE and thereby laying the foundations for future positive learning experiences.

1.8 Summary

This chapter presented the background context to the study. It considered the role of play in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and the role of play in early childhood education. It examined two policy documents that are central to this study, namely, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016), and charted the historical development of policy and curriculum design in Ireland. It offered a comparative analysis of the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) and the new curriculum (DES, 2016), in terms of their potential for alignment to Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The analysis concluded that the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) is well-aligned with the principles and methodologies of Aistear (NCCA, 2016); however, how the curriculum is enacted in relation to the principles of Aistear is context dependent, as shown in Figure 1 (p. 21), where a multiplicity of contextual factors impact on the learning experiences of children in the early years classrooms. Having set out the background context to the study, the chapter to follow presents a review of the relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews the literature pertinent to the research focus which is to gain an understanding of how curriculum changes are enacted and managed within the early years primary school classroom. The chapter begins by providing an account of how the literature review was carried out. The subsequent sections explore understandings of curriculum and its associated concepts, review the literature relating to pedagogical approaches to curriculum within an Irish context, and explore how ideas derived from socio-cultural perspectives influence curriculum reform. The final section discusses curriculum reform and the role of context and leadership.

Hart (2001) defines a literature review as:

The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed.

(Hart 2001, p. 13).

The review was guided by Cooper's (1984) classification guide to carrying out a literature review which suggests that the researcher considers six main characteristics: focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organisation, and audience. Each of these characteristics are discussed in the next section.

2.2 The Focus

The focus of the review was to critically analyse and explicate the literature to build an understanding of how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in schools and to explore how ECE teachers understand and implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within their curriculum and within their contextual settings.

2.2.1 The Goal

The goal or purpose of the review was to identify the central issues that need to be considered in the development of a model of practice that could support primary school

teachers to implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within a new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). A further purpose was to contribute new empirical research evidence on policy enactment in relation to ECE curricula.

2.2.2 Perspective

In deciding what to include and exclude in the literature review the focus remained on the research questions and objectives. Key to answering the research questions was a need to identify literature regarding how teachers understand Aistear, curriculum change and the role of context in curriculum change, and policy enactment.

2.2.3 Coverage

Identifying what literature to include was a very interesting part of the research study but also a time consuming one. The literature review for the pilot study was very helpful in keeping a focus on what areas of research should be explored. The following academic databases were used: The British Educational index; Child Development and Adolescent Studies; Education Line; Eric (Proquest); Jstor; Sheffield Hallam University Library; Springerlink; Taylor and Francis online; and Wiley online Library. The search was conducted between 2016 and 2019. Key search terms were used, these included: context of policy enactment; early childhood curriculum; pedagogy; professional development; leadership; curriculum enactment; socio-cultural perspectives; and policy enactment. As the review progressed additional terms were added, these included: professional learning; distributed leadership; change practice; workplace learning; children's participation; discourses in early childhood; and constructs of early childhood. The review identified a wealth of literature relating to curriculum and pedagogy in the early years. However, it should be noted from the outset that the literature on the role of context and curriculum enactment within ECE was marked by its absence.

2.2.4 Organisation

Throughout the literature review process, notes of interest relating to further research papers were made, some of which later became part of the review. Anything that was considered to be useful was entered into an index book. Each journal article and book were given a number and entered into the index book along with notes of where the research findings might fit. It is important to point out that the literature review did not follow a linear process. Rather, it could be described as an iterative process that involved going back and forth between many journal articles and chapters and developing a mind

map of how I visualised their fit to inform the study and to answer the research questions. This mapping was an evolving and changing process. There was no set start or end point within which the literature review was carried out. If something new arose within the review it was followed through to see if it could add to the answering of the research questions. The review was organised around the key concepts discussed above. Key policy documents included: OECD publications regarding ECE; the primary curriculum (1999); the new primary language curriculum (2016); and Aistear (2009). These policy documents were then mapped and linked to the relevant literature. The next stage was to identify and map out useful conceptual models to support the answering of the research questions and meeting the study's aims.

2.2.5 Audience

The final characteristic Cooper (1984) puts forward requires the researcher to identify who the research is for. The primary audiences is the supervisors and reviewers of the research study. The secondary audience is the academic community, the key policy developers, namely, the Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and primary school teachers and principals.

2.6 Curriculum as a Concept

Over the last decade, both nationally and internationally, there has been a move to recognise ECE as a distinctive phase in children's learning (OECD, 2001; 2015). At its simplest level, Daniel (2001, p. 6) posits that a curriculum can be described as a plan for learning made up of many components including programme and content, learning objectives and learning strategies, assessment methods, and resources. Ross (2000) argues that such a description has the potential to present as a deceptively simple process. Litjens and Taguma (2010) suggest that the curriculum describes the content and methods that substantiate children's learning and development. Congruent with Ross (2000), they argue that curriculum is a complex concept that contains multiple components, such as ECE goals, content, and pedagogical practices. Mac Naughton (2005, p.91) suggests that curriculum can be understood as a reflection of historical and cultural perspectives and a "project of contestable meanings and different understanding".

Moreover, she argues that there can be no objective true way to 'do' curriculum in early childhood. A curriculum can also be understood as a "culture unto itself" in which dominant cultural perspectives are reflected in the curricular design "incorporating

assumptions and the valuing of certain skills and knowledge” (Dunne, 2011, p. 616). From this perspective, the curriculum is seen as “locus and transmitter of values” (Rudolph, 1977, p. 3). Siraj-Blatchford (2010, p.150) posits that in considering the definition of curriculum there is a need to include the material resources within the classroom such as toys, furniture and props, and the activities, the social interactions, and the environments. The NCCA (2001, p.10) goes further in its description of curriculum whereby curriculum is understood to address the totality of the child’s learning and development and refers to the complete programme of activities offered to the children. These include: the policies and practice of the school, the relationships between the teacher, the children, the parents, the resources, the physical environment both indoor and outdoor, the teaching and learning styles, and the systems of assessment (NCCA, 2001). Both Siraj-Blatchford’s (2010, p.150) and the NCCA (2001, p.10) descriptions of curriculum support Braun, Ball, Maguire, and Hoskins (2011) conceptual model which identifies and links a variety of contextual factors that influence and affect how curricula are enacted within schools. Braun et al., (2011) argue that policies are “intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific factors, even though in much central policy making, these sorts of constraints, pressures, and enablers of policy enactments tend to be neglected” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 585).

Considering these definitions of curriculum together illustrates that defining the meaning of curriculum is complex. Given this complexity, understanding how primary school teachers can be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear requires a conceptual model that can support a process of untangling the interconnected and interrelated contextual factors that need to be considered in understanding the process of curriculum enactment. This model is discussed and explained in the methodology chapter.

2.7 Pedagogical Approaches to Curriculum within an Irish Context

Identifying effective early childhood pedagogy is highly complex (Dunphy, 2008; OECD, 2015). Dunphy (2008) argues that effective early childhood pedagogy can be conceptualised in terms of practices, principles, and professional dimensions. The complexity of early years pedagogy is evident from the framework developed by Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002) which identifies three interconnected and interrelated areas that they consider to be important when considering pedagogy, shown in Figure 2:

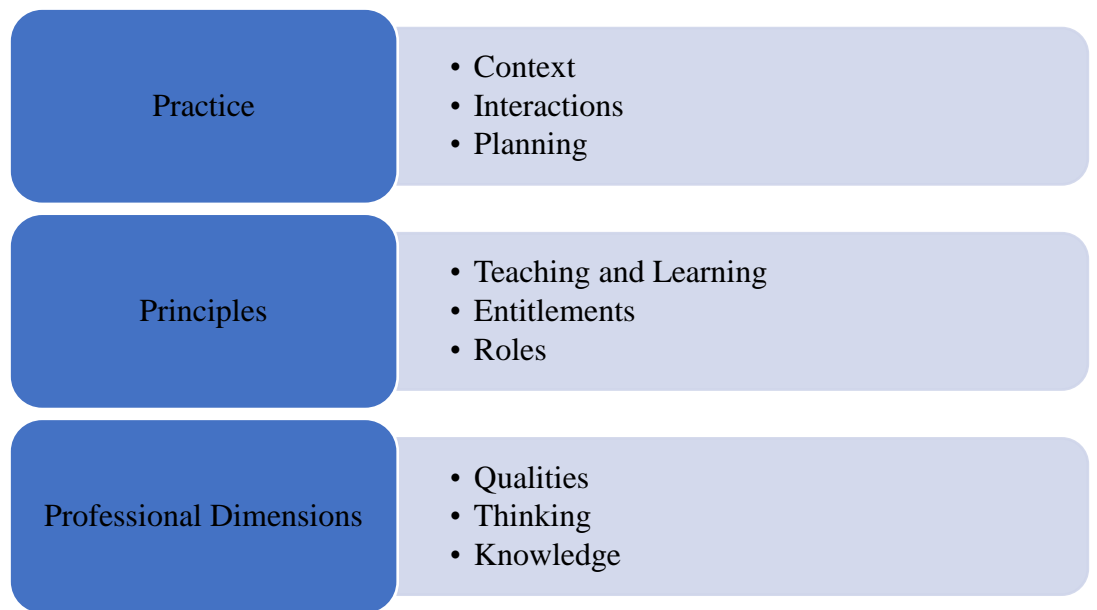


Figure 2: The Three Interconnected and Interrelated areas of Importance when Considering Pedagogy (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002)

Source: Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, (2002, p.103)

Key practices or pedagogical strategies have been identified as highly effective and at the core of these, Moyles et al., (2002) suggest, is the quality of the interactions between the teacher and the child. The need for change in pedagogical practices in infant classes (children aged between four and six years) in Ireland has been indicated by a number of research studies and reports. The OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (OECD, 2004) described infant classes as one of whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables. This approach, they suggested, was directive, teacher-centred and formal compared to practices they had observed in other countries that were theoretically underpinned. These practices placed more explicit emphasis on exploratory learning and self-initiated, hands-on (as opposed to table-top) activities (OECD, 2004, p. 58). The report concluded that the impetus driving the pedagogical approach was a prescribed curriculum, with little account being taken of children's interests or concerns (OECD, 2004). These findings resonate with a study carried out by Murphy (2004) which looked at curricula implementation in 15 Irish junior infant classes and concluded that the implementation was characterised by an “overwhelmingly teacher-directed” pedagogy. The significance and concern in relation to these findings are that over a decade on, research suggests that a predominately didactic approach still persists within the infant classroom (Eivers et al., 2010; McGettigan & Grey, 2012; Moloney, 2011). A further concern relates to findings from O Donoghue's (2016)

study which found that teachers' expectations of junior infant class are for children to sit quietly in large groups for long periods rather than allowing for playful, child-led experiences away from their tables.

2.7.1 Effective Pedagogies

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project was a large scale, mixed method, longitudinal study which tracked the progress of 3000 children aged between three and eleven years over an eight-year period (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 1999). The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project conducted by Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell (2002) was a qualitative extension to the EPPE study and followed the progress of 3000 children in 141 pre-schools in England. Both studies formed part of a single longitudinal study of a national sample of young children's development who were aged between three and seven years commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A further linked study entitled The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) carried out by Moyles, Adams, and Musgrove (2002) looked at what pedagogical approaches were most effective in early learning.

Taken together these studies provide rigorous evidence on the quality of pre-school provision in the UK. While the EPPE study (2004) did not evaluate any one particular intervention regarding a specific pedagogical approach, it did look at whether some forms of pre-school provision were more effective than others for children's cognitive and affective development. The findings from these three studies moved the field forward in terms of identifying what an appropriate pedagogical approach for young children needs to include. The studies resulted in a range of publications from the authors involved in the projects.

This study draws upon the research findings and theoretical models developed by Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002; 2004). While acknowledging that the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2002) and the REPEY study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) were conducted over sixteen years ago, this conceptual model provides analytical tools for exploring the teachers' understandings and enactment of Aistear (2009) within the primary language curriculum (2016) and within their contextual settings. This study draws on an understanding of pedagogy put forward by Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) where it is defined as:

That set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, learning dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and the community).

(Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 28)

Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002; 2004) looked at what factors can support an “effective pedagogy”. Their studies suggest that there is no one universal “effective pedagogy”, rather, the effective pedagogue was seen to orchestrate a pedagogy by creating interventions that were appropriate and suitable to the children’s potential level of learning and the concept or skill being taught. They argue that child-initiated interactions form “a necessary pre-requisite for the most effective early years settings” (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p.11-12). Settings that were considered to be excellent were identified as those that achieved a balance between opportunities provided for children in terms of teacher-initiated group work and opportunities for children to benefit from the provision of “freely chosen, yet potentially instructive play activities” (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 12).

Congruent with Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002), Katz (2003) argues that pedagogical interactions are a key component of quality ECE and suggests that teachers need to focus their energies on their interactions with children which, she argues, will provide them with experiences that are interesting, engaging and meaningful. Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) considered “excellent settings” as those which encouraged relatively more “sustained shared thinking” (SST). Sylva et al., (2004) define “sustained shared thinking” as:

An episode in which two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend thinking.

(Sylva et al., 2004, p. 36)

Building on this definition, Sylva et al., (2004) explain that the cognitive processes that take place during SST are:

...mutual when each party engages with the understanding of the other and learning is achieved through a process of reflexive co-construction.

(Sylva et al., 2004, p. 720)

This sustained shared element that takes place during a period of SST, Allen and Whalley (2010, p. 100) elucidate, is not about chronological time but about allowing time that facilitates a child's learning to penetrate and become accommodated within their memory. It may be noted, however, that Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) found that interactions which resulted in SST did not happen very frequently. Congruent with the findings of the REPEY study (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), Allen & Whalley (2010, p.100) suggest that the capacity to engage in SST with children is central to effective early years pedagogy. Siraj-Blatchford (2005) identifies some strategies to support children's SST one of which is "tuning in" or listening effectively to what the children say. Similarly, Nutbrown (2012) argues that:

Children learn much in sustained interaction with other children, as well as adults who are attuned to children's learning and development needs and who can support their play and foster early interactions between young children.

(Nutbrown, 2012, p.12–13)

One of the success factors for effective SST put forward by Siraj-Blatchford and Smith (2010) is the ability of adults to show an interest in a conversation led by a child, extend it and develop it without resorting to their personal agendas which often involved trying too hard to lead children to what they think is the "right" answer. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe a process of thinking which is similar to a rhizome, where thinking can go in all directions with no predetermined order, beginning or end. Such an approach provides opportunities for children to explore and develop their own understandings in a way that is meaningful to them.

2.7.2 Implementing Aistear

As an ECE curriculum framework, Aistear emphasises the key role of the adult in promoting a nurturing pedagogy, encouraging playful interactions, behaviours, explorations, conversations, and collaborative learning. These principles support Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues' (2002) and Nutbrown's (2012) concepts of SST. The move to a new primary language curriculum which views the child as an active, capable and competent learner, learning through play and relationships (NCCA, 2009) requires that

teachers adopt “effective pedagogies” that include time for SST (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). It requires that teachers incorporate methods of teaching and learning that support and enable children to exercise choice and to use their initiative as active participants and partners in their own development. A concern then is that the new primary language curriculum does not provide a structure as to how teachers might adopt such an approach.

Findings from a study by Gray and Ryan (2016, p. 196) which looked at Aistear in relation to the Primary Curriculum (DES, 1999) showed that 43% of early years teachers reported being unfamiliar with their role in implementing Aistear in the primary school curriculum. In addition, 64% of teachers responded that they did not feel confident about organising play-based learning activities. This is significant as the literature suggests that achieving positive outcomes for children in the early years classroom is dependent on the skills and competences of early years teachers, on them having an informed understanding of how children learn through play, being clear on the adult’s role, including attention to the processes of play and learning as well as their outcomes (Hurst and Joseph, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 2005). Moreover, Siraj-Blatchford (2002, p. 11) argues that characteristics associated with highly effective ECE settings (those which led to positive outcomes for children aged three to seven years) include: adult and child involvement, cognitive (co-constructive) engagement, and sustained shared thinking between adults and children.

My review of the literature revealed a gap in the knowledge specifically relating to teachers’ understanding of Aistear, particularly in relation to what extent the new primary language curriculum can support children in the early years classroom to develop the dispositions, skills, values, knowledge and understanding that Aistear highlights as being critical in the twenty first century. Aistear promotes a child-led and play-based approach in tandem with the learning outcomes encapsulated in the new primary language curriculum. Hunter and Walsh (2013, p. 33) found that while teachers appear to recognise the value of play, they realise they lack the skills needed to provide quality play experiences and that their efforts are mainly “tokenistic” in nature. Aistear provides an important space for play and can support teachers to develop what Carter and Nutbrown (2016, p.11) refer to as the “art and craft of friendships”. They argue that play can provide a space where children can express their own views, where they can negotiate and problem solve free from adult intrusion (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). Teachers can use play opportunities to listen and observe the children and to build their understanding of the children’s peer culture, rules and practices. Building on this, Carter and Nutbrown

(2016) put forward that children invest a great deal of energy and time in making and developing their friendships, suggesting that teachers need to recognise and support children in their friendship building and provide time and space to allow children establish and nurture their friendships.

In providing opportunities for play, teachers need to plan for spaces wherein children can learn how to learn, fostering their natural predisposition toward relationships and co-construction of knowledge (Rinaldi et al., 2006, p. 126). A key task for the ECE teacher, Hurst and Joseph (1998) suggest, is to create a balance between giving children time and space to learn through their self-initiated play and providing learning which is more formally negotiated between the child and the adult. Vecchi (2010, p. 138) suggests that teachers can often diminish thinking opportunities for children through artificially separating out subjects. She argues that teachers need to be clear on how much space they leave children for original thinking and avoid rushing to restrict it with predetermined plans that define what knowledge the children need to know and what knowledge the school intends to promote. Opportunities for space to play are furthered diminished by what Roberts-Holmes (2015, p. 302) describes as “performativity demands” on ECE teachers to produce “appropriate data”. Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that teachers’ pedagogy is increasingly being narrowed to ensuring children reach measurable objectives at the cost of providing time and space where children can be given room for other important elements of the curriculum such as art and developing friendships.

These studies are significant because they highlight the need for teachers working in ECE classrooms to make a shift in their thinking and to move from a pedagogy which views the adult as the reproducer of knowledge to seeing the classroom as a place where knowledge is co-constructed between the adult and the child, and where the child is an active agent in the co-constructing of knowledge. However, before teachers can be supported to make such a shift in their thinking it is vital to gain insight into how they currently understand and perceive Aistear.

Hunter and Walsh (2013, p. 33) argue that teachers cannot rely on a policy document to act as an infallible blueprint for practice, and that a change in policy statements alone will not ensure a change in pedagogy, and that teachers need to be up skilled so that they develop a more “nuanced and sophisticated” understanding of the meaning of play as pedagogy in the early years classroom. This resonates with Hedges and Cullen (2012) who suggest that policy statements need to be accompanied by policy strategies and

appropriate funding to ensure the continuing professional development of early years teachers. Furthermore, evidence suggests that providing quality play experiences for children in the early years will require teachers to reconceptualise early childhood education. Research suggests that teachers need to move from a predominately didactic approach to how the curriculum is enacted to a socio-cultural model (OECD, 2006; McGettigan and Gray, 2012; Hunter et al., 2014; O Donoghue, 2016). Such a model views children as active participants in their learning, within which they are given a sense of belonging and connectedness to their world, and where the child and adult co-exist in interdependent relations (Dahlberg et al., 2005; Dunne, 2005; Moss et al., 2002).

2.8 A Socio-Cultural Approach to Curriculum Enactment

A socio-cultural approach to childhood understands children as social actors and holders of rights (Qvortrup, 1994; James & James, 2004). Children are viewed as “active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live” (Prout & James, 1990, p. 8). This resonates with Brooker (2002) and Garrick et al., (2010) who argue that children have the capacity to contribute to society as competent social actors and can contribute to shaping their own experiences.

The role of the teacher in a socio-cultural model of ECE is central since it is the teacher who enables the learning to take place by actively engaging with the children, the curriculum, and the learning context. It is a view of childhood that acknowledges the capacity of children to shape their own lives (Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith & Burns, 2013). Such views challenge the concept of children as passive objects who are properties of their families, to be shaped and socialised by adult teaching (Smart et al., 2001). Adopting a socio-cultural understanding of children requires the teacher to be both proactive and interactive; it involves drawing on pedagogical strategies that ensure a balance between learning that is guided by the child and learning that is guided by the teacher. Adopting a socio-cultural pedagogy recognises children’s agency and inherent capacities (Mayall, 2002; James & James, 2004; Moss & Dahlberg, 2005); and promotes a rights-based approach to early years teaching in line with the UNCRC (1989).

2.9 A Rights-Based Approach to Curriculum Enactment

Cultures vary and change over time; thus, notions of childhood change correspondingly. These constructions of how children are understood are constituted through discourses on how childhood is theorised. How curriculum policy is enacted is closely linked to how

those enacting the policy understand what is meant by a child-centred rights-based approach. Lansdown (2011) posits that a child-centred approach promotes a structured, child-centred curriculum that includes teaching-learning methods that are appropriate to the child's developmental level, abilities and learning style; and considers the needs of children over the needs of the other actors in the system. She suggests that a child-centred curriculum encourages participation, creativity, self-esteem and psychosocial wellbeing. Aistear, as a policy text, promotes a child-centred rights-based approach where children should be offered opportunities to make choices about what, how and with whom they want to play. Such an approach enables children to initiate and direct their own play with the support of interested and responsive adults. Within a child-centred rights-based approach, children construct their own knowledge from their experiences and interactions with the world around them. ECE teachers can foster children's growth and development by building on their interests, needs, and strengths, within a safe and caring environment.

The UNCRC (1989), ratified in Ireland in 1992, positioned children's rights at the centre of social and political agendas. Adopting a rights-based approach, it challenges those working in ECE to move from a dominant developmental discourse of childhood to a socio-cultural discourse of child development. The UNCRC (1989) portrays children as competent citizens with rights and responsibilities. The rights set out in the document and the principles underpinning it, accepts children and young people as citizens, places them at the centre and recognises their capabilities to determine their own lives. It frames children's lives and wellbeing in the context of rights. The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the UNCRC (1989). Article 12 of the UNCRC requires children's views to be considered in decisions that impact on them. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) General Comment No. 12, entitled The Right of the Child to be Heard, argues that although it does not appear in the text of Article 12:

The views expressed by children may add relevant perspectives and experience and should be considered in decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures as well as their evaluation.

(UNCRC, 2009, p.7)

Enacting Article 12 (UNCRC 1989) within the early years classroom would require that teachers involve children in individual decisions affecting their education and deliver a curriculum that is child-centred. Despite widespread support at a national level, Gray and Winter (2011) highlight that many countries found it challenging to implement the obligations of the UNCRC (1989), which led to some countries, including Ireland, to reconsider their existing ECE policies to support the enactment of the Convention. Implementing Aistear within a rights-based approach in the new primary language curriculum will require a change in the pedagogical practices of ECE teachers.

2.10 Curriculum Reform

Dunphy (2008) suggests that the practices of primary school teachers have been shaped by the primary curriculum (DES 1999) and as part of that curriculum they have been enculturated into what constitutes appropriate ‘ways of being’ within that context.

Theories of how children learn and, accordingly, what constitutes appropriate practice, particularly in the last century, have been strongly informed by the field of developmental psychology. Developmental psychology views children as “becoming rather than being” fully human (Qvortrup, 1994, p. 2) and, as such, views them as unfinished, less competent or incomplete social actors (Jenks, 2005). This view locates childhood within a ‘need’ discourse which, Qvortrup (1994) suggests, persistently constructs the notion that children are innocent and incompetent. A practice that is rooted in this view of the child can only take the form of a teacher-led, didactic approach that excludes the child as an active, competent agent in the learning process. Moss (2012) argues that the perception of children who enter junior infants as needing to be filled with predetermined knowledge that should progress sequentially ignores their potential and readiness to learn (Moss 2012, p. 360). He posits that such an approach threatens to waste children’s capabilities and is more about controlling and predicting than creating learning based on shared learning, experimentation, and meaning-making (Moss, 2012, p. 360). Building on this, Rinaldi et al., (2006, p. 123) posits that ECE teachers should understand the child as competent in constructing theories to interpret and understand their lived experiences.

Teachers use their knowledge-base to make decisions on all aspects of teaching and also in adjusting to curriculum reform (Duffee & Aikenhead, 1992). It is therefore inevitable that teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and tacit understanding of how children learn, will have

a direct and substantial impact on how the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016) is enacted in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Supporting teachers to implement a play-based child-centred curriculum requires the development of policies that are sensitive to the different approaches to play as well as considering developmental objectives (Pylea, Delucaband & Dannielsaa, 2017). Fang (1996) and Pedersen and Liu (2003) point to the need to consider teachers' beliefs alongside any curriculum reform to avoid resistance and misinterpretations. Additionally, Wallace and Loudon (1992) posit that lack of success in curriculum reform efforts is attributed to the failure to take into account teachers' beliefs and practices when developing a new curriculum. Studies have shown that changing educational practice is known to be notoriously difficult, and that sustained changes must be reinforced by re-alignments in teachers' knowledge and beliefs (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009).

Research suggests that teachers develop views about teaching from their own learning experiences. Dahlberg and Taguchi (1994) in their study, which looked at the differences in pedagogical approach of pre-school teachers and primary school teachers, introduced the idea of a "vision of a meeting place" where differences in traditions and beliefs and understandings could be discussed and, through a co-construction, develop a new shared tradition, shared understanding, values, concepts and practices. However, Urban (2018) acknowledges that a coming together of different and not necessarily matching conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies, and accepted practices, creates new challenges.

A study conducted in Israel (Sverdlov et al., 2014) explored the impact of a new curriculum on kindergarten teachers' beliefs, perceptions and literacy promoting practices six years after the publication of a new national pre-school literacy curriculum. Their study involved 120 teachers. The study found that six years after the new curriculum programme was introduced, 78% of kindergarten teachers used the literacy curriculum only once per week, and 19% used it less than once per week, ranging from once a month to several times a year. These findings are important as they suggest the need to understand what factors could support a more positive outcome in relation to curriculum reform, and the need to consider the contextual role that teachers' beliefs, perceptions and values may have on the implementation of curriculum reform. Sverdlov and colleagues (2014) study fills a gap in the literature and is significant as it reminds us that the introduction of a new curriculum does not automatically ensure its enactment. Building on this, a study by Gallant (2009) of Kindergarten teachers' experiences, reported that

many teachers felt frustrated by new requirements, disempowered, and pushed by administrators to implement new policies that were not compatible with their beliefs or their practical context.

In light of these empirical findings, researchers have emphasised the need to listen to and support teachers as they undergo curricular re-forms (Gallant, 2009; Van Veen & Slegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010). The findings from these studies are significant regarding ECE teachers' enactment of the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear as they highlight the need to gain insights into teachers' understandings, values, and belief systems and how these inform their responses to curricular change within their contextual settings. Research on teaching effectiveness by Bowman et al., (2001) has shown that teachers have implicit beliefs about the subject matter, their students, and their own roles and responsibilities.

Taken together, these elements collectively and individually influence the way teachers practice (Bowman et al., 2001). Fenwick (2008), underlining the importance of the individual and their beliefs, argues that individual differences in perspectives, dispositions, position, social and cultural capital, and forms of participation are often unaccounted for. Similarly, Yero (2002) argues that any reform made in the education system must take into account what teachers feel about those changes in the light of their beliefs and values, their social and ideological context, and their understandings of the practical implications in relation to a curriculum. Apart from the need to consider the teachers' understandings, Li et al., (2011) and Lieber et al., (2009) argue that when introducing curriculum reform there is also a need to take into account other factors which include: the availability of support from colleagues, administrators and principals, the availability of effective professional development programmes, and the reform's cultural and contextual fit.

2.11 The Importance of Context

A study by Unwin, Felstead, Fuller, Bishop, and Jewson, (2007) offers important insights regarding the enactment of the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear. Their study underlines the need to identify and take serious account of the contextual factors that affect all organisations as these are central to developing our understanding of the nature of practice. Further, they give a note of caution that, in the absence of explicit guidelines that intentionally cultivate the transfer of desired skills to practice, tacit

behaviours that perpetuate undesirable practices may persist. Using the metaphor of the Russian doll with all its layers, Unwin et al., (2007) propose that it is in the taking apart of each layer and putting it back together that we might seek to understand the role and function of the various layers. It is when the layers are brought together that they result in a meaningful whole. This metaphor transfers well in understanding change practice in relation to curriculum enactment and highlights the importance of acknowledging the complexity of the contextual layers which influence individual understandings and pedagogical approaches in ECE.

A study by Einarsdottir, Dockett, Perry (2009) found that, in almost every case, more teachers reported about practices which were very useful than reported actually using the practices. For example, they found that in Iceland, although not many of the primary school teachers reported that they held shared meetings to discuss education and continuity in children's education, 61% of primary school teachers reported it to be a good idea. Similarly, Colmer (2014), in a study of how Australian early childhood centres' directors understand and lead professional development and learning during a major reform of curriculum, found that although early childhood directors articulated belief in the value of collaborative professional learning, individualised, one-off, external professional development events remained a common strategy.

The implication of these findings in relation to this study underlines the need to understand why there is a gap between what ECE teachers think and say in relation to their pedagogical approach and how that relates to their practice in the classroom (Gray & Ryan, 2016; O Donoghue, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2013). Effectively these findings suggest that, without identifying the current pedagogical practices of ECE teachers and how they understand Aistear, current policy will continue to promote and possibly assume that Aistear is implicit within the enactment of the new primary language curriculum, that teachers engage with the framework, perceive a potential benefit from the change, and successfully implement it. A key purpose of Aistear was to move away from a predominantly didactic approach to ECE to a more child-centred rights-based approach. The new primary language curriculum for junior and senior infants while aligned with the principles and methodologies of Aistear provides very few examples of how the two policy documents are linked.

The classroom environment is a complex mix of interrelationships between teachers and children, context and pedagogy. Professional cultures, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, p.

26) point out, refer to teachers' values, belief systems and commitments within schools, and includes teachers' understandings of curriculum policy, of how children learn and develop, and the school ethos. Ball (1993) argues that how curricula are implemented primarily depends on who is enacting it. He suggests that teachers' belief systems reflect personal theories about the nature of knowledge and knowing that, in turn, influence their curriculum decision making. Similarly, Artz and Armour-Thomas (1996, p. 8) suggest that teachers' belief systems and decisions represent implicit assumptions about curricula, knowledge, teaching and learning, and act as cognitive and affective filters through which new knowledge is interpreted and enacted. They suggest that teachers provide curricula experiences that they believe are important for their pupils and will prepare them for their future based on their beliefs about child development and their expectations of what and how children should learn. Loizou (2017) suggests that while teachers discuss the benefits of play in ECE, they are mainly trained in the organisation of the classroom space and materials, and that their personal involvement is often neglected.

Scott (1996, p. 133) defines policy enactment as “fractured, dislocated, and only occasionally exhibits a linear form”; whilst Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) describe policy as an “overlay” or “bricollage”. At each phase of the policy process, Bowe et al., (1992) suggest, the policy is overwritten by different social actors operating within each context or site, and the meaning of the policy will be contextualised by the reader who will interpret and implement them.

Bowe and colleagues (1992) identify three contexts of policy production: the context of influence; the context of text production; and the context of practice. These three contexts collectively constitute what they call the policy cycle. Ball et al., (2012) note that in much of the writing on education policy, the meaning for those who are expected to enact the policy is often overlooked. They argue that individual policies and policy makers do not usually take into consideration the complexity of institutional policy enactment, and highlight the need to consider the contextual environments of the teachers. Moreover, they argue that policy makers work on the assumption that schools can and will respond quickly to multiple policy demands and other expectations. Similarly, Spillane (2004) and Maguire (2007) argue that policies are sometimes poorly thought out and can become “rewritten” or “retro-fitted” as government objectives change, or ministers move on. Ball (2012, p. 8) suggests that the onus is often on the school to make sense of policy and argues that policies can be fitted in without precipitating any major or (real) changes and/or they can produce radical and sometimes unintended changes. Schools may also be

subject to what Ball (1994, p. 20) terms “performative implementation”, that is, schools pay some attention to a policy and “fabricate” a response that is incorporated into school documentation for purposes of accountability and audit, rather than to effect pedagogic or organisational change (Ball, 2011). Hall (1995, p. 101) emphasises the need for those who are concerned about achieving success in policy initiatives to understand how change takes place. He argues that the journey from policy to practice can be problematic and stresses that the implementation of policies can be as costly as the developmental phase, and suggests that the main difficulties arise from a lack of understanding of the complex web of practice on the part of the policy developers. Hall (1995) views the relationship between policy and practice as a continuum rather than a gap or division.

Understanding the role of context in relation to Aistear is important. On one level, Aistear’s broad guidance supports and promotes the individual agency of the ECE teacher in adopting a child-centred rights-based pedagogy, and on another level, it leaves interpretations of what that might look like in practice open to the individual subjective views of those who educate. Individuals bring their own experiences, scepticisms and critiques to bear on what they see or read and will read policies from the positions of their identities and subjectiveness (Hall, 1997).

Ball and colleagues’ (2012, p. 43) conceptualisation of policy enactment draws upon and relates together “three constituent aspects of the messy reality of school life”. These aspects: material, interpretive, and discursive, taken together, make up a version of what Ball et al., (2012) describe as “material semiotics”, which Law (2007) suggests:

...are better understood as a toolkit for telling interesting stories about and interfering in the complex webs of social relations and relations of power that produce and circumscribe policy and practice in schools.

(Law, 2007, p. 2)

Lauder, Jamieson, & Whikeley (1998, p. 62) argue that schools operate in different contexts and will have different capacities, potentials, and limits. These, they suggest, constitute a material context of interpretation and create different practical possibilities and constraints for policy enactment and frameworks of expectation within which responses to policy are constructed.

Building on this, Coldwell (2019, p. 12) posits that context is “independently agentic” explaining that the term ‘agentic’ relates to how actors or groups of actors can work

together to create changes separate from the programme while at the same time the changes can influence the programme. Thus, how Aistear is enacted is dependent to some extent on the ethos and culture of the school but also on the ‘agentic’ influence of the teachers and the principal (Coldwell 2019). Context can also be affected by teachers’ histories, their values, beliefs in relation to how children learn, and context is relational in how contextual factors can interact with the school as a whole (Coldwell, 2019). The enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum needs to be considered within all of these contexts. Ball et al., (2012, p. 10) argue that policy enactment should not be understood as a “moment” but rather as a “process of interpretation that is framed by institutional factors involving a range of actors” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 15). As signalled earlier, what happens inside a school in terms of how policies are interpreted and enacted will be mediated by institutional factors which include the ethos of the school and the leadership role adopted by the principal.

2.12 Leadership

Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2013) argue that leadership in early years settings and schools has been recognised as significant in raising standards and increasing the quality of educational, health, and social outcomes for children. The successful enactment of the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear is, as Bleach (2016) suggests, contingent on the pedagogical and content knowledge about what and how children should learn. The leadership role of the principal in supporting change is an important contextual factor in understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the classroom. The Effective Leadership in the Early Years Study (ELEYS), conducted by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007), identifies key practices required in the role of leadership. These are set out in Table 4:

Table 4: Effective Leadership Practices

Identifying and articulating a collective vision
Ensuring shared understandings, meanings and goals
Effective communication
Encouraging reflection
Commitment to ongoing professional development
Monitoring and assessing practice
Distributed leadership
Building a learning community and team culture
Encouraging and facilitating parent and community partnerships
Striking a balance between leadership and management

Source: Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007, p.28)

Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) propose that a key element of effective leadership practice is “distributed leadership”. Lindon and Lindon (2012) define “distributed leadership” as:

A deliberate process of sharing leadership behaviour, so that team members other than the head or manager take an active lead.

