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Teachers' Perceptions of Play-based Pedagogy in the Infant Classroom

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HIBERNIA COLLEGE

Teachers' Perceptions of Play-based Pedagogy in the Infant Classroom

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
award of Professional Master of Education in Primary

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Abstract

This research dissertation investigates the implementation and impact of play-based learning in infant education through an interpretive qualitative paradigm. Utilising a convenience purposive sample of five teachers, the study explores educators' perceptions, experiences, and practices related to play-based learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews allowing for in-depth, thematic analysis of the contextual and personal factors influencing teaching methodologies and practices. Findings reveal a spectrum of understandings, practices and interpretations of the role of the teacher in play-based learning. The study contributes to the discourse on educational best practices, offering insights into enhancing children's engagement and learning outcomes through play.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

British Educational Research Association (BERA)

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

Early Childhood and Care Education (ECCE)

Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)

EPV (Extra Personal Vacation)

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Research Council United Kingdom (RCUK)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate teachers' perspectives on play-based learning in the infant classroom. Play based learning is rooted in the understanding that play is a fundamental aspect of human development and learning (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

Hunnicuttt posits that play has always been an essential part of human existence (1990). It is significant that both Plato and Socrates valued the importance of play in childhood education as a central conduit for teaching the liberal arts (Hunnicuttt, 1990). In recent decades, play-based pedagogy has gained recognition and adoption worldwide following the work of seminal theorists such as Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, Reggio Emilia, Piaget and Vygotsky. Many countries have integrated play-based learning into their early childhood education systems, recognizing its effectiveness in promoting holistic development and preparing children for lifelong learning (Bruce, 2015).

In this chapter, the origin of the dissertation, the background, rationale and dissertation layout are all discussed before a succinct conclusion.

1.2 Origin of the Dissertation

In 1992, Ireland signed up to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) which placed children's rights at the centre of social and political agendas. It was incumbent on signatories to facilitate the right of the child to engage and learn through playful pedagogies (ibid.). Some seventeen years later the Irish Government's response finally materialised as Aistear the Irish word for journey (NCCA, 2009).

The personal rationale for undertaking this research stems from working as a substitute teacher. Through classroom practice the practitioner observed and recognised Aistear and play-based learning as very beneficial in the infant classroom. However, as a teacher, one was uncertain of the teachers' role in play-based learning or how play should be integrated into the everyday infant classroom. This research will enable the researcher to ascertain the role, responsibilities and practice of play-based learning in the infant classroom.

1.3 Background to the Project

Today, across the world, play-based pedagogy is a fundamental approach to international early childhood education, valued for its ability to foster creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills in young learners (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). This research is currently very significant as the newly drafted Aistear framework now complements and aligns with The Primary Language Curriculum for infant classes in the Irish Primary School (Department of Education, 2023). Both Aistear and the Primary Curriculum Framework emphasise that early childhood is at a critical time of rapid learning and development. During these years the development of cognitive skills, emotional well-being and social competence build a strong foundation for adult years (ibid.).

1.4 Rationale for the research

It is significant to note that the Aistear Framework is embedded in The National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2024-2033 (Department of Education, Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2024). Recommended requirements for teachers include ‘an emphasis on literacy and numeracy development based on the Aistear framework and reinvigorating literacy and numeracy in day-to-day experiences of children’ (Department of Education, 2024, p.32). The Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile was first introduced in 2016 to children in junior infants to second Class in primary schools (DES Inspectorate, 2018). Chapter Two expands on the suite of policies that underpin Aistear.

