



COLÁISTE
HIBERNIA

Play Always Matters: It matters even more in infant classes now

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Play and children's voice



Play a 'leading activity' and holistic activity in early childhood (Vygotsky, 1978)

Dominant social representation of play emphasises play as:

self-initiated, purposeful & free (Smith, 2010)

Enables children to **recreate and rehearse their life experiences**

Drawing on **self-identity and self-expression**

Reveals children's interests and **funds of knowledge** (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Chesworth, 2016)



Characteristics of play

Active	Meaningful
Adventurous & risky	Social & interactive
Communicative	Symbolic
Enjoyable	Therapeutic
Involved	Voluntary

NCCA (2009) **Learning and developing through play** in *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, p.53, <https://www.curriculumonline.ie>

Play with peers central to children's well-being



Playing with peers is key priority for children (Kernan, 2011; Coyne et al. 2018)

COVID effect

Most children (1-10 years) missed their friends, playing with other children, and the routine and structure of ECEC and school settings.

(Survey of 506 parents, May-June 2020, Egan et al. 2021)

Play especially important for social-emotional development

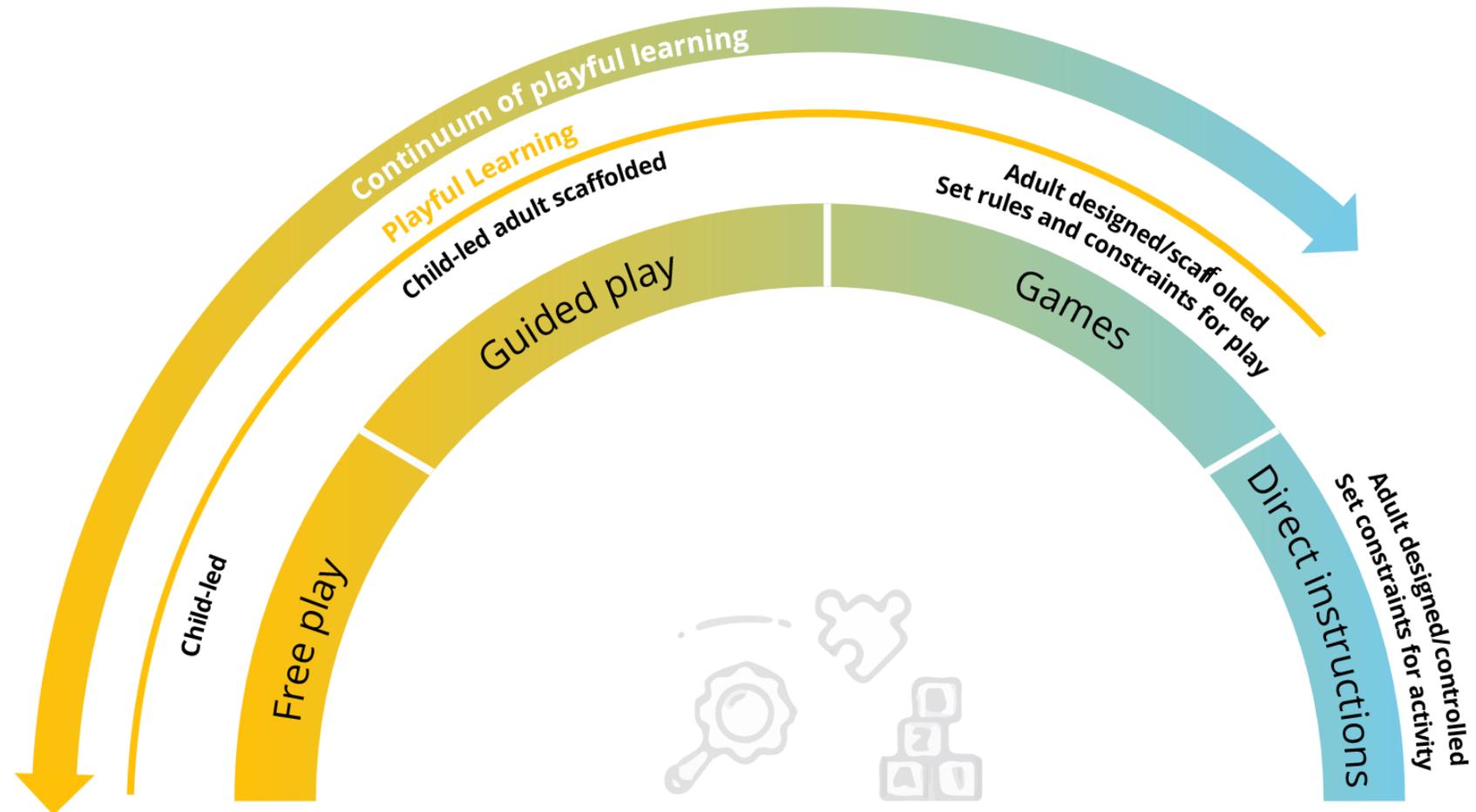
99% teachers planned to use play as pedagogical strategy post COVID school reopening