(Lindon & Lindon, 2012, p. 119)

Spillane (2006) explains “distributed leadership” as a process that is enacted within a social context and involves shared patterns of communication, learning, and action. Building on this, Heikka, Waniganayake, and Hujala (2012) argue that “distributed leadership” is about relationship building and creating a culture of learning that welcomes the expertise and diverse views of others and is also open to new learning experiences. They argue that successful “distributed leadership” is dependent on the level of interaction between the organisational members.

The enactment of Aistear requires principals to understand the interaction between other contextual elements which include the teachers, their practices, their values, attitudes,

ideas and beliefs (Rodd 2015, p. 15). Harris and Allen (2009), in a UK study which looked at leadership in relation to the implementation of Every Child Matters (ECM), found that the attitudes of the leaders had a significant impact on the implementation of ECM. Although ECM is no longer in use, their findings show that school leaders played a crucial role in ensuring its effective implementation, and that it was integral rather than peripheral to school development planning. Additionally, a high degree of implementation of ECM was associated with the comprehensive training of school staff. Congruent with (Harris & Allen, 2009), Macfarlane et al., (2011) argue that successfully imbedding changes in pedagogical approaches requires an approach that is collaborative and includes reciprocal learning spirals resulting from ongoing dialogue, conversation, and debate. Macfarlane and colleagues (2011) suggest that curriculum change requires leadership that provides teachers with a space for critical thinking, reflection, and a space to consider multiple perspectives which could support the construction of new understandings and ways of working (Macfarlane et al., 2011).

The development of a framework for policy enactment, Ball et al., (2012, p. 21) suggest, needs to consider the material, structural, and relational elements that need to be incorporated into policy analysis in order to understand the particular policy enactment at an institutional level. Adopting a “distributed leadership” approach in the enactment of the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear would firstly require that the principal and ECE teachers have a good knowledge of the objectives of Aistear and the new curriculum, and secondly, in a process of collaborative reflection, consider the identified objectives in relation to a set of what Ball et al., (2012, p. 21) refer to as “subjective interpretational dynamics”.

Rodd (2015, p. 7) argues that significant, sustainable changes are influenced by what leaders think, say, and do. She puts forward that leaders who successfully advocate change build a supportive workplace culture grounded in respect, trust, cooperation and community, that protects, encourages, and empowers everybody during potentially stressful processes of change (Rodd, 2015, p. 7). Heikka et al., (2012) suggest that within ECE, the concept of a principal functioning within a hierarchical system and working in isolation is not effective as a means of pedagogical leadership. Building on this, Moss Kantor (1999) argues that change leaders require three critical and enduring competences: firstly, they require imagination to innovate and entertain new possibilities, create new concepts, and identify new ways forward; secondly, leaders need the ability to be open to collaboration and to building connections; and thirdly, they require a level of

professionalism to perform to best practice. Taken together, she argues, these three skills are key to becoming an effective leader of change, and are the core competencies that maintain and advocate for the professional nature, development, and significance of early years provision in the twenty-first century. Rodd (2015, p. 54) suggests that advocating for change requires principals to have the ability to clearly communicate their vision, their aspirations, and their goals that give shape to the future. A vision must generate inspiration, action, and transformation of the status quo. Where a vision is inadequate, poorly communicated, or indeed absent, teachers may feel confused and lack a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction (Rodd 2015, p. 54).

2.13 Summary

The aim of this research study was to develop a model of practice that would support primary school teachers to implement the principles of Aistear within a new primary language curriculum. To establish a basis for understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the early years classroom, and to add to the literature on policy enactment in relation to practice.

This chapter provided a review of the literature pertinent to the research focus. Different understandings of curriculum and its associated concepts were identified and distinguished (Daniel, 2001; Dunne, 2011; Litjens and Taguma, 2010; NCCA, 2001; NCCA, 2009; Ross, 2000; New Zealand, MoE 1996; Rudolph, 1977). The review explored the literature relating to pedagogical approaches to curriculum within an Irish context and discussed how ideas derived from socio-cultural perspectives influence curriculum reform.

The review identified the need for change in pedagogical approaches to ECE in primary schools in Ireland, and the need to move from a teacher-centred approach to a child-centred approach (Dunphy, 2008; Eivers et al., 2010; Grey & McGettigan, 2011; Moloney, 2011; Moyles, Adams & Musgrove 2002; Murphy, 2004; OECD, 2004; 2015; NCCA, 2009; O Donoghue, 2016).

Findings from the review suggest that identifying effective early childhood pedagogy is highly complex (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004; Dunphy, 2008; OECD, 2015). The literature further highlights that achieving positive outcomes for children in the ECE classroom is dependent on the skills and competence of early years teachers, their having an informed understanding of how children learn through play, being clear

on the adult's role, including attention to the processes of play and learning as well as their outcomes (Hurst & Joseph, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 2005). The review identified that characteristics associated with a highly effective ECE classroom need to include: adult and child involvement, cognitive (co-constructive) engagement, and sustained shared thinking between adults and children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, p. 11). Developing such pedagogical practices requires that teachers adopt a socio-cultural model of ECE whereby the teacher enables the learning to take place by actively engaging with the children, the curriculum, and the learning context. Such practices require that teachers understand children as active agents, social actors and holders of rights (Qvortrup, 1994; James & James, 2004; Rinaldi et al., 2006; Vecchi, 2010; Moss, 2012).

The review highlights that policy enactment should not be understood as a “moment” but rather as a “process of interpretation that is framed by institutional factors involving a range of actors” and contextual factors (Ball et al., 2012; Unwin et al., 2007; Cohen, 2006). The review identified that principals, as leaders, need to play a key role in the process of policy enactment and curriculum change. Policy enactment is complex and requires principals to be competent and supportive leaders who have an informed understanding of how children learn through play and the role of the ECE teacher in promoting a play-based curriculum, and engage in a process of “distributed leadership” (Lindon & Lindon, 2012). At a very basic level, principals must have a vision and clear objectives in relation to how new policies and curriculum changes will be enacted in their schools.

Adopting a “distributed leadership” approach in the enactment of the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear requires principals and ECE teachers to be knowledgeable and informed in relation to the objectives of both policy documents. Principals need to facilitate time and a space for teachers to collaborate, engage in reciprocal learning, ongoing dialogue, and debate (Macfarland et al., 2011; Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2012).

The indication is that the role of context in relation to curriculum enactment in ECE is generally under-researched and under-theorised. There remains uncertainty, for example, about how ECE curriculum policy is interpreted and translated into practice. This review identified not only a gap in empirical research in ECE policy enactment but also the absence of an examination of the complex contextual realities that impact enactment. Taken as a whole, this indicates a significant gap in the literature. The review underlines

that the introduction of a new primary language curriculum that views the child as an active co-constructer of knowledge (DES, 2016) does not automatically ensure its enactment. It also highlights the need to take into account the beliefs, perceptions, and understandings of ECE teachers, and the leadership role of principals in bringing about a change in curriculum and pedagogical practices.

The chapter to follow provides an account of the research design, the theoretical models chosen, and how the methodological choices support the research aims and the answering of the research question.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research approach adopted in this study. It explains how, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Braun et al., (2011) and Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002), the researcher created a conceptual model to serve as a heuristic device to guide analysis of the data. It situates the study within a social constructivist paradigm that takes an interpretivist approach to the research endeavour. It discusses the reasoning behind the choice of a two-case study approach and describes the processes of purposive sampling and defining the boundaries of the cases. Data was generated primarily, though not exclusively, through in-depth interviewing and non-participant observations and these methods are described and discussed. Over the course of the study, the process of data analysis comprised two overarching stages, each of which encompassed a number of steps, and these are explained in detail. The researcher's reflective stance and ethical issues are also considered.

3.2. Conceptual Models Adopted

The social constructivist paradigm (Berger & Luckman, 1991) which frames this study takes the view that there are no immutable understandings of how children learn. As noted in the literature, how ECE teachers enact curriculum changes is dependent on their understandings of ECE and the contexts in which they teach. Supporting teachers to enact what Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) consider to be effective pedagogical interactions requires the critical examination of discourse practices, understandings, and cultural activities that become embedded into practice.

The study draws on three conceptual models: Braun and colleagues' (2011) contextual dimensions model; Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002) pedagogical interventions model; and Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002) pedagogical interactions models (Appendix 28). The three models draw attention to the enactment of an ECE curriculum through effective pedagogical approaches, the role of 'context' and the 'social construction' in relation to policy enactment. In this thesis, the term 'conceptual model' is understood to mean a model that provides a coherent, unified and orderly way of envisioning related events or processes relevant to a discipline (Fawcett, 2005).

Conceptual models provide an organising structure and guide the development and testing of interventions and hypotheses based on the tenets of the theory (Fawcett, 2005). The sections to follow set out each of the conceptual models that are used to inform and guide the study.

3.2.1 Model 1: The Role of Context in Policy Enactment

The first conceptual model draws on Braun and colleagues' (2011) model which identifies and relates a variety of contextual factors that influence differences in policy enactments between similar schools. Their study, an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project entitled 'Policy enactments in the secondary school: theory and practice' (RES-062-23-1484) was conducted between 2008 and 2011. The UK based qualitative research study explored how policies were 'enacted' in four case study secondary schools. The research employed semi-structured interviews with various policy actors including head teachers, members of the senior leadership teams, heads of departments, middle managers, classroom teachers, teaching assistants and other non-teaching staff, as well as local authority representatives and relevant 'outsiders' with a link to the school (Braun et al., 2011). Their research design also comprised some ethnographic observations of policy events in the schools, including training sessions and staff meetings, as well as policy documents from local and central government. The study resulted in a number of related publications (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012; Ball, 2015) which this study draws on. Aspects considered in the study of the four schools included school intake, history, staffing, school ethos and culture, buildings, resources and budgets, as well as external environments. Braun et al., (2011, p. 585) explain that in their attempt to present a "grounded exploration" of the localised nature of policy actions that is more "real" and realistic than that often assumed by policy making, these factors were separated out into four concepts: situated, material, professional, and external dimensions. This, they explain, was done as a means by which to draw together four main issues that lie at the centre of the policy enactments. Conceptualising these factors as situated, material, professional, and external dimensions, provides an analytical tool with which to examine the role of context in shaping policy enactments in schools. Table 5 provides examples of the contextual dimensions which need to be considered in policy enactment:

Table 5: Contextual Dimensions

1. Situated contexts (such as locale, school histories, intakes and settings).
2. Material contexts (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure).
3. Professional contexts (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and policy management in schools).
4. External contexts (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context, such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities).

Source: Contextual Dimensions (Braun et al., 2011, p. 585)

Enactment of policy in schools is “a complex and nuanced process involving both interpretations of policy texts and their translation into practice” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 43). The term “enactment” put forward by Braun et al., (2011), represents the dual processes of policy interpretation and translation by policy actors across a wide variety of situations and practices. The first process, interpretation, relates to how policy actors (teachers and principals) make sense of or understand the meaning of the policy texts. The second process, translation (Ball et al., 2012) involves a re-reading of policy or “enacting” policy in and through conversation, school plans, meetings, classroom lessons, data walls, and school websites. School policies can be understood as attempts to solve a problem (Maguire et al., 2015). However, such a narrow understanding of policy places the government as the problem solver separate from society, and ignores the “other moments in the processes of policy and policy enactments that go into schools” (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 485). Building on this, Braun et al., (2011, p. 603) argue that “policies are enacted in material conditions, with varying resources, in relation to particular problems and are set against, and alongside, existing commitments, values and forms of experience”.

3.2.2 Model 2: The Role of Pedagogy in Policy Enactment

The second conceptual model used to inform this study draws on Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues' (2002, p. 24) pedagogical model set out in Figure 3:

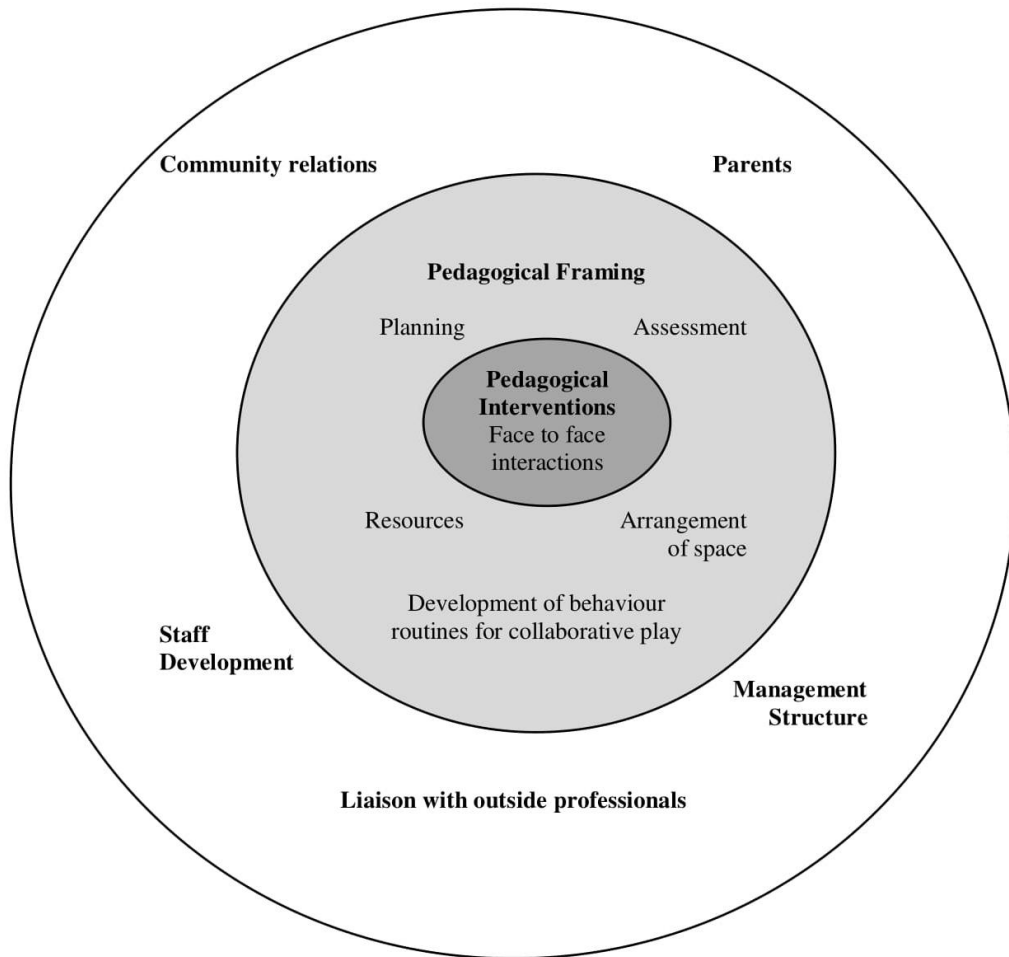


Figure 3: Pedagogical Model (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002)

Source: Pedagogical Model (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 24)

Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues' pedagogical model provides a three-circle nested framework that identifies what, based on my practice and experience, I consider to be critical components of an effective pedagogical approach to implementing Aistear within a new revised primary language curriculum. At the centre of the nested model are pedagogical interventions which relate to face-to-face interactions between the teacher and the child and child to child. The second circle relates to pedagogical framing which includes planning, assessment, resources, the arrangement of space, and development of behaviour routines for collaborative play. The third circle relates to community relations, parents, management structure, staff development, and liaison with outside professionals. The observations on which the findings of Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues' (2002) study is based focused on the inner and middle layers of their pedagogical model.

In their analyses of the research findings, Blatchford and colleagues (2002) draw a clear distinction between pedagogical framing and pedagogical interactions. They conceptualise pedagogical interactions through a further conceptual model, discussed in the section to follow.

3.2.3 Model 3: Pedagogical Interactions

The third conceptual model I draw on is Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues' (2002) pedagogical interactions model, shown in Figure 4:

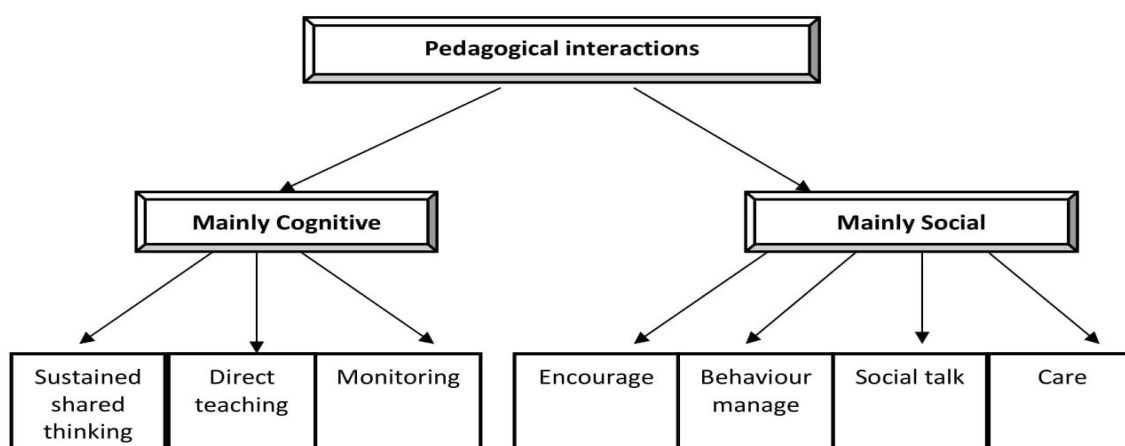


Figure 4: Pedagogical Interactions Model

Source: Pedagogical Interactions (across all settings and curricular areas) (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 50).

This model divides pedagogical interactions into two separate groups: “mainly cognitive” and “mainly social”. The mainly cognitive interactions are: sustained shared thinking, direct teaching and monitoring. The mainly social interactions are: encourage, behaviour manage, social talk, and care. The findings from the REPEY study report that what Blatchford and colleagues (2002, p. 23) considered to be “excellent settings” were the settings that provided both pedagogical framing (Figure 4 above) and pedagogical interactions.

3.3 Synthesising the Conceptual Models

Drawing on Blatchford and colleagues’ (2002) models of pedagogical framing and pedagogical interactions and Braun and colleagues’ (2011) conceptual model of the role of context in policy enactments and synthesising them, I created a new model. While all three models are established, they have not previously been brought together to support an understanding of the complexities of enacting an effective pedagogy in relation to context, as shown in Table 6:

Table 6: New Conceptual Model of Policy Enactment

Situated Contexts Pedagogy	Material Curriculum	Professional Understanding of Aistear	External Challenges
Classroom	Resources	Knowledge	Leadership
Environment	Planning	Professional	structure
Pedagogical	Assessment	development	Staff
approach		Values and Beliefs	Development
			Collaborative opportunities

The new conceptual model served as a heuristic device that supported the analysis of the data, allowing key questions to be asked about the interconnectness and interrelatedness of contexts in the enactments of policy in the two schools that participated in this study. Conceptualising the contextual factors as situated, material, professional, and external provided a new approach and analytical tool with which to examine the role of context in shaping curriculum enactment in the classroom.

3.4 The Research Paradigm

A paradigm, Kuhn (1970) suggests, is:

A set of beliefs, values and techniques which is shared by members of a scientific community, and which acts as a guide or map, dictating the kinds of problems scientists should address and the types of explanations that are acceptable to them.

(Kuhn, 1970, p. 175)

The study sits within a social constructivist paradigm. Matthews and Ross (2010) argue that “our own ideas and perspectives on knowledge, what we know and how we know, will then impact on the way in which we think about and design social research (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 24). They argue that all that we know has been determined by the intersection of our biographies, our individual lives, values, religious beliefs, and ideologies. A constructivist paradigm sees knowledge as coming from experience and interaction with others. Lincoln and Guba (2005) suggest that working within a constructivist paradigm acknowledges that realities are constructed from multiple, intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based. Adopting a constructivist approach, Berger and Luckman (1967) posit, is to view reality as being socially constructed.

Aistear and the new primary language curriculum intersect with the subjective understandings of teachers and the context within which curricula are delivered. This is a view strongly influenced by Berger and Luckman’s (1967) concept of how we come to know what we know:

The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaning conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions and is maintained as real by those.

(Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 33)

Examining how teachers perceive Aistear as an early childhood curriculum framework, requires an exploration of how their understandings of the document inform their practice. Primary school teachers work in different environments with different constraints and realities that impose on their day-to-day practice (O Donoghue, 2016). The data from the semi-structured interviews include the opinions and feelings based on the teachers' own experience. Bryman (2004) suggests that the subjectivist views social phenomena as created from the perceptions and consequent actions of the social actors. Congruent with the subjectivist orientation of the study, the primary school teachers expressed their own subjective opinions and beliefs in the context of their understanding of Aistear, explaining how their understanding of Aistear is interpreted in their practice.

In line with a social constructivist paradigm, the research adopted an interpretivist approach to explore the individual teachers' understandings of their practice. MacNaughton et al., (2010, p. 35) explains that interpretivism views the social world as not just "out there", but it is "in here", "in us" and suggests that these different interpretations may affect actions or practice, and the nature of social interaction with others. Adopting an interpretive position allowed for an exploration of the subjective meanings motivating the actions of the teachers, to understand their practice. An interpretivist approach, Lincoln and Guba (2005) suggest, supports the concept that reality is socially constructed, it is nondeterministic and dependent on individual perspective and context.

Quinn and Patton (2015, p. 265) suggest four steps for research design alignment. The first is to determine the enquiry purpose; the second to focus the enquiry question. The third step is to decide what data to collect. As set out in the introductory chapter, the study has been guided by the findings from a pilot study which looked at how primary school teachers understand Aistear and how their understanding of Aistear influenced their practice. The findings from the pilot study provided the enquiry purpose and the research questions for this study. The fourth step Quinn and Patton (2015) suggest is to decide on a method of data collection and to select relevant cases, which is also referred to as purposive sampling. The following sections discuss each of Quinn and Patton's (2015) four steps as applied in this study.

3.5. The Enquiry Purpose

The methodological objective of the study was to gain an understanding of the meanings the teachers placed on Aistear as an early childhood curriculum framework and how their understandings inform their practice, this is consistent with how I view the world through a social constructivist paradigm. In line with my ontological and epistemological position, I adopted a case study approach as the method of data collection.

3.5.1 Adopting a Two-Case Study

The question of whether to use a single case study or a two-case study was carefully considered; it was decided to look at two separate primary schools to gain a broader understanding of the contextual issues than if a single school was used. Adopting a two-case study approach enabled the exploration of policy enactment in two different schools thus extending and illuminating how policy is enacted within different contexts (Ball et al., 2012). Using two schools rather than one was based on the belief that having data from two different schools would enable the enrichment of theorising within my theoretical framework. The decision to choose two rather than more was based on an understanding of the reality of what could be achieved in the period set out within the EdD. Using two separate schools facilitated a broader understanding of contexts, relationships, processes and practices from the perspectives of four different classroom settings. This approach facilitated the exploration of how the teachers implement Aistear within the new primary language curriculum in relation to other contextual dimensions.

The objective of the study was not to look for comparisons or generalise across one school to another. The study is about the particular and the belief that examining the practice of four teachers through interviewing and classroom observations and interviewing their principals within two different contexts would provide a richness of data and add to the telling of the story.

Drawing on two case studies supports what Sturman (1994) describes as a holistic approach that investigates the relationships between the component parts. This approach added to an understanding of how context impacts on practice and informed the development of a new model of practice that can support teachers to implement the new primary curriculum in relation to Aistear. Selecting a case does not usually depend on the notion of representativeness, but on the concept of how much the reader can learn from the case, what Abma and Stake (2001) describe as the “learning potential” even though

the case cannot be claimed to be representative of other cases. Case study, Adelman et al., (1980, p. 59) suggest, recognises the complexity and “embeddedness” of social truths. Further, they argue that by “carefully attending to social situations”, case studies can represent something of “the discrepancies or conflicts between the viewpoints held by participants and are capable of offering some support to alternative interpretations” (Adelman et al., 1980 pp. 59-60).

Abma and Stake (2001) argue that a better understanding of the activities and relationships will emerge and can provide local knowledge that is time- and context-bound. Building on this, Pring (2000) suggests that it is the reader’s responsibility to look critically at the case studied and to ask what is in it that can relate to their situation. Methodologically, case study calls into consideration the construction, bounding and representation of the case (Meriam, 1998). Each of these research elements, Stake (2006) argues, occur through the decisions and practices of the researcher and the researched in the generation, analysis and re-presenting of the data. Stake (2006) suggests that case study allows for multiple perspectives and derives from the ontological position that reality is socially constructed, and that experiences gain different meanings in the context of different biographies, disciplinary frameworks, and positions. Building on this, he argues that adopting a case study approach facilitates the researcher in providing a descriptive, interrelated and contextually bound case. Furthermore, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) argue that case study material “can provide powerful human scale data on macro-political decision making, fusing theory and practice” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 291)

There are several approaches to case study research. Stake (1995) describes a case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake 1995, p. xi). He suggests that it is the intrinsic value of the case that matters rather than using the case “instrumentally” to understand an issue or theory, and emphasises that it is the case in particular that is the focus of interest and not primarily in relation to, or in comparison with, other cases (Stake, 1995, p. xi). Building on this, Geertz (1973) argues that case study allows for a rich description of values, perceptions and actions of persons, which are seen in context, and are open to flexibility. Yin (1984) defines the case study as:

An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used

(Yin, 1984, p. 23)

Yin (1984) suggests four critical tests confront the case study researcher. These are the need to:

Construct validity: establish correct operational measures for the concepts being studied.

Internal validity: establish a causal relationship, whereby certain conditions are shown to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships.

External validity: establish the domain or population to which a study's findings can be generalised.

Reliability: demonstrate that the study can be replicated with similar results.

(Cited in Nunan, 1992, p. 80)

Yin tends towards the positivist paradigm, describing the case study as an evaluation method that: “assumes a single objective reality that can be investigated by following the traditional rules of scientific enquiry and where the findings can be generalised” (Yin, 2003, p. 64). In contrast to Yin and more aligned with Stake (2006), Merriam (1998) puts forward that “reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). She maintains that “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6); from her perspective, the epistemology that should orient qualitative case study is constructivism.

Aligning myself within the constructivist paradigm, I view knowledge as emerging from the interactions of people's social practices. Therefore, I conceptualise social reality as being generated and constructed by people and believe that there is not one reality but rather multiple realities. Due to this philosophical stance, I find myself epistemologically discordant with Yin's (2003) argument that there is a “single objective reality” and that findings from a case study can identify data that points to universal patterns and generalisations, and much more consonant with arguments that there is no one reality, but rather multiple realities (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Simons, 2009). Stake (1995) argues that the case study is an integrated system focusing on specifics rather than generalities. Building on this, Vasconcelos (2010, p. 330) argues that the case study has many layers

of meaning and that the case never stands apart from its context. Kemmis (2010) highlights that case study provides an opportunity to become aware of the actions and practices of particular people or groups within the situation or context of their happening.

3.6 Defining the Boundary of the Case

Considering the time scale of the study, important research decisions had to be made in relation to what could and could not be included in the boundary of the study. The defining characteristic of case study research, Merriam (1998) puts forward, is the delimitation of the case. Building on this, she views the case “as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” and argues that “the case is a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context”. Merriam holds that if the researcher can specify the phenomenon of interest and draw its boundaries or “fence in” what they are going to inquire, they can name it a case (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Stake (2003, p. 141) cautions that not everything about the case can be understood and that the researcher has choices to make.

The two case studies in this research were bounded within the context of understanding how curriculum changes are implemented and managed in the classroom in relation to other contextual dimensions. Simons (2009) argues that the essential task of the case study is to understand the distinctiveness of the individual case, to explore the values and the multiple perspectives of stakeholders, participants, and observations in naturally occurring circumstance, and interpretation in context. Stake (2005) highlights the need to define what is within the boundary of each case and what can be included in the time scale. Similarly, Simons (2009) highlights the importance of being clear as to what components lie within the boundaries of the case and what features lie outside of it. If time had allowed, the following elements would have been included in the study: the physical structure of School A and School B; the socio-economic, cultural and historical background of School A and School B; and the values and beliefs of the parents and the children of each of the four classes in School A and School B. Deciding and making choices in relation to what was within the boundary of each case and what was not was a challenge. Table 7 sets out what contexts were included within the boundary of each case:

Table 7: What is Included within each Case

Interviews to explore the four teachers' values, beliefs and understandings of Aistear and early childhood education.

Observations of each teacher's classroom environment

Observations of the teachers' pedagogical approaches

Interviews with the two principals to explore school policy

DEIS Teaching Plans

The schools' websites

The new primary language curriculum (2016)

The primary curriculum (1999)

Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)

Merriam (1998) suggests that the case study is descriptive, and yields a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study. The case study, she argues, is heuristic and illuminates the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. Each participating school is a singular case study and is made up of parts, for example: the teachers' individual values, beliefs and understandings of Aistear and early childhood education; the schools' ethos, policies and teaching plans; the classroom environment, including its design and its contents; and how the schools incorporate the policies of the Department of Education. Each of these parts yielded insights into the role of context and added to the story of the case

The methodological objective was to gain an understanding of the meanings the teachers placed on Aistear as an early childhood curriculum framework and how their understandings informed their practice, this is consistent with how I view the world through a social constructivist paradigm. Before introducing the study sample, it is appropriate that ethical issues be addressed, and the section to follow describes and explains the steps taken to ensure the integrity of this research study.

3.7 Ethical Issues

The study was guided by what (Wiles (2013) describes as a “principlist approach” which requires that the researcher draws on the principles of respect for the participants’ autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

The participant information sheet (Appendix 1) set out the purpose of the study. It stated that pseudonyms would be used, and anonymity would be maintained as far as possible. The consent form (Appendix 2) stated that the participants would be free to withdraw from the study and could do so without giving a reason for their withdrawal; this included withdrawal of data within one week of data collection. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions without consequences to their future treatment by the researcher. The form stated that, on completion of the study, digital audio recordings would be destroyed, and other data would be securely held for seven years before being destroyed, according to Sheffield Hallam University Guidelines. The parents of the children were provided with an information sheet which set out that they were free to not agree to allow their child to participate in the research (Appendix 3). The consent forms for the children provided a picture of two faces, a happy face indicating ‘yes I am happy to take part’ and a sad face indicating ‘I am not happy to take part’, each child was asked to indicate their consent by colouring or marking the relevant face (Appendix 4). No direct benefit in the form of inducement or otherwise was attached to the participants. The study involved no risk to the participants greater than any encountered in everyday life. Ethical clearance was approved by the Development and Society Ethics Committee of Sheffield Hallam University (reference: D&S-305, Appendix 5). It was explained to the participants that the findings would be used to inform further research studies, they would be shared with Sheffield Hallam and at conference presentations, and would be included in publications. By agreeing to take part in the research, the participants gave of their valuable time; they were informed that, on completion of the study, a presentation setting out a summary of the findings would be available on request.

Having addressed ethical issues and outlined the steps taken to ensure the integrity of this research study. The section to follow introduces the study sample.

3.8 The Study Sample

Purposive sampling procedures were adopted to identify and select two primary schools. In contrast to random sampling, purposive sampling, Creswell (2013) suggests, is not

intended to provide a representative sample or lead to generalizable findings, but to enable a comprehensive understanding that describes and illustrates the specific case being explored. The logic and power of purposive sampling, Quinn and Patton (2015) suggest, lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Sampling was also based on convenience (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 32) and both schools met the criteria identified for participation in the study. These are set out in Table 8:

Table 8: The Criteria Required in Relation to Purposive Convenience Sampling

<p>The principals and teachers of School A and School B showed a positive interest in taking part in the research study.</p> <p>School A and School B indicated that they were actively engaged and using Aistear (NCCA, 2009).</p> <p>School A and School B were both registered as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme (DEIS).</p> <p>School A and School B had begun training in relation to the language strand of the new primary school curriculum (DES, 2016).</p> <p>The principals, teachers of School A and School B, and the children, agreed to allow observations in their classroom and the use of documentation as part of the study.</p> <p>Both School A and School B were within feasible travelling distance from the researcher's place of work.</p> <p>School A and School B are different in relation to their ethos and management.</p>
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Selecting two very different schools added to the richness of the data collected and helped to illuminate an understanding of the role of context (Ball et al., 2012) within policy enactment. While the schools are driven by a different ethos, both schools are under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme (DEIS, 2006). DEIS primary schools differ markedly from non-DEIS primary schools in terms of the social class background, parental education, household income and family structures of their pupils (DES, 2017), this is an important factor as the demographics of a school are a critical component to the context within which primary school teachers implement curricula in relation to Aistear. The following section provides a background to the DEIS (2006) programme.

3.9 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme

The DEIS programme was introduced by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2006. The aim was to bring together a number of existing stand-alone schemes which addressed specific aspects of educational disadvantage. At primary level, a distinction is made between DEIS Band 1, the most disadvantaged (School A) and DEIS Band 2, also classified as disadvantaged but to a lesser degree (School B). Schools classified as DEIS Band 1 have a teacher pupil ratio of 1/20. These schools have a much higher concentration of disadvantage than other schools and cater for more complex needs, with a greater prevalence of students from Traveller backgrounds, non-English speaking students, and students with special educational needs (Smyth, McCoy, & Kingston, 2015). Schools under the DEIS Band 1 programme receive additional funding, access to literacy and numeracy programmes, and assistance with school planning (DES, 2017). Funding allocation is based on the relative level of disadvantage within the individual school. In addition, the most disadvantaged urban primary schools have reduced class sizes. Designated DEIS schools in urban areas are also allocated a Home School Community Liaison person to support communication between families and the school. Table 9 sets out how the participants are represented throughout the research:

Table 9: Identifiers used for Study Participants

School A	School B
Teacher 1: T1(A)	Teacher 3: T3 (B)
Teacher 2: T2(A)	Teacher 4: T4 (B)
Principal: P (A)	Principal: P (B)

The two schools were quite different in character. The following section provides a profile of both schools.

3.10 Profile of School A

School A is located on the North side of Dublin in an area that is economically and socially deprived, and is recognised as a DEIS Band 1 school. The principal of School A is known to me as I have been involved with the school in setting up local ECE projects and I was aware of their engagement with Aistear. The teachers of School A who took part in the study were not known to me. The school is a co-educational school and is under the management of the Department of Education and Skills (formerly Department of Education and Science). The school was established in 1985. It has a strong Catholic ethos while respecting the diverse nature of the beliefs and cultures of all pupils in the school. School A has a total of five-hundred-and-thirty pupils and forty-five teachers. The current principal has been in her role for four years. There are twenty children in T1(A)'s class (aged four to five years). T1(A) has taught junior and infant classes for two years and had not completed any Aistear training, however she had completed a training module entitled 'Infant Education'. There are also twenty children in T2(A)'s class (aged four to five years). T2(A) has taught junior and senior infant classes (children aged four to six years) for three years. T2(A)'s final year of college included a module on Aistear, and she had attended a short Aistear workshop.

3.11 Profile of School B

School B is also located on the North side of Dublin in an area that is socially deprived. This school is recognised as a DEIS Band 2 school. Neither the principal nor the teachers of School B were known to me. The school was identified to me as a school that engaged with Aistear by a colleague who works with schools in the area. School B is an Educate Together primary school. Educate Together schools are set up and developed by groups of parents in a local area who wish to send their children to a primary school that is multi-denominational. The school is also run by the Department of Education and Skills (formerly Department of Education and Science). It has 36 staff and 438 pupils. The ethos of School B is to promote the fullest participation by parents and teachers in decision-making processes and to promote a genuine creative partnership between parental involvement and the professional role of teachers. There are 24 children in T3(B)'s class (aged four to five years). T3(B) had taught in senior infants for one year and was in her first year of teaching junior infants at the time of the data gathering. Aistear was not covered during T3(B)'s teacher training, but there had been an early childhood education module. Before taking up teaching the junior infant class, T3(B) completed an Aistear summer course run by Dublin West Education Centre. T3(B)'s attendance on the course was voluntary.

There are 25 children in T4(B)'s class (aged four to five years). T4(B) has taught junior infant class for five years. Like T3(B), Aistear was not covered in her teacher training. T4(B) completed a six-week introduction course on Aistear two years into teaching junior infants and also completed an online summer course on learning through play which was run by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO). T4(B)'s attendance on both courses was voluntary.