1.5 Dissertation Layout

In this dissertation, the introductory chapter contextualises play-based learning in Ireland in the Aistear Framework. Chapter two presents a detailed review of the literature on play-based learning in the infant classroom concluding with the emergent research questions. Chapter three presents the methodological approach, it outlines and justifies the qualitative methodology used in this dissertation. Chapter four, rich in participant voice, presents the findings from the data collection. Chapter five compares and contrasts findings from this research with findings from the literature review. Chapter six draws together the main conclusions and offers recommendations for teachers’ practice in play-based pedagogy.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, it was outlined that this dissertation aims to ascertain teachers' perspectives on using-play based learning in the infant classroom. Evidence from the literature reveals that play-based learning is a significant area in education. Play-based learning offers many benefits to young children including social, emotional, linguistic, cognitive and physical advantages. By conducting this research on play-based learning, it is hoped that the practitioner will become a better teacher and reflective practitioner as a facilitator of play-based learning in the infant classroom. Chapter Two follows with a review of the literature on play-based pedagogy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to review the literature on play-based learning. It begins with a review of the international and national policies affecting and impacting on play-based pedagogy in Ireland. In the next section, definitions and outlooks of play-based pedagogy are discussed with the contributions of the foundational seminal theorists of play-based pedagogy being reviewed. Following this, a critical analysis of the multifarious definitions and outlooks of current play-based pedagogy is undertaken. The final section outlines the benefits of a play-based pedagogy from the literature. The chapter ends with a conclusion and presentation of the emergent research questions.

2.2 Policies and structures impacting play-based learning in Ireland.

In this section, the international and national policies related to children's education and more specifically children's early years' education are discussed and analysed. The first section discusses the impact of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2.2.1 Policies impacting play-based learning

As outlined in Chapter One, Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international treaty that explicitly recognizes the right of every child to engage in play and recreational activities (U.N. 1989). Play-based learning has emerged as a pedagogical approach that not only aligns with this fundamental right but is also recognised in curricula across the globe as having the potential to transform early childhood education (French, 2019; Gray and Ryan, 2016). Ireland ratified the UN Convention on 28 September 1992: As a signatory to the UNCRC, Ireland has an obligation to ensure that children have the opportunity to play and learn through play.

Ireland has established several policies and frameworks that promote play-based learning and impact teaching and learning in the Irish education context. The 'Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme' initiative aims at providing children with access to quality early childhood education, emphasizing play as a fundamental component (Murphy, 2015). The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act of 2004 represents a significant milestone in Ireland's commitment to a more inclusive and equitable education provision for all children of all abilities (EPSEN Act, 2004). Additionally, Aistear: The Early Childhood

Curriculum Framework, promotes play as a central element in early childhood education and focuses on the holistic development of children through play-based learning (NCCA, 2009).

The Aistear Framework, introduced in Ireland in 2009, represents a significant advancement in early childhood education: its aim is to provide quality early childhood education to young children from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009). Aistear is implemented in all early childhood settings across Ireland, including preschools, crèches and childminding services. Before the introduction of Aistear, early childhood education in Ireland was marked by a lack of consistency in curriculum and practices (Murphy, 2015).

2.2.2 The structure of the Aistear Framework

Aistear is modelled on the New Zealand Curriculum of *Te Whāriki* and advocates the important role of play in early childhood (McGrath and Kenny, 2022). Aistear comprises a framework of four interconnected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking' (McGrath and Kenny, 2022). It is clear that Aistear is a quality framework, however, it is not without its challenges with Murphy positing that 'neither Aistear nor Síolta is compulsory and the implementation of both has been slow' (2015, p.288). Nic Craith and Fay concur with, and cite the 2004 OECD review which found that an overly didactic approach prevailing in infant classrooms was attributed to large class sizes, lack of space and facilities, and over-dependence on workbooks (Nic Craith and Fay, 2019, citing the OECD Report, 2004). Evidence from French's research reveals that teachers reported that the implementation of Aistear is heavily dependent on whether the school incorporates the Aistear framework or encourages teachers to avail of Aistear training (French, 2019). Indeed, French also points out the fact that Aistear is not compulsory makes it difficult to 'translate Aistear into everyday practice, planning and supervision' (French, 2013, p.4). Significantly, Gray and Ryan's important Irish research states that while teachers acknowledge the importance of play, 'there was little evidence that Aistear has transformed classroom teaching. Didactic teaching approaches remain dominant, with play afforded peripheral status' (Gray and Ryan, 2016, p.188).

Nevertheless, Murphy posits the Aistear framework presents opportunities for innovation, research, and further development to meet the evolving needs of young children in Ireland (Murphy, 2015). Ryan and Ní Fhoghlú's research reveals that over 3000 teachers have participated in seminars and summer courses on Aistear and there has been an enthusiastic response by teachers to Aistear (Ryan and Ní Fhoghlú, 2012).

2.3 Definitions and outlooks of play-based pedagogy.

This section begins by critically evaluating the contributions of the seminal theorists on play-based pedagogy, namely, Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel, Steiner and Montessori. Following this, a review of the current literature on the multifarious definitions and approaches to play is presented.