(Survey of 310 early childhood teachers, O'Keeffe & McNally 2021)

Conundrum of play in education settings

Play can be adult-scaffolded and remain playful in essence

Continuum of Playful Learning



Source: Adapted from Zosh et al. (2017) Learning through play: A Review of the Evidence, LEGO Foundation

Play as a spectrum

Play as a spectrum



	Free Play	Guided Play	Games	Co-opted Play	Playful Instruction	Direct Instruction
Initiated by:	Child	Adult	Adult	Child	Adult	Adult
Directed by:	Child	Child	Child	Adult	Adult	Adult
Explicit learning goal:	No	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Here, we refer to 'serious games' as outlined in Hassinger-Das et al., 2017 in which the game has a learning goal.

'Learning is optimized when adults scaffold an environment or feedback towards a learning goal but the learning environment encourages fun child-led exploration and discovery'.

Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum, *Frontiers in Psychology*, Zosh et al. 2018, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01124/full>



Need to disrupt 'Aistear Hour'?

- 76% teachers reported that they were drawing on the *Aistear* framework in their classroom 'very much'
- Aistear strongly associated in teacher's minds with play-based teaching and learning
- 99% reported being aware of the benefits of play-based learning for young children, and of the benefits of Aistear (91%)
- Some uncertainty re Aistear approaches in teaching and learning:
 - Inadequate resources (37%); training (35%), time (33%)
- Significant differences in way play-based learning used across schools

Children's School Lives in Junior Infants, Report No. 3, CSL Study (Sloan et al. 2021, p.30-31))



Research goal

To make space for children's voice and experience through play in infant classroom in Ireland (especially in contexts of educational disadvantage)

How: Professional development

Enhance professional learning of teacher educators re play-based pedagogy

Research focus: (Phase 1)

Explore understandings of play-based pedagogy in the context of infant classes in primary school in Ireland

Main research question:

How do primary school teacher-educators understand play-based pedagogy and its operationalisation in the infant classroom?



Teacher education in Hibernia College



Professional Master of Education in Primary Education
(PME)

Average cohort size: 1500 students

Blended learning model

Early Childhood Education Module part of Pedagogy
Strand

At least 1 school placement in infant class

Faculty and Adjunct Faculty (practising and retired
teachers & school principals.....)

Methodology



Online
questionnaire &
follow up focus
group

Adjunct Faculty
tutoring ECE
Module 2021-
2022

Ethics approval
granted

Piloting
questionnaire N=2
(30-40 minutes to
complete)

Administered
March 2022

Response Rate-
22 tutors received
the survey link

9 responded =
40.9% return

- 9 = N=4 male and N=5 female

Of these 9, 5 will
go on to Phase 2
to form a focus
group



Survey questions

Respondents
background
(*experience in infant
classes and
implementing Aistear*)