3.12 Data Collection Tools

Case study enables the use of diverse methods of data generation. In this study, these included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, documents and photographic data, each of which provides an account of the individual participating teacher's practice situated in time and context. Stake (1995) explains that varied sources of data are collected and analysed to obtain multiple perspectives to reach a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

3.13 Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

Working within a social constructivist paradigm, the interview was viewed as a social encounter within which, as Stake (1995) suggests, knowledge, meanings and understandings are constructed through language, therefore the interviewer's role is as significant as the participant's role. The interviews were designed in semi-structured format which facilitated the use of some predetermined questions to explore key areas in relation to Aistear and the new primary language curriculum (2016) but also allows for flexibility which is necessary for the evolution of ideas (Mertens, 1998; Robinson, 2002). Developing questions for the interviews involved an examination of Aistear and its relationship to the new primary language curriculum (2016). Questions were developed which would explore firstly, the teachers' understandings of Aistear, and secondly, how their understandings of Aistear related to their practice (Appendix 6: Teachers Interview Schedule).

Again, it is important to acknowledge that the questions asked underpin the researcher's understanding of ECE and are also influenced by the epistemological stance that knowledge is socially constructed. Merriam (1998, p. 48) states that "our analysis and interpretation and the study's findings will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place".

The principals of School A and School B were also interviewed (Appendices 6 and 7: Principals Interview Schedules). The questions for their interviews were informed by the data collected from the teacher interviews and the classroom observations in each school (Appendix 9-11). The experience of interviewing the principals was different from interviewing the teachers because the knowledge and understandings gained from the teacher interviews and observations led to more in-depth and informed questions to the principals.

All interviews were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcribing the data was very time consuming, however, it did provide an opportunity to get immersed in the data and to make analytical notes in relation to new insights as they emerged. The recordings were transcribed within two weeks of the interviews, this facilitated recall of further important data, such as non-verbal communication, gestures, and behavioural responses which can also be important sources of data (Bryman, 2004; Silverman, 2011). Notes of these were made in the

margins of the pages during the transcribing process. Researcher reflexivity is an important part of the transcribing process; as I transcribed, I was aware of my presumptions coming into my thought processes and I needed to remind myself of the advice from Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) who suggest that:

It is unrealistic to pretend that the data on transcripts is anything but already interpreted data...and that the data is decontextualised, abstracted from time and space, from the dynamics of the situation, from the live form and from the social, interactive, dynamic and fluid dimensions of their sources; they are frozen.

(Cohen et al., 2007, p. 367)

I was aware of what Peshkin (1988, p. 20) refers to as the “taming of subjectiveness”. Having run my own Montessori school for fourteen years, I have a tacit understanding of the situations and context that were described by the teachers. Through each stage of the research process, I needed to be aware of biases and prejudices that I may have and to examine how my understandings of ECE impacted the study.

In this study, the data analysis process was not a linear procedure, rather, it involved constantly moving back and forth between data sets in an ongoing intertwined process of data collection and analysis. Overall, the process could be described as comprising two overarching stages, each of which encompassed a number of steps, as shown in Figure 5:

	Stage 1 of Data Analysis
Step 1	Analyse the new primary language curriculum and Aistear to inform the observational framework and the interview questions
Step 2	In-depth reading of teacher interviews to identify areas of observational interest
Step 3	Grouping the general themes under specific themes and relating them across Aistear and the new primary language curriculum
	Stage 2 of Data Analysis
Step 1	First cycle codes assigned to transcripts from individual teacher interviews
Step 2	Assigning codes to the individual classroom observational frameworks
Step 3	Applying codes to interview transcripts of school principals
Step 4	Further coding cycle to bring together data from teacher and principal interviews and classroom observations, identifying relationships between data sets
Step 5	Coding and analysis of DEIS school plans
Step 6	Coding and analysis of school websites
Step 7	Data reduction: reducing, merging and distilling codes from all data sets to form a final configuration of themes.

Figure 5: Stages of Data Analysis

3.14 Classroom Observations

The first purpose of the classroom observations was to capture and document a snapshot of the teachers' practice in relation to the aims of Aistear and the new primary language curriculum (2016). The second purpose was to inform understanding of context when taken with other data, for example, the data gathered from the interview with the principals and the data gathered from documents deemed relevant to the research. The third purpose was to observe the teachers' point of view within a real-life context. The classroom observations were carried out within a two-week period following from the teacher interviews, and were conducted over five months from September 2016 to January

2017. Two classroom observations were conducted within School A and two within School B. Each observation was conducted over a four-hour period, a complete cycle of a daily class practice. To minimise disruption, observations were carried out on a suitable date and time identified by the teachers. The collecting and recording of the observational data first required the design of an observational framework to provide a frame of reference in relation to the data gathered from each interview. The observational framework enabled the identification of critical moments in teaching which could be used together with the interview data to build a picture of how the teachers' understandings of Aistear and of how children learn influenced their pedagogical approach.

3.15 Designing the Observational Framework

The design of the observational framework followed three steps of analyses. The first step involved an exploration of how the new primary language curriculum (2016) and Aistear are linked together (Table 1 p.15) sets out the principles of Aistear and the new primary language curriculum). The second step involved several in-depth readings of each teacher's interview transcript to identify areas of observational interest. The researcher's questions and the participants' answers were set out in a table format. Areas of observational interest were identified within each answer and these were then assigned to emergent themes (Appendix 12). The third and final step in developing the observational framework involved grouping the general emergent themes under more specific themes which related to the research questions and were linked to the principles of Aistear and the new primary language curriculum (2016). These new themes then served as a guide for the classroom observations.

The same approach was adopted with each of the observations and there were no direct interactions with the teachers during the process. However, it is important to acknowledge that my presence as a researcher in the classrooms could have influenced the interactions and practices I observed. Data from the classroom observations was gathered using hand written field notes which were written into the observational framework design sheet as they happened (Appendix 13). These notes provided detailed descriptions of events, activities, and behaviours of the children and their teacher as they happened in the classroom. Some further memos were made in situ in relation to tentative ideas to think about during analyses. In addition, time was allowed after each observation to enter supplementary observer comments (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These two separate processes allowed for both descriptive and analytical/reflective note taking. On re-visiting

these memos, I needed to remind myself of the role of the reflective researcher; I was cognisant of the argument put forward by Silverman (2011, p. 382) that “the facts we find in the field never speak for themselves but are impregnated by our assumptions”. I needed to be mindful not to box off my subjective opinions of what I observed and acknowledge that my observations were not just physical and temporal but were influenced by my pedagogical judgement, and that I needed to try to separate out what I observed and be as neutral as possible in recording my observations.

3.16 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began at the early stages of data collection. Analysing the data concurrent with data collection facilitated a process that Miles et al., (2014, p. 70) refer to as “cycling back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new data”. The process, they suggest, also serves as a “health corrective for built in blind spots”. Data analysis involved many of what Miles et al., (2014) refer to as “iterative cycles” of induction and deduction. Again, it is important to acknowledge that all stages of the research study were guided by my ontological and epistemological understandings of knowledge and by my philosophical stance on early childhood education.

In the second overarching stage of analysis, step 1 involved the coding of the data. My understanding of ‘a code’ is guided by Saldana (2016, p. 4), who describes a code as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data”. The data sets from School A and School B were analysed as two separate case studies and followed the same stages and steps of analyses. The first data set to be coded was the teacher interviews. Having read the interview scripts in-depth several times, initial themes were identified through the first cycle of the coding process (Appendix 14-15). The process of noting codes and writing analytical memos was a very useful guide in supporting an analysis that was reflective and that was open to new inductions and deductions throughout all the stages of data analysis.

The next step in data analysis was applying codes to the classroom observational frameworks. The coding began with a re-reading of the already coded teacher interview transcripts and applying the codes identified in their transcripts to where they had a conceptual link within the observational data. Reflective analytical notes were made in

the process of continual back and forth analysis across the observation transcripts and the teacher interview transcripts.

The next stage was to apply codes to the interview transcripts from the school principals. This began with a first cycle coding whereby the transcript was read through twice to identify emerging codes and to make a note of areas of interest. In the first cycle, fifteen codes were noted. A second cycle of coding was then carried out which involved identifying interrelated areas, grouping these together, and making memos of how they linked conceptually. The cycle of second coding reduced the number of codes from fifteen to nine (Appendix 23)

These nine codes were then examined to see how they related to the coded data of the teacher interviews and the observations. Coding is not a linear process where all of the data fits neatly into codes, rather, it is an ongoing process of moving back and forth between the different data sets looking for relationships. During the analysis, there was some data that was relevant to more than one code, these were noted as sub-codes and, where indicated, analytical memos were made (Appendix 21) A further cycle of coding was conducted to bring together the data from the teacher and principal interviews, as well as the classroom observations, under the assigned codes, and to facilitate what Cohen et al., (2011, p. 567) refer to as “a process that identifies any associations and links between the codes and to look at categories and any relationships between them”.

3.16.1 Emergence of a New Data Set

I felt it was important to be open to the possibility of having to add new data during the data analysis stage. During the interview of P(A) there was a discussion about the fact that the school was a DEIS school. The DEIS programme requires that each participating school has an action plan with set targets and plans across five key areas: literacy, numeracy, attendance, parents, and outside agencies. The DEIS action plan then became a relevant document to add to the data set for analysis, this is discussed in the next section.

3.16.2 Coding and Analysis of the DEIS School Plans

The DEIS school plan sets out the goals and objectives of the school and is directly linked to the goals and objectives of DEIS. The analyses of DEIS was guided by Richard and Morse (2013, p. 154) who suggest that coding is not just labelling, it is linking: “it leads you from the data to the idea and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea”. Building on this, Bryman (2016, p. 562) suggests that documents should be “viewed as

linked to other documents because invariably they refer to and are in response to other documents”. Documents, Atkinson and Coffey (2011) suggest, are, texts written with distinctive purposes in mind and should not be seen as simply reflecting reality. Bryman (2016, p. 561) posits that documents are significant for developing a contextual understanding of the documents and their significance in relation to other data and, in some cases, can form part of the context or background that captures the culture of the organisation. Codes were assigned to the DEIS action plans that linked to the codes from the analysis of the data sets from the teacher interviews, the principal interviews, and the observation data, with some new codes emerging (Appendix 26 A-E).

3.16.3 Coding and Analysis of the School Websites

The final documents to be analysed were the school websites. Each page of the school website was copied into a word document and coded (Appendix 27). During the analysis and coding, analytical memos were made about how the data linked to the other coded data sets, and a note was made of areas of interest to be discussed.

3.16.4 Outcome of Data Analysis

Having conducted analysis of the various data sets (interview transcripts, classroom observational framework, DEIS school plans, and school websites) and engaged in the processes of reducing, merging and distilling codes, the final configuration of codes identified four overarching themes as follows:

- Pedagogy
- Curriculum
- Teachers’ understanding of Aistear and the role of play
- Challenges to enacting a new primary language curriculum

These themes form an organising structural framework for presenting the research findings in the chapter to follow.

3.17 Summary

This chapter discussed the research approach adopted in this study. It explained how, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Braun et al., (2011) and Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) the researcher created a conceptual model to serve as a heuristic device to guide analysis of the data. It situated the study within a social constructivist paradigm that takes an interpretivist approach to the research endeavour. It discussed the reasoning behind

the choice of a two-case study approach and described the processes of purposive sampling and defining the boundaries of the cases. Data was generated primarily, though not exclusively, through in depth interviewing and non-participant observations and these methods were described and discussed. Over the course of the study, the process of data analysis comprised two overarching stages, each of which encompassed a number of steps, and these were explained in detail. The researcher's reflective stance and ethical issues were also considered.

The chapter to follow presents the study findings under the four themes identified in the process of data analysis: pedagogy; curriculum; teachers' understanding of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting a new primary language curriculum.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study findings arising from analysis of all data sets, and identifies key issues to be drawn out in the discussion chapter.

Before presenting the findings, it would be beneficial to recap the study aims and research questions. The study aimed to develop a model of practice that supports primary school teachers to implement Aistear within a new primary language curriculum; and to establish a basis for understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the early years classroom. In order to meet these aims, two research questions were formulated as follows:

How do primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear?

How can primary school teachers be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear within their contextual settings?

In presenting the findings, I have endeavoured to represent the data and my interpretations of the data in what Cohen et al., (2011, p. 300) refer to as a “fair and honest way”. The findings are supported by evidence in the form of extracts from the data sets indicated in Figure 6:

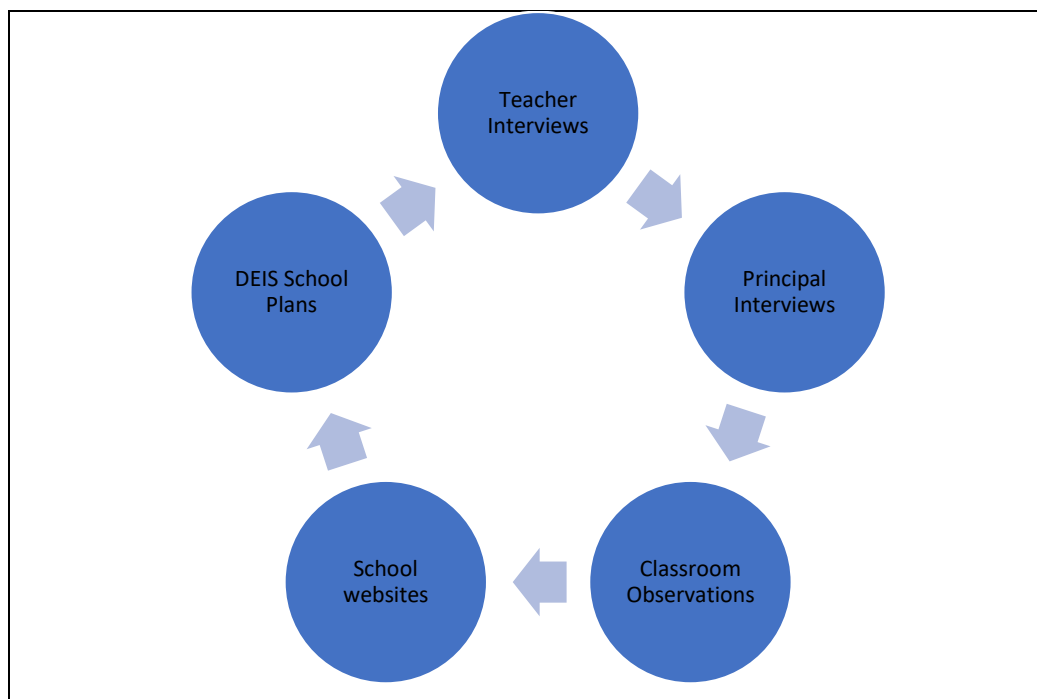


Figure 6: Data sets for School A and School B

All stages of the study were guided by my ontological and epistemological understandings of knowledge and by my philosophical stance on ECE, which may be summarised as a social constructivist and interpretivist view of knowledge, and a child-centred rights-based view of ECE which emphasises the importance of play in pedagogy for early childhood education.

4.2 Format for Presenting the Findings

The findings from School A and School B are presented separately but are brought together in the discussion chapter which follows. The findings are presented under the four themes identified in the final stage of data analysis: pedagogy; curriculum; understandings of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting a new primary language curriculum. It is important to note that while Aistear suggests that developmental domains such as cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical should not be separated out, and that the primary curriculum subjects should be integrated (NCCA, 2004), the findings suggest that the participating teachers and principals understood Aistear as a discrete subject and separate from the curriculum; therefore, the findings in relation to Aistear and the new primary language curriculum are presented separately.

4.3 Findings from School A

This section considers the findings from School A in relation to the four key areas of: pedagogy; curriculum; understanding of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting a new primary language curriculum.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Pedagogy (School A)

This study draws on Siraj-Blatchford's (2004) definition of pedagogy as:

The practice (or the art, the science, or the craft) of teaching ... [it] refers to the interactive process between teaching and learning and the learning environment.

(Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 138)

Such a broad definition includes the classroom environment and the provision of resources for discovery learning and play. How a classroom is set out reflects, to some extent, the pedagogical approach of the teacher. The following section describes T1(A)'s classroom environment and presents this in relation to her pedagogical approach.

4.3.2 T1(A)'s Classroom

T1(A)'s classroom was arranged into four groups of tables as shown in Figure 7:



Figure 7: School A: T1(A)'s Classroom

There were between five and six children sitting at each of the four areas. T1(A)'s desk was at the front of the room. During the four-hour classroom observation, T1(A) continually moved around the children's work areas and did not remain at her desk for any length of time. The classroom was bright with educational posters and information on all of the walls which were placed at child level. The children could not see clearly out the window as the windows were covered with a clouded transparent plastic cover. There was a free-standing sandbox at the back of the room.

4.3.3 T1(A)'s Pedagogical Approach

T1(A) was asked about her pedagogical approach and understanding of how children learn. She responded that children learn:

... from each other and from doing things and from working with concrete materials... children learn by being very active and experiencing the actual task themselves and manipulating the materials and kind of constructing their learning.

T1(A)

During my observations of T1(A)'s classroom, the children sat at the tables working in groups. Examples of the concrete materials referred to by T1(A) related to many of the table top activities which the children were given to work with individually but while being part of a group:



Figure 8: T1(A)'s 'Concrete Materials' Table Top Activities

T1(A) understood her teaching role as one of facilitating the children's learning and fostering their independence and recalled her own learning experiences describing how they differed from today's teaching approach:

Providing good learning experiences... the big thing as well is oral language, trying to teach them and even just get them used to hearing a set of vocabulary that they might not otherwise hear at home... when I was in school it was you know more chalk and talk. We did play time as well I think that the way education is progressing it is becoming...all about active learning, and I think in that setting you can ...take into consideration the child's individuality you can differentiate for the child.

T1(A)

T1(A) spoke about the children working independently; while this was evident on the day of the classroom observations, it is important to note that the activities on the day were set out in advance by T1(A). Once the children were given instructions on what to do, they were then expected to work on their own but within a group. I consider this important as T1(A) talked about the children working independently and this could be perceived as children working solely on their own and having opportunities to choose. However, what I observed was a teacher-led approach. Similarly, when T1(A) talked about the children learning from each other, this could be understood as collaborative learning but what I observed was the children carrying out the activities they were instructed to do in groups, but they were not engaging in collaborative work. A mainly didactic approach to teaching was observed during the period spent in T1(A)'s classroom. On being asked about how much of the children's day would they consider to be teacher-led, T1(A) replied that a lot of the day would be teacher-led and described what I would consider to be a didactic pedagogical approach to ECE:

I would say most of the time it is probably coming from me... because you are kind of very definite in your objectives, you know what you have to cover. You have to stay on track. They are very vocal they do participate in the discussion, like I am trying to get them to practise raise your hand, wait your turn, all the time because they are very vocal, they will blurt out things and shout out things, like I think the participation levels are quite good.

T1(A)

T1(A)'s classroom had an area which displayed the rules of the classroom that the children are expected to follow:

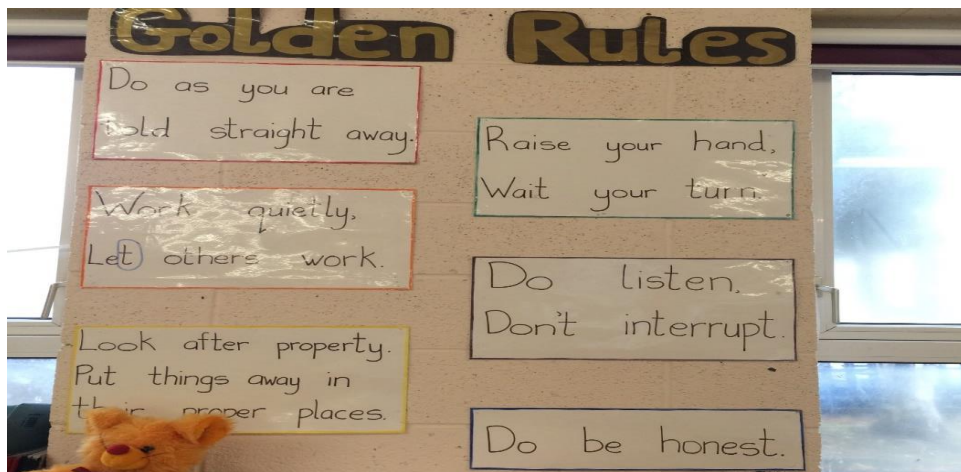


Figure 9: T1(A)'s Golden Rules of the Classroom

T1(A) had clear ideas of what she expected the children to be doing and understood that it was her job to foster independence in the children and that it was important for the children to be able to manage to do things by themselves and not always be dependent on the teacher:

There are two groups on their own working with something that they should be able to do independently, like one group today was working on chalk boards and they can draw a picture or they can practise having a go at writing their name... like we haven't started Jolly Phonics yet so I don't expect them to be able but is just their own attempt at writing their name.

T1(A)

During a lesson on the weather T1(A) asked the children what the weather was like today. One child suggested that if the window was opened they could look out to see if it was windy. This response presented an opportunity for T1(A) to be guided by the child's interest but the opportunity was not taken up. The lesson continued with a discussion of what clothes would the children need to wear for today's weather and the opportunity to let the children guide their own learning, to engage in what Siraj-Blatchford (2005) refers to as "shared sustained thinking", was missed.



Figure 10: T1(A)'s Weather Lesson

I asked T1(A) if the children contribute their own ideas to any part of the curriculum. Replying, she described a recent event when the children returned from the yard after play time and there had been a rainbow in the sky. T1(A) explained that the children were very excited and talked about the rainbow, so she drew a rainbow and the children began to talk about the different colours. T1(A) became very animated and excited as she recalled the incident:

I had nothing in my plan about a rainbow... I put 'I can sing a rainbow' on Youtube and we sang it ... I asked them 'how do we get rainbows' like what do you need to have a rainbow and some of them knew that it's rain and sunshine, so I did a whole lesson on rainbows and they drew their own rainbow, it is in the folder actually and they were gorgeous. I probably should have hung them up, they were gorgeous. They did a great job on them, I think it was because they had just you know they were excited.

T1(A)

T1(A) showed the children's drawings of the rainbow to me and then handed me another one saying "There you go. That's a boy with very little English, the rain clouds and the rain drops".

Having unexpected and unplanned lessons was an unusual occurrence in T1(A)'s classroom and she was excited as she described her surprise at how well the activity had gone and how it had worked very well as a learning experience for the children. T1(A) talked about how she is trying to move away from 'uniformity' in the children's art work, using artwork displayed on the wall as an example of this aim:



Figure 11: Children's Art Displayed on T1(A)'s Classroom Wall

...I am trying to give them a blank page and let them do it themselves, like with the rainbow, you know, give them the freedom to produce their own work... I think if I had gone home and planned to do a lesson on rainbows, I wouldn't have thought they would have turned out like that, because there was no template, there wasn't a colouring in exercise, they drew their own rainbows and they did great, they were brilliant.

T1(A)

4.3.4 T2(A)'s Classroom

The furniture in T2(A)'s classroom was arranged in a similar layout to that of T1(A):



Figure 12: T2(A)'s Classroom

Her classroom was very bright with lots of colourful pictures and educational posters displayed on the walls. Similar to T1(A)'s classroom, the children could not see clearly out the windows as they were covered by a clouded plastic transparent cover. All of the class equipment materials were at child level. T2(A) commented that having the equipment at child level facilitated the children's independence as they were able to bring materials out and put them back themselves when they were finished their work; and this was something that I did observe in T2(A)'s classroom.

4.3.5 T2(A)'s Pedagogical Approach

On being asked about her pedagogical approach to how children learn T2(A) focussed the importance of what she called 'active learning' and 'discovery learning':

I believe in the holistic development of the child...it is not just their cognitive knowledge that you are developing, it is their physical, emotional and social aspects that they are developing too. I suppose here, in particular in infants, it is all active learning, hands on discovery learning.

T2(A)

One of the key pedagogical principles that the primary curriculum (1999) promotes is the concept that teachers should provide opportunities for guided activities and discovery activities where the children are free to discover new learning. During observations of T2(A)'s classroom, I did not see any opportunities for what she referred to as 'discovery learning'. There were many opportunities for the children to learn through music which is something T2(A) highlighted as important:

I think using different resources, like different ways of learning, like music, visual aids, they all help learners in different ways – help the children to remember the things more. Fun and play are other ones, that if the children are enjoying something, they are much more willing to participate in it.

T2(A)

During the observation of T2(A)'s classroom, it was evident that the children enjoyed and were very engaged in the activities that involved music and singing. However, the only opportunity for 'fun and play' that I observed was during what T1(A) and T2(A) referred to as 'Aistear Time'. T2(A) described a didactic understanding of how children learn:

For some things they just need to sit down and listen, some things are just too difficult to teach hands on, things can get a bit crazy different days. Some days they are too tired to be left on their own, so I think they need a bit of structure sometimes. Sometimes they are just sitting down and it's not as child-centred as I would like it to be.

T2(A)

T2(A)'s classroom displayed similar 'Rules of the Classroom' as in T1(A)'s classroom. It also displayed a 'Rules and Routines' poster setting out further rules and a three step approach to discipline for breach of these rules. Step one was a warning, for step two the child would be asked to move their seat to another table, and step three involved the child being sent into the classroom next door, which was considered a serious step in the disciplinary process. These posters are shown in Figures 13 and 14:



Figure 123: T2(A)'s Rules of the Classroom



Figure 14: T2(A)'s Rules and Routines

One of the ways T2(A) promoted the children's independence was by getting them to take off their coats, hats, and gloves in the morning, on their way out to the yard at play time, and going home. She also promoted the children's independence during art lessons:

I will delegate different jobs so there will be someone cleaning the paint brushes and another person cleaning the pots and they do that independently while the rest of us are cleaning the tables.

T2(A)

At lunch time the children were expected to open up their lunch box and drink bottle, push in their chairs and walk to their line. Each child was responsible for where they were situated in the line. T2(A) described how the children are expected to walk out to the yard at break times:

We do a 'hip and lip' when we walk in the line so that is kind of taking control of their own behaviour. They know that is how they walk down the corridor and out in the afternoons.

T2(A)

The 'hip and lip' process that T2(A) refers to expects each child to put their finger on their lip and not to speak, the other hand goes on their hip as they walk quietly into the yard.

4.3.6 P(A)'s Pedagogical Approach

As discussed in the literature review, the enactment of a new primary language curriculum framed by Aistear requires a pedagogical approach that is collaborative between teachers and principals. Supporting teachers to develop a pedagogical approach that adopts a child-centred rights-based approach to ECE is dependent on principals' understanding of a child-centred rights-based approach and how such an approach is coupled with the teachers' practices, their values, attitudes, ideas and beliefs. I asked P(A) to discuss her understanding of a child-centred rights-based approach to ECE. She began by discussing the importance of assigning a "suitable" teacher to the ECE classroom and explained why she considered this important. In her narrative, I noted she used the word "students" when talking about the children:

The impact that they [teachers] have is quite profound for the students going forward... you have to be very conscious of the fact that if you don't get a teacher in there that really gives the students a good start ... they're kind of on the back foot a little bit. The teacher has to be able to communicate with parents, communicate with us, communicate with other agencies... we also have to look at how well this group of ECE teachers will work with each other.

P(A)

When asked to discuss the opportunities the ECE teachers had to engage in collaborative practices, P(A) said that such opportunities happened on a daily basis because the classrooms were all interconnected by doors on the same level to allow freedom of movement through the classrooms. P(A) spoke of other opportunities for the teachers to meet:

Informally I'd say they meet once a week at this stage, it could only be for ten minutes but that ten minutes is invaluable to what they're doing...they're planning their activities and 'their Aistear' for the following week, so they would be communicating particularly on a Friday over what's going to happen the following week.

P(A)

When P (A) was asked how much autonomy the teachers would have in deciding their approach to implementing the new primary language curriculum, she talked about the importance of teachers “being on the same hymn sheet”. Her emphasis during the discussion was more focused on what the parents might think if children were not doing the same thing across two classes rather than on the importance of consistency and equality of opportunity for all children:

There is scope for some individualism within the recommendations ... There has to be consistency, we've had cases where we've had twins, one in one senior infant class and one in the other senior infant class, and you can't have them going home, one doing reading and one not, one doing writing and the other one not, so we do have to keep an eye on that.

P(A)

During the classroom observations, I noted that each of the classrooms was organised differently. P(A) talked about the management of the classroom and that the classroom set-up was a personal choice left to the individual teacher:

There is already a sharing of ideas and working together...which is important because ultimately the teachers are all working together. There's a lot left up to the teacher and with regard to where the children are seated, that's entirely left up to the teacher. ... There's a bit of scope, there'd be guidance through “the Aistear” ... we would buy equipment, like we bought kitchens one year, and at the moment there's a carpenter doing up a little... like a corner, a shop or its daily changed into a vet or a restaurant or whatever.

P(A)

4.7 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme

School A was a DEIS Band 1 school. DEIS schools have a much higher concentration of disadvantage than other schools and cater for more complex needs, with a greater prevalence of children from Traveller backgrounds, of children with English as an additional language (EAL), and of children with additional educational needs (Smyth, McCoy, & Kingston, 2015). The teachers from School A and School B commented that, being DEIS schools, they had a high proportion of children in their class who had EAL. While I had not considered including DEIS as a context, it became relevant during the gathering of the data. DEIS schools must have a DEIS Action Plan (DAP) that is set out under six key areas. The next section presents the findings from the analysis of School A's DEIS Plan.

4.8 School A's Pedagogical Approach as Evidenced from their DEIS School Plan

The DEIS school plan sets out the individual target plan that each school will implement across the following areas: literacy, numeracy, attendance, parents, and outside agencies. The plan relates to the whole school which includes all classes for children from junior infants (aged four years) to senior class (children aged twelve years). The findings from the analysis of the DEIS school plan were marked by an absence of any specific mention of the early years classrooms (junior and senior infants), apart from the literacy plan where there was mention of a one-day annual event which the school ran to promote early years literacy.

The section on the attendance plan addressed the need to reward all classes, including junior and senior infants, for individual one-hundred percent attendance, with the prize to be given in class. There was also a prize awarded to the class with the best attendance during each school term to promote good effort of the whole class. There was no information relating to the junior and senior infants in the other three DEIS Plan areas of: involvement of parents; numeracy and literacy; and assessment.

4.9 School A's Pedagogical Approach as Evidenced from the Website

A child-centred approach to ECE recognises that children have an active role in guiding their own learning. Analysis of the data from School A's website evidenced that the website promoted an inclusive child-centred approach, it stated that:

School staff will foster an atmosphere of friendship, respect and tolerance. Children's self-esteem will be developed through celebrating individual differences, achievements, acknowledging and rewarding good behaviour and manners, and providing opportunities for success throughout the curriculum and school... A high level of co-operation and open communication between parents, staff and children is seen as an important factor in encouraging positive behaviour in the school.

School A's Website

While the website stated that the children are consulted in the drawing up of individual classroom rules at the beginning of the school year, it was noted that the school Discipline Code has not been updated since 2010 and therefore may not have been carried out in consultation with the cohort of children who were attending the school during this study.

4.10 Theme 2: Curriculum (School A)

This section presents the findings regarding the second theme: curriculum. In this study curriculum is understood to mean: addressing the totality of the child's learning and development (NCCA, 2001). The language strand of the new primary language curriculum emphasises the critical role of adult-child and child-child interactions. Acknowledging that the ECE curricula experience children have in their first year in primary school can impact on their future experiences and development, a key issue then is how the teachers who create these experiences understand ECE and how those understandings influence their practice, which includes "interactive processes" between teacher and child and child to child (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

4.10.1 T1(A)'s Understanding of Curriculum

T1(A) was asked how she divided the curriculum between child-initiated activities and teacher-directed activities. She discussed how group work provided opportunities to see which children are "struggling" and which children are "flying it". She described how, on any given day, about a quarter of the curriculum content would be child-led, explaining that she would choose a child who would then decide on what rhyme or game they were going to play from the list on the board. She explained that they would have a choice like colouring or drawing or writing, they would have "some bit of a choice".

T1(A) talked about how she felt about the new language strand of the primary curriculum. She spoke about having just completed an in-service training day and that she was still getting used to the new terminology but felt that it would be easier for teachers and involve less paper work than the curriculum (1999), particularly regarding "ticking off" the different developmental stages of the children. T1(A) was referring to the (1999) curriculum which has 269 content objectives that teachers are required to identify across the seven years of primary school. By contrast, the new curriculum (2016) has 94 learning outcomes. Chapter 1 set out the structural differences between the primary English language curriculum (1999) and the new primary language curriculum (Table 3, p. 19).

T1(A)'s discussion in relation to the content objectives and the learning outcomes is in line with a "developmentally appropriate practice" which Qvortrup (1994) and Moss (2012) argue views childhood within a needs discourse:

With the (1999) curriculum I always struggled with the amount of paper work ... it was so confusing...The new oral language is very practical, it's like you could totally see you could be ticking off 'have they reached that milestone'?

T1(A)

The new primary language curriculum does not require teachers to carry out checklists but despite this, T1(A) discussed how this is something that she would continue to do:

They are not asking us to write checklists but, you know, if you want to bring them on to the next milestone you would need to be kind of doing a little checklist, your own personal checklist.

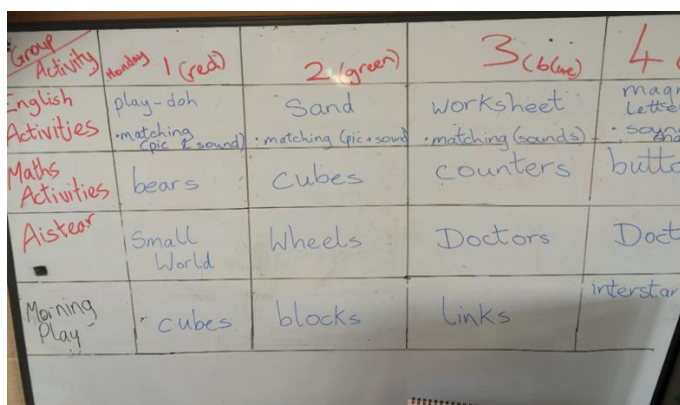
T1(A)

4.10.2 T2(A)'s Understanding of Curriculum

T2(A) was asked about the opportunities the curriculum provided for the children to engage in collaborative interactions. She responded that opportunities for collaborative interactions were provided during the maths and English table top activities when the children played matching games working in teams. T2(A) explained that collaborative play and learning also happened during nursery rhyme time when the children can choose which characters they want to be. She described an activity in which she reads out a well-known children's book [Brown Bear Brown Bear] and the children decide whether they will be the audience or the actors, adding however: "sometimes I do need to interfere alright".

T2(A) was asked if the children were allowed to choose their activities. Replying, T2(A) spoke about how in the later part of the school year the children may be able to choose what materials they use, but for now [December], she chooses, as she particularly wants to focus on materials that would appeal to their fine motor skills. Additionally, she explained that the children have some autonomy during story time: when the story is finished the children get an opportunity to give a thumbs up if they liked the story or a thumbs down if they did not like the story. Whatever signal the children give they must provide a reason for their choice and in this way, T2(A) suggested, the children got to voice their opinion.

T2(A) spoke about the curriculum needing to allow time for the children to be “carrying out the investigation” rather than just sitting down and observing. She spoke about how she needs to plan each day because planning the daily activities was important as it provided comfort to the children. Figure 15 shows a photograph of the plan for the day; it is clear from the board that Aistear is separated out from the other subjects:



	Group Activity	Monday 1 (red)	2 (green)	3 (blue)	4
English Activities		play-doh • matching (pic & sound)	Sand • matching (pic & sound)	worksheet • matching (sounds)	magna letters • sound
Maths Activities		bears	cubes	counters	buttons
Aistear		Small World	wheels	Doctors	Doctor
Morning Play		cubes	blocks	links	interstar

Figure 15: T2(A)’s Day Plan

T2(A) described the children’s day as follows:

Well three days a week when the children come in we have structured activities – they know exactly what they have to do. Two days a week then they can pick what toys they want to play with in the mornings. Golden Time is on a Friday afternoon, so we have a list of things and the children get to pick which one they want to do.