2.3.1. Seminal Theorists:

As highlighted above, play-based learning is a central element in early childhood education. In this academic sphere, it is incumbent to discuss the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel and Montessori who have significantly influenced educational practices in play-based learning. Their diverse perspectives offer us as educators a range of insights into how children learn through play. While their approaches may differ, they collectively emphasize that play is a powerful tool for children to make sense of the world and foster their development in multifaceted ways. Among the early researchers who explored the use of play for early development is Piaget: his constructivist theory and theory of cognitive development identified play as a means by which individuals can integrate new information into their already existing schemas (1962). Piaget identified different stages of play, from sensorimotor play in infancy to more advanced stages of symbolic play in early childhood (Piaget, 1962).

Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, regarded play as ‘the leading source of development in the preschool years’ (1967, p.62). Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of development emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural context in a child’s development. He argued that play is a zone of proximal development, where children engage in activities just beyond their current level of understanding and with the help of more knowledgeable individuals expand their cognition (Vygotsky, 1967). In play, Vygotsky argues, children can internalize new concepts and skills through interaction with peers and adults (ibid). Similarly, Froebel, the German educator, commonly referred to as the father of the modern kindergarten, identified core elements of play that he embedded in his kindergarten: his model advocates the concept of ‘free play’ (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). Montessori classrooms, in contrast, incorporate purposeful play as a means for children to explore their environment and develop essential life skills. Montessori believed that children learn best when they are engaged in activities they find meaningful and purposeful (Lilliard, 2022).

2.3.2 Current definitions of play-based pedagogy

It is very clear from a review of the literature that definitions of play and play-based learning are on a continuum of perspectives (Wallerstedt and Pramling, 2012; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2013). Interestingly, Pyle and Danniels point out, ‘Many researchers debate how to define the concept of children’s play, and there continues to be disagreement regarding what human actions are included in this activity, why children engage in it, and how it impacts learning and development (Pyle and Danniels, 2017, p.274). Children’s play has been defined as an activity that is freely chosen, actively engaging, opportunistic, pleasurable, creative, and concerned more with means than ends (Ashiabi, 2007). Pyle and Danniels conclude, ‘two different types of play have dominated the focus of current research in education: children’s pretend play and adult-guided play’ (Pyle and Daniels, 2017, p.274). Significantly, Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff posit that even in adult-guided play whether or not the adult or the child initiated the play, the activity is still child-led with the locus of control being firmly the child’s (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff , 2013).

On reviewing the literature, it is very significant that educators, academics and teachers are not all aligned on the role of play in education either. In their Irish study, Ó Sioráin, Kernan and McArdle point out, ‘Some participants [teachers] understood Aistear as something to be ‘done’ (subject/practice) during a distinct part of the day, whilst others viewed Aistear as play-based pedagogy (philosophy) which should permeate throughout the whole day’ (Ó Sioráin, Kernan and McArdle, 2023, p.1). Similar to Irish findings, Fesseha’s and Pyle’s Canadian research on teachers informs us, ‘Results revealed inconsistencies in participants’ definitions and implementations of play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. Several participants described the enactment of play that was entirely separate from learning, yet still indicated some belief in the ability to learn through play’ (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016, p.361). Evidence from Wallerstedt and Pramling’s Swedish research is consonant with Irish and Canadian findings and they posit there continues to be disagreement regarding what human actions are included in play-based learning, why children engage in it, and how it impacts learning and development (Wallerstedt and Pramling, 2012). Moreover, findings from Samuelsson and Carlsson’s Swedish research also finds that without appropriate training on how play and learning are related, teachers often fall back into ‘teachy’ ways’ (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008, p.625). O’Sioráin, Kernan and McArdle call for a more cohesive understanding of ‘Structure and Agency’ in the Aistear Programme with ‘Classroom

experiences within early primary settings that turn play on and off for a period during the day. This is a practice commonly referred to as the ‘Aistear hour’ (Ó Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle, 2023, p.8). However, while there are undoubtedly challenges to play-based pedagogies it is evident that the benefits for children outweigh the advantages. In the next section, the advantages of play in the infant classroom are reviewed.