Their understandings
of play-based
pedagogy and its
benefits

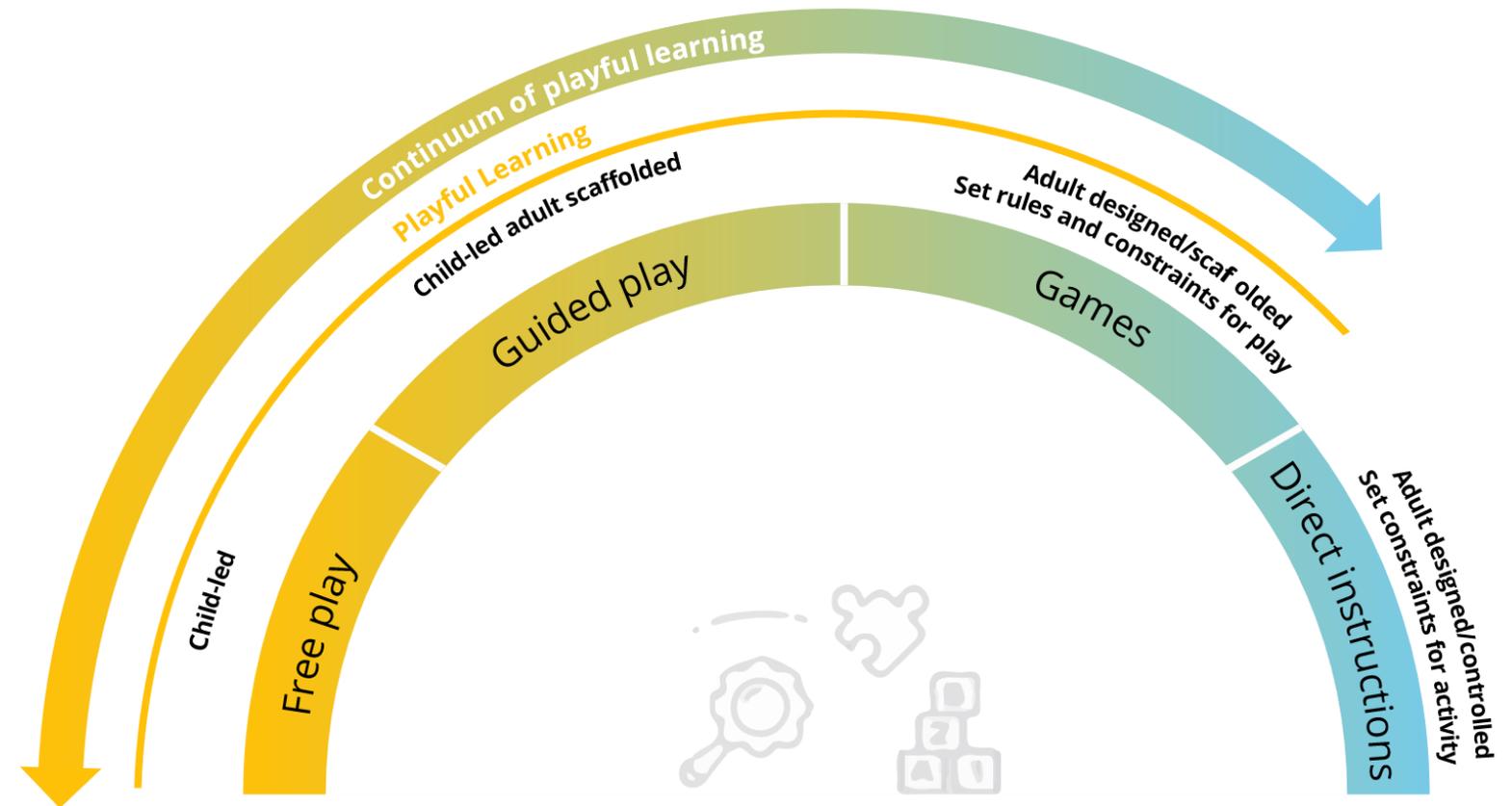
Their understanding
of role of Aistear in
infant classes

Perceptions of factors
promoting play-based
pedagogy

Challenges in
explaining play-based
pedagogy to student
teachers

Student-teachers'
understanding and
implementation of
play-based pedagogy
and Aistear

Keeping in mind



Source: Adapted from Zosh et al. (2017) Learning through play: A Review of the Evidence, LEGO Foundation



Preliminary findings

Basic information

- Various experiences – 23 years to 2 years
- ‘Hour of Aistear’ takes away the real concept of a playful, play-based curriculum framework - ?Aistear and not Play

What is play-based pedagogy

- Play-based learning = teacher activity, thematically planned, chosen and tailored for – based on teacher knowledge of the child
- Allows interaction with peers, communication, provides opportunities to problem solve

Most relevant factors of play-based pedagogy

- Play across the day (indoors and outdoors)
- Freedom
- Collaboration with peers
- Well trained teachers –knowledge, experience and enthusiasm
- Structure – resources, planning

Findings continued



- Challenges in explaining play-based pedagogy to student teachers
 - Station teaching in an Aistear hour is not Aistear – school practice undermines play based pedagogy. Not seeing it – means not valuing it
 - Themes in Aistear get confused with thematic approaches to learning
 - Confusion around the concepts of framework as opposed to curriculum
 - Children can lead and take ownership of the play
 - Play may be different from their own experiences
 - Money and resources are not needed by children for play
 - Choice is theirs, also freedom to move to different stations
 - Engage with critical reading and reflection on play

Next steps



Do a deeper exploration of the data and start to build our report to NCCA from it



Using this data – devise the topics for our focus group discussion

Host the focus group and gather the material
Explore and examine data
Finalise the report and submit



Attend to the data to build professional development sessions for adjunct staff



References

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