T2(A)

The next section presents the findings from School A in relation to the third theme identified at the final stage of data analysis.

4.11 Theme 3: Understandings of Aistear and the Role of Play (School A)

Aistear promotes a curriculum that builds on children's interests. As an ECE curriculum framework, it emphasises the key role of the adult in promoting a nurturing pedagogy, encouraging playful interactions, behaviours, explorations, conversations, and collaborative learning. During the classroom observations, I noted that Aistear was something that was carried out as an activity separate from the curriculum. Both T1(A) and T2(A) explained how they incorporated Aistear into their day. Their classrooms had four areas that the teachers called 'Aistear Stations' and these stations were set out by the teachers each day.



Station 1: Aistear Small World



Station 2: Aistear Police Station



Station 3: Aistear Sand Play



Station 4: Aistear Construction

Figure 16: T1(A)'s Four Aistear Stations

The children would spend time at one of the stations and the following day they would move to a new station. The station themes changed each month and were planned at the start of the school term. I asked T1(A) if Aistear has an impact on how she implements the curriculum. Although she had been teaching junior infants (children aged four to five years) for two years, she had had no training in Aistear; she described Aistear as “a block that has a name” which therefore means it must be “a programme”, but unlike other programmes, it is a release from the pressure of meeting curriculum objectives because it does not state that its aim is to “improve the standard”:

I think that it is a good idea, that it is kind of like a block and has a name and you know it is a programme. So I am just kind of getting used to it now, and actually I think it is good that it has like in a way the separateness like the term Aistear, because like that when another programme comes into the school...there is a lot of pressure to really like improve the standard, and that kind of eats into the play time and other subjects. ... But I think the fact that we have this block that is called Aistear it gives it some value and importance and even if you have a day, a manic day and you didn't get to do your Aistear - you know your official Aistear you would do it the next day.

T1(A)

When T1(A) was asked about what role she saw play having within the classroom, she spoke about play as being integral to the curriculum and that it links the subjects together. This, she thought, was a good thing as she felt under so much pressure to fit everything in. She described how Aistear is incorporated into the curriculum, in her description she spoke about Aistear as something separate from the curriculum:

In the morning when they come in, like three mornings a week, I would let them play or do construction play. One morning it would be library time where they do quiet reading, then another morning it would be jigsaws. So that is just what I am doing at the minute, but I am going to probably move the Aistear to morning...

We have a lot of resources that aren't necessarily Aistear. One group is doing construction this month, but we have a lot of construction toys, so like in the mornings at the minute they are playing with construction, so I suppose that is not necessarily Aistear, but it is play ... like the activities, the inter maths activities, it is all active learning, it is not free play though, you know because there is an objective.

T1(A)

T2(A) said she had not “done” Aistear before and that she looked online for a summer course in relation to Aistear specifically but could not find one, so instead she did a course called ‘Infant Education’. She pointed out that Aistear was “not that difficult to understand” and that “once the children were in front of you, you can see how it works”

T2(A) referred to one teacher who is in charge of putting together the ‘Aistear boxes’ and explained that it would be good if like some other schools, there was a teacher in charge of the administrative side rolling out ‘Aistear’, that would make it a lot easier for the class teacher. She also referred to Aistear as something that is separate from the curriculum, something that she does not have a lot of time to facilitate.

T2(A) commented that Aistear provided many opportunities for language development, social skills and an opportunity to observe the children when playing:

Aistear opens up a new outlet that they can develop their language skills through play, and they learn an awful lot of new language...Play in Aistear gives you a chance to develop children's social skills and their play skills to observe whether they are parallel playing or co-operatively playing or anything like that. It gives you a chance to observe all those things, it also gives you a chance to speak to the child in maybe a group of one adult to six children rather than the whole class.

T2(A)

T1(A) explained how Aistear is applied in relation to a chosen theme, using the example of the hairdresser’s salon which had been the ‘Aistear theme’ the previous month. T1(A) described how the hairdresser station included combs, brushes, hairbands, scrunches, a hair straightener, a hair dryer, two manikin models, shampoo, hair conditioner, hair gel, a telephone and an appointment book. T1(A)’s role was to develop a ‘word bank’ on a flip chart of all the words that might be used during the children’s conversation while playing at this station during Aistear Time. She also added words that could be included in a paired conversation which the children might engage in when making appointments with the hairdresser. T1(A) expressed surprise at the extent of the language opportunities the role play of hairdressers provided.

T2(A) also spoke about Aistear in terms of language development, explaining how she uses the themed Aistear Stations to develop the children’s vocabulary:

At the start of the week we learn all the vocabulary, we go through it, we go through the roles like the doctor, the nurse, the patient, the receptionist. So then if they are working on their own they are aware there is supposed to be one doctor and one nurse, I might call over and check in and say, 'who is the doctor now? what is the problem with the patient?', and then afterwards, when we have tidied up, each group will get a chance to speak and say what they liked and what they didn't like. Sometimes there is a special needs assistant working with the group, directing the language and prompting and stimulating.

T2(A)

T2(A) speculated on how Aistear might facilitate the curriculum in observing the children's development. She explained that 'Aistear Time' provided an opportunity to observe the children's social skills, how they play together, whether they can share, whether they can take turns, and whether they can initiate a conversation with someone:

I think it would be easier to observe what milestone the children are at through Aistear rather than just asking them language questions that would just be repeated that they would just know off by heart. I think Aistear would probably be a way of checking for understanding and comprehension. It would be handy in that regard...

...in terms of behaviour management, are they willing to be patient, to wait and take their turn, do they understand the rules? ... in that smaller group you have a chance to see, you are more confident I suppose ticking those boxes. You have spent a few more minutes with them and you get a more detailed view of them. I think often it is hard to get a whole view of a child ... it is alright to see from a worksheet whether they have understood a task or something, but to get a real picture of their comprehension of the concept can often be tricky, especially in junior infants when the assessments are often colouring or drawing simple pictures.

T2(A)

T2(A) explained that Aistear provided a time where she could hear what the children had to say about their learning:

You have more time to listen to them explaining and verbalising their learning, you know often if they draw pictures it is nice to get a chance to go around and ask them 'what is that?' and to engage in more conversation about their pictures with them and to ask them why have they drawn it or what does it remind them of or things like that. Sometimes, not always, if it is a busy day, I just choose one group and remind myself the next day to go on to the next group.

T2(A)

T2(A) discussed the benefits of Aistear in relation to language development, when time allowed her to “do it properly”, but regretted that, due to time constraints and pressure to get everything covered, Aistear didn’t always get the time it deserved:

I think Aistear is great when you get a chance to do it properly, but often it is a bit rushed and I don't get to hear the children's responses as much, whether they liked playing with that station or that area or what was their favourite part. That actually is the bit that I think I neglect, just because we do it before home time and things often get a bit crazy, you know, coats on, bags, extra notes to hand out, and things like that. So, I would love to do more of it but I just feel that we just don't have the time to facilitate it.

T2(A)

4.12 P(A)'s Understanding of Aistear and the Role of Play

Aistear highlights the importance of play for young children's learning. Hughes (2003) offers three criteria to describe play: freedom of choice, personal enjoyment, and a focus on the activity itself rather than its outcomes. As discussed in the literature review, play in the ECE classroom in Ireland has been identified as problematic in practice (Hunter & Walsh, 2013; O' Kane, 2007; Gray & Ryan, 2016). Similarly, international research findings (Fung & Cheng, 2012; McInness et al., 2011; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Wisneski & Reifel, 2012) have identified that structural factors such as space, time, and the role of the adult are perceived as constraints in implementing play in the ECE classroom. Sherwood and Reifel (2010) posit that free choice and free play are always controlled within educational settings because of teachers' beliefs and values and the different meanings they attribute to play. Supporting teachers to develop a play-based approach in line with Aistear requires leadership from the principal; Kotter (2003) suggests that where leadership is weak or directionless or unskilled there is a greater probability of failure. P(A) was asked if she felt the teachers could enact Aistear within the new language curriculum:

I don't think it's difficult to do, it's just a question of how do you, I suppose, shove it into something that's working very well already? ...that's the difficulty for teachers, where do we start with this and where is it actually taking us. It's the milestones ... and that you are plotting the children.

P(A)

P(A) said that all was “working very well” in relation to Aistear and the new language curriculum, suggesting that “very little change” or new approaches were anticipated. Her use of the word “shove” in relation to enacting Aistear as part of the new primary language curriculum did not convey an understanding of Aistear which, as a curriculum framework, proposes a pedagogical approach that is holistic and promotes the integration of subjects across the curriculum. Further, P(A)’s highlighting of her main concern in relation to plotting the children’s milestones suggested a separating of the new primary language curriculum and Aistear. Throughout the interview P(A) spoke about Aistear and the new primary language curriculum in a very disconnected way.

The findings across all participants’ narratives highlighted a disconcerting discourse in relation to Aistear. The participants variously described Aistear as “Aistear Hour”, “Aistear Time”, “a block with a name” and “a programme”. T1(A) and T2(A) both spoke about how they would like to do “more of Aistear” but due to time pressures to get the curriculum covered they couldn’t. During P(A)’s discussion there seemed to be no awareness of the teachers’ concerns in relation to pressures to cover the curriculum objectives. Moreover, she did not anticipate that the new primary language curriculum would change anything in relation to Aistear:

Whatever programme is on in the classroom Aistear will work into itself, it won't be like we'll have to sit and say how do we do this, with Aistear it'll just be a seamless transition.

P(A)

P(A) suggested that while the new primary language curriculum would benefit the children’s oral language, it would not bring anything new to the children’s learning experience. This gave an indication that P(A) did not envisage any change in practice with the introduction of the new primary language curriculum:

The feedback I'm getting from teachers is that once we know what we have to do, it will probably enhance the oral language which in turn will enhance Aistear and what's going on in the classroom. I think we're doing a huge amount of it and I think there won't be as much, certainly for the infants that will be new, that will come out of this.

P(A)

P(A) talked of teachers’ concerns in relation to “measuring” or “plotting” the children’s development, to record their learning and bring them to the next milestone or stage:

I think it's more for the teachers, the oral language with a class of twenty children, how do we plot them, and if we do plot them how do we get through to the next stage.

P(A)

P(A) acknowledged that teacher training regarding Aistear was not consistent and added that it would be advantageous if training could be provided to the ECE teachers as a group:

It has been a slow steady process because training was not provided for everybody at the same time. I know a couple of the teachers have availed of training but none of the others have. So you get new staff and whatever they've learnt at college, and in most cases that's more than we know here, so the challenge is it's a real mixed bag.

I think that's the biggest challenge, you're relying on other teachers to pass on the information. There are teachers who've had no formal training in it because they qualified a few years ago. They are just fumbling around finding their way. Even me, I've never taught it, so I've gone in and observed it a couple of times but that's limited and I'm observing another teacher's interpretation of it, so that's a gap.

P(A)

P(A)'s comment that when she observed another teacher's class, she was observing that teacher's interpretation is interesting as it suggests she was of the opinion that there may be more than one way to 'do' Aistear. Additionally, her lack of knowledge in relation to Aistear would make it difficult for her to monitor and assess its enactment within the ECE classroom. P(A) discussed how one teacher had taken an interest in the role of "taking on" Aistear:

Thankfully one of our teachers was willing to take the lead on it and is helping out... they've really sat down and worked it out on a practical level, developed some sample plans, put together a list of equipment they need, and we've started building that up.

P(A)

During the discussion P(A) regularly referred to Aistear as something separate from the curriculum. She described a cascade model of knowledge-sharing in relation to Aistear where one teacher attends a training day and returns to the school to pass on their understanding. Such a process relies on one teacher's interpretation and can lead to a diluted transfer of knowledge, with a risk of the original information becoming adulterated. In the absence of some mechanism to bring the ECE teachers together following the transfer of knowledge, there is a risk that Aistear will be implemented in an inconsistent manner and that the children may not experience equality of opportunity within ECE classrooms.

Effective leadership requires principals to be effective communicators who can identify and articulate a collective vision, which includes the monitoring and assessment of teachers' practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). These findings are important as they highlight the need for those who are responsible for overseeing policy enactment to have some understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the policy to be enacted. In the absence of such knowledge, it is difficult to see how principals can ensure the enactment of a new language curriculum that is aligned with the principles and methodologies of Aistear if they don't know what it is they are monitoring.

P(A) discussed how accessing Aistear training was a challenge, suggesting that training in Aistear as a team was important, that there was a role for collaborative discussion and argument which she said was not happening:

What would be ideal I think for us would be if we had the go ahead to leave the class at home and send all the teachers on a training day and if that came up once a year or once every two or three years it would suffice.

P(A)

She spoke about how she had tried to get training in Aistear for the teachers as a group and delivered in the school, however, she was unsuccessful in this. Such training would have involved "everybody getting the same training, hearing the same thing and then there's no discussion or argument, this is what we need to do". P(A)'s comments suggest an understanding of training in Aistear that does not facilitate collaboration and discussion amongst the teachers, which is a key factor to support the enactment of new curricular policy.

P(A) was asked about her understanding of Aistear and the role of play in the ECE classroom. She described how play was a big part of the classroom and gave the example of the children playing with the construction materials similar to the table top activities used by T1(A)'s four Aistear Stations. She added that while free play was important, learning needed to take place, and this was done through structured play rather than free play:

I think there has to be some sort of learning outcome, whether it is just anything cutting or matching or making little sequences or whatever the case with building blocks. I think that's very important...

I think there's a lot of 'it' (play) covered in the junior infants and senior infants. It's something I've no experience of ... It seems to be fairly well covered from what I can see in any of the classes I go into, I don't actually know how it's timetabled, there seems to be an element where they have the free play and then they have the structured play but there is a concept or an aim to what they're doing.

P(A)

A child centred approach to learning is about adults engaging and responding to children which can include some time where sustained shared thinking (SST) is facilitated. This is a pedagogical skill that requires the teacher and the child to work/play together and where the child leads as well as the teacher presenting focussed, planned activities in a child-centred and exciting way (Sylva et al., 2004).

Ball et al., (2012, p.15) argue that the enactment of policy should be understood as a process of interpretation framed by the school and the actors within the school, in this case T1(A), T2(A) and P(A). P(A) had no experience with Aistear and was not familiar with how it was timetabled, which suggests very little collaboration between herself and the teachers. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how she could report being confident that "Aistear was working very well" as part of the classroom and that play was a large part of this.

As noted in the literature, what teachers describe in relation to their pedagogical approach does not always match with their practice, and there was a gap between what the teachers said about their pedagogical style and the practices I observed in their classrooms (Gray & Ryan, 2016; O Donoghue, 2016; Hunter & Walsh, 2013). This is an issue, and evidence that curricular change cannot be assumed to have taken place on the basis of what teachers say they are doing. Moreover, the findings highlight the need for a collaborative reflective space that allows for examples of practice to be explored and elucidated in relation to the principles and methodological approaches set out by the new primary language curriculum and Aistear.

P(A) was asked in what way the teachers were supported to enact a play-based child-centred pedagogy. In her reply, the focus of support was in relation to materials, in particular toys, rather than opportunities for collaborative debate, discussions and reflection:

I'd say very much supported. There is never any issue around a teacher coming and saying, "I need a bit more of this, I need more of this material", there's no questions asked. I know in some schools it'd be "do you not have enough toys" but there's not, we don't see them as toys, they're materials and there's no argument or discussion around "is it of any use". We absolutely know it is, we appreciate the importance of play and I think the teachers feel supported in that, and there's never any question around the amount of resources they need. If they're looking for it they get it.

P(A)

P(A) talked about the need for children to know how to play together, particularly to support their social development. She suggested that an increase in electronic games had left children with poor social skills and because of this, the focus of the “play” for the teacher needed to be on developing the children’s social skills rather than other types of learning that the teacher may feel appropriate:

It is probably the only traditional play that they're doing in groups together where there's the whole social aspect of it as well, where they're actually playing together. My own opinion would be that we could possibly do more of it and maybe should do more of it, it all comes back to this whole screen time or social media, it's taken away all of these social skills.

P(A)

4.13 Theme 4: Challenges to Enacting a New Primary Language Curriculum (School A)

As noted in the literature review, introducing curriculum reform is complex. Li et al., (2011) and Lieber et al., (2009) argue that when introducing curriculum reform there is a need to take into account the availability of support from colleagues and administrators, the availability of effective professional development programmes, and the reform's cultural and contextual fit. Understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed in the classroom requires an understanding of the challenges teachers may have in implementing policy changes.

T1(A) spoke about the challenges she faced in the classroom in relation to children who had English as an additional language (EAL). She referred to a boy who was very shy and quiet and whose first language was not English; and her description reflected a pedagogical approach that was neither child-centred nor inclusive:

Like that little boy now who has very little English. I know myself he does go under the radar a little bit ...he is so quiet, and he slots in. He copies the others a lot ... he has kind of got familiar with routines and all that so like he is no bother at all, but I know like I need to spend more time with him. I know he needs more than he is getting... but he is doing great considering he has no English. He is picking up words and he is getting familiar with the routines and I suppose at this stage that's all you can really hope for.

T1(A)

During the classroom observations T1(A) pedagogical approach was didactic. She explained that there was little opportunity for the children to participate in collaborative learning and that most of the learning needed to be led by her as there were very clear objectives that she needed to reach by the end of the school year. T2(A) found that fostering the children's social skills was difficult and a challenge, she described how some of the children mix from day one but more children find it very difficult. T2(A) was asked if she felt it was difficult to engage with the individuality of the children in the class. She replied that this was something she found difficult in a class of twenty-one children and that "it is hard to listen to everyone's news or listen to all their concerns". She highlighted the challenges she faced in relation to children with EAL:

I think like I have had junior infants a couple of years, you just spend your whole day teaching English and language, even in maths like the language of maths you are just all-day teaching English...I find that sometimes the children's language levels vary, so some of the children, particularly the EAL, find it very difficult to adapt all the vocabulary that has to do with an 'Aistear Station or an area'. It is hard to stimulate a lot of oral language especially when they don't understand as much as the other children.

T2(A)

4.13.1 P(A)'s Perspective: Challenges to Enacting the New primary Language Curriculum

A key purpose of this study was to establish a basis for understanding how curriculum changes are enacted and managed on the ground in relation to other contextual dimensions, and to develop a model of practice that supports primary school teachers to implement Aistear within a new primary language curriculum. Braun et al., (2011, p. 591) argue that professional contexts include "teachers' values, commitments, and experiences, and policy management in schools". Additionally, Clarke and O' Donoghue (2016, p. 175) posit that "It is not possible to separate considerations of material contexts from the dynamics of the external contexts, which are instrumental in generating pressures as well as supports for schools". These contexts, they argue, include inspectors' reports, legal requirements and responsibilities. In her discussion on curriculum, P(A) spoke about the pressures experienced in relation to the implementation of the new language curriculum, pointing to difficulties for the staff in understanding the language used in the curriculum document, which she described as a "book".

P(A) explained that the class learning plans start from the "primary curriculum" and that, within each school, the teachers are expected to work from the primary curriculum plans drawn up by the individual post-holders within each school. She described how there was scope for the teachers to choose what songs or poems they might like to use within their class plans. She talked about how the teachers could put forward new suggestions but highlighted that any suggestions would need to sit within the "curriculum plan". Such an approach restricts a process of collaboration to facilitate change, reflection or debate:

I suppose its reminders and just touching base because...you can come up with great ideas and sometimes you have to be reined in, it is a good idea, but we can't just decide and go off on our own little trips, you know?

P(A)

During the interview, it was noted that P(A) regularly made reference to the curriculum as being the priority. There was no reference to Aistear in relation to planning the curriculum. This separation of curriculum and Aistear was consistent amongst all the study participants:

In the classrooms they have their own ways of doing things, but they have to do things that are benefiting the children on an equal level. I don't think teachers feel that they have to.... they would plan together but if a teacher said, "I'm not going to do that song, I like this one", you know, there's freedom when it comes to that. Like you wouldn't knock a good idea, it's more the curriculum, if it fits into the curriculum... if you've a framework and a plan and this is what we're going to cover in junior and senior infants. Teachers will come up with brilliant ideas and might try them, but once it isn't affecting what is being taught in the curriculum in the sense that then it's a little bit of an issue.

Going back to the '99 curriculum, the 'curriculum books' were full of very impressive jargon and terminologies, but people didn't understand what it was. It seems to be similar here, 'the book' is very, very good but you could condense it down to maybe ten pages.

P(A)

P(A) described the teachers' initial response or reaction to the new language curriculum and then how they are trying to 'break it down':

We had two days and we were lucky that two staff members went. We got the whole philosophical approach to how it should be taught which was a bit "oh this isn't as easy as we thought". So, we're back now to where we had another half day in school where there's a group got together and they're going to break it down again.

P(A)

P(A) described how the teachers felt they were already "doing" a lot of what was suggested in the new primary language curriculum. However, she also highlighted that there were concerns which indicated that the teachers were still unclear as to how they would implement the changes and explained that there was a bit of agitation about the oral language.

...we need more than a year to implement it in the school and get it running. The key thing is not so much as 'we're doing a lot of it', its teachers are 'where do I start, if I get my 20 children, what do I actually do?' That's what we want to know and that's what we're focusing on.

P(A)

P(A) explained that the new language curriculum is just a guide which gives no information for the teachers as to how to include it in their planning:

We are going to start, teachers know what they have to do. In September they'll be ready to plot their milestones and get to where the majority of the class is, and how they're going to move it on where kids are behind, how to improve that, and the couple that are ahead, and that's really it then.

P(A)

P(A)'s discussion of how the teachers would enact the new primary language curriculum returned again to her concern regarding plotting the children's learning as a priority. She talked very positively about the last training day that they had had in the school to support literacy and numeracy. Her description of the training represented a very didactic approach where the trainer emphasised the need to "demand precision" from the child:

While we would have been a little bit shy about not drawing attention to the fact that the child's grammar isn't right, but no the trainer was saying: "no, from the word go demand that precision, demand the correct grammar and get the children confident in saying it, if they can't say it they can't write it" and that's where we are at the moment.

P(A)

P(A) did not anticipate that there would be too much difference in the new primary language curriculum. She welcomed the literacy approach validated by the training consultant which she linked to her understanding of the new primary language curriculum:

It's hugely linked in with the curriculum, I don't see it that there's a big gap. I just think the challenge is to just merge what we're doing and what we're being asked to do and to see what we're doing already anyway.

P(A)

In her discussion she gave no indication that there would be a need for much change. She made a reference to how the teachers continue to use their checklist format in assessing the children's skills, highlighted a developmentally appropriate practice where children are assessed from a deficit model by identifying what they have not yet achieved:

At Christmas time the teachers would work towards literacy and numeracy checklist, so they would kind of be bound by them... it would be there in the background that they would be trying to cover those skills, but there would be a little bit of scope and flexibility as to how they would do that.

P(A)

Like T1(A) and T2(A), P(A) also discussed how children with EAL posed a challenge for the school and explained how, as a DEIS school, they received funding to promote challenges that they faced in literacy and numeracy:

The last couple of years has been a particular challenge. We currently have eight children in junior infants who are EAL children. Identifying where your class is at can be a challenge for teachers because now there's a lot of needs, particularly in oral language. Children coming in who don't have English or speak in Latvian at home but are playing with children from Nigeria, there are all of these things we are trying to tease out when they come in initially. Now that's not a problem, it's an issue.

P(A)

P(A) outlined the support the EAL children receive:

Because we are a DEIS school we have a ratio of 1:21 as opposed to the national standard of 1:29. We have three support teachers between junior and senior infant classes. So, the support teacher would be in with a class for half a day...it is really valuable. The emphasis in our school would be very much on oral work in infants and certainly in junior/infants they wouldn't be reading, they wouldn't be doing any formal writing.

P(A)

P(A) seemed to have a more optimistic and positive view of the EAL children's experiences than the teachers who worked with them on a daily basis did:

What we are seeing is that after two years the EAL children have the language, unless there is an impairment there as well. Generally, we find they are immersed in it and they have that extra support ...by the time they reach first class (their third year in school, aged 7) they have the language and it is not an issue anymore.

P(A)

Fullan (1982), argues that in introducing change there is a need to understand the needs of those implementing the change. Moreover, he argues that there is a critical need to pay attention to culture, and to adopt participatory, bottom-up processes that hear the views of all stakeholders. P(A) discussed how the teachers are supported in meeting new challenges and that it is not something that comes up very often. Her understanding was that there was in place a spirit of collegiality where the teachers work together, a process enhanced by the fact that their classrooms were all connected. Supporting curriculum change requires a process of engagement with “all the actors” (Braun et al., 2011) which includes principals. In P(A)’s discussion she did not include herself as part of the collegial spirit of the school. Throughout her narrative she talked about not being in touch with what T1(A) and T2(A) are doing in the classroom, particularly in relation to Aistear. Such a lack of awareness does not give way to a supportive and collaborative approach:

I can't speak on their behalf, but I would hope that they would feel supported. If they have an issue that they want formally brought to my attention ... they'd have the opportunity to do that through the year head and the year head would come and either talk to me or bring it up at the year head meeting. But to be honest that doesn't happen very often. I suppose there's a very good support mechanism between them because all the junior and senior infants are in a row so most of the doors are inter-connected, so the doors are open, people are talking, people are communicating and sharing ideas. It's a long time since I taught in infants but that would be my memory, that there's a lot of collegiality and a lot of discussion.

P(A)

4.14 Findings from School B

This section presents the findings in relation to school B. The teachers and principal of school B are presented as Teacher T3(B), T4(B), and P(B). The findings for school B are presented under the same four themes: pedagogy; curriculum; understanding of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting the new primary curriculum.

4.14.1 Theme 1: Pedagogy (School B)

T3(B)'s Classroom

T3(B)'s classroom was organised into four clusters of tables, each cluster accommodated up to five children:



Figure 17: T3(B)'s Classroom

T3(B)'s classroom was organised, warm and bright. Her desk was set at the front of the room in the right-hand corner. Most of the equipment materials were at child level. The windows were on one wall and were clear for the children to see out. There were lots of educational posters on the wall. The room had a quiet corner with cushions and a rug, this space also served as a library area where the children could go and read during play time:



Figure 18: T3(B)'s Quiet Area

All of the play during ‘Aistear Time’ took place either at the tables or around the tables, with one corner of the classroom given over to the Aistear monthly theme.

4.14.2 T3(B)’s Pedagogical Approach

T3(B) was asked about her pedagogical approach and understanding of how children learn. She responded that children learn when they are “interested” and when there is something that “catches their eye”. She explained that children learn through “active learning and visual learning” and described an understanding of ECE as something that should involve interactions between the teacher and the child:

It is not the traditional teacher talks and they listen, but active learning and visuals are really important... When you give them a chance to engage with you in an interaction, to ask questions, to contribute. I don't think it is just that they learn from the teacher, I think they learn a lot from each other as well, from engaging with each other.

T3(B)

T3(B) provided an account on her understanding of the term ‘child-centred approach to ECE’, her description was detailed as she talked about placing the child’s interests and needs at the centre of her pedagogical approach; her definition aligned with a rights-based pedagogical approach to ECE:

I suppose like there are different aspects, there is the aspect like that when you make decisions it is what is best for the child, not what is what is best for the adults. It is how is the child going to be helped? How is the child going to learn the most? I think child- centeredness is about finding out about the children in your class and going with their interests and their needs, and catering for that as well, that they are at the centre of it and that their needs are catered for.

T3(B)

T3(B) described her role as an ECE teacher as an organiser. In line with Aistear, she described a holistic pedagogical approach. She talked about how she felt that listening to children was important. She described a pedagogical approach that is child-led and understands children as having a right to be listened to:

You know really listening to the kids so you can catch things, and going with the conversations, so like, you know, today we were doing Autumn, and I said ok right at the weekend what did you see? And one of the girls was talking about going to her Nannie's house and building a pile of leaves – so then we were doing a song, so we sang a song about the pile of leaves.

T3(B)

4.14.3 T4(B)'s Classroom

T4(B)'s Classroom was set up very similar to that of T3(B). It was a warm and bright well-organised room:



Figure 19: T4(B)'s Classroom Layout with Four Areas Grouped Together

The children were very calm. The tables were set out in groups of four with each group given a name. In a similar way to T3(B)'s room, there were up to five children in each group. T4(B)'s desk was set at the front of the room in the left-hand corner. Most of the materials and equipment were at child level. The windows were on one side of the wall and were clear for the children to see out. There were lots of colourful posters on the wall. T4(B)'s room did not have a designated quiet corner but it did have an area which served as a library where the children could go and read during play time. Again, in a similar way to T3(B)'s classroom, all of the play during 'Aistear Time' took place either at the tables or around the tables, with one corner of the classroom given over to the Aistear theme which the teachers planned each month.

4.14.4 T4(B)'s Pedagogical Approach

I asked T4(B) to talk about her pedagogical approach and understanding of how children learn. She talked about the children needing to be active and how she integrates the children's subject learning rather than separating out the different curriculum areas. Although Aistear was not mentioned, she described a pedagogical approach that aligned with Aistear's framework of subject integration:

I always try to get the children actively involved as much as possible. That can be hard depending what you are doing, but that would be in the ideal day, as much as possible all-day long. Teaching through topic-based learning and stuff like, it kind of means that you are managing to get through the curriculum. You are pulling in things that if you were just doing a history lesson or just doing a science lesson you might not get a chance to touch on, and I think it is a much more natural way to learn.

T4(B)

T4(B) discussed how she enjoyed integrating the subjects, which she referred to as "topic theme", and the importance of developing the children's resilience:

I love the kind of topic theme way of teaching, and you can get the social skills in as well, all that sort of stuff. I think for me, one of the really important things that I always concentrate on when I am teaching is resilience. I think that it is so important. As a teacher ... I love mistakes, make more mistakes, because people are afraid to fail, and you are never going to become more than what you can be while you are afraid.

T4(B)

4.14.5 P(B)'s Pedagogical Approach

Throughout P(B)'s discussion, she spoke about the importance of children's rights and their right to play. Her focus was firmly fixed on the critical role of play and the rights of the child:

Play is important for them for their learning....so they are five hours in the classroom and forty minutes outside and a huge amount of learning goes on out there. A lot of life skills are honed out there in that playground. Play is really important, whether it is in the classroom or in the yard. We do play, and human rights, and the children's rights are really important, so we talk to the children about their right to play.

P(B)

P(B) talked about a scheme they have in place called 'Friendship Friday'. The idea came from the older children who were part of the student council. The children felt that they never got to play with their siblings or their cousins during break because the yard is divided up into 'junior yard' and 'senior yard'. P(B) took the school council's concern on board and the concept of 'Friendship Friday' was established, whereby siblings could play together. P(B) gave another example of the children being listened to. She explained that the children in the senior classes (aged 11-12 years) asked if they could have mirrors in the school bathrooms so that they could fix their hair or check that they had not got paint on their faces after art class. P(B) spoke about the request with the teachers and the board of management and the decision to install mirrors was agreed. It was interesting to note that the children from the ECE classes are not part of the student council. P(B) explained that the junior classes are visited by the class representatives and told what is going on. While P(B) promotes a child's rights-based approach, this did not extend to the ECE classroom. P(B) also spoke about the school's ethical education programme:

Each week we have a learning together theme, which is values-based. Some of them at face value, when you read them, might seem quite old fashioned but then we're teaching them the life skills. We would have things like good manners, courtesy, good listening, all that kind of thing. Our approach would be never do anything for them that they can do for themselves, and that would be something we would talk to parents about before the children even start. We involve the children in making announcements over the school intercom system rather than adults always doing it and the children love it.

P(B)

Like P(A), P(B) identified the importance of the role of the ECE teacher and emphasised that the need to find the right teacher was crucial.

4.15 School B's Pedagogical Approach as Evidenced from their DEIS School Plan

As highlighted earlier, the DEIS school plan sets out the individual target plan that each school will implement across: literacy, numeracy, attendance, parents and outside agencies. The plan relates to the whole school which includes all classes for children from junior infants (aged four) to senior class (aged 11 to 12). The findings from the data analysis of the DEIS school plan for School B highlight that the school placed a strong focus on the literacy and numeracy development for the children in junior infants. There was also a focus on involving parents in supporting their children's learning through running supportive workshops on literacy and numeracy. Like school A, the section on the attendance plan addressed the need to reward all classes, including junior and senior infants, for individual one-hundred percent attendance, with a prize awarded to the children with best attendance and their photograph and name displayed in the school hall.

4.16 School B's Pedagogical Approach as Evidenced from the Website

The analysis of School B's web page highlighted a friendly, welcoming and children's rights-based approach to education. Such an approach is linked to the ethos of the school:

We have endeavoured to guarantee that every child's self-esteem, personality, and belief system, regardless of their social, cultural or ethnic background are respected, nurtured and celebrated. The principle of equality of access and esteem is at the foundation of every Educate Together school and is reflected daily in our school ethos and atmosphere... We endeavour to create a happy and safe environment in which children learn and play inclusively. The School aims to create a warm and stimulating environment so that each child may work towards realising his/her highest potential. We believe in a child-centred curriculum. We strive to meet the needs of each child so that they can achieve their full potential: academically, emotionally and socially. Parents, children and teachers are on first name terms, which creates a relaxed and informal atmosphere for everyone. In co-operation with parents, the school will work to instil feelings of self-confidence, self-awareness and self-respect in the children. Within the parameters of the Primary curriculum we are committed to developing and fostering a life-long love of learning in each child, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, creativity and fun.

School B's Website

The website provided detailed information on Aistear, describing it as an initiative:

Initiatives such as Maths Recovery, Reading Recovery, Team Teaching, Aistear, Student Council and much more are all running successfully in the school.

Aistear is also described as a framework:

Teachers plan for play to enable the children's learning using 'Aistear' as a curriculum framework for children from birth to 6 years in Ireland.

School B's Website

The section on Aistear focuses on the importance of play in children's learning and development:

Play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development. Through relationships in play, children develop and demonstrate improved verbal communication and high levels of social and interaction skills. The creative use of play materials supports imaginative thinking and problem-solving capacities.

School B's Website

A detailed description of how the teachers implement Aistear is provided on School B's website. The description supports a pedagogy that is child-centred and emerges from the children's interests. It also describes how the teacher engages with the children and assesses their learning during their play by making notes:

In Aistear the teacher provides rich environments where the children are able to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with a variety of real life and diverse materials. Children ask questions, make predictions and develop their thinking. They learn together with others. The environment offers opportunities to actively explore, to work independently and with others, to make decisions and follow through on their ideas, to solve problems, to engage in real life activities and to experience co-operative, symbolic, dramatic or pretend play.

The role of the teacher while the children are playing is very important. We participate in the play; sometimes the teacher is 'in role' in the dramatic area; we role model specific language; ask questions; monitor the play; observe the children and document their play through notes or photos. The teacher gathers evidence of the children's learning.

Aistear' recommends an hour of play each day. Children plan together in a 'huddle' (5 mins); play (40 - 45mins); tidy up (5 - 10 mins); review their play (5 - 10mins).

Organising Play: We have 5 groups of 5/6 children; we have a rota to change areas for play each day; we provide various types of play activities (e.g. role-play, construction, junk art, creative, small world, sand / water, jigsaws, play dough, listening / writing area). Reviewing play: Review happens daily via 'show and tell'; discussing the photographs of their play; groups discussing what worked well / any difficulties they experienced; and via interviews with children.

School B's Website

The website provides a list of topics that the children in the class have covered during 'Aistear Time' and provides examples:

This year classes have covered the topics of Home, School, the Café, Our Community, shops (Bakers, Butchers), Doctor, Dentist, Hospital, Food shops, Clothes shop, Chinese New Year and Travel Agents. We have many more exciting topics to cover in the coming months.