2.4 The benefits of a play-based pedagogy.

Parker and Thomsen (2019) reveal that learning through play not only cultivates children’s social, emotional, physical and creativity skills, it also enhances both literacy and numeracy skills significantly. Similarly, Dickey, Castle and Proyer (2016) inform us that play not only supports a child’s physical, social and emotional development but also increases a child’s attention span and promotes their concentration skills. Evidence from both research studies show that play-based learning encompasses cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth as well as encouraging creativity, problem-solving, and self-regulation skills (Parker and Thomsen, 2019; Dickey, Castle and Proyer, 2016).

Wellbeing is one of the most prominent themes in education today as is evidenced with the Department of Education and Skills Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023 (Wellbeing Framework, Department of Education and Skills, Revised Edition, 2019). Researchers from education and psychology have suggested ‘play’ is a sturdy mediator of learning various skills throughout a person’s life’ (Ali, Constantino et al., 2018).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter began with a review of the international and national policies affecting and impacting on play-based pedagogy in Ireland: In section one, it became evident that while play-based learning is commended in the literature, there are a lot of structural and agentic misunderstandings of it in practice in both an Irish and international context. No literature review of play-based pedagogies would be complete without the foundational theorists of play-based pedagogy being reviewed. From Piaget’s cognitive and constructivist theory to Vygotskian socio-cultural theory we learned the complexities in the interpretations of play. From the critical analysis of the multifarious definitions and outlooks of current play-based pedagogy it is evident that play in the infant classroom is intricate and often misunderstood

by classroom practitioners and academics alike. However, the literature revealed that the benefits of a play-based pedagogy not only enhance cognitive development but augment the holistic development of the child's socio-emotional and academic wellbeing. Following this extensive literature review the emergent research questions are:

1. What are teachers' understandings of play-based learning and Aistear in the infant classroom?
2. What are teachers' understandings of the structural and agentic aspects of play-based pedagogy in the Irish infant classroom?

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This dissertation investigates teachers' perceptions and practice of play-based pedagogy in the Irish infant classroom. In this chapter, the research methodology process that pertains to this research is outlined. In the first section of this chapter, the philosophical paradigms that underpin educational research are outlined and considered. The second section defends and justifies the selection of the interpretive paradigm as the most appropriate for this research. This is followed by an explanation of the data collection strategy including the pilot interview. Next, the population sample is outlined and defended. After that ethical issues, data collection procedures and data analysis are outlined *ad seriatim*.

3.2 Paradigms in educational research

Before embarking on the dissertation it was necessary to frame the research design. 'Research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009, p.3). The first aspect of the methodology considered for this dissertation was the philosophical framework. For the philosophical framework to become clear the researcher had to ascertain their own perceptions of reality.

In their seminal text Cohen et al. explain that there are 'two conceptions of social reality' (2009, p. 7). How one aligns one's thinking determines if one subscribes to the positivist or interpretive paradigm (Cresswell, 2009). In a positivist, quantitative world-view, researchers collect information on instruments based on measures completed by the participants or by observations recorded by the researcher. Being objective is an essential aspect of competent inquiry with standards of validity, reliability, conformability and dependability and bias being of critical importance to the research.

In contrast, in the interpretive worldview, 'the central endeavour is to understand the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009, p.21). In the qualitative view, actions are only meaningful, if we, as researchers, can ascertain the intention and experience of agents (*ibid.*). Creswell goes on to explain that a newer, mixed methods approach has also gained momentum (Cresswell, 2009).

3.3 The selection of paradigms for this dissertation

In this section, the justification for the choice of the interpretive paradigm is delineated.

On the selection of paradigms for research, Silverman urges researchers that, ‘you need to think through exactly what you are trying to achieve rather than be guided by some fashion or trivial preference’ (Silverman, 2005, p. 7).

Quantitative research seeks ‘detail in certain aspects of correlations between variables’ (Silverman, 2005, p. 9). In contrast, in qualitative research, the detail is found ‘in the precise particulars of such matters as people’s understandings and interactions. This is because qualitative researchers tend to use a non-positivist model of reality’ (Silverman, 2005, p. 9). On consideration of the above clarification of paradigms, the researcher has chosen the interpretive, qualitative paradigm as the most appropriate to answer the research questions. Interpretive researchers embrace the notion of subjectivity and the personal involvement of the researcher in constructing their own knowledge and beliefs. In the interpretive paradigm, there is no claim to generalisability or transferability, instead, this research contributes to existing knowledge which may provide new understandings in similar contexts (ibid.). Researchers in the qualitative paradigm acknowledge the importance of understanding participants’ intentions and refer to it as ‘behaviour-with meaning’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009, p.21). As this research focused on teachers’ perceptions of play-based learning, the knowledge sought from teachers is acquired according to individuals’ contexts, experiences, circumstances, place, time and perceptions. Therefore, the interpretive, qualitative paradigm is selected as the paradigm for this research.