School B's Website

4.17 Theme 2: Curriculum (School B)

As already noted, in this study curriculum is understood to mean: addressing the totality of the child's learning and development (NCCA, 2001).

4.17.1 T3(B)'s Understanding of Curriculum

T3(B) was asked how she divided the curriculum between child-initiated activities and teacher-directed activities. During the discussion she talked about how, through the planning of Aistear, the curriculum subjects are interrelated. This, she suggested, reduced the pressure to get everything covered in a particular day or week as she can return to the topic:

Because we are both [relating to herself and T4(B)] junior infant teachers, we are partner teachers and we plan together. So, we have to have fortnightly plans which are our short-term plan, but we have to have long term plans as well. We do it termly, so we have September to December planned, very kind of broadly because obviously things kind of change as you go along so you don't want to be too specific...so, we would have say our themes for Aistear planned out for each, we do three weeks of each topic... in December we will probably plan January, February March and then probably run up to April and then Easter you use the curriculum – the one that is for all the subjects is the 1999, so we would use that one to inform the planning and then you plan your short term and long term.

T3(B)

T3(B) spoke about the need to have her plans in place and that once this was done, she had to trust that the children are learning through play:

I have my fortnightly plan. Then every day I would have it written out on my desk what I am doing and the times that I am doing everything, and then they are all kind of related to the topic. I suppose it is whatever happens and the conversations that happen and go with it. Then you have play time so there is huge initiation for the kids in that you are not even going to get to them all. They are at their stations, they stay there, but you just have to trust the play and that they are learning through that.

At the moment we are doing 'Home' and we are doing 'Autumn' and assembly topic, so everything is kind of related back to that. I don't really go subject by subject, even though I have my timetable and I make sure I am tapping all the subjects. It is kind of more topic related. I used to be like 'oh my God, you have to get this and this done', but now I would be more like 'oh, ok, it is ok if I don't get everything done once there is learning going on.

T3(B)

T3(B) was asked to talk a little more about what 'assembly topic' was:

So, every week we have like a kind of moral or equality or justice theme linked to our ethical education. This last few weeks we have just been about the 'Golden Rules', so this week we are doing 'be nice to staff and other visitors that come to the school'. So, I would teach them about that and then read them a story or talk about it, and all through the day I would make links to the theme if I observed an example that linked well. So, you know, it is just like catching the opportunities, they are way more meaningful for the kids at this age, at any age, when they just kind of happen and you can talk about them then and there.

T3(B)



Figure 20: T3(B)'s Golden Rules of the Classroom

4.17.2 T4(B)'s Understanding of Curriculum

When T4(B) was asked how she divided the curriculum between child-initiated activities and teacher-directed activities, she pointed to the need to adopt an approach to learning that was child-centred and supported the emerging interests of the children:

I try to teach it in lots of different ways. The child's experience is at the centre of it... that it is not just 'talk and chalk', that the child is getting to experience the learning and being part of it. So, if it is child centred then it is what their interests are and what they are drawn to, whether it is art or whatever, it is kind of maybe brought into it. That you are thinking about the different children and their different strengths in your teaching and learning.

T4(B)

T4(B) talked about the importance of planning to make sure all areas of the curriculum are covered. She highlighted the need to keep to the themed topic and integrate the different subjects within the topic. She used the term “ad hoc” to reiterate her point about “the need to keep to topic”:

You organise the day and you make sure it is all running smoothly, you make sure they are getting all aspects of the curriculum, so you have the plans to make so that it is not just ad hoc learning, so that there is a focus to it, that things are integrating together, and that you are not teaching lots of different topics, but that your topic is spreading across the curriculum, especially for young children, because I think that is how they learn the best.

T4(B)

4.18 Theme 3: Understandings of Aistear and the Role of Play (School B)

During the classroom observations I noted that Aistear was something that was carried out as a separate “block” during the day. Both T3(B) and T4(B) discussed how they “used” Aistear in their day. Like T1(A) and T2(A), T3(B) and T4(B)'s classroom had four areas which they referred to as “stations”.



Figure 21: T3(B)'s Aistear Shopping Station

On the day the classroom observations were carried out, T3(B)'s theme was 'the shop' and T4(B)'s theme was 'Airports'. Figure 21 (above) and Figure 22 (below) show how T3(B) and T4(B) set out their Aistear themed stations in their classroom.



Figure 22: T4(B)'s Aistear Airport Station

Aistear promotes a child-led approach which includes the opportunity for children to choose their play. T3(B) commented that she found it difficult to give the children a choice during ‘Aistear Time’. She spoke about having to “trust that the children are learning during their play”. However, later in the discussion she talked about how the children did not get to choose which ‘station’ they went to at ‘Aistear hour’. T3(B) explained that she plans a rota for the children and that if she allowed the children choose that the boys would stay playing with the blocks, implying that ‘playing with blocks’ is not a sufficient learning experience:

I always kind of struggle with Aistear with the playtime aspect of it, like I have them on a rota, so they move every day and they do have to stay at that station. I know that what you are really supposed to do is let them choose everyday where they play. But then I find, when I let them choose where they want to play every day, I find that boys especially will go to blocks every single day and they won't go anywhere else and like there will be three or four days of blocks.

T3(B)

A serious concern for T3(B) related to a sense of conflict between the concept of allowing the children choice and the obligation to cover the curriculum. She discussed how, in her experience, allowing the children choice could lead to aspects of the curriculum being left out, in particular, art. This is in contrast to how she described integrating the subjects earlier in her narrative. It is worth noting that the only time T3(B) could find for art or drama was during the “Aistear hour”:

I find, we are trying to get the curriculum covered but if they never go to ‘the creative station’ how are they doing Art, because I only do art in playtime, I don't do it at any other time of the day, unless it is like looking or responding to a picture. The actual art lesson is playtime, drama is playtime. So, if they don't get to ‘that station’ then how can I say I am getting the curriculum covered with them? ...you know, even though I know the idea is they choose themselves where they play and if they don't like somewhere, they can go somewhere else... I find that hard.

T3(B)



Figure 23: T3(B)'s Aistear Creative Junk Art and Construction Stations

T3(B) explained that while the children were playing, she did not consider that the type of playing was providing learning opportunities that related to the curriculum which she felt under pressure to cover. This is an important context to understand in relation to supporting primary school teachers to implement Aistear within a new primary language curriculum:

Even though they are playing, and they might make a little ramp or something, but it is all about the cars, so those kinds of aspects I find hard in terms of trying to get the curriculum covered. You know they can just have any choice they want, and I get that, but then again with the construction, all they were doing was getting cars and playing with the cars, they weren't building anything. They might get a block because I would like say 'you have to build, and like run the car up and down it' but then they are not developing their building and motor skills in that way.

T3(B)

T4(B) described Aistear in a highly confident manner, she spoke about how she plans Aistear to be integrated into other curriculum areas rather than separated out. Such an approach is in line with how the new primary language curriculum is aligned with Aistear. However, when talking about the table top games the children did, T4(B) considered these to be play, which indicates a teacher-led pedagogy of play:

The first hour of the day is the playtime, but Aistear does run through other subjects throughout the day to try and make it playful and fun. So, when we have literacy or numeracy, some of that would be Aistear because we would have games that we would be playing or something like that, so it would be more the kind of table top games, those kinds of elements.

T4(B)

T4(B) referred to Aistear as a curriculum and spoke about the different types of play afforded to the children during the rest of the day:

You know in the Aistear curriculum, there is like role play, socio-dramatic play, creative play, gross motor whatever but then it has games with rules. So during playtime we wouldn't tend to have the games with rules, but during maths teaching or anything like that we would have the games with rules that they would play by themselves, once they have been taught the game, so in that way it comes into it. So, the topic then runs through everything we are doing, so all the books and everything like that.

T4(B)



Figure 24: T4(B)'s Aistear Creative Junk Art

T4(B) talked enthusiastically about how she found the play element of Aistear offered great opportunities for collaborative play:

That is the brilliant thing about playtime, you have got so much scope, you know, to get on the same level as the child and to join in with them playing and to get to know them and, you know, spend time with them.

T4(B)

T4(B) talked about how play time provided opportunities to observe the children, particularly in relation to their learning and development across a number of areas. She spoke about play time being a time in which you can assess the individual needs of the child:

There are always the kids that take up all of your time. Then there are the kids that don't say anything all day, and then at the end of the day you are like 'oh Janey mack' whereas during playtime you have the chance to get to everybody. To spend specific time with those children you know don't get a look in in the other parts of the day... I think that during playtime it is definitely a time that the individual within the child is able to come out, and that you can get to know and see, and you can see what their strengths are, if they are really artistic, or maybe if they are more kind of social or that you know have they got great spacial awareness, you know you can see all of those things coming out during playtime. But during the rest of the day you would see it in some ways, you know but as I said there is always the children who are just maybe a bit shy or don't get a look in with the big personalities.

T4(B)

4.18.1 P(B)'s Understanding of Aistear and the Role of Play

P(B) began her discussion about Aistear with the revelation that when she first graduated in 1984, she was doing something very similar to Aistear. She spoke about Aistear as a “programme” and discussed how she herself took part in an Aistear information session for principals. Following from that, a couple of the ECE teachers took part in a course and asked if they could “try out Aistear in their classes”. P(B) talked about Aistear in a knowledgeable and informed way. She praised Aistear as “a wonderful way of developing the children’s vocabulary and language skills”, adding that they were keen that the “Aistear approach” would be used throughout the school. She spoke about the importance of the adult to desist from directing the children’s play:

I taught junior infants many times myself and, you know, in some ways they talk about Aistear as though it's some new amazing thing – I was doing it 33 years ago. It just wasn't called Aistear, we were doing that in huge classes, you know, classes of 40 to 42 children. It was very similar with play corners, sand and water, and dressing up. Different obviously but the idea was the same. They are the ones [the children] that are directing it, you don't direct the play or activities, but you are I suppose enriching it, and guiding it along without interfering with it in any way. You are getting in there and encouraging the conversation, making sure each child is involved. If there is a child that's very quiet, you just encourage them in and make sure that nobody is isolated. It is wonderful to see and it's amazing to see how the children take it on and get into that routine.

P(B)

P(B) talked about Aistear as 'an approach' and described her role as an enabler of Aistear:

There is a huge amount of planning time and paperwork and gathering resources for Aistear, the teachers meet together ... I see them here in the evenings, they're meeting, planning, coordinating resources and gathering the bits. A lot of my role would be enabling the teachers, so if they need stuff, I have the credit card, or I go and do the 'principal's Aistear thing' and make sure the teachers all get their courses, you know, that kind of thing, so I'm more about enabling and facilitating.

P(B)

Later in the discussion P(B) described Aistear more in line with a framework when she talked about how the "beauty" of Aistear was that it can integrate so many subjects and that's what the teachers were doing:

So, under the theme they're integrating subjects, it could be history and geography, social, personal and health education (SPHE). There are so many things you can cover under the umbrella of Aistear, which is great.

P(B)

4.19 Theme 4: Challenges to Enacting a New Primary Language Curriculum (School B)

Both T3(B) and T4(B) had attended a one-day training workshop in relation to the new primary language curriculum. At the time of this study, they were working to the primary curriculum (1999). They both spoke about the challenges they faced. Similar to T1(A) and T2(A), T3(B) talked about the challenges she faces in relation to meeting the individual needs of all of the children in the classroom. This dilemma points to a contextual factor that needs to be understood in supporting teachers to implement Aistear within a new primary language curriculum:

You can't be the same for everybody, and they all need different things and there is different ways you need to be throughout the day, it is very tiring.

T3(B)

T3(B) explained that, in her view, it was more important that the children know how to take off their coats rather than know their letter sounds. She also spoke about how she would like the children to have more individual choice:

I suppose the library and the writing table, that's the only time they would have choice. We are doing three weeks cycle of a theme topic. I am hoping that once they are 'trained in' and they are very comfortable that the third week would be a choice week.

T3(B)

While the children had minimal choice, T3(B) spoke about a system that she would like to eventually have in place, a system that she had tried previously. She explained that the system allowed the children some choice in their play and would not take up too much of her time. She spoke about how she allowed the children to go to the reading area if they were finished with whatever they were doing during the play time and this again provided some choice:

Aistear is meant to be a bit freer than you are able to have in the classroom situation like this. So that is the way I try to kind of bring that choice element into it.

T3(B)

T3(B) continued to discuss the challenges of free play and choice:

It is so hard, I wish I could do more, and I mean I try to. If something comes up in a discussion, I try to kind of go with it, but you are always pulled back by what you have to get done. I would love to be able to go: 'come on everyone, we're going on a big walk' but it is just not possible.

T3(B)

T4(B) suggested that because the class was a big class, the children needed to learn to develop independence and routine at the start of the year. She talked about a child who had been absent for the first four weeks of September and so had missed out on learning the routines:

So, all the time that I had given to that, I can't go back, I don't have that time anymore to give to them, so they really missed out.

T4(B)

Due to time pressures, T4(B) said she was not able to cover what the child had missed out on, thus further highlighting the pressure teachers can feel to ensure they complete the curriculum objectives, and the need they feel to have to keep moving forward. It raises the issue too of the rights of all children to have equal opportunities and support in their education. She spoke about the pressure to try to 'fit in as much as you can':

There are a million and one things. You can have ideals that are hard to hit at every moment of the day, but you can try to fit in as much as you can. By having the child at the centre of your teaching and having child-centred learning, that is going to happen hopefully 80% of the time.

T4(B)

The need to understand what Ball et al., (2012) refer to as the "messy realities" of school policy was highlighted when T4(B) spoke about the beginning of the school year when there were times she felt that she was simply "crowd controlling". She said she found it difficult to stay out of the children's play at this early stage as she felt pressure to develop the language skills of the children with EAL:

So, like they are learning, and they are active, but myself I am like, I'm kind of thinking – 'oh but I need to get in there and teach them the vocab', especially with all the EAL kids.

T4(B)

Although T4(B) acknowledged that it was difficult to stand back from the children's play, she did talk about the advantages she had experienced when she did stand back:

The children are there playing with you but then when you step away you go: 'gosh that child is interacting with nobody', all he has done is put a hat and a jacket on for the whole time. It teaches you those things that you wouldn't know. So, it is really important, but it is just making myself do it.

T4(B)

T4(B) identified a further contextual challenge in relation to children with additional needs (AN). While children with additional needs are allocated a special needs assistant (SNA) at the beginning of the year, there are some children who would not be assessed in time for the start of the school year and therefore do not have that additional support in the class. T4(B) provided an example of one such child:

There is a boy in my class and he just could not stay in his seat and he was not following anything. He comes in each morning and doesn't sit in his chair, he doesn't know what to do, he is just not coping in relation to what is going on around him. Just this morning I was thinking what am I going to do, he has no support, he needs support and intervention like the other children with additional needs but when am I going to get that done? Who is going to apply for them? And when are we going to get time to get that ready?

T4(B)

P(B) highlighted a further challenge for the teachers relating to the design and space in the classrooms. This was not something that the teachers raised but, as highlighted earlier, the space within which teachers teach reflects, to some extent, their pedagogical approach. This is an important contextual factor. P(B) talked about how the teachers need to be creative in the designing of spaces for things like library shelves and creating little corners for reading. She gave an illustration of where there is a space at the back of the room where there were computers that the children were not really using and the teachers asked if that space could be redeveloped for Aistear. She also spoke about how, during the construction of the school building, a request to have the classroom doors opening into the garden was refused and, as the building was built to a plan, it was not possible to add anything on at that stage of building. A challenge P(B) raised was in relation to the timetabling of the curriculum (1999), suggesting that the new primary language curriculum would be easier for the teachers to implement:

The timetable [of the curriculum 1999] can be tricky, because the curriculum is huge, it is so packed, at the moment it says you spend so much time on 'X' and so many minutes on 'Y' and it can all be a bit daunting for teachers, especially if they are new or younger teachers, how do you fit everything in?

P(B)

P(B) raised the issue of a lack of support for the teachers from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) inspectors:

You would just like them to maybe come in and tell us we are doing a good job here and encourage us. The teachers here are so enthusiastic, they just love the kids and they are so child-centred themselves.

P(B)

The Inspectorate is the division of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) responsible for the evaluation of primary schools. Inspectors also provide advice on a range of educational issues to school communities, policy makers in the DES, and to the wider educational system. All inspectors are teachers, many of whom have also worked as school principals.

Although the new primary language curriculum was set to roll out in 2017, P(B) explained that schools were only "dipping their toes in" and it was all still "very new". She spoke about how long it takes for the DES to get through all of the schools in relation to training, and described how unsatisfactorily new policy changes can often be rolled out:

This is the way the DES starts: the principals are all sent off to do something first, so like a couple of hours in the afternoon we would head off to Dublin West (Training centre) and we get a blast of something. The next step is you have to come back to the school and start talking about this new primary language curriculum. Then the principal plus one goes off to the teacher training, so one of the literacy teachers came with me on a full days training, we got more stuff and a bit more detail. We then had to close the school for a day and deliver a day 'in service training' to the staff. This year we will all get another full day of training from the professional development services for teachers (PDST) where someone will come to the school to do the training.

P(B)

P(B) explained that the initial training was difficult as they were only given an outline of the new primary language curriculum and an overview of the website and the curriculum book. On returning to the school, there was a series of links to informational videos which P(B) described as very patronising:

There was one and we said ‘seriously?’ ... we did very little with that, we ran through it ourselves first and said, ‘we cannot show that one, it is so patronising, we will have a mutiny on our hands if we show that’.

P(B)

P(B) felt that she needed to find the best way to present the new primary language curriculum and that it is hard to get people enthusiastic when they are already overloaded with work, and they were tired as it was the end of the school year:

They are willing to put in the time, but it is time consuming... There is an awful lot going on in schools and an awful lot of new initiatives, and expectations are very high from the powers that be. It is hard. I think the rate of change has speeded up an awful lot, it is just one new thing after the next. It will take time, one bit at a time. It will be fine.

P(B)

P(B) also identified the challenge of children in the school who have (EAL):

Even when they [the children] are born here, they just don’t speak English at home, and they come in with very little English, but then they pick it up very quickly, but they do need a lot of support which is a challenge.

P(B)

4.20 Summary of Findings

This chapter presented an account of the findings arising from the data analysis across all data sets. The findings were presented separately for School A and School B under the four themes that emerged from the final stage of data analysis. These themes were: pedagogy; curriculum; understanding of Aistear and the role of play; and, challenges to enacting the new primary curriculum. It is important to point out that, although these themes were presented separately in this chapter, they are interrelated, and their interrelatedness is addressed in the discussion chapter.

4.20.1 Theme 1: Pedagogy

The findings show that both teachers in school (A) described their pedagogical approach as one that was child-centred, facilitated children's learning and fostered independence. However, the approach that I observed was mainly didactic and teacher-led. In school (B), the teachers described a pedagogical approach that promoted the children being actively involved in their learning, as much as possible. During the observations, the children were indeed actively involved within their table top activities, however, these activities were teacher-led.

P(A) acknowledged the importance of the role of the ECE teacher and the need to assign a "suitable" teacher, that is, one who can communicate well with parents, staff and other agencies. The findings indicate that although she said there were some opportunities for the teachers to work collaboratively, these were limited.

The findings from the websites of both schools promoted a child-centred inclusive pedagogical approach to ECE. However, School B's website presented a more children's rights-based approach to education. School B's DEIS plan placed a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy for the children in ECE which was not evident in School A's plan.

4.20.2 Theme 2: Curriculum

Much of the class time in both School A and School B was attributed to whole class teaching. In both schools the teachers understood Aistear as a discrete subject outside of the curriculum that was enacted as "Aistear Time" through four different "Aistear Stations". Additionally, the findings confirmed that the teachers in both schools followed similar processes in how they engaged the children in "Aistear Time". This was particularly evident in school A where P(A) emphasised the need for all of the ECE teachers to be "singing off the same hymn sheet". The principal's emphasis on uniformity, it could be said, limits individual teachers' options and closes off the possibility of pedagogical change.

The teachers in both schools spoke of the pressure they felt under to cover the curriculum. Both T1(A) and T2(A) suggested that while they would like to provide the children with more choice within the curriculum, this was not possible due to time constraints and pressure to complete the curriculum objectives. While T4(B) described an approach that attuned to the emerging interests of the children, she acknowledged that the pressures to

meet the curriculum objectives meant that her approach to the curriculum was not guided by the children as much as she would have liked.

4.20.3 Theme 3: Understandings of Aistear and the Role of Play

The teachers and principals from School A and School B variously spoke about Aistear as “an approach”, “Aistear Hour”, “Aistear Time”, “a block with a name” and “a programme”. “Aistear Time” was not available to the children every day. The findings highlight a difference in professional development in relation to Aistear across the two schools. While P(A), T1(A) and T2(A) had no training in Aistear, they acknowledged the important role of play in ECE and described how Aistear is integral to the curriculum and supported the integration of subjects and the language development of the children.

In contrast to school (A), P(B), T3(B) and T4(B) had taken part in some Aistear training. T3(B) spoke about how Aistear facilitated the integration of subjects. She explained that without “Aistear Time” there would be no other time to cover subjects like art and drama.

The findings highlight that although T3(B) felt Aistear supported the curriculum, she did not consider the type of play the children engaged in during “Aistear Time” provided learning opportunities that related to the curriculum, and so she found it “hard” to allow the children the freedom to choose their activities. In contrast to T3(B), both P(B) and T4(B) spoke about Aistear in a way that promoted children’s choice. T4(B) described how she plans Aistear to be integrated into other curriculum areas rather than separated out, which she found to be more fun and playful for the children. She talked about how play time provided opportunities to observe the children, particularly in relation to their learning and development and assessing their individual needs.

P(B) spoke about the importance of children’s rights and their right to play. She praised Aistear as a wonderful way of developing the children’s vocabulary and language skills. Both P(A) and P(B) spoke about how the teachers were supported to implement Aistear, but this was from a financial perspective rather than through collaborative processes or leadership.

4.20.4 Theme 4: Challenges to Enacting a New Primary Language Curriculum

The teachers and principals in both schools spoke about the challenges they faced in the classroom in relation to children who had English as an additional language (EAL). T1(A) identified a further challenge regarding finding the time to foster the children’s social

skills and support their individual needs. P(A) spoke about the challenges the staff had in understanding the language used in the new primary language curriculum and found that it was particularly difficult to follow.

P(B) provided a very descriptive account of the very limited training the teachers receive in relation to implementing the new primary language curriculum, accompanied by training videos that were “patronising”, and neither realistic nor helpful. She also commented that the amount of new policies and initiatives coming into schools had increased and that schools were under pressure to implement them.

4.21 Summary of the Development of Conceptual Models

As explained in the methodology chapter, I drew on the works of Braun et al., (2011) and Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) to design a conceptual model that would serve as a heuristic device to underpin and guide the data analysis process. This model, shown as Table 6, is reproduced here for the reader’s convenience:

Table 6: New Conceptual Model of Policy Enactment

Situated Contexts Pedagogy	Material Curriculum	Professional Understanding of Aistear	External Challenges
Classroom	Resources	Knowledge	Leadership
Environment	Planning	Professional	structure
Pedagogical approach	Assessment	development Values and Beliefs	Staff Development Collaborative opportunities

The contextual dimensions: situated, material, professional, and external served well as an analytical tool in the process of data analysis with its various cycles of coding and stages of merging, distilling, reducing and grouping the data into a coherent thematic framework. Over the course of this process, I revised my conceptual model and the data

was re-grouped under three contextual dimensions: pedagogical approach; understanding of Aistear and play; and, leadership, as shown in Table 10:

Table 10: Revised Conceptual Model of Contextual Dimensions

Pedagogical Approach	Understanding of Aistear and Play	Leadership
Classroom Environment	Knowledge	Leadership structure
Resources	Values and Beliefs	Professional
Planning		Development
Assessment		Collaborative opportunities

Table 10 shows how some of the contexts set out in Table 6 were linked together during the process of data analysis, for example the contexts of resources, planning and assessment were placed under pedagogical approach in the new model.

The revised conceptual model of contextual dimensions (Table 10) served as an organising framework for presenting the findings and facilitated the development of a new model designed to serve as a practical tool to support primary school teachers to integrate Aistear (NCCA, 2009) within the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016). This new and original model is shown in Figure 25:

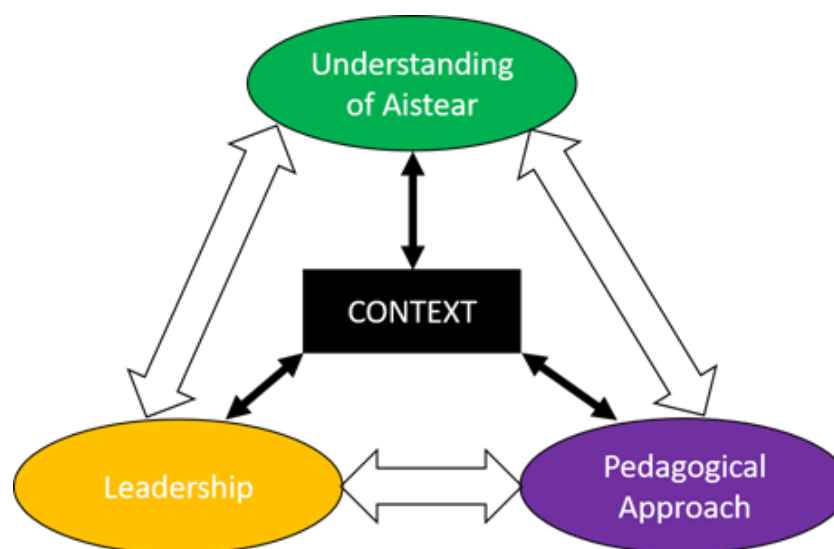


Figure 25: Model of Practice for Teachers in the Integration of Aistear within the New Primary Language Curriculum

The chapter to follow discusses the implications of the research findings and explains how the new model of practice (Figure 25 above) can support teachers to integrate Aistear within the new primary language curriculum.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the implications of the study findings. It addresses how the new model of practice, shown in Figure 25, can support teachers to integrate Aistear within the new primary language curriculum:

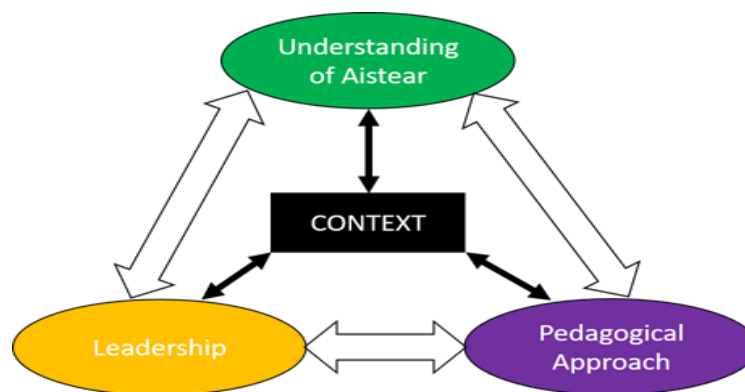


Figure 25: Model of Practice for Teachers in the Integration of Aistear within the New Primary Language Curriculum

As Figure 25 shows, the new model of practice places context at the centre of policy enactment, thus recognising and acknowledging that context affects practice. The model identifies three key contexts that have emerged from the study: teachers' understanding of Aistear and play; pedagogical approach; and, leadership. Each of these contexts, shown in Table 11, are discussed in the sections that follow.

Table 11: Key Contexts that have Emerged from the Study

Understanding of Aistear and Play
Pedagogical Approach
Leadership

5.2 Teachers' Understandings of Aistear and the Role of Play

How Aistear is implemented within the new primary language curriculum differs according to the understandings, beliefs, and practices within ECE and the particular context within which the learning is taking place (Anning et al., 2004; Ball et al., 2011; Dunphy, 2008). The new primary language curriculum presents an important opportunity for teachers to explore how Aistear can support the new curriculum, and how it can impact positively on children's learning experiences. However, it cannot be assumed that the introduction of a new primary language curriculum will bring about a change in teachers' pedagogical approach in relation to Aistear.

The four themes of Aistear: well-being; identity and belonging; communicating; and, exploring and thinking, provide a flexible framework that facilitates the integration of subjects across the curriculum (NCCA, 2009). The findings from this study show a lack of understanding of how the four themes of Aistear frame the primary school curriculum (1999). They also highlight a discourse across both schools that is misaligned with the espoused principles of Aistear. This is critical because the enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum is contingent on how it is understood. Rather than Aistear being understood as a flexible framework, it was understood as something apart from the curriculum that was enacted within an allotted time which the teachers variously referred to as: "Aistear Time"; "Aistear Hour"; "a curriculum"; "a programme"; and "a block with a name". Aistear was interpreted as an hour of play each day where the children were directed to one of four individual "Aistear Stations" which the teachers would have chosen and set out in advance. So, rather than Aistear supporting an integrated curriculum, it had become reified within a discourse of understanding it as something separate. This understanding was evidenced when the teachers in School A spoke about how Aistear is facilitating the integration of subjects – the integration they were referring

to related specifically to how this happens within the “Aistear Hour” where subjects like maths and language development were incorporated into their “Aistear Time” – this is very different from the objective of Aistear, which is to support the integration of all curriculum subjects throughout the day.

The teachers’ understanding of Aistear agree with Gray and Ryan’s (2016) research which looked at the enactment of Aistear within the primary curriculum (1999). Their study reported that teachers lacked the knowledge and training required to enact the principles of Aistear within the primary curriculum, and that 43% of the teachers conveyed that they were unfamiliar with their role in its implementation. Given that training in Aistear is not compulsory, their findings and the findings of this study regarding the teachers misunderstanding of Aistear are not unexpected. In the absence of compulsory training, the expectation that teachers without training in Aistear will be competent to act as conduits of curricula change is unreasonable and unfair.

The teachers in Schools A and B described a pedagogical approach put forward by Aistear, where the individual needs of the children are addressed. However, they explained that pressure to ensure that the curriculum objectives were covered impacted on the time they had to “do Aistear” and that meeting the individual needs of the children was very challenging. T1(A) spoke about how she would “love to do Aistear every day” but at times she was so busy that she did not get to “do it”. The pressures the teachers experienced in relation to meeting the curriculum objectives impacted on their pedagogical approach and therefore impacted on how the children experienced Aistear within the ECE curriculum. Aistear, as a policy document, advocates a view of children as active, constructive learners, it provides a broad framework within which teachers have a choice in how it is implemented. However, the new primary language curriculum sets out clear learning outcomes which the children are expected to achieve, the focus on which limits teachers’ choices of pedagogical approaches. There is a need to recognise that teachers need to be supported to understand how the two policy documents can work in tandem. They need time to explore ways in which the learning objectives of the new primary language curriculum can be achieved through appropriate means of engaging all the children in learning experiences that work towards the learning outcomes, while also taking the individual perspectives of the children into account.

The enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum is closely linked to teachers’ understandings of how play enhances children’s early learning experiences.

The findings show that while the teachers tried to implement some form of play for the children, their understanding of play was problematic. Incorporating play in ECE provides opportunities for teachers to engage in active participation in partnership with children. Aistear describes the child as “an active capable and competent learner, learning through play, relationships and language, and every day experiences” (NCCA, 2009, p. 26).

Achieving positive outcomes for children in the early years classroom is dependent on the skills and competences of teachers, on them having an informed understanding of how children learn through play, and on them being clear on the adult’s role, including paying attention to the processes of play and learning as well as their outcomes (Hurst & Joseph, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 2005; Bleach, 2016).

The critical role of play in ECE is acknowledged by a growing body of international evidence that supports a play-based approach to learning (Wood, 2013; Hunter & Walsh, 2013). However, play in practice within ECE has been found to be highly challenging and problematic (Walsh et al., 2010; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; O’ Kane, 2007; Gray & Ryan, 2016). Hunter and Walsh (2013) emphasise the need for those working in ECE to engage in professional development and purposeful reflection to develop their understanding of play as a critical component of pedagogy in the early years classroom.

The new primary language curriculum states that “an engaging environment supports all children to explore, make discoveries, solve problems, express themselves and interact with others” (DES, 2016, p. 20). This is a powerful statement, but studies have shown that teachers lack an understanding of what “an engaging environment” might look like. For example, Gray and Ryan (2016) found that 64% of teachers who taught infant classes (children aged four to six) said that they did not feel confident about organising play-based learning activities within Aistear. The findings from this study were similar. T3(B) acknowledged the important role of play in children’s learning but said that she could not “trust that the children would learn through play” and thus she needed to direct the children’s learning within the play to cover the objectives of the curriculum.

While the teachers and principals of both schools acknowledged the important role of play in ECE, it is evident from the findings that the context within which they practiced led them to doubt that the children were learning what they needed to learn during play. As a consequence, the teachers tended to direct the children’s learning during “Aistear

Time”. The reality for the teachers in Schools A and B was that Aistear provided a space to cover aspects of the curriculum that had not yet been covered. These findings point to the need for teachers to be supported through guidance and training on the implementation of a play-based approach within the new primary language curriculum so as to understand that learning objectives can better be reached through responsive and reciprocal pedagogical approaches than through an imposed prescriptive pedagogy.

Nutbrown (2018) holds that it is crucial to effective pedagogy that ECE teachers understand children’s learning and developmental theories and how that knowledge is applied in practice, but also how the practice is informed by teachers’ values, beliefs and understandings. The teachers and principals of both schools acknowledged the important role of play in children’s development. However, it is evident from the findings that while the teachers’ words stressed the importance of play in ECE, their actions showed that they did not know how to implement this ideal. These findings concur with earlier research findings that point to a difference between how teachers describe their pedagogical approach and what is actually observed in their practice (OECD, 2004; Eivers et al., 2010; Gray & Ryan, 2011; Moloney, 2011; O Donoghue, 2016).

Drawing on Aistear and the research on language development, the new primary language curriculum recognises the need: to adopt a child-centred pedagogy that embraces the individuality and agency of the child; to acknowledge the centrality of collaborative learning; to understand play as a pedagogical approach (DES, 2016). The new primary language curriculum describes how Aistear’s principles are reflected in its rationale, aims, and strands (DES, 2016). Given this, the lack of guidance on how teachers might use Aistear to enhance how children experience the new primary language curriculum is disappointing. The new primary language curriculum fails to provide clarity on how its principles align with the principles of Aistear. As a curriculum framework, Aistear does not impose an outcomes-driven curriculum, whereas the new primary language curriculum does. Returning to the findings of this study, it is not difficult then to understand how the teachers of both schools conceived Aistear as something separate from the primary curriculum.

Aistear’s broad themed framework allows teachers to develop their own methodologies for enacting the new primary language curriculum. Such freedom for the teacher is to be welcomed, however, in the absence of suggestions, ideas, guidelines or training on how teachers might do this, both Aistear and the new primary language curriculum are open

to misinterpretation. The lack of guidance on how Aistear and the new primary language curriculum correlate at policy level could lead to a dilution of the principles of Aistear and of the vision and aims of the new curriculum. Additionally, the findings point to the need for policy makers to consider the contextual realities within which teachers work; without this, the expectation that the teachers will be able to align the new primary language curriculum with Aistear is unlikely to be realised.

Policy enactment is “fractured and dislocated” (Scott, 1996, p. 133). As discussed in the literature review, Aistear’s broad guidance supports and promotes the individual agency of the ECE teacher in adopting a child-centred rights-based pedagogy, while also leaving interpretations of what that might look like in practice open to the individual subjective views of those who teach. Teachers will bring their own experiences, knowledge and critiques to bear on new policies and will read policies from the positions of their identities and subjectiveness (Hall, 1997). The new primary language curriculum states that it has implicit links with Aistear as an ECE framework, however, there are no examples of these implicit links. Both Aistear and the new primary language curriculum are separate, this separateness is compounded by the fact that the school curriculum evaluation does not include any focus on how Aistear is implemented.

Ball and colleagues’ (2012, p. 43) conceptualisation of policy enactment draws upon and relates together “three constituent aspects of the messy reality of school life”. These aspects: material, interpretive, and discursive, taken together, make up a version of what Ball et al., (2012) describe as “material semiotics. Schools operate in different contexts and will have different capacities, priorities, and limits. Lauder, Jamieson, & Whiteley (1998, p. 62) suggest that these contexts, constitute a material context of interpretation and create different practical possibilities and constraints for policy enactment and frameworks of expectation within which responses to policy are constructed.

Aistear provides teachers with a framework that promotes a pedagogy of an interplay between child-initiated and teacher-initiated experiences. It recognises the significant role of play in enabling children to develop as confident and competent learners. The findings of this study and earlier research concur that children in the early years classroom have very few opportunities for child-initiated experiences, even within “Aistear Time” (O’ Kane, 2007; Gray & Ryan, 2006; Walsh et al., 2010; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; and O Donoghue, 2016). In the absence of any exploration of how teachers understand Aistear, the role of play, and how children learn, and the contexts within which teachers teach,

there is a concern that the status quo will remain – that the new primary language curriculum will continue to be enacted by teachers who understand Aistear and the new primary language as two unconnected policy documents and prioritise the formal objectives of the curriculum over Aistear.

5.3 Pedagogical Approach

Implementing the principles of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum is dependent on the teachers' understandings of the framework, and their beliefs and understandings of how children learn. Fourteen years on from the OECD (2004) report on ECE in Ireland which found that a teacher-centred rather than child-centred pedagogy was observed with little account being taken of children's interests or concerns, the findings from this and other studies show that a predominantly didactic pedagogy still persists in ECE today (Eivers et al., 2010; McGettigan & Grey, 2012; Moloney, 2011; O Donoghue, 2016).

It is important to emphasise that the enactment of the new primary language curriculum that is aligned with the principles of Aistear does not require a change in curriculum content but rather a change in teachers' pedagogical approach – a change to where Aistear is understood as a framework that underpins the new primary language curriculum as a whole rather than an hour or less each day where children get to take part in controlled play. This change will require support for teachers to empower them to move away from understanding curricula as information to be transmitted in a didactic form to an understanding that learning occurs through social interactions. To make this shift, teachers must be given space and time to adopt a socio-cultural understanding of how children learn and how such a theoretical approach relates to Aistear and the new primary language curriculum. Making links between theory and practice takes time; teachers need to be allowed 'to press pause' so as to reflect and re-evaluate their pedagogies. Jerome et al., (2015) talk about key roles for teachers: as implementers, as collaborative agents, and as change agents. These roles are complex, they require considerable professional development, training initiatives at government level and support at school level if teachers are to be equipped to carry out these roles.

Adopting a socio-cultural understanding of children requires the teacher to be both proactive and interactive and involves drawing on pedagogical strategies that ensure a balance between learning that is guided by the child and learning that is guided by the

teacher. Socio-cultural perspectives challenge the concept of children as passive objects to be shaped and socialised by adult teaching (Smart et al., 2001). This perspective includes what Sylva et al, (2004) refer to as moments of sustained shared thinking (SST). A socio-cultural pedagogy recognises children's agency and inherent capacities and acknowledges the capacity of children to shape their own lives (Mayall, 2002; James & James, 2004; Moss & Dahlberg, 2005; Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith & Burns, 2013). Aistear promotes a rights-based approach to ECE and is much more than an hour of play each day. A rights-based approach requires teachers who are respectful educators and who recognise children as competent learners, for, "understanding that even the youngest children are equal in personhood to adults has profound implications for how we treat and teach them" (Nutbrown, 2018, p. 5).

Adopting a rights-based approach to ECE requires teachers to listen to children and to act on what they hear. The findings presented a lovely example of sustained shared thinking when T(1)A described an unplanned moment in which the children guided their own learning. Prompted by the children's interest in a rainbow that appeared in the sky during yard play, T(1)A guided and enhanced their learning by harnessing their prior knowledge and building on it through the provision of additional new knowledge. As the adult, she scaffolded the children's learning, creating a bridge between the knowledge they already had and the new knowledge they gained through her strategy (Bonfield & Horgan, 2016). As a policy text, Aistear promotes a child-centred rights-based approach to early childhood education where children are offered opportunities to make choices about what, how and with whom they want to play. The centrality of a children's rights perspective is a key feature of Aistear and one which I consider critical to its implementation within the enactment of the new primary language curriculum. Within a child-centred rights-based curriculum, children construct their own knowledge after their experiences and interactions with the world as they experience it.

The new primary language curriculum gives some recognition to a rights-based child-centred approach in stating that teachers must adopt "varied methods that complement learning and take into account the differences in children, their interests and motivation" (DES 2016, p.26). Highlighting the critical role of adult-child and child-child interactions, it suggests that learning is co-constructed between the teacher and child through joint attention, mutual interest and enjoyment (DES, 2016). However, despite the emphasis on such interactions, the document provides no suggestions, discussion or guidelines on how teachers might engage in them.

The findings from this study show that the teachers in School A described their pedagogical approach as child-centred. While T1(A) and T2(A) expressed their views on the effectiveness of a child-centred enactment of curriculum, their words did not correlate to the practice observed in their classrooms. T1(A) estimated that one quarter of her teaching day was child-centred and provided examples of where this happened. She explained that she would choose a child to decide what rhyme or game they were going to play from the list she had written on the board. The children were also given a choice as to whether they wanted to colour, draw or write. The examples T1(A) provided seem tokenistic, particularly as they are decided by the teacher. T2(A) also offered examples of the children being given “choices”; for instance, at the end of story time (the story having been chosen by teacher) the children are invited to give the story a thumbs up or thumbs down. These examples demonstrated some choice for the children, however, they do not represent a pedagogy that aligns with a child-centred perspective as the choices are limited, decided by the teacher with a specific learning objective in mind, and leave little room for hearing the voice of the child or supporting their emergent interests.

In contrast to School A, the teachers in school B described a more child-centred pedagogical approach. T4(B) described how “Aistear Time” provided an opportunity to spend time with the children and to observe their strengths. Providing the children with choice during “Aistear Time” was something T3(B) found difficult to do. She explained that she planned the rota for the children because if she allowed them to choose “the boys would stay playing with the blocks” which she did not consider learning. She added that giving the children choice at “Aistear Time” could mean leaving aspects of the curriculum out, especially art. Moreover, she reasoned that play did not “provide learning opportunities related to the curriculum” that she was under pressure to cover.

The study raises a concern in relation to the children having access to art and creative expression because “Aistear Time” was the only space where T3(B) could find time for the children to take part in these activities, yet creative expression is an important part of the new primary language curriculum. ECE must include time for children to engage in creative sessions together, and to learn about the arts through engaging and interactive approaches. Indeed, Article 13 of the UNCRC (1989) highlights the child’s right to “freedom of expression”. T4(B) described a more child-centred pedagogy, she found the play element of Aistear offered great opportunities for collaborative play amongst the children and allowed her to join in and play with them.

Empirical studies which have looked at different pedagogical approaches to teaching such as dialogic teaching, exploratory talk, and sustained shared thinking, have shown that curricula that are well designed can contribute to children's language and communication skills, reasoning and learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). The studies demonstrate that providing children with explicit guidance on how to use language and how to reason can impact positively on their problem-solving skills, intellectual development and curriculum learning. Children become more autonomous and motivated language learners when given opportunities for enjoyable and engaging interaction with others. The combination and interplay of child-initiated and teacher-initiated experiences play a significant role in enabling children to develop as confident and competent oral communicators (Ó Duibhir & Cummins, 2012).

The design and quality of education systems have a strong impact on children's participation and performance (European Commission, 2014). Formal didactic teaching styles have been shown to negatively impact on young children's motivation to learn, independence, social interaction and self-esteem (Walsh et al., 2006). There is also a view put forward by neo-traditionalists who argue that there is a place for teachers to impart subject knowledge in a didactic pedagogical style (Hirsch, 1987; Donovan & Bransford, 2005;). Hirsch (1987) argues that children must first possess information and knowledge in relation to a particular subject and from this they can then add to their understanding. Similar to Hirsch (1987), the teachers' understanding of what is best for the child in both schools translated into a model that was teacher-led and didactic as they imparted the information they believed the children needed to have. This, they explained, was due to the pressures they were under to complete the curriculum objectives. Although well-intentioned, this 'blinkered' view of best practice could be deemed indicative of a systemic flaw: where policy documents are issued without guidelines; where formal teacher training prioritises meeting curriculum objectives over developing imaginative and innovative pedagogical approaches; and where in-service training tends toward the cascade model.

Implementing theory to practice within ECE does not follow in a linear form. Nutbrown (2018) argues that the absence of a coherent structure between policy documents is problematic and that the guidance about developmental goals and the content of children's learning is at best inconsistent. ECE is constructed along a continuum, where at one end of the continuum Aistear constructs children as active agents with rights to guide their own learning, and at the other end of the continuum the new primary language

curriculum constructs children as objects which need to move through set stages of development having achieved specific knowledge and learning outcomes. This lack of coherence is problematic for teachers. The findings from this study show that the teachers in both schools had different understandings of what a child-centred pedagogy meant. They highlighted that adopting a child-centred pedagogy was difficult due to large classes, the number of children with EAL and pressures to cover the curriculum learning outcomes. The teachers' understanding was that the only way they could cover the learning outcomes was to adopt a mainly didactic pedagogy. While there are no standardised tests for children in junior infants, the teachers felt the need to formalise the children's learning by developing checklists to ensure the children were reaching the learning outcomes set down by the primary curriculum (1999). The findings demonstrate that the teachers were constrained by the inherent tensions between wanting to allow the children time to learn through play (Aistear) and the need to complete the learning outcomes set out by the primary curriculum (DES 1999). The findings support Ball's (2006) argument that the process of translating policy into practice is problematic. The enactment of policy is not something that can be done at one point in time and space, but rather it is always a process of becoming (Ball et al., 2011, p.3). Furthermore, Spillane (2004, p.8) posits that policy can be "morphed as it moves from player to player" through a process of human sense-making. Teachers need to be supported to explore ways in which they can balance their pedagogical approach to enact the principles of Aistear and at the same time meet the learning outcomes set out by the new primary language curriculum (2016). Creating such an approach will be dependent on how teachers and principals translate and reproduce the new primary language curriculum and Aistear.

My understanding is that children learn through a range of pedagogical approaches. There is a space in the classroom for teachers to adopt a didactic approach, but integrated within child-led and child-child interactions. The enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum requires a pedagogy that is flexible in the use of both didactic and interactive teaching styles and can develop along a continuum that is framed by the principles of Aistear which include a child-centred, rights-based focus.

An understanding of how children learn articulated by the teachers of both schools conveyed an understanding of a "highly effective" ECE pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002), yet, when observed in class, T1(A) displayed a didactic style whereby the children's contributions to conversations were taken over and re-directed towards the learning goal that she had planned. The teachers appeared to understand the importance

of a child-centred focus, but their actions did not align with this. T1(A) described how children learn from “being active”, by “doing things together”, “by manipulating the materials” and “kind of constructing their learning”. T2(A) highlighted the importance of “active learning” and “discovery learning”. T1(A) talked about how the children learn by being active and experiencing tasks for themselves. Although there was a recurring discourse of how the curriculum ought to be child-led, both of these teachers described a pedagogical approach that was didactic. T1(A)'s approach, she explained, was due to the need to “stay on track” and complete the curriculum objectives. Similarly, T2(A) described how she did not always “get an opportunity to do Aistear” and that it was “often a bit rushed”. Both teachers explained how their priority was “to cover the curriculum objectives”. To do this they adopted an adult-led didactic style that involved taking control of most of the decisions concerning the children’s learning. Such a teaching style closes off possibilities and opportunities for “an effective pedagogic interaction where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to problem solve, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative” (Department for Education and Skills, [DfES], 2004, p.37). Implementing a new primary language curriculum that is aligned with Aistear requires support for the teachers to engage in training that is more than a once off Aistear workshop, rather, a comprehensive training that gives them the space to explore their practice and reflect on how it is informed by Aistear.

These findings add further evidence of the need to consider the context in relation to the gap between the pedagogical approaches teachers describe and their approach in practice, and the need to understand how teachers can be supported to reflect on these differences. Even though the ethos of School B was more aligned with a children’s rights perspective on education than School A, School B was not implementing such an approach. Spillane (2001) argues that it is the teachers and principals who ultimately decide whether policymakers’ purpose is reflected in children’s learning experiences. While Aistear remains absent from primary school curriculum evaluations, teachers are unlikely to prioritise its enactment.

Fullan (2000) suggests that new policy implementation must focus on the process of putting into practice the ideas or structures that are new to those who are expected to implement them; the process of implementation, he argues, is elusive and complex something which agencies and governments underestimate.

The findings reveal that the introduction of a new primary language curriculum does not automatically ensure its enactment in keeping with its principles and aims. The findings are consistent with Sverdlov and colleagues' (2014) study which reported that six years on from the publication of a new national pre-school literacy curriculum, 78% of kindergarten teachers used the literacy curriculum only once per week and 19% used it less than once per week. Of further significance, their study observed that, once the teachers became convinced that the curriculum allowed them to retain their pedagogical principles by giving them the freedom to choose what they deemed developmentally appropriate teaching practices, they adapted the new components of the curriculum and integrated them into a "shared ideology". Sverdlov and colleagues' (2014) findings point to the fact that the introduction of a new primary language curriculum into schools which lack an understanding of Aistear risks teachers implementing the curriculum within the structure and systems that already exist and thereby fitting the 'new' into the 'old'.

Ball (1994, p. 19) holds that policies usually tell you what to do, and generate circumstances in which the choice of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or reformed. Elmore and Mcloughlin (1998, p. 59) outline three phases which teachers must go through in coming to terms with new policy that requires a change in practice. The first phase is survival, characterised by persuasion and reassurance on the part of the agents of change (the teachers). The second, consolidation, needs to afford teachers opportunities to rehearse and a chance to move towards understanding the implications of the change. The third phase, mastery, is characterised by teachers gaining an understanding of the conceptual basis of the new policy and practice. Each phase, Mcloughlin (1998) argues, is associated with a specific kind of support or professional development to enable "the mode of transition from one structure to another".

The findings demonstrate that a decade on from the introduction of Aistear, ECE teachers are still unsure of how to implement it within the primary curriculum (1999), the question has to be asked, can we assume that their understanding of Aistear will be any clearer in relation to the new primary language curriculum? The findings suggest that changing pedagogical approaches and understandings of how children learn is difficult, and that sustained changes must be reinforced by re-alignments in teachers' knowledge and beliefs (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009). Furthermore, this study shows that the teachers lacked the skills and confidence to incorporate Aistear within the primary curriculum (DES, 1999) and the new language curriculum (DES, 2016).

The new primary language curriculum promotes the individuality of children's cultural identity and emphasise the importance of embracing the uniqueness of each child. T4(B) spoke about how, at the beginning of the school year, she felt she was "simply crowd controlling" and found it difficult to stay out of the children's play due to pressure to develop their language skills, particularly in relation to the children who had English as an additional language (EAL). The teachers in both schools said that they felt under pressure to complete the curriculum objectives with the children who had EAL. The new primary language curriculum highlights the need for teachers to support children with EAL to feel accepted and that the classroom is a place where children's language is celebrated (DES, 2016, p. 20). The findings from this study in relation to the children with EAL show that the teachers did not feel they could embrace the uniqueness of each child. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that the teachers' pedagogical approach did not represent a child-centred pedagogy, this was particularly evident in relation to the children with EAL. The teachers said that they did not have the time required to embrace the children's individuality and the children with EAL were described as an additional challenge.

The findings bring to the fore that, in the absence of any discussions on the need for teachers to adopt a child-centred rights-based pedagogical approach, the assumption that such practices will happen is unrealistic. When introducing curriculum reform there is a need to consider the availability of support from principals, colleagues, administrators, and the availability of effective professional development programmes (Li et al., 2011; Lieber et al., 2009).

5.4 Leadership

Implementing a new curriculum is complex and contextualised. The introduction of the new primary language curriculum does not in itself ensure a change in pedagogical approach (Hunter & Walsh, 2013). Both school principals believed that the implementation of Aistear in their schools was going well and that training in Aistear was not a priority. The principals spoke about how they supported the implementation of Aistear, however this related to the funding made available to the teachers for materials for the "Aistear Stations". Supporting teachers to implement curricular change requires principals to reflect, monitor and assess the teacher's practice. As a starting point, principals as leaders should have a good understanding of Aistear and how it frames the primary curriculum. The principals of both schools, like the teachers, spoke of Aistear as

something separate from the school curriculum, and described it as “Aistear Time” and the “Aistear Hour”. The findings demonstrate that both principals remained outside of any discussions in relation to how Aistear enhanced the children’s learning experience within the classroom. This, they explained, was left to the teachers. Bringing about a change in pedagogical approaches requires a commitment to building a learning community which includes a collaborative team culture (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2007).

P(A) spoke about the teachers having fifteen minutes at the end of each week to collaborate. However, this was an informal arrangement where the teachers had the opportunity to meet up and discuss activities for the forthcoming week. It was not a designated time that would facilitate the exploration of the teachers’ individual understandings and contexts within which they were expected to implement the new primary language curriculum. Without facilitating a space for on-going reflection, dialogue, debate, and collaboration, there is unlikely to be a change in pedagogical approach leading to what Moss and Kantor (1999) refer to as “new and innovative possibilities”. Harris and Allen (2009) argue that school principals play a crucial role in ensuring that policy change is integral rather than peripheral to school development planning. Rodd (2015, p.7) puts forward that leaders who successfully advocate change build a supportive workplace that encourages and empowers everybody during potentially stressful processes of change.

It was evident from the research data that all the teachers experienced pressure to complete the curriculum objectives, and these objectives were a given priority over Aistear. It was not clear from the data whether the principals were aware of the pressures the teachers articulated, although P(A) did refer to the school’s challenge on how they were going to measure the learning milestones in the new primary language curriculum.

Both principals described how Aistear had been first introduced to the teachers in the school. They described a cascade model (Hayes, 2000) whereby one teacher in each of the schools was allocated the responsibility of taking on the role of ‘Aistear coordinator’. This role involved the teacher attending an Aistear training workshop and then returning to the school to pass on their knowledge to the other teachers. If a cascade model of training is to be successful it needs to be decentralised, experiential and reflective and not the responsibility of one teacher to transmit their understanding of the policy (Hayes,

2000, p. 138). Moreover, he suggests that rigid adherence to prescribed ways of working does not represent good practice. It may be noted that the idea of the four “Aistear Stations” came from a teacher’s understanding of Aistear, brought back to the school and implemented “in a rigid and prescribed way” in keeping with P(A)’s articulated “need for all the teachers to be singing off the same hymn sheet”. This approach indicated that there was little room for teachers’ individual ideas to be teased out, developed and shared. P(A)’s own lack of knowledge in relation to Aistear was a contributing factor in how it was implemented in her school. In contrast, P (B) had had some training in Aistear, however its implementation followed a similar cascade model as school A.

Desimone et al., (2002) advise that the successful implementation of policy and reform needs to include: a focus on the classroom context, opportunities for teachers to engage in active learning, and an emphasis on a shared or whole school participation. These practices were not evident in either school. Desimone and colleagues (2002) stress the need for professional development and training to be extended, with opportunities for teachers to lead change as well as respond to it, as opposed to the one-off workshops which the teachers in both schools spoke about.

The context of leadership needs to be considered in supporting school principals too. P(B) expressed disappointment that her school received very little support from the Department of Education and Skills, and that it was left up to individual schools as to how they would implement the new primary language curriculum. She was aware that the teachers had a lot of new policies to contend with and that the new primary language curriculum added to the pressure the teachers were experiencing. The teachers frequently referred to the pressures they experienced to complete the curriculum objectives. Yero (2002) argues that any reform made in the education system must consider what teachers feel about those changes in the light of their understandings of the practical implications in relation to a curriculum. The implementation of the new primary language curriculum must be supplemented by policy strategies that include comprehensive training to ensure that those given the responsibility to implement it understand what it is they are implementing.

5.5 Summary

This chapter discussed the key study findings in relation to the new model of practice (Figure 25, p. 134) which identifies three key contextual dimensions, namely: teachers' understanding of Aistear and play; pedagogical approach; and, leadership.

Aistear is designed to support an integrated curriculum; however, the findings show that the teachers and the principals understood Aistear to be a discrete subject separate from the curriculum. The enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum is closely linked to teachers' understandings of how play enhances children's early learning experiences. The study found that there was a gap between how the teachers described their pedagogical approach and what was observed in their classroom practice. The teachers and principals of both schools acknowledged the importance of play in supporting children's development, however, the findings show that the teachers doubted that the children were learning through play, and they tended to direct the children's play in order to cover the curriculum objectives. A predominantly didactic approach was adopted by the teachers in both schools. The children were given very limited choice or voice in guiding their learning. The choices they were given were teacher-led.

Aistear and the new primary language curriculum promote the individuality of children's cultural identity and the need for teachers to support and celebrate the language of children with EAL. The study found that the teachers did not have the time to get to know the children with EAL and their priority was to get the curriculum objectives covered.

In the absence of any collaborative opportunities for professional development in understanding how Aistear can support teachers in the enactment of the new primary language curriculum, the findings indicate that Aistear and the new primary language curriculum will likely continue to be implemented as two separate policy documents, with priority being given to the formal objectives of the curriculum over the principles of Aistear.

The final chapter of this study addresses the research questions this thesis set out to answer; it discusses the study's contribution to knowledge and to practice; it outlines the study limitations; and it explains the direction in which I would like to take the study forward.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter brings the thesis to a close. It addresses the two research questions the study set out to answer. It discusses how the new conceptual model contributes to knowledge and practice. It identifies the study limitations and points to areas for further research. The chapter concludes by explaining how I plan to take the learnings and insights gained in the study forward.

6.2 The Research Questions

The study began with two research questions, the first of which was posed as follows:

How do primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear?

The new primary language curriculum has both implicit and explicit links with Aistear, however, the findings from this study show that the teachers and principals of both schools understood and implemented Aistear as something separate from the primary curriculum (1999; 2016). Rather than Aistear being understood as a curriculum framework to guide and support the integration of curricula content, it was introduced to the children in these schools as a separate part of their day and commonly referred to as “Aistear Hour” or “Aistear Time”. The teachers and principals understanding of Aistear as something separate was compounded by a lack of coherence or guidelines as to how the two policy documents are linked.

The teachers and principals of both schools acknowledged the importance of play in supporting children’s development, but the findings indicate that the teachers were not convinced that the children would learn through child-initiated play and tended to direct the play towards activities that they deemed would meet the curriculum objectives. At times the “Aistear Hour” was used to complete areas of the curriculum the teachers had not covered.

Even though there are no standardised test for children in junior infants, the teachers felt the need to carry out formalised testing through the use of checklists to ensure that they were meeting the learning outcomes set out in the curriculum. Studies have shown that changing educational practice is difficult, and that sustained changes must be reinforced by re-alignments in teachers' knowledge and beliefs (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009; Moss, 2012; Nutbrown 2018; Wallace and Loudon 1992). Despite widespread support at a national level research suggests that many countries have found it challenging to implement a child centred rights-based approach to ECE (Anning et al., 1999; Fleet, 2016; Gray & Winter, 2011; Moyles et al., 2002; Wood, 2013; Mac Naughton et al., 2010). Evidence suggests that providing quality play experiences for children in the early years will require teachers to reconceptualise ECE (Moss, 2012; Rinaldi et al., 2006). The perception of children entering ECE as needing to be filled with predetermined knowledge that should progress sequentially ignores their potential and readiness to learn (Moss 2012, p. 360). The introduction of a new curriculum does not automatically ensure its enactment. Empirical research has emphasised the need to listen to and support teachers as they undergo curricular re-forms (Gallant, 2009; Sverdlov et al., 2014; Van Veen & Slegers, 2006; Zembylas, 2010). Changes in curriculum policy need to be accompanied by policy strategies and appropriate funding made available for professional development to support teachers in how they might enact the changes.

The study identified a gap between how the teachers described their pedagogical approach and what was observed in their classrooms. The new primary language curriculum suggests that learning is co-constructed between the teacher and child through joint attention, mutual interest and enjoyment. Additionally, Aistear promotes the rights of children to guide their own learning and provides an important opportunity for teachers to engage in active participation with the children. The study showed that the teachers provided very few opportunities for the children to engage in co-constructed learning, especially for those children with English as an additional language (EAL). The teachers in both schools spoke about how they found the children with EAL a challenge in relation to covering the curriculum objectives.

Aistear advocates for a curriculum that is based on the theoretical perspective that curiosity, wonder, resilience, and playfulness should be at the centre of what and how children learn (NCCA, 2012). Such a child-centred rights-based approach to ECE is to be welcomed in my view. Based on my experience as an early childhood educator, the study findings, and findings from earlier studies, it is fair to say that we are quite a way off from

such a pedagogical approach. If we believe that adopting a child-centred rights-based approach to ECE, and this is the ideal promoted in Aistear and the new primary language curriculum, then we need to take seriously the contexts within which teachers teach. If we want to make a difference to children's lives, then we need to challenge teachers' understanding of Aistear as something separate from the primary curriculum and acknowledge that teachers need support to enact the principles of Aistear as it was intended within the new primary language curriculum. How we might do that leads to the second research question of this thesis:

How can primary school teachers be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early childhood curriculum framework, within their contextual settings?

The study exposes the important role of context and the need to consider the contextual realities that teachers experience in their schools in relation to the enactment of curricular policy. The teachers' teaching styles were mainly didactic with very little choice given to the children to guide their own learning. Aistear was almost 'retro fitted' into the existing curriculum in the teachers' classrooms. The teachers implemented Aistear based on their understandings of what it meant to them and made it fit with the contextual realities of their school. If, as Spillane (2001, p398) suggests, implementation agents (teachers) will always work to make the strange familiar: "preserving existing frames, rather than radically transforming them", then this is a challenge that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Teachers need to be supported to adopt a pedagogical approach that supports the principles of Aistear while also supporting children to meet the learning outcomes set out by the new primary language curriculum (2016). Identifying and exploring the complexities of enacting an "effective pedagogy" in relation to the contextual realities within which teachers operate requires a model of practice that can support them to reflect and engage collaboratively to explore innovative ways to enact Aistear within the new primary language curriculum. The principals of both schools stated that the teachers had opportunities to work collaboratively, however, their examples of collaboration depicted a casual arrangement whereby teachers might meet up after school to discuss the content of their "Aistear Stations". Neither school had a specifically allocated time to facilitate teachers to come together to discuss Aistear.

The study found that Aistear's implementation followed a cascade model of training; and no opportunities were provided for teachers in either school to attend Aistear workshops or training during school hours.

While the principals supported the teachers in the enactment of Aistear, this support did not relate to pedagogical issues but rather to their purchasing materials for the teachers' "Aistear Stations".

From a policy perspective, a profound lack of awareness of teachers' contextual experiences is disconcerting in relation to the translation of new policies into practice. Given the absence of comprehensive teacher training, of opportunities for teacher debate and collaboration, and of awareness of the contexts within which they teach, there is a risk that any new curricula policies will be enacted through a process whereby teachers and principals will incorporate the policy into existing school practices, making the new fit into the old, and thereby avoiding any changes in pedagogical approaches and, by default, missing valuable opportunities to explore new approaches. There is a need for policy makers to understand that teachers' cognitive responses to any policy change are a key factor in how they will respond to the change. The findings from this study show that where there is uncertainty on the part of the teachers about the effects of a play-based child-centred approach to ECE then this is a fundamental obstacle.

6.3 Limitations of the Research Study

As with every research project, this study had some limitations. The time-scale meant that decisions had to be made about what to include and exclude from the two-case study. The decision to use two schools was made on the understanding that it would yield a broader understanding of the contextual issues than if a single school was used. While the study identified three key contexts that affect ECE teachers' pedagogical approach, there are other contexts which have not been explored that are nonetheless important. Had time allowed, I would have liked to explore the role of the family and the school environment in supporting teachers in the enactment of Aistear. I would also have liked to observe each class over a two-week period to gain an understanding of how teachers might be supported to use Aistear as an assessment tool to build a picture over time of a child's learning progress across the curriculum.

6.4 Future Research

The study findings have raised possibilities for future research studies. While both schools believed they were implementing Aistear in a way that honoured its child-centred rights-based ideal, the study found that neither school had adopted a pedagogical style that translated this ideal into practice. Although School B's guiding philosophy, as stated on its website, claimed a children's rights-based perspective, the findings show that there was little difference between the schools in how they implemented Aistear. This gap between professing a children's rights-based perspective on teaching and learning yet adopting a didactic approach that is sceptical of the role of play suggests that future qualitative research could, perhaps, explore and tease out the source of this contradiction. It may be that teacher education and training fails to provide a space for in-depth discussion and debate concerning the merits of 'old style' and 'new style' approaches to teaching.

Given the study's findings, Cordingley and colleagues' (2015 p.12) suggestion that schools move from a model of one day workshops and seek ways to embed sessions within a longer programme of support and engagement is welcome. It is also welcome that these researchers propose that the introduction of new knowledge to teachers must include access to the theory and evidence underlying the relevant pedagogy and subject knowledge, for only by such measures can true reflection on the meaning of teaching and learning take place. While Cordingley et. al., concentrate on in-service training, future research needs to explore teacher training at the earlier formal level. The academic community could benefit from studies that focus on pre-service teacher training that explore whether such training includes spaces where trainee teachers can critically reflect on their beliefs, values and understandings of how children learn and how these beliefs might impact on their pedagogical approaches, or whether teacher training reproduces didactic models to the exclusion of new thinking.

This thesis argued the need for a pedagogical approach that draws on a child-centred rights-based perspective, thus a further consideration would be to undertake research that would include the voice of the child in relation to their experiences of the "Aistear Hour". Their voices would add to understandings of the contextual reality of curricula enactment.

6.5 Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

The introduction of a new primary language curriculum provided an important opportunity to explore how teachers could be supported to implement the principles of Aistear in their classrooms. The study identified three key contexts that impact ECE: teachers' understanding of Aistear and play, pedagogical approach, and leadership. The study brought together for the first time three theoretical models: Braun and colleagues' (2011) contextual dimensions model; Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002) pedagogical interventions model; and Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues (2002) pedagogical interactions models. While all three models are established, they have not been synthesised previously. In synthesising the three models, I designed a model of practice for teachers in the enactment of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum. The new model can serve as a practical tool for primary school teachers in their implementation of Aistear within the new primary language curriculum and can act as a catalyst for change in teachers' and principals' pedagogies.

6.6 Applying the New Model of Practice

It is envisaged that the new model of practice will inform a future research project with School A. The principal and teachers of this school have indicated that they are interested in taking part. Drawing on my newly designed model of practice, I plan to carry out an action research project with T1(A) and T2(A). The findings from this study have provided me with a good understanding of the contexts within which these teachers practice. As I have gained valuable insight into their understanding of Aistear, the first stage of the research would be to work collaboratively with these teachers to explore how Aistear can inform the implementation of the new primary language curriculum. In the second part of the action research, the teachers would identify one of the contextual dimensions set out in Table 10: Revised Conceptual Model of Contextual Dimensions (p.132) which they would like to develop in relation to Aistear and the new primary language curriculum together. The contextual dimension chosen would then be explored under each of the three contexts set out in the new model of practice. For example, one of the teachers might decide they would like to work on 'assessment'. If so, then, taking 'assessment', we would work together to explore how their pedagogical approach, their understanding of Aistear and play, and their experience of leadership, impacts on how they carry out assessments. Each of the contextual dimensions in Table 10: Revised Conceptual Model of Contextual Dimensions would be explored in relation to 'assessment'. The teachers

experience pressure to complete the curriculum objectives. The findings identified key contextual dimensions that could be explored with the teachers to identify how Aistear could enable them to complete these objectives within a child-centred rights-based approach.

The proposed research would be conducted over a school term. I feel strongly about the need for teachers to be supported in relation to any changes they might decide they would like to try. Supporting a change in the teachers' pedagogy in relation to Aistear and understandings of how children learn will require a space within which they can be supported to try out new approaches and concepts. For this reason, I would propose to the principal that they would assist the teachers by allowing them to take the first four weeks of a new school year to try out their new concepts and ideas without any expectations or pressures to complete curriculum objectives. Having completed four weeks, the teachers would come together to discuss their experiences and the action research cycle would continue.

Changing how teachers teach will only happen if teachers believe that the change can support their curriculum objectives and include some form of checklist that the children are completing the curriculum learning outcomes. If one school makes changes in their practice, they can then become role models or exemplars for other schools. Teachers need to see examples of where a school like their own is using a child-centred rights-based approach and that it is working. I would work collaboratively with the teachers to develop an assessment tool that would allow them to assess whether their change in approach was working. This is important because teachers cannot be expected to change if the change cannot be seen to bring potential benefits they might have expected. This is critical as teachers need to be supported to achieve their objectives and know that they are being achieved. Making small changes to their pedagogical approach that benefits the children and simultaneously covers the teachers' curriculum objectives can lead to identifying further areas for change. I also envisage that by working through the new model of practice with the teachers that new contexts would be identified and added to the model. As the new primary language curriculum continues to be rolled out, it will be the main point of focus for the teachers. Expecting teachers to also look at how they can implement Aistear during the roll out phase of the new curriculum will be a challenge. However, the challenge is to be welcomed as it will illuminate new contexts which may not yet have been identified and thus add to further theorisation and adaptation of the model of practice.

My proposed study aspires to initiating a cyclical process of reflection and action to assist teachers in grappling with the principles of Aistear and how those principles could underpin their adopting of new and innovative pedagogies that benefit the child. However, even if similar intentioned research projects were to be conducted in other schools, the cause cannot be advanced without a commitment from the government that goes further than producing curricula frameworks and new curricula without guidelines and without comprehensive training. Reforming how teachers teach in early childhood education will be stifled if the focus remains only on the teachers as agents of change.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Title of Research Study: Understanding the link between context and curriculum change in early years' education

1. The study is part of the requirement for the completion of the professional Doctorate programme at Sheffield Hallam University Sheffield. The research will be conducted by myself Margaret O Donoghue under the supervision of Dr Caron Carter and Dr Michael Coldwell.

2. Details of what involvement in the Research Study will require:

Participation in this study will involve the following:

Interviews

The interviews will be one to one interview. There will be one interview with each participant, following a classroom observation. The interviews will be no longer than one hour in duration. The interview will take place in your school, at a time that suits you.

The focus of the interview will be Áistear (NCCA 2009) and how you're understanding of Áistear (NCCA 2009) influences your practice. With your permission I will audio record the interview with a digital recorder. The recording will then be transcribed for analysis by myself. At the conclusion of the research project you will be given access to a report summarising the research findings. Findings from the project will be shared with Sheffield Hallam and externally, both at conference presentations and in publications such as academic journals.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations will be carried out at a date that suits you after the first interview. The purpose of the classroom observations will be to document the interactions of the children and the teachers practice in relation to Áistear (NCCA 2009). There will be one observation in each classroom. The observation will be for the duration of a full class session (four hours).

The data will be documented using field notes. All the data will be collected over a four-month period from September 2016 – December 2016.

Collection of Documents

As the research study is looking at understanding the link between context and curriculum change in early years' education, I would like to collect examples of the children's work and other relevant documentation as it emerges. This will only be done with agreement from the school principal, the teachers, the board of management, the parents and the children. A record will be kept of all the documents collected. I will explicitly ask for consent of each document before making use of them and keep a record of approval as it is granted in relation to each document.

3. Potential risk to participants from involvement in the Research Study

No risk greater than any encountered in everyday life is anticipated due to involvement in this research.

4. Benefits to participants from involvement in the Research Study

No direct benefit, in the form of inducement or otherwise, is attached to participation in this study. However, it is likely to be a useful professional opportunity to reflect on how *Áistear* (NCCA 2009) can be incorporated into the new primary school curriculum. The research will add to the literature on policy implementation in relation to ECE curriculum, and the role of context in implementing changes in relation to practice. The research will contribute incrementally to the accumulated knowledge of *Áistear* in practice, and will provide a significant piece in the jigsaw of understanding the complexities of implementing *Áistear* (NCCA 2009) within a new revised primary school curriculum. On completion of the research study I will make myself available to meet with the participants to discuss the findings of the study.

5. Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality

Data and information gathered will be treated as confidential and will be stored securely during the lifetime of this study. There will be no public access to the digital recordings of the discussions. Anonymity will be maintained as far as possible. Pseudonyms will be used in all written material from the start of the research study, this includes anonymising the names and locations of the two schools.

All personal details (such as names, addresses, telephone numbers and emails) will be stored separately from this data and will be password protected. In the case of a disclosure being made by a participant I will be required to follow the Children First Guidelines (2011) in relation to child protection reporting guidelines.

6. Advice as to whether or not data is to be destroyed after a minimum period:

On completion of the study digital audio recordings will be destroyed; other data will be securely held for a period of seven years before being destroyed, in accordance with Sheffield Hallam university guidelines.

Contact Details: If you have any concerns or questions about the study please contact me at margaret.odonoghue@itb.ie

Research director of studies: Dr Caron Carter: c.carter@shu.ac.uk

Research supervisor: Dr Michael Coldwell edsmrc@exchange.shu.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form



Title of Research Study:

Understanding the link between context and curriculum change in early years' education

Please answer the following questions by circling the response that applies

1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me. **Yes**
No
2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any point **Yes**
No
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet. I may do so without giving a reason for my withdrawal. I am free to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher. This includes withdrawal of data **within one week** of data collection. **Yes**
No
4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the information sheet. **Yes**
No
5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet. **Yes**
No
6. I consent to the information collected for the purpose of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes which includes publishing of research findings. **Yes**
No

Participant's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Participant's Name: (printed): _____

Contact Details: _____

Researcher's Name: Margaret O' Donoghue

Researcher's Signature: _____

Please keep a copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Researcher's contact details: margaret.odonoghue@itb.ie

Telephone: 01-8851541 (work)

Research director of studies: Dr Caron Carter: c.carter@shu.ac.uk

Research supervisor: Dr Michael Coldwell edsmrc@exchange.shu.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Information Sheet for parents of children in classroom observations



Dear Parents

My name is Margaret O Donoghue, I am a lecturer in Early Childhood Care and Education at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Dublin 15. I am currently researching classroom interactions between children and their teachers in relation to Aistear (Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework and the new primary school curriculum). As part of my research I would like to carry out classroom observations in your child's classroom. The research will be conducted by myself.

What will the study involve?

Classroom observations will be carried out. The purpose of the observations will be to document the interactions of the children and the teachers practice in relation to Áistear (NCCA 2009). The observations will be for the duration of a full class session (four hours). The data will be documented using field notes. All of the data will be collected over a four-month period from September 2016 – December 2016.

Does my child have to take part?

No – participation is voluntary. Your child will be given information and asked to put their mark on a consent sheet. Your child will have the option of withdrawing at any time.

Will your child's participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. I will ensure that your child will not be identifiable in any report(s) or any subsequent publications resulting from the research. All information in relation to the observations will be treated as confidential. Data will be securely held for a period of seven years before being destroyed.

What are the possible benefits to my child of taking part?

There will be no direct benefits to your child, it is envisaged that the study will contribute to the development of the new primary school curriculum.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't expect any negative consequences for your child in taking part in this research.

What Next

If you are happy for your child to be part of the classroom observations, could you please sign the consent sheet at the back of this page.

Contact Details: If you have any concerns or questions about the study please contact me at margaret.odonoghue@itb.ie

Parental Consent Form for children in classroom observations

I..... give permission for

my child to participate in the research study set out.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing. I understand that my child will be participating voluntarily. I understand that my child can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time. I understand that my child's anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising their name and taking heed of any sensitive issues arising.

Signed: _____

Date _____

I..... do not give permission for my child to participate in the research study set out.

Signed: _____

Date _____

Appendix 4: Permission Form for children regarding classroom observation and collecting any examples of their work.



(To be completed by each child before commencing the classroom observation and prior to collecting any examples of their work)

Child's Name: _____

Colour in the Face you agree with

	Us working in our classroom	Margaret working in our classroom
		

**I am OK for Margaret to look at what I do in our class room and to make notes.
I can decide whether or not Margaret can have copies of my work.**

	Us working in our classroom	Margaret working in our classroom
		

**I am not OK for Margaret to look at what I do in our class room and to make notes.
I can decide whether or not Margaret can have copies of my work.**

Please keep a copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Researcher's contact details: margaret.odonoghue@itb.ie

Telephone: 01-8851541 (work)

Research director of studies: Dr Caron Carter: c.carter@shu.ac.uk

Research supervisor: Dr Michael Coldwell edsmrc@exchange.shu.ac.uk

Appendix 5: Ethical Approval



Our Ref AM/KW/D&S-305
18 November 2016

Margaret O Donoghue
Sheffield Institute of Education
Faculty of Development and Society
Charles Street Building
Sheffield
S1 1WB

INTERNAL

Dear Margaret,

Request for Ethical Approval of Research Project

Your research project entitled "**Understanding the link between context and curriculum change in early years' education**" has been submitted for ethical review to the Faculty's rapporteurs and I am pleased to confirm that they have approved your project.

I wish you every success with your research project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A Macaskill".

Professor A Macaskill
Chair
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Office address :
Business Support Team
Faculty of Development & Society
Sheffield Hallam University
Unit 4, Sheffield Science Park
Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB
Tel: 0114-225 3308
E-mail: DS-ResearchEthics@shu.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Interview Schedule P(A)

Interview schedule P(A)

(Drawing on emergent themes from T 1 and T 2 interviews and observation)

Can you tell me about the philosophy of the school in relation to how children learn, particularly in relation to the children in junior infants?

Priorities?

Does the school have a policy in relation to promoting children's independence?

Resilience?

Can you give me some examples?

How do you see the role of the junior infant teacher?

Can you describe how the teachers are supported in their role?

To what extent is the organisation of the classroom space decided by the individual teachers?

How much autonomy does the teacher have in how they deliver the new primary curriculum?

Can you give me some examples?

Are there opportunities for the teachers to share their collective knowledge from their day to day experiences?

Could you describe how that might work in practice?

To what extent are children with EAL supported in the classrooms?

Aistear

Can you talk to me about how you introduce a new primary curriculum?

Can you explain to me how new policy initiatives are introduced to the teachers?

For example:

Healthy Eating

Food Dudes

Read and Write Numeracy and Literacy

To what extent does the implementation of new policy initiatives impact on the children and the teachers?

Can you describe the impact on the teachers in relation to the new primary curriculum?

Could you describe how you see Aistear supporting the new primary curriculum?

How would you describe the school's engagement with Aistear?

What professional development opportunities do the teachers have available to them to link the new primary curriculum with Aistear?

Play

What role do you see play as having in the children's learning and development within the classroom?

Is it central?

To what extent are teachers supported or facilitated to incorporate a play based pedagogy within their class?

Assessment

What is your opinion in relation to Aistear supporting assessment of children's learning?

To what extent do you feel play as a helpful way to assess a child's learning?

What do you see as the challenges teachers face in the class room in relation to assessment?

Parental Involvement

Could you tell me what role you feel parents have in their child's learning?

In your opinion, what are the challenges to involving parents in the school?

Ideally how would you like to engage parents?

Appendix 7: Interview Schedule for P (B)

(Drawing on emergent themes from T 3 and T 4 interviews and observation)

Can you tell me about the philosophy of the school in relation to how children learn, particularly in relation to the children in junior infants?

Priorities?

Does the school have a policy in relation to promoting children's independence?

Resilience?

Can you give me some examples?

ETHOS

We are committed to developing and fostering a life-long love of learning in each child, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, creativity and fun.

We believe in a child-centred curriculum. We strive to meet the needs of each child so that they can achieve their full potential: academically, emotionally and socially.

How do you see the role of the junior infant teacher?

Can you describe how the teachers are supported in their role?

To what extent is the organisation of the classroom space decided by the individual teachers?

How much autonomy does the teacher have in how they deliver the new primary curriculum?

Can you give me some examples?

Are there opportunities for the teachers to share their collective knowledge from their day to day experiences?

Could you describe how that might work in practice?

To what extent are children with EAL supported in the classrooms?

Aistear

Can you talk to me about how you introduce a new primary curriculum?

Can you explain to me how new policy initiatives are introduced to the teachers?

Government policy

For example:

Healthy Eating

Maths for Fun

Food Dudes

Read and Write Numeracy and Literacy

School policy

Friendly Friday?

To what extent does the implementation of new policy initiatives impact on the children and the teachers?

Can you describe the impact on the teachers in relation to the new primary curriculum?

Could you describe how you see Aistear supporting the new primary curriculum?
How would you describe the school's engagement with Aistear?

What professional development opportunities do the teachers have available to them to link the new primary curriculum with Aistear?

Play

What role do you see play as having in the children's learning and development within the classroom?

Is it central/peripheral?

To what extent are teachers supported or facilitated to incorporate a play-based pedagogy within their class?

Is there a school policy in relation to play?

Outdoors

Weather?

Assessment

What is your opinion in relation to Aistear supporting assessment of children's learning?

To what extent do you feel play as a helpful way to assess a child's learning?

What do you see as the challenge's teachers face in the class room in relation to assessment?

Parental Involvement

Could you tell me what role you feel parents have in their child's learning?

In your opinion, what are the challenges to involving parents in the school?

Breakfast Mornings

Ideally how would you like to engage parents?

Appendix 8: Teachers Interview schedule

Interview Questions

What is your philosophy in relation to how children learn?

What is your understanding of child centred?

Do you see your practice as 'Child Centred'?

How do you understand your role as a teacher of children from 4-6 years of age?

How do you organise your classroom around how you think about how children learn?

How is your practice/day divided between child initiated and teacher directed activities?

How much of your classroom day would be child initiated?

Aistear

How does Aistear impact on your daily practice?

'Teacher Centred' or 'Child Centred' or both?

Is the individuality of the child – a difficult concept to engage with in class?

How much of the children's day involves collaborative learning?

How do you nurture Independence?

Is there any way you encourage resilience?

How much autonomy do the children have?

Are there opportunities for individual choice?

How is Aistear integrated within your class?

Are there aspects of Aistear that you find difficult?

Play

What role do you see play having in the classroom? – What is the purpose of play?

What role do you see play having in the children's learning and development?

Do you see play as peripheral in your classroom or an integral part of the learning process?

Would you see play as embedded in your curriculum?

How is play integrated into your curriculum?

Can you identify ways in which you could be supported or facilitated to incorporate a more play based pedagogy within your class?

Is Aistear helpful as a tool to support the different developmental needs of the children?

Do you think Aistear has a role to play in supporting the new primary curriculum?

Assessment

Do you see play as a helpful way to assess a child's learning?

What do you see as the challenges to assessment?

Can Aistear support assessment?

Are there challenges in relation to formal assessment and accountability?

Parental Involvement

What role do you see parents as having in their child's education?

Are there challenges to involving parents?

Could parents be more involved?

How do you think you could be supported to involve parents more?

Appendix 9: Sample of Themes from the Interview with T1

A sample of the emergent themes from the interview with T1 that can inform the development of interview questions for the principal within the same school

<p>Q 10. Linking to Aistear then, you were kind of saying how it impacts on you daily practice and that you moved it to afternoons to get the other stuff done? Has Aistear an impact on how you carry out all the other things you have to do?</p> <p>T 1 I am still getting used to Aistear but I don't think it impacts on the other subjects. I think like I have had junior infants a couple of years, you just spend your whole day teaching English and language, even in maths like the language of maths you are just all day teaching English. So, I think Aistear doesn't feel like it impinges on the school day.</p> <p>I have no training in Aistear you know I did a stint in Early Start before I went on maternity leave, so I got to know a little bit about it, but I haven't been in a junior infant or a senior infant room with Aistear, so I am just kind of getting used to it now, so I would have to say no - it doesn't impinge on the day and actually I think it is good that it has like in a way the separateness like the term Aistear because like that when another programme comes into the school like First Steps writing which was brilliant and everything, there was a lot of pressure to really like improve the standard that kind of eat into the play time and other subjects. I think when like you know when you are introducing something, like say for example if they introduced some programme to improve the numeracy levels that would have an impact teachers would feel pressure, but I think the fact that we have this block that is called Aistear it gives it some value and importance and even if you have a day a manic day and you didn't get to do your Aistear - you know your official Aistear em you would do it the next day, and the kids would remind you, they would know, because we have a little wheel there that turns and they would know that it is their turn now to play with the hairdressing box you know whatever.</p>	<p>Themes</p> <p>Children with EAL</p> <p>PD in relation to Aistear Professional in class support</p> <p>Time allowed to facilitate Aistear into new class policy programmes</p> <p>Perception that Aistear is a 'Block' a thing?</p>
<p>Q 12. How much of the day involves collaborative learning? Do you get opportunities where the children can feed into</p>	

<p>your day? or is it more time controlled or is it more coming from you?</p> <p>A. I would say most of the time it is probably coming from me. You know because you are kind of very definite in your objectives, you know what you have to cover. You have to stay on track. But like they are very vocal they do participate in discussion, like I am trying to get them to practise raise your hand, wait your turn all the time, because they are very vocal they will blurt out things and shout out things, like I think the participation levels are quite good.</p>	<p>How could more collaborative learning be facilitated?</p>
<p>Q 14</p> <p>I think the 1999 curriculum I always struggled with the amount of paper work because it was so confusing, there was four boxes, three strands but the four strand units are so confusing, there isn't enough to differentiate them and I think this one is a lot more practical for the teacher to use.</p> <p>The new oral language is very practical, it's like you could totally see you could be ticking off they have reached that milestone or they have - I don't know it all off by heart - it is in my bag, but you could actually be ticking off a little check list for yourself.</p> <p>Q 20</p> <p>I suppose as well I was a bit worried in June, I hadn't done Aistear before, and I looked on line during the Summer for a specific Summer course that would teach Aistear and I couldn't find one so the one that I did was 'Infant Education' so it touched on everything but there wasn't one Summer course specifically about Aistear which is what I was looking for</p> <p>Q 17</p> <p>like you are under so much pressure for time to fit everything in you have to link in subjects.</p>	<p>Opportunities to link the new curriculum with Aistear</p>

Themes arising from T1 classroom observations

Children with EAL

PD in relation to Aistear

Professional in class support

Perception that Aistear is a 'Block' a thing?

How could more collaborative learning be facilitated

Opportunities to link the new curriculum with Aistear

Time allowed to facilitate Aistear into new class policy programmes

Appendix 10: A Sample of the Emergent Themes from the Interview with T2

A sample of the emergent themes from the interview with T2 that can inform the development of interview questions for the principal within the same school

<p>Q.11 Then looking at Aistear then how does that impact on your daily practice?</p> <p>A. I think it is great when you get a chance to do it properly but often it is a bit rushed and I don't get to hear the children's responses as much whether they liked playing with that station or that area or what was their favourite part and that actually is the bit that I think I neglect just because we do it before home time and em things often get a bit crazy you know coats on, bags and extra notes to hand out and things like that, so I would love to do more of it but I just feel that we just don't have the time to facilitate it.</p>	<p>Professional Development to incorporate Aistear.</p>
<p>Q 31. Can you think of ways in which you could be supported to incorporate a more play-based pedagogy?</p> <p>A. Yeah I suppose if you had less objectives to achieve, it is quite an overcrowded curriculum so trying to fit everything thing in can be a challenge especially when you have like the book fair and reading week - fabulous initiatives but they throw your time table.</p> <p>You will get only two afternoons out there and it is definitely worthwhile going but you know it is time away from the class room. I know they learn things out there but at the same time it takes up more time. I suppose if I had more hands here for Aistear I could feel more confident that the learning principles were going to be achieved the language goals were going to be accomplished and things like that.</p>	<p>Time allowed to facilitate Aistear into new class policy programmes</p> <p>Time allowed to facilitate Aistear into new class policy programmes</p>

<p>Q34. And does it support the new curriculum? - in reaching the different milestones?</p> <p>A. I think it would I think it would be easier to observe what milestone the children are at through Aistear rather than just asking them other language questions that would just be repeated that they would just know off by heart.</p> <p>I think Aistear would probably be a way of checking for understanding and comprehension. It would be handy in that regard.</p>	<p>Aistear as an assessment tool</p>
<p>Q 36. What do you see then as the challenge to assessment?</p> <p>A. I think often it is hard to get a whole view of a child that you know it is alright to see from a work sheet whether they have understood a task or something, but to get a real picture of their comprehension of the concept can often be tricky, especially in junior infants when the assessments are often colouring or drawing simple pictures - it is hard to get a true picture of their understanding.</p> <p>Q 37. Do you think Aistear could help with that if you had more time?</p> <p>A. I suppose it could in that you would have more time to listen to them explaining and verbalising their learning, you know often if they draw pictures it is nice to get a chance to go around and ask them 'what is that'? and to engage in more conversation about their pictures with them and to ask them why have they drawn it or what does it remind them of or things like that.</p> <p>Q 38. And do you get time to do that?</p> <p>A. Em sometimes, not always if it is a busy day I just choose one group and remind myself the next day to go on to the next group.</p>	<p>Incorporating Aistear across the new primary curriculum</p>

Themes arising from T2 classroom observations

PD in relation to Aistear

Perception that Aistear is a 'Block' a thing?

How could more collaborative learning be facilitated

Opportunities to link the new curriculum with Aistear

Interview Questions Principal 1 (P1)

The interview questions for principal 1 (P1) have been developed by analysing the data gathered from the interviews and classroom observations of T1 and T2 (T1 and T2 are from the same school as P1).

Q 1. Can you tell me about the philosophy of your school in relation to how children learn?

Q 2. What do you see as the role of the teachers in the classes of children from 4-6 years of age?

Q 3. How does the school support teachers in their role?

Q 4. Is the organisation of the classroom space decided by the individual teachers?

Q 5. How much autonomy does the teacher have in how they deliver the primary curriculum?

Aistear

Q 6. Do you think the individuality of the child is a difficult concept for teachers to engage with in class?

Q 7. Is there a school policy in relation to collaborative learning between the child and their teacher?

Q 8. Are there professional development opportunities to link the new curriculum with Aistear?

Q 9. How are teachers facilitated to the introduction of Aistear?

How is the introduction of policy initiatives facilitated within the classes?

For example:

Healthy Eating

Food Dudes

Read and Write Numeracy and Literacy

Q 10. Is there a way that the teachers could be supported to have some flexibility in how they can integrate the curriculum through Aistear?

Play

Q 11. What role do you see play as having in the children's learning and development within the classroom?

Q 12. Do you see play as peripheral in the classroom or an integral part of the learning process?

Q 13. Would you see play as embedded in the teachers practice?

Q 14. How are teachers supported or facilitated to incorporate a play based pedagogy within their class?

Q 15. Do you think Aistear will support the new primary curriculum?

Assessment

Q 16. Do you see play as a helpful way to assess a child's learning?

Q 17. What do you see as the challenges teachers face in the class room in relation to assessment?

Q 18. Can Aistear support assessment?

Parental Involvement

Q 19. What role do you see parents as having in their child's education?

Q 20. Are there challenges to involving parents in the school?

Q 21. Could parents be more involved?

Q 22. How do you think your school could be supported to involve parents more?

Appendix 11: A Sample of the Emergent Themes from the Interview with T3

A sample of the emergent themes from the interview with T3 that can inform the development of interview questions for the principal within the same school

Question	Themes
<p>Q1. What is your philosophy in relation to how children learn? how do you think they learn?</p> <p>I think they learn a lot from each other as well from engaging with each other. Active learning and visual learning like again it is not the traditional teacher talk and they listen but active learning and visuals are really important in their learning too.</p> <p>Q 3. What is your role as a teacher in the class for these children who are 4 and 5 years in relation to their learning?</p> <p>you make sure they are getting all aspects of the curriculum, so you have the plans to make so that it is not just ad hoc learning, so that there is a focus to it. That things are integrating together, that you are not teaching lots of different topics that your topic is spreading across the curriculum cause especially for young children because I think that is how they learn the best.</p> <p>Q 4. How do you organise your classroom, you have said you are guided by the children, does that change daily?</p>	<p>Active learning Collaborative learning</p> <p>Integration of curriculum</p>
<p>I suppose yeah I think I used to be like 'oh my God you have to get this and this done' but now I would be more like 'oh ok it is ok if I don't get everything done once there is learning going on, it doesn't always have to be .. like I think Aistear is definitely thought me that, the curriculum is kind of general enough and I think we get focussed on like say we are</p>	<p>Opportunities to develop Aistear</p>

doing the 'home' so everyone has to draw a home, no one cannot draw a home whereas there is nowhere in the curriculum that says the children have to draw their home it is just about mark making and experimenting with different types of materials so you are covering the curriculum so I think it is about being more relaxed about that kind of stuff is good yeah.

Q 7. How does Aistear impact on you practice?

A. Well we do it every day. So, it impacts on our daily practice like I suppose this is my third year doing it now so it is just what happens, it is not a big deal or anything like that. It is just all the learning goes on in it.

Are there aspects of Aistear you find hard?

A. Yeah I think I find that hard, or even just you know they can just have any choice they want and I get that but then again with the construction all they were doing was getting cars and playing with the cars they weren't building anything. I find hard in terms of trying to get the curriculum covered.

Q20. Will the new curriculum be any easier?

A. I don't know I am not familiar with it yet. I suppose the other side of it as well is like I am lucky that I have an EAL teacher coming in 20 minutes but say in September we didn't very hard if you were a teacher on your own, like really hard to try you just felt in September because they were doing all the testing I was just like all I was doing was crowd control here, I am not actually getting in to teach any of them I am just opening sellotape - you know that is all I am doing. And another thing I am finding hard is getting the assessment, the observations done like I really have to force myself to do that and I can see the

PD opportunities to explore Aistear as a curriculum framework rather than an hour of the day

benefit because they did it to day but I am like oh but I have to get in and teach them or if you have something new you know I am like I am lucky this year I have an SNA in the room and I have the EAI teacher but if I didn't have that I would find it a lot harder, just because I am like oh but I am not teaching them but I know the assessment is important as well.

Q21. You don't find Aistear makes that easy for you? you find it is an extra stress?

A. No not necessarily because it is grand because they are active while you are trying to do the assessment so like they are learning and they are active but I suppose myself I am like I kind of do be thinking - oh but I need to get in there and teach them the vocab especially with all the EAL kids but then today I was watching you know I was this is this week I am sitting down and I am observing everyday role play and I am writing the notes and that is what I am doing and you know I did see so much that I wouldn't have known otherwise if I had been in there playing, I think if you are in there playing you don't see what they are actually like because they are in there playing with you and interacting but then when you step away you go Jesus that person interacts with nobody - all he has done is put a hat and a jacket on for this whole time you know so it just teaches you those things that you wouldn't know - so it is really important but it is just making myself do it.

at it this year, on the last two years I was kind of focused on that hour whereas this year I am more about the whole day is Aistear related but then I don't know maybe I need a bit more training because I am like well is that so everything has to be through play, or through games and rhymes and songs and things like that, that is what I would take from it so you try and bring a lot of that and do the language through games and rhymes and

Aistear providing opportunities for classroom assessment

<p>songs and stuff like that but I think it is something that I could maybe get a bit better on like as if you know when you are reading them a story that is not play but still there is loads and loads of learning, but like the Aistear curriculum would recommend all that anyways. When I hear play I hear games and songs when am I doing all that? but when I hear Aistear I would be like oh yeah I am doing loads of Aistear. I know I am doing loads of Aistear but I wouldn't call Aistear Play either I know play is a big part of it and rhymes and songs and games and making things fun and active but then there is the</p>	
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Themes arising from T3 classroom observations

Aistear as an assessment tool

Incorporating play throughout the day

PD opportunities to explore Aistear as a curriculum framework rather than an hour of the day

School policy in promoting children's independence and resilience.

Classroom environment: Bright

Incorporating play throughout the day

School policy in promoting children's independence and resilience

Interview Questions for P 2 (Drawing on emergent themes from T 3 and T 4 interviews and observation)

Can you tell me about the philosophy of the school in relation to how children learn, particularly in relation to the children in junior infants?

Priorities?

Does the school have a policy in relation to promoting children's independence?

Resilience?

Can you give me some examples?

How do you see the role of the junior infant teacher?

Can you describe how the teachers are supported in their role?

To what extent is the organisation of the classroom space decided by the individual teachers?

How much autonomy does the teacher have in how they deliver the new primary curriculum?

Can you give me some examples?

Are there opportunities for the teachers to share their collective knowledge from their day to day experiences?

Could you describe how that might work in practice?

To what extent are children with EAL supported in the classrooms?

Aistear

Can you talk to me about how you introduce a new primary curriculum?

Can you explain to me how new policy initiatives are introduced to the teachers?

Government policy

For example:

Healthy Eating

Food Dudes

Read and Write Numeracy and Literacy

School policy

Friendly Friday?

To what extent does the implementation of new policy initiatives impact on the children and the teachers?

Can you describe the impact on the teachers in relation to the new primary curriculum?

Could you describe how you see Aistear supporting the new primary curriculum?

How would you describe the school's engagement with Aistear?

What professional development opportunities do the teachers have available to them to link the new primary curriculum with Aistear?

Play

What role do you see play as having in the children's learning and development within the classroom?

Is it central/peripheral?

To what extent are teachers supported or facilitated to incorporate a play based pedagogy within their class?

Is there a school policy in relation to play?

Outdoors

Weather?

Assessment

What is your opinion in relation to Aistear supporting assessment of children's learning?

To what extent do you feel play as a helpful way to assess a child's learning?

What do you see as the challenges teachers face in the class room in relation to assessment?

Parental Involvement

Could you tell me what role you feel parents have in their child's learning?

In your opinion, what are the challenges to involving parents in the school?

Ideally how would you like to engage parents?

Appendix 12: A Sample of the Analyses of T2 Interview to inform Observational Framework

Interview Transcript T2	Observational interest	Themes
<p>Q1. What is your philosophy in relation to how children learn? how do you think they learn?</p> <p>A. I suppose I think they learn when they are interested, when it is something that catches their attention, I think they learn well when there is interaction involved when it is not just teacher to them, when you give them a chance to engage with you in an interaction to ask questions to contribute like I don't think it is just that they learn from the teacher I think they learn a lot from each other as well from engaging with each other. Active learning and visual learning like again it is not the traditional teacher talk and they listen but active learning and visuals are important in their learning too.</p>	<p>They learn when they are interested</p> <p>When it is something that catches their attention</p> <p>When there is interaction involved when it is not just teacher to them</p> <p>When you give them a chance to engage with you in an interaction to ask questions to contribute</p> <p>They learn a lot from each other as well from engaging with each other.</p> <p>Active learning and visuals are important in their learning too.</p> <p>Not the traditional teacher talk</p>	<p>Actively engaged</p> <p>Active learning</p> <p>Learning from each other</p>
<p>Q2. What is your perception of child centred?</p> <p>A. I suppose like there are different aspects, there is the aspect like that when you make decisions it is what is best for the child, not what is what for the best of the adults, it is how is the child going to be helped? how is the child going to learn the most? and then I think as well child centeredness is about finding out about the children in your class and going with their interests and their needs and catering for that as well, that they are at the centre of it and that their needs are catered</p>	<p>When you make decisions, it is what is best for the child, not what is what for the best of the adults.</p> <p>Child centeredness is about finding out about the children in your class</p> <p>Going with their interests and their needs and catering for that as well.</p>	<p>Following the child's interest</p>

Interview Transcript T2	Observational interest	Themes
for - I think that is child centred.		
<p>What is your role as a teacher in the class for these children who are 4 and 5 years in relation to their learning?</p> <p>A. I suppose you are the organiser, you organise the day and you make sure it is all running smoothly and you make sure they are getting all aspects of the curriculum, so you have the plans to make so that it is not just ad hoc learning, so that there is a focus to it. That things are integrating together, that you are not teaching lots of different topics that your topic is spreading across the curriculum cause especially for young children because I think that is how they learn the best. I think planner and organiser is one of your roles, then I think when you are in the class it's kind of facilitating the learning and you know really listening to the kids so you can catch things and go with the conversations so like you know today we were doing Autumn and I said ok right at the weekend what did you see? and one of the girls was talking about going to her Nannies house and building a pile of leaves - so then we were doing a song, so we sang a song about the pile of leaves and then it was back to - 'well I didn't jump right in because I had my clothes on' and then it was back to the song and then it went well why wouldn't she jump right in and so on - while that wasn't where the conversation was going if you</p>	<p>You make sure they are getting all aspects of the curriculum</p> <p>That things are integrating together</p> <p>Not teaching lots of different topics that your topic is spreading across the curriculum</p> <p>Facilitating the learning</p> <p>Really listening to the kids so you can catch things and go with the conversations</p> <p>Tap into what they say and to grab all the learning opportunities and the language development that you can</p>	<p>Integration of subjects</p> <p>Facilitating learning</p> <p>Listening to the children</p> <p>Promoting opportunities for language development</p> <p>Scaffolding</p>

Interview Transcript T2	Observational interest	Themes
<p>are listening you get so much learning if you can just go with the flow, so I think that's your role as well to really listen to the kids and to tap into what they say and to grab all the learning opportunities and the language development</p>		

Appendix 13: A Sample of the Observational Framework Sample Completed T3

Observation Framework for T3		<p>Classroom very organised, warm and bright. Lovely atmosphere on arrival. The room is set out with four tables: Bees, Butterflies, Caterpillar and Snails. The windows are clear for the children to see out. Posters on the wall ‘Rules for Good Listening’ ‘Good Manners’</p> <p>Children asked to tidy up and helped by staff to get coats and snack time. T3 moves water to snack time on board. Wears jacket and goes out (on yard duty)</p> <p>T3 eyes in front, hands on hips, zip our lips and children walk out in line.</p>
Peer Interactions	Time	Comments
Children learning from each other		
Learning in small group		
Individual children’s activity		
Children actively engaged		T3 says hello to all the children who come in quietly and then chatting and singing. The children hang up their coats and hats as the teacher engages with them.
Teacher Led	8:30am	<p>I want to see coats off, lunch in your bags, homework in your bags. T3 counts down 2-1-0 quietest table gets a star – a star to Bees and Snails. T3 Laimh a suas, laimh amach, laimh trasna.</p> <p>Support teacher comes into take his language children.</p> <p>T3 teacher invites children to sing – laimh amach, laimh sios, laimh isteach. Sing song in Irish – very interactive about weather.</p> <p>Interactive questions – answer prompted. Children reminded to stay in seats. Whiteboard story – introduces words/cards first.</p>

		<p>Then story on white board – children listen and reported ‘Three Little Pigs’.</p> <p>T3 mixes sequence of cards and interacts with children in Irish for sequence all in Irish – invites children to say what is the first picture – ‘come up and show me’.</p>
Child led		<p>T3 Introduces the children to me and reminds them of the sheet they coloured in to say they were happy with me coming to see them do their work.</p>
Collaborative	10:40am	<p>T3 reminds children to be in seat.</p> <p>T3 Children stand up, laimh laimh eile</p> <p>T3 Invites children to sit down, story time - Story about airport.</p> <p>T3 chooses a table to come and sit on mat ‘quietest one’ then next, then next.</p> <p>Children very very quiet (participating)</p> <p>T3 ‘legs in a basket’ ‘hands to yourself’</p> <p>‘Song on listening well’</p> <p>Story</p> <p>‘The Airport’ links to role play new words introduced on flip chart – (teacher led but interactive).</p> <p>T3 goes through sequence cards of story and goes through words 1-8.</p> <p>T3 invites children back to seats</p> <p>T3 stands in front and mimics hands up, hands down.</p>
Individuality of child Individual Choice		<p>As the children finish up their play activity ‘Aistear Time’ they are free to go to the reading area, they are also free to move from station to station. The children move to the chill area to chat and interact with each other and read books.</p> <p>T3 laimh suas, laimh trasna.</p> <p>Close eyes, ‘think what makes you happy?’</p> <p>‘When my mammy gives me a hug’.</p> <p>‘When my brother does funny things’.</p> <p>‘When I bring my bike to school’.</p> <p>‘When my mammy gives me ice-cream’.</p> <p>‘When it is Christmas or Halloween or trick or treat’.</p> <p>‘When my mammy gives me a lollipop’.</p> <p>‘When I wake up and have a sleepover’</p> <p>‘When my mum gives me kisses’.</p>
PE	11:00am - 11:30am	<p>Children given a few minutes to find space bubble and sing a song</p> <p>Penguin game</p> <p>[Teacher led but interactive]</p> <p>Some children engage but others do own think – ok. Chat about ‘bear’, ‘a mouse’, ‘snake’.</p>

	11:30am	<p>T3 calls out action animals Child calls out ‘a lion’, they use ‘lion’. What time is it ‘Mr Wolf’? T3 invites children to hold hands in a circle. [Interactive but teacher led]</p> <p>Return to class</p>
Snack time	11:45am 12:30pm	<p>T3 goes for lunch. Peppa Pig put on screen during snack time, (about fruit).</p> <p>Children get on coats</p> <p>Coats off and sing a song about man in moon. Children talk about not getting prizes, ‘T3 I don’t want to hear any more about prizes’.</p> <p>T3 awards a star to snails – bees table – put on chart. Nursery Rhyme for homework: Twinkle All sing together and do actions Child wanted again, T3 maybe later.</p>
Promote Independence	12:40pm	<p>Assembly time ‘Happiness’ looking out for shining starts.</p> <p>T3 let me see ‘happy face’ it’s ok to be sad, angry emotions – hand up. When sad can talk to a mammy/daddy/friend (child led also).</p>

Notes:

- Friendly Friday children can mix around, T: I hate friendly Friday.
- Intercom voice of child to say this is happy week when bell rings at 11:30am to have minutes.
- Behaviour traffic lights – get opportunity to go back.
- Policy - Food Dudes For a few weeks eat fruit and veg and get a treat.
- Dance to go ‘noodle’.com / Dinostamp – really fun and active all do their own thing
- Star to best children
- Goodbye song

Sing song to line up one by one quietest

Appendix 14: A Sample of Raw Data from T1

Raw Data T 1 Interview 16th October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>Q1 What is your philosophy or how do you perceive how children learn?</p> <p>A. Well I think they learn by being active learners and by you know doing activities in a group so you know all the tables you know they are laid out in four groups and some of the EAL children you know they are spread out so you know</p> <p>they are working with a child who em is a native English speaker and em I kind of have it all mixed up like that you know so it is mixed abilities so you know I don't really have anyone with special needs but em yeh I think they learn from each other and from doing things and from working with concrete materials, being very active and experiencing the actual task themselves and manipulating the materials and em you know kind of constructing their learning. So, we do em maths activities and English activities every day - actually four days a week. That's when I have my support teacher in Mary Jane she comes in from - in the morning up until small break so she is here all that time and we do our English and maths activities then and at the minute I am doing Aistear in the afternoon because I find just I think they are tired in the afternoon, it is only their first stint in school so we are doing Aistear in the afternoon but I find that at some point I am going to move that to the morning time when Mary Jane is in the room as well, she will be in the room for that so em so like the mornings are very busy, em very active and yeh I think that is my philosophy.</p> <p>We don't have any workbooks. It is kind of tiring you know you run out of ideas you know you run out of steam at certain points of the year but em you know you are constantly kinda thinking of em different activities and you know you are looking at your resources and thinking you know how can I use them, how can I apply them to</p>	<p>Active learners</p> <p>Group activities</p> <p>English speaking</p> <p>Collaborative and peer learning</p> <p>Active learners</p> <p>English and maths daily</p> <p>Support (Teacher)</p> <p>Doing Aistear</p> <p>Curriculum</p> <p>Curriculum</p> <p>Professional Development</p>	<p>Pedagogy How Children Learn</p> <p>Pedagogy Experiential learning (Dewey)</p> <p>Curriculum</p> <p>Aistear (as a 'thing')</p> <p>Support (emerging Curriculum)</p>

Raw Data T 1 Interview 16th October 2016	First Codes	Cycle	Analytical Memos
<p>teach whatever objective you know so. That's how we do it.</p> <p>Q2. What is your understanding of a curriculum that is child centred?</p> <p>A. I suppose like we had our oral language English in service there on Tuesday and one of the activities we did was the presenter read a story and we were sitting in a circle and then in the end she said I am just going to pass this talking peg around the circle and everyone can make a comment so as the people made their comment and passed the peg on to the next person she never opened her mouth or said you know 'oh well done' or 'good boy' or whatever you know she never praised anyone for their comment and she said in the end that sometimes we do that without realising it and then the children can kind of sensor what they say, they want to please you so they can kind of get to know what answer you are looking for so like I would say that isn't child centred you know they can kind of change their answer to please you. So sometimes withholding your comment is good because they have more freedom then in their answer.</p> <p>Q 3. What do you see your role as a teacher of children age 4-5 years?</p> <p>A. They are 4-5, like I remember all the theory I learnt when I went to college and it's you know facilitator and you know all of that you know I feel like now I am giving you the answer to please you (laughs). yeh like I have a child a daughter who is in senior infants, the teacher is brilliant but she also taught me so I remember her and the teacher she had in junior infants well I had her as well and I remember them and I would say her classroom is totally different to this one, they have workbooks and you know it is not a DEIS school so you know that drive to get them active probably isn't there as much.</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Personal biographies</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Personal histories</p> <p>Teacher led but</p>		<p>Pedagogy Voice of the Child</p> <p>Social Construct In relation to how children learn</p> <p>attending a DEIS school?</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>

Raw Data T 1 Interview 16th October 2016	First Cycle	Analytical Memos
<p>A. So for instance when we are doing our activities, Maryjane works with one group and I work with another and</p> <p>but I do have to check in on them you know, but</p> <p>Q 20. Is there an aspect that you feel if you got more support in relation to Aistear that it would serve more of a purpose for you that you would be able to incorporate it a bit more into the day?</p> <p>A. I suppose as well I was a bit worried in June, I hadn't done Aistear before, and I looked on line during the Summer for a specific Summer course that would teach Aistear and I couldn't find one so the one that I did was 'Infant Education' so it touched on everything but there wasn't one Summer course specifically about Aistear which is what I was looking for. At the same time having said all that it is kind of natural, you know it is not rocket science, like you can see yourself how it works, once the children are there in front of you can see exactly how it works, they teach you how it works and you know it is great that Una the teacher next door she spent time I think a year or two ago designing the Aistear box's without that like you know that would be something</p>	<p>Aistear as a 'Thing' separate from other subjects</p> <p>Aistear not part of the subject – not part of English or language learning</p> <p>'So, I think Aistear doesn't feel like it</p>	

Reflection

I was aware that I interrupted a few times, this was mainly to elaborate on the question if I felt T1 was not clear on what I was asking. Made a note to myself to ask the question and then try to remain quiet. However, this is not always easy as you also need to be engaged with the participant, so it is finding that balance.