3.4 Research Methods: Data collection strategy.

Data collection strategies associated with the interpretive paradigm include ethnography, grounded theory, case-studies, phenomenological research, interviews and narrative research (Creswell, 2009). On considering the conceptual framework and the information sought in this research, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable instrument for collecting the type of data sought. This method of data collection aligns itself well with a qualitative methodology in an interpretive paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009).

The flexible structure of the interview also allowed for an interest in the interviewees’ perspectives and the capacity to respond to the direction of the conversation (ibid.). After a

first draft of suitable questions was developed, a pilot study was undertaken to test the questions. The pilot process provided valuable insights into the shortcomings of the researcher. On transcribing the pilot interview, it became clear that there were missed opportunities to probe more deeply into issues raised by interviewees. The value of asking open-ended questions became clear, for example, rather than asking ‘Do you use the Aistear Framework?’ and eliciting a yes/no response, questions such as ‘Can you tell me what Aistear looks like in your classroom?’ yielded a much thicker description.

Kvale and Brinkman’s definition of an *inter-view* as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). The literature specifies that interviews enable the multi-sensory channels of verbal, non-verbal, spoken and aural cues to be used, which yield substantial data (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009).

The interviews were carried out over five lunchtime periods. The interview guide began each time with a prescriptive list of introductory comments and questions that gathered relevant factual information about the interviewee and setting, which was considered relevant later for ‘contextualising people’s answers’ (Bryman, 2004, p. 442). This interview schedule included name, gender, number of years’ teaching, teaching role, and the curriculum under which participants were trained in.

With an audio recording, one must acknowledge that nuance, setting and context are lost post-interview. To militate against this loss, a reflexive journal (jotting down what was seen and behaviour observed) was kept (Silverman, 2008). So, for example, in response to the question ‘Do you think play is central to the infant curriculum?’ an answer without nonverbal cues would translate as ‘I do, and I think it’s under emphasised in some ways in this school.’ This may read quite differently when relevant notes are added: ‘I do . . . but (shoulders shrug, hands open) I think it’s under emphasised in some way.’ This ‘interpretive validity’ was one of the most practical ways to reduce bias – the commitment to authenticity and trustworthiness through verification of meaning conveyed in transcripts (Maxwell, 1992, p. 282).

3.5 Sampling

Typical of the interpretive paradigm, a non-probability, convenience, purposive sample of five infant teachers with over five years’ experience was chosen for this small-scale research. Cohen et al. note that, ‘Small-scale research often uses non-probability samples because [they] can prove perfectly adequate where researchers do not intend to generalize their

findings beyond the sample in question' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009, p. 113). Exclusion criteria are retired teachers, SEN teachers, SNA's, children, parents and all other third parties as well as teachers with less than five years teaching experience.

3.6 Data analysis

An inductive approach to data analysis, typical of the interpretive paradigm was selected.

Braun and Clarke urge that 'Reflexive Thematic Analysis' is essential and that 'the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and with the analytic process' (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 330). The Braun and Clarke six step process was the chosen method for data analysis, this framework is outlined below.

Phase one: familiarisation with the data.

Following Braun and Clarke's advice, a manual transcription of data was undertaken as it can greatly facilitate a deep immersion into the data. On transcribing the data, inflections, breaks, pauses, tones, etc. on the part of both the interviewer and the participant were noted.

Phase two: generating initial codes.

Codes were the fundamental building blocks that later became themes. The process of coding was undertaken to produce succinct, shorthand descriptive or interpretive labels for pieces of information that were of relevance to the research questions.

Phase three: generating themes.

When all relevant data items were coded, the focus shifted from the interpretation of individual data items to the interpretation of aggregated meaning and meaningfulness across the dataset. The coded data was reviewed and analysed as to how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings so that they may form themes or sub-themes.