I felt the interview went well. T1 was a little nervous and restrained at the start of the interview but once we got into the second question they were more relaxed and reflective in their answers.

Areas of interest highlighted during transcribing

Forms of assessment

Checklist

Documents Required

Assessment Checklist designed by school

Children's Rainbows and Red Bird/Pumpkin pictures

Areas of interest Stage 1 data analysis P1

Support with Aistear training

Aistear links well to ne language strand

Pressure to stay on track

Lack of time to work with EAL children

Aistear a s a Block – a thing separate

Parental involvement

Appendix 15: A Sample of First Cycle Coding of T2 Interview

Raw Data T 2 Interview 16th October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>Q1. What is your philosophy on how children learn?</p> <p>1. Yeh well I believe in the holistic development of the child and that, it is not just their cognitive knowledge that you are developing it is their physical, emotional and social aspects that they are developing too.</p> <p>I suppose here in particular in infants it is all active learning, hands on discovery learning, the more colours there are the better for them and I think like using different resources like different ways of learning like music, visual aids they all help learners in different ways -help the children to remember the things more.</p> <p>Fun and play is another huge one, that if the children are enjoying something they are much more willing to participate in it.</p> <p>Q2. And linked to that what is your understanding of child centred or child centred practice?</p> <p>A. That the focus is on the children doing something rather than just sitting down, watching observing that they are the ones that are actually carrying out the investigation</p> <p>or like this week we have doctors so we were investigating the equipment we are not just looking at pictures but they are testing out the toy stethoscope, they are involved in it, hands on.</p> <p>Q 3. And do you see your practice as child centred? are you able to have it child centred with 22 children?</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>‘That you ‘ are developing</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active learning</p> <p>Hands on</p> <p>Multiple resources</p> <p>Role of play in learning</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active and engaged</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active learning</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Didactic approach</p> <p>Em I try to most of the time but then for some things they just need to sit down and listen,</p>	<p>Holistic curriculum</p> <p>Top down approach</p> <p>help the children to remember – one direction learning</p> <p>View of how children learn</p> <p>View of how children learn</p> <p>some things are just too difficult</p>

Raw Data T 2 Interview 16th October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>A. Em I try to most of the time but then for some things they just need to sit down and listen, em some things are just too difficult to teach hands on, things can get a bit crazy different days. some days they are too tired to be left on their own, so I think they need a bit of structure sometimes. Sometimes they are just sitting down and it's not as child centred as I would like it to be.</p> <p>Q4. How do you understand your role as a teacher of children 4-6 years here in this class? What do you see your role as being?</p> <p>A. A facilitator of learning and someone who is very welcoming. It is often the children's first year in the school new environment new faces, it can be a big change in their lives, so someone who they can rely on and come to and someone who is approachable I suppose. Just to make the environment as comfortable and welcoming as it can be. I suppose to aid them in their learning and to help them discover new things, develop independence, social skills.</p> <p>Q 10. How much of your classroom day would you say is child initiated- do they get a chance to initiate any learning or any new thinking ?</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Supporting children</p> <p>Being approachable</p> <p>Provide a welcoming environment</p> <p>New environment – change</p> <p>difficult challenges</p> <p>Helping children to mix</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Promote independence</p> <p>Environment</p> <p>The need for visuals lots of colours</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>less material on board is less</p> <p>maybe I would like to say 25% but I don't know. They would have an input into what we do. They would have a choice like colouring or drawing or writing, they would have some bit of a choice.</p>	<p>to teach hands on</p> <p>Their purpose is to be there to help the children and help them discover new things, develop independence, social skills.</p>

Appendix 16: A Sample of the Transcribed Data from T3 Interview

Transcribed Data T 3 October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>Interview T3</p> <p>Q1 What is your philosophy in teaching? how do you think children learn in junior infants?</p> <p>A. Well definitely sitting there passively they are never going to learn that way in Junior infants, I don't think even throughout the whole school that's not the best way for learning at all. So, for me as a teacher I always try to get the children all actively involved as much as possible- and that can be hard depending whatever you are doing, but that would be in the ideal day, as much as possible all day long that they are what we call actively engaged in what we are doing - and here it is great because we have got what we call 'team teaching' so junior infants and senior infants have so much extra hands to kind of make that possible.</p> <p>So, there are three teachers and so there are two independent stations and three teacher led stations and then we alternate literacy, numeracy every four weeks.</p> <p>Me. But the two classes are completely separate?</p> <p>A. Yeh, so in the morning time Jane and Mark go into and then come straight into me after that, so we go straight from play time - Brulla and then we go straight into our stations. So, the whole morning time is just broom, broom. laughs.. So, the same two people come into me - they go into first and then they come into me so during my playtime has - it is only 25 minutes has her team teaching after her morning time whatever she does and then they come into me straight after that - so when you come in for those days</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Environment</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>	<p>The children learn by being active made possible by the number of class helpers</p> <p>The more support in class teachers the more can be done with the children</p>

Transcribed Data T 3 October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>it - because people are like even adults are afraid, they are afraid to fail and that's not you are never going to become more than what you can be if you are not - or while you are afraid.</p> <p>Q 3. What is your understanding of teaching that is child centred? or learning that is child centred?</p> <p>A. That the child's experience is at the centre of it. That you are not kind of, that it is not just 'talk and chalk' that the child is getting to experience the learning and being part of it. So, if it is child centred then the child what their interests are and what they are - what they are kind of drawn to - whether it is art or whatever is kind of maybe brought into it. That you are thinking about the different children and their different strengths in your teaching and learning.</p> <p>Q 4. Can you manage that in the day here with all the pressures?</p> <p>A. Well you know there are a million and one things so I think that the way that it is that you can have ideals that are kind of hard to hit at every moment of the day, but you try to fit it in as much as you can, so by having the child at the centre of your teaching and having child led, child centred learning that that is going to happen hopefully 80%</p> <p>of the time, you know you are never going to get things like that all the time, I think that is just not realistic when you have got just one teacher and so many children.</p> <p>Q 5. How many are there in the class ?</p> <p>A. Luckily we only have 23 this year, but it still feels like so many - laughs.</p> <p>Q 6. So how do you understand your role as a teacher then for children this small - 4-6 what do you see your role as being?</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Child centred</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Pedagogy</p>	<p>Don't be afraid to fail</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Child centred</p> <p>That the child's interests are followed and guided by their interests and their different strengths</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Keeping child centred for all of the time a challenge</p> <p>Class sizes and class numbers</p>

Transcribed Data T 3 October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
A. Em she has her, - her library is set out a bit different		

Appendix 17: A Sample of the Transcribed Data from T4 Interview

Raw Data T 4 Interview 16th October 2016	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Memos
<p>Q 1. What is your philosophy on how children learn?</p> <p>1. Yeh well I believe in the holistic development of the child and that, it is not just their cognitive knowledge that you are developing it is their physical, emotional and social aspects that they are developing too.</p> <p>I suppose here in particular in infants it is all active learning, hands on discovery learning, the more colours there are the better for them and I think like using different resources like different ways of learning like music, visual aids they all help learners in different ways - help the children to remember the things more.</p> <p>Fun and play is another huge one, that if the children are enjoying something they are much more willing to participate in it.</p> <p>Q2. And linked to that what is your understanding of child centred or child centred practice?</p> <p>A. That the focus is on the children doing something rather than just sitting down, watching observing that they are the ones that are actually carrying out the investigation</p> <p>or like this week we have doctors so we were investigating the equipment we are not just looking at pictures but they are testing out the toy stethoscope, they are involved in it, hands on.</p> <p>Q 3. And do you see your practice as child centred? are you able to have it child centred with 22 children?</p>	<p>Pedagogy</p> <p>‘That you ‘ are developing</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active learning</p> <p>Hands on</p> <p>Multiple resources</p> <p>Role of play in learning</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active and engaged</p> <p>Pedagogy</p> <p>Active learning</p> <p>dagogy</p> <p>Didactic approach</p> <p>Em I try to most of the time but then for some things they just need to sit down and listen,</p>	<p>Holistic curriculum</p> <p>Top down approach</p> <p>help the children to remember – one direction learning</p> <p>View of how children learn</p> <p>View of how children learn</p> <p>some things are just too difficult to teach hands on</p>

Appendix 18: Sample of First Stage Coding of Principal Interview

Raw Data Transcripts Interview Principal School B	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Codes
<p>Q: I was writing down a piece from the website about the ethos of the school but it leads into my first question which is philosophy of the school in relation to how children learn, particularly in junior and senior infants because that's what I'm focusing on. So, what's your view of how children learn in early years, it's quite a big one?</p> <p>P: It is a big one because we've literally just developed a new mission statement we've been framing them this morning and putting them round the school so that would give a good starting point. That would certainly be the underlying philosophy of our school and that is the foundation I suppose, everything else kind of comes from that. We drew this up last term in consultation with staff, students and families and that's sort of we did surveys and workshops with the kids and we had a staff planning day and we tried to merge all our ideas, there was a committee that drew up this mission statement and we launched it with a day in December to launch it. The school is growing and changing all the time we're thirteen now, some of the children were joking saying "we're a teenage school now" and it definitely feels like that so we're growing and changing and we thought this year; you know you go through phases and when we moved to this building and we were five years old and then we had a tenth birthday celebration at some stage and then we felt this year we did an ethos evaluation some years ago with Educate Together and then we thought this year staff were changing so we thought maybe it was time to sit down again and have a look. It's important to ground yourselves so this is what we did, based on that I suppose we're very diverse, diversity would be key but everybody</p>	<p>Creativity fun emotional and Aistear Framework</p>	<p>To look at Mission Statement on website</p>

Appendix 19: Sample of First Stage Coding of Principal B Interview

Raw Data Transcripts Interview Principal School B	First Cycle Codes	Analytical Codes
<p>Q 18: That you all draw up separately?</p> <p>P: Yes, each school has to draw up their own one so English, Irish, Maths, History, Geography, all that kind of thing and then we have one for ethical education because that's our Religion bit. So, we try and involve families and parents as much as we can so I suppose child centred very often in the infant classrooms and in the other classrooms very often you'd find parents in there which the children obviously love if their Mum or Dad or Granny or whoever is in but the parents equally enjoy. So, it could be preparing food in the home school room and showing them food, they eat at home or food that's for a special event or celebration</p> <p>- teachers do a lot of planning after school so it would be child centred in that way in that they sit down and they plan ahead their themes very much with the children in mind, "what are we going to need" for example said with the restaurant theme coming up in a couple of weeks there are a couple of lovely books it'd be great to have so I order those. A lot of my role would be enabling the teachers so if they need stuff I have the credit card or if we want to organise courses or stuff for the parents, organising for Dublin West to do a talk about Aistear for parents or I go over there and I do the Principals Aistear thing and make sure the teachers all get their courses, you know that kind of thing so I'm more about enabling and facilitating.</p> <p>ways they talk about Aistear as though it's some new amazing thing, I was doing it 33 years ago.</p> <p>, dressing up, very similar. Different obviously but the idea was the same.</p> <p>Q 23: Different because they're</p> <p>"learning through play" so we added this in, we have the English, Irish, Maths,</p>	<p>Curriculum</p> <p>Parental Involvement</p> <p>Child centred</p> <p>Aistear</p> <p>Play – is important Human Rights and Children's Rights The right to play</p>	

Appendix 20: Sample of Second Stage Coding for PA

2 nd Stage Coding P1 Transcript Themes	Memos
<p>Collaborative working and Communication</p> <p>Q: Okay so the philosophies</p> <p>P: The philosophies can be a hypothetical dream that this is the way you want things to be but it doesn't necessarily have that but you have to have a philosophy from where you're coming from but I'd more focus on a framework of how things are done but I would say that for Early Ed there's a huge amount of planning from half one to half two I know the teachers will meet, they could meet maybe twice a week informally go through what hasn't worked, what has worked, new ways of doing things, sharing ideas, it's all collegiality, that's a huge part of it. As regards philosophy if it came from my perspective as a leadership principal that unless the children are safe, they're happy, they're secure and the teacher has a good kind of... we have this new thing with the teaching council now, a code of ethics or standards/procedures, if all of those are being adhered to and you've got a good environment, a good culture, good context then your philosophy kind of comes from that and then the teaching comes from that and that's how it impacts on the children. But that's kind of to quote Steven Graham, that's more a macro way of looking at things whereas to focus on the micro side of philosophy is very simple,</p> <p>You can have the best philosophy in the world but if you haven't got an environment that's conducive to learning it's very difficult then.</p> <p>P: The culture is there, it's there already of sharing ideas and working together, talking to you and having quite robust conversations which is important because ultimately the teachers are all working together. In the classrooms they have their own ways of doing things but they have to do things that are benefiting the children on an equal level, you can't have one parent here "well you're doing this" and another, that doesn't work so to be quite open and frank, we have to do this and we have to do it properly, we can't just decide and go off on our own little trips you know.</p>	<p>The importance of the children's safety, happiness and security</p>
<p>Environment/Context</p>	<p>Meeting the children's needs</p>

2 nd Stage Coding P1 Transcript Themes	Memos
Collaborative working and Communication	
If you've got a good environment, a good culture, good context then your philosophy kind of comes from that and then the teaching comes from that and that's how it impacts on the children	
Aistear	
<p>Q 25: You've answered this one too; what extent are the AL's supported in the classroom so we've covered that. If we move onto Aistear, can you talk about how you introduce Aistear into the new curriculum are we onto the new primary curriculum yet, the oral language is the first bit isn't it still onto that, is it a difficult....</p> <p>P: I don't think it's difficult to do it's just a question of how do you I suppose shove it into something that's working very well already, that's the difficulty, that's the difficulty with teachers, where do we start with this and where is it actually taking us because it's the milestones and gauging that you are plotting the children. I don't think there'll be any issue marrying the two with Aistear from my perspective, I think it's more for the teachers the oral language we get a class of twenty children, how do we plot them and if we do plot them how do we get through to the next stage, whatever programme is on in the classroom Aistear that'll work into itself, it won't be like we'll have to sit and stay how do we do this with Aistear it'll just be a seamless transition. At the</p>	Aistear as a 'thing'
Curriculum (New)	Curriculum and Policy
<p>... I'll show you before you go we have check lists for infants that at Christmas time the teachers would work towards, literacy and numeracy check lists so they would kind of be bound by them, they would be there in the background that they would be trying to cover those skills but there'd be a little bit of scope and flexibility as to how.</p>	

Appendix 21: Sample of Second Stage Coding of PB Transcripts

2nd Stage coding P 2 Transcript Themes	Analytical Memos
<p>Aistear</p> <p>being themselves, you know, in the early years creativity and fun is in there, that would be very important and it's all there, academics are very important but emotional and social are very important that's why I suppose the Aistear approach, the Aistear framework would be something that we take quite seriously. And we have and have probably explained to you already that we've extended up into first class this year.</p>	<p>Creativity fun emotional and Aistear Framework</p>
<p>Curriculum</p>	
<p>Q 20: It's what you all deserve. P: Yes it's what every school should be like and I suppose then the girls and lads - all the teachers do a lot of planning after school so it would be child centred in that way in that they sit down and they plan ahead their themes very much with the children in mind, "what are we going to need" for example said with the restaurant theme coming up in a couple of weeks there are a couple of lovely books it'd be great to have so I order those. A lot of my role would be enabling the teachers so if they need stuff I have the credit card or if we want to organise courses or stuff for the parents, organising for Dublin West to do a talk about Aistear for parents or I go over there and I do the Principals Aistear thing and make sure the teachers all get their courses, you know that kind of thing so I'm more about enabling and facilitating.</p> <p>Basically principal is all things to all people is what you're supposed to be but it doesn't say that anywhere in writing but a teacher is required to do short term planning, long term planning so they would do short term like a weekly or fortnightly plan and then they do long term plans so term or yearly plans for each subject and then they're required to</p>	<p>Curriculum Planning</p> <p>Curriculum planning after school teachers meet</p> <p>Principal – role is to enable the teachers</p> <p>Curriculum Planning part of a teacher's role</p>

2nd Stage coding P 2 Transcript Themes	Analytical Memos
<p>Aistear</p> <p>submit to me what's called a Cuntas ..like a monthly report just sent at the end of every Curriculum EAL</p> <p>Q 53: Then I've seen this in action but to what extent are children with English as an additional language supported in the classrooms?</p> <p>P: Just during Aistear or in general?</p> <p>Q 54: In general, just for junior and senior?</p> <p>P: Well I suppose our approach would be early intervention so we have lots of support, well lots, I suppose we have lots of support teachers, we'd love more and we're still waiting for the announcement on this new model of support to see what our allocation will be next year and hopefully we'll get more but we have two teachers that are specifically EAL teachers and they're historical posts because we would have been one of the schools that had high levels of EAL students back when you use to have to apply every year for your teachers and send in your numbers and your scores and you used to have to do that every single year.</p> <p>conversation. That's how EAL works but there would be withdrawal of groups for sure and there would be a lot more EAL support obviously at the junior end of the school especially junior infants, it's incredible that there are still children arriving with no English even though they've been born in Ireland, we thought by this stage we would have got past all of that but no, they don't speak English at home.</p>	
DEIS	
I suppose we're lucky being a DEIS school we have that bit of extra funding	DEIS and Funding to support materials for Aistear
Pedagogy	Values and Beliefs Caring and enabling Child Rights Play
Q 4: The rooms are lovely, that really struck me when I was in with the two girls, they're	

2nd Stage coding P 2 Transcript Themes	Analytical Memos
Aistear	
<p>just very pleasant to be in for a child to work in.</p> <p>P: They're child centred I suppose and the teachers and myself and whoever, we try and use</p>	

Appendix 22: Themes from Stage One Coding of PA Transcripts

Themes from stage 1 coding PA Transcript
Collaborative working Collegiality Curriculum (New) Professional Development Environment Pedagogy Aistear Values and Beliefs School Policies Government Policies Communication Understanding of how children learn Department of Education Inspection Parental Involvement Role of Parents Total number of themes 15

Appendix 23: Themes from Second Stage Coding of PA Transcripts

Themes from stage 2nd coding PA Transcript
Collaborative working Curriculum (New) Professional Development Environment Pedagogy – values and beliefs Aistear Policies Department of Education Inspection Parental Involvement
Total number of themes 9

Appendix 24: Sample of Data Analysis of Coding from Transcripts T1 and T2

Data Analysis 2 nd Coding Transcripts T1 and T2 School A	
Pedagogy	Memos
<p>T1 = PURPLE T2 = GREEN RED – Interesting Quotes from T1 and T2</p> <p>Q1 What is your philosophy or how do you perceive how children learn?</p> <p>A. Well I think they learn by being active learners and by you know doing activities in a group so you know all the tables you know they are laid out in four groups and some of the EAL children you know they are spread out so you know</p> <p>they are working with a child who em is a native English speaker and em I kind of have it all mixed up like that you know so it is mixed abilities so you know I don't really have anyone with special needs but em yeh I think they learn from each other and from doing things and from working with concrete materials, being very active and experiencing the actual task themselves</p> <p>I think it is good as well to kind of foster independence that they are not always dependent on teacher and that they can manage to do some things by themselves.</p> <p>I suppose at this stage that's all you can really hope for , it will take time and he is happy and he is smiling and all that , but you know he is so quiet, it is just as you were saying about their individuality, I don't know an awful lot about him, when it comes to what they do they draw a picture of their news he says the same thing every time like 'he played football with his daddy ' but like that's a start, but I don't know an awful lot else about him, it will come out eventually.</p> <p>You know because you are kind of very definite in your objectives, you know what you have to cover.</p> <p>----- ----- T 2</p>	

Data Analysis 2 nd Coding Transcripts T1 and T2 School A	
Pedagogy	Memos
<p>1. Yeh well I believe in the holistic development of the child and that, it is not just their cognitive knowledge that you are developing it is their physical, emotional and social aspects that they are developing too.</p> <p>I suppose here in particular in infants it is all active learning, hands on discovery learning, the more colours there are the better for them and I think like using different resources like different ways of learning like music, visual aids they all help learners in different ways -help the children to remember the things more.</p> <p>Fun and play is another huge one, that if the children are enjoying something they are much more willing to participate in it.</p> <p>Q2. And linked to that what is your understanding of child centred or child centred practice?</p> <p>A. That the focus is on the children doing something rather than just sitting down, watching observing that they are the ones that are actually carrying out the investigation</p> <p>Q 15. But there are other times when you are almost on your own then is there?</p> <p>A. Yeh, between breaks I am often on my own and I have my resource teacher most mornings.</p> <p>Q 16. How much of the children's learning involves collaborative learning? Do they get a chance to work together, to plan things out or would that just be in the Aistear hour?</p> <p>A. Yeh this morning now we were doing jigsaws and it was kind of depending on their ability they had a 12 piece a 25 piece, four-piece jigsaw and often the 5 piece the kids who are doing those are finished really fast so they know they tidy up their jigsaw and they walk around and go and help someone else so I suppose that is a bit of learning collaboratively. In the maths activities and the English activities there is often games, matching games you would be on teams or pair work. English activities we dramatize the nursery rhymes so with their group they pick</p>	<p>Pedagogy and Play</p> <p>Pedagogy Curriculum and</p>

Data Analysis 2nd Coding Transcripts T1 and T2 School A	
Pedagogy	Memos
which character and things like that they were, so they are learning collaboratively.	

Appendix 25: Data Analysis Second Stage Coding of Transcripts T3 & T4 School B

Data Analysis 2nd Coding Transcripts T3 and T4 School B	
Pedagogy	Memos
<p>T3 = Orange</p> <p>T4 = Blue =</p> <p>Q1. What is your philosophy in relation to how children learn? how do you think they learn?</p> <p>A. I suppose I think they learn when they are interested, when it is something that catches their attention, I think they learn well when there is interaction involved when it is not just teacher to them, when you give them a chance to engage with you in an interaction to ask questions to contribute like I don't think it is just that they learn from the teacher I think they learn a lot from each other as well from engaging with each other. Active learning and visual learning like again it is not the traditional teacher talk and they listen but active learning and visuals are really important in their learning too.</p> <p>Q2. What is your perception of child centred?</p> <p>A. I suppose like there are different aspects, there is the aspect like that when you make decisions it is what is best for the child, not what is what for the best of the adults, it is how is the child going to be helped? how is the child going to learn the most?</p> <p>and then I think as well child centeredness is about finding out about the children in your class and going with their interests and their needs and catering for that as well, that they are at the centre of it and that their needs are catered</p>	<p>Active learning</p> <p>Visual Collaborative learning</p> <p>Understanding of how children learn</p> <p>Children were active in their learning during observation</p>
<hr/> <p>T3 Begins Here</p> <p>Q1 What is your philosophy in teaching? how do you think children learn in junior infants?</p> <p>A. Well definitely sitting there passively they are never going to learn that way in Junior infants, I don't think even throughout the whole school that's not the best</p>	<p>Understanding of Child centred</p>

Data Analysis 2nd Coding Transcripts T3 and T4 School B	
Pedagogy	Memos
<p>way for learning at all. So, for me as a teacher I always try to get the children all actively involved as much as possible- and that can be hard depending whatever you are doing, but that would be in the ideal day, as much as possible all day long that they are what we call actively engaged in what we are doing - and here it is great because we have got what we call 'team teaching' so junior infants and senior infants have so much extra hands to kind of make that possible</p>	<p>ad hoc learning Emergent curriculum ?</p>
Aistear	
<p>like I think Aistear is definitely thought me that, the curriculum is kind of general enough and I think we get focussed on like say we are doing the 'home' so everyone has to draw a home, no one cannot draw a home whereas there is nowhere in the curriculum that says the children have to draw their home it is just about mark making and experimenting with different types of materials so you are covering the curriculum so I think it is about being more relaxed about that kind of stuff is good yeh.</p> <p>Q 5. So, you say assembly topic - what is that?</p> <p>A. So every week we have like a kind of Moral or equality or justice linked to learn together which is like our ethical education so like every week there is a topic, this last few weeks we have just being doing the 'Golden Rules' so this week we are doing 'be nice to staff and other visitors that come to the school,</p> <p>planned all the way up to Christmas and then when we come back after Christmas or probably in December actually we will probably plan January, February March and then probably run up to April and then Easter so the long term plans and the short term plans so you are and then you use the curriculum - the one that is for all the subjects is the 1999 so we would use that one to inform the planning and then you plan your short term and long term.</p> <p>A. Yeh, but thankfully like during playtime you have that opportunity so when whatever we have planned for the different areas, so say the shop at the moment the Supermarket is for role play. We are doing for this week anyway, playdoh in the</p>	<p>Aistear Play The stations are set up for the children and they go to whatever station is set up for them</p> <p>On the 4th week the children will have a choice as to what station they can go to</p> <p>Aistear</p> <p>Understanding of how subjects link well together</p> <p>RQ – how play can be used to assess in relation to Maths and number</p> <p>How can teachers be RQ supported to incorporate learning through play and not just have an hour of play that they feel they need to ‘get in there with the curriculum’</p>

Data Analysis 2nd Coding Transcripts T3 and T4 School B	
Pedagogy	Memos
creative area, junk art, the Jago blocks in construction and then small world	
Reflection In listening to T2 answers if I felt there were opportunities to explore further what they had said previously I would re-visit with a similar question which I felt worked well as it clarified for me their thinking on the subject, in particular how they felt about play.	

Appendix 26 (A): Coded DEIS Action Plan Involvement of Outside Agencies

DEIS Action Plan 2015 – 2016

Our Priority: Involvement of outside agencies

Our Target: To make optimum use of the involvement of outside agencies

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Who will do it?	When will it be done by?	Codes and Memos
1. Invite (school counsellor) to talk to staff regarding bereavement and children		October 2015	No specific mention of Junior or Senior Infants
2. 5 th class to take part in Junior Entrepreneurs' Programme in association with JEP		October 2015	
3. 5 th class to take part in 'One Book, One Community' Project in partnership with St. Patrick's SNS, Corduff & Riversdale CC		March 2016	
		February 2016	
4. Class to take part in 'Roots of Empathy' Programme in association with Barnardos		November 2015	
5. Amnesty International to talk to staff about children's rights		School Year 2015\2016	
6. 2 nd & 6 th class teachers & pupils to liaise with pastoral workers in preparation for First Holy Communion & Confirmation ceremonies		October 2015	
7. Targeted children from classes to participate in a		Ongoing	
		Ongoing	

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Who will do it?	When will it be done by?	Codes and Memos
<p>reading programme in association with Barnardos</p> <p>8. Interschool activities to be organised where convenient (Sporting activities, Quizzes etc.)</p> <p>9. Liaise with Mulhuddart Community Centre regarding use of their facilities , attendance at after-school club and other community events</p>			
<p>Who will monitor progress?</p> <p>How will progress be monitored?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion with pupils involved • Discussion with outside agencies • Discussion at staff meetings 	<p>Success Criteria - How will we know this worked?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased involvement in listed areas • Positive feedback from pupils, teachers & outside agencies • The various CPD courses will take place for staff • Interschool activities will be organised 	<p>Review Date: October 2016</p>	<p>Professional Development</p> <p>The various CPD courses will take place for staff</p>

Appendix 26 (B): Coded DEIS Plan Literacy

DEIS Action Plan 2015 – 2016

Our Priority: Literacy First Steps Reading and Writing

Our Target: To continue improving the teaching of First Steps writing, to improve the structure and outcome of guided reading lessons, to improve the children's attitude to reading

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Analytical notes	When will it be done by?	Codes and Memos
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading Week : Buddy Reading, Read & Relax, Poster Competitions, Book Review Competitions, Jim Jam Jamboree Infants- First Classes 2. Whole-school approach to use of SALF 3. Oral Language- Introduced Progression Steps, distributed to all staff 	Whole-school approach to use of SALF ?	Ongoing	Jim Jam Jamboree Infants- First Classes This was the only mention of Junior and Senior infants class in relation to literacy
How will progress be monitored? Staff Meetings Year head Meetings Children's work samples	Success Criteria -How will we know this worked? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive feedback from meetings • Teachers using the resource packs and teaching explanation and exposition genres in their classes • Improved results in standardised tests • Evidence of increased awareness and knowledge of exposition and explanation genres amongst students and teachers (teacher & pupil surveys) • Evidence of increased confidence in teaching the above genres (teacher survey) • Positive attitude towards 'One Book, One Community' project reflected in survey results 		

Appendix 26 (C): Coded DEIS Action Plan Numeracy

DEIS Action Plan 2015 – 2016

Our Priority: Numeracy, Tables, Mental Maths and Assessment

Our Target: To improve the standards of tables throughout the school, to teach mental maths daily, to formalise and implement assessment strategies

No mention in relation to numeracy in the early years

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Who will do it?	When will it be done by?	Codes and Memos
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers use ideas for daily mental maths lesson (in Maths Folder) and with resources (digi-cards, loop cards etc) 10 minutes Mental Maths lesson taught each day as part of a structured 3-part lesson Teachers follow updated booklets in their green folders detailing the explicit teaching of mental strategies in each operation. First class teachers will be upskilled in and explicitly teach mental maths strategies for addition and subtraction. Third class teachers will be upskilled in and explicitly teach mental maths strategies for multiplication and division 			<p>A very obvious gap of any mention of numeracy in relation to the Junior and senior infant classes</p>

Appendix 26 (D): Coded DEIS Plan Parental Involvement

DEIS Action Plan 2015 – 2016

Our Priority: Involvement of parents

Our Target: To encourage more parents to be involved in activities throughout the school

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Who will do it?	When will it be done by?	Codes and memos
1. Reintroduce Science for Fun with 3 rd class parents		December 2015	
2. Reintroduce Maths for Fun to 2 nd Classes		June 2016	Parental Involvement
3. Introduce in-class Christmas Crafts with Junior Infant parents		October 2015	Parental involvement (Literacy Curriculum) –
4. Introduce Cookery to 6 th Classes using parents individual skills and expertise		May 2016	Parental involvement
5. Parents to help with reading in Junior & Senior Infants , 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd classes			Parental involvement (Literacy Curriculum) –

Appendix 26 (E): Coded DEIS Plan for Attendance

DEIS Action Plan 2015 – 2016

Our Priority: Attendance

Our Target: Improve Attendance

Tasks: What steps do we need to take?	Who will do it?	When will it be done by?	Codes and Memos
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual termly attendance prizes awarded to children with 100% attendance in all classes; Junior & Senior Infants presented in classroom 2. 1st–6th class names of children with 100% attendance called out at Award Ceremony (all parents invited), photos displayed to increase awareness 3. Acknowledgement of and small prize given in Junior & Senior Infants to class with best attendance during term to promote good effort of whole class 		<p>End of each term</p> <p>End of each term</p> <p>October, February, May</p> <p>November 2016 & 2017</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Spring 2016 & 2017</p>	<p>Pedagogy Understanding of how children learn Reward promotes attendance Values and beliefs</p> <p>Pedagogy Understanding of how children learn Reward promotes attendance Values and beliefs</p>

Appendix 27: The Three Conceptual Models which Informed the Study

Model 1: The role of context in policy enactment

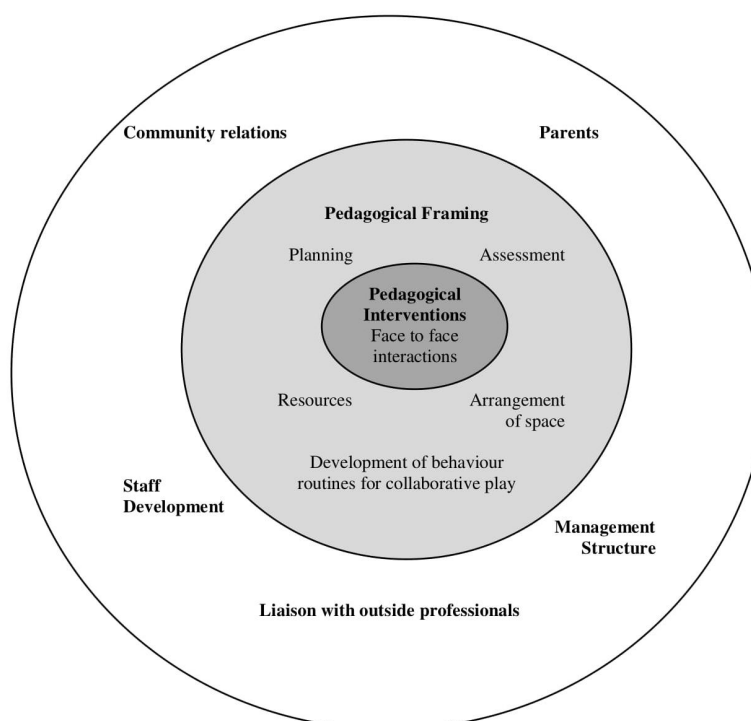
Contextual Dimensions

1. **Situated contexts** (such as locale, school histories, intakes and settings).
 2. **Material contexts** (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure).
 3. **Professional contexts** (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences, and policy management in schools).
 4. **External contexts** (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context, such as Ofsted ratings, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities).
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Source: Contextual Dimensions (Braun et al., 2011, p. 585)

Model 2 : The role of pedagogy in Policy enactment

Figure A: Pedagogical model (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002)



Model 3: Pedagogical interactions model