Phase four: reviewing potential themes.

This phase required the researcher to conduct a recursive review of the candidate themes in relation to the coded data items and the entire dataset.

Phase five: defining and naming the themes.

At this phase, the researcher is tasked with presenting a detailed analysis of the thematic framework. Each individual theme and sub-theme is to be expressed in relation to both the dataset and the research questions.

Phase six: producing the report. (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The writing-up of qualitative research was very much interwoven into the entire process of the analysis and findings are presented in Chapter 4.

3.7 Ethics.

This research adheres to the code of ethical best practice. The research process adheres to The Research Council UK Code of Conduct in Britain (RCUK, 2013), the British Educational Research Association Code of Ethics (BERA, 2018) as well as all GDPR requirements (Data Protection Act, 2018) and also to Hibernia College's Code of Conduct for Research. This research is undertaken with the full understanding, agreement and participation of the school, principal and teachers involved. A framework of clarity about issues of confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, intellectual property rights and the right of withdrawal as appropriate to this research was made explicit in the information letters to the Principal as the school gatekeeper and in the information letter to the teachers. The five teachers also signed a consent letter indicating their understanding of the standard of ethics upheld.

Confidentiality is defined as the agreement between researcher and participants as to how information shall be used (Cohen, Manion. Morrison, 2009). In the Consent Forms that the interviewees signed, it was clearly stated that they have the right to withdraw consent without negative consequences during the data collection phase and up to one month after data collection. Other information included, individuals can only access their own data (transcripts and audio recordings upon request) and may not access data from other participants. Hibernia College requires that data is kept for three years after the project is complete: at this point the data will be deleted. This practice ensures that participants have access to the data, once the study is complete, if they request access.

In accordance with GDPR guidelines, all data are stored safely and securely: all transcripts, audio recordings, consent forms and research information sheets are saved in password-protected and encrypted directories/folders. No data/files were left in a classroom or in an open office where others could gain access to them. Identifiable data such as names and addresses were kept separately from other data collected i.e. interview transcripts, audio recordings, consent letters and research information sheets so these are not connectable, thereby ensuring anonymity. Numbers were used in interviews and no participants' names or addresses were on the word documents or recordings. To mitigate participant discomfort, data collection is approached in a thoroughly responsible, sensitive and affirmative manner.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, a comprehensive account is given of research paradigms with the selected interpretive paradigm defended justified. Informed by an initial pilot study, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate data collection method for this qualitative small-scale research. Typical of the interpretive paradigm, a non-probability sample of five teachers was chosen as a convenience, purposive sample. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phase framework (2021). Finally, robust ethical considerations that were negotiated throughout the entire research process were described in detail. The next chapter presents the findings of this research.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This dissertation aims to ascertain teachers' perspectives of Aistear and play-based learning in the infant classroom. Consonant with the interpretive paradigm, semi-structured interviews were conducted and subsequently thematically analysed as the data source. The first theme to emerge is teacher training, continuous-professional development and teachers' changing understanding of Aistear, this is followed by the second theme, the implementation of Aistear in the classroom. The third theme to emerge is the teacher's role in play-based learning in the infant classroom. The final theme to emerge was the benefits and challenges of play-based learning.

4.2 Teacher training, CPD and the changing understanding of Aistear.

On thematically coding the data, the first theme that emerged was teachers' changing perception of Aistear since the school first introduced Aistear in 2015. At that point [in 2015] we learned Aistear was set up in the adjacent Community Centre. The SEN team took charge of the Aistear room, the SEN teachers set up the stations, planned the themes and made out the rota for the four infant classes to take turns attending once a week. The infant teachers had very little to do with planning or preparation of the room and just had to turn up for their weekly hour of 'play.' As individual perceptions and variations of the implementation of play in the infant classroom were explored it was apparent that there had been some recent changes in the perception of play-based learning.

4.2.1 The history of Aistear in the school

Participant 2, was critical of how Aistear was initially set up in the school 'so we were like, "oh, it's time to play now off we go" and like that the children saw Aistear as a separate subject.' Participant 2's criticism of Aistear contrasted with Participant 4's. 'We were really lucky in this school in that we had lots of space and we decided to set Aistear up in a room in the Community Centre and so the separate room really worked well for us.' Similar to Participant 4, Participant 5 commented, 'What the 8 of us here in the infant section decided to do was to establish an Aistear room and that the theme would change each month and that worked well.' Participant 3, recognised the recent shift in play-based learning, 'Aistear... [pauses] well it seems to be changing now, like the way we learned about Aistear in first year in Mary I [College of Education] was that it was almost an extra subject... Whereas now that seems to be changing and it's a pedagogy and not a subject.' Similarly, Participant 1 also

recognised a paradigm shift in the practice of play-based pedagogy: ‘In our final year [in college] we learned how to make learning playful outside of just Aistear so the thinking seemed to change in my final year from seeing play as something that was separate to something that was to be brought into everything.’

4.2.2. Teacher training in Aistear

When questioned about teacher training Participant 2 commented, ‘When I came to this school seven years’ ago there was an “Aistear Room” which was in another part of the school. That wasn’t ideal at all and not what I had learnt in Marino but it was our school policy so you have to go with that’ [shrugs his shoulders]. Participant 5’s experience was similar to Participant 4 ‘well I trained 25 years ago play wasn’t a thing then really [laughs]. When Aistear was introduced here in this school around 2015 or so, I had no experience of it so I did an online course and that was only OK.’ Participant 4, who had graduated in 2002 said of play: ‘Up to that point [2015] a lot of our play was unstructured or just free-play in the morning which I do think has merit as well and it was what we were taught in college. What I liked about the unstructured play was, with time constraints, it allowed me as a teacher to listen to individual reading and things like that because you don’t have time during the day.’

4.3 The implementation of Aistear in the infant classroom

Findings from teachers’ implementation of play-based learning show that for the past two years, Aistear has been transferred from the separate Aistear room to the teachers’ own classrooms. The infant teachers, as distinct from the SEN team, get together to plan a thematic approach at regular fortnight or monthly intervals. Play-based learning is, for the majority of teachers, still called ‘The Aistear Hour.’ There are four separate stations which are rotated for the children every fifteen minutes. Some of the rotations include construction, small world, role play, sensory play, drama, art, painting, clay, free-play and reading.

Participant 1 explains that ‘Play-based learning is now established in each room on a daily basis for an hour with four different stations each for fifteen minutes. It’s a start.’ Participant 4, however, seemed to prefer the separate Aistear room to the current classroom-based set up, ‘We were really lucky in this school in that we had lots of space and we decided to set Aistear up in a room in the Community Centre and that it was somewhere we could go to whereas more recently it’s been integrated in the actual day to day life which may a better way?’ [quizzically raises eyebrows]. Participant 1 said that play in the infant classrooms now consists of ‘individual groups that are rotated, for example, from drama to art to construction

to free play.’ Participant 3 further explained, ‘We use a thematic approach each month and we feel this team planning works well. We all prepare four stations for the children to work on over a fortnight or a month.’ Participant 5 indicated that play-based learning in her classroom is ‘fun, noisy, often hectic, always busy.’

4.4 The teacher’s role in play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom

On being questioned about the teacher’s role in the infant classroom, it is clear that teachers’ perceptions of their role in play is not defined, is open to personal interpretation and differs between teachers.

On being questioned about their role in play-based pedagogy, Participant 2 answered, ‘You don’t want to get in the way too much, it’s all about preparation and that all the children realise where they are in their stations, so you’re just facilitating it really.’ Participant 1’s view of the teacher’s role was consistent with Participant 2’s, ‘If you’re doing Aistear with them, the role of the teacher is guidance and how you observe the play really. I incorporate myself into the play by asking them what they’re doing.’ Participant 4’s interpretation of the teacher’s role in Aistear differed somewhat to Participant 1 and Participant 2: ‘As I said, before Aistear came in, we felt free play was very important.’ Participant 5’s view was similar to Participant 3 and Participant 4; ‘I saw my primary role as setting up the resources and planning time to implement Aistear efficiently in the classroom [pauses] though nowadays I take the opportunity to teach the EAL children some vocabulary especially if you hear them reverting back to Ukrainian.’ This is similar to Participant 2 who said: ‘I always found that putting EAL children in with the rest of the cohort of the class and mixed in, it’s better for their confidence and their language as it forced them to use English.’

Participant 5 noticed a difference in how she approaches play-based learning in the infant classroom in the last couple of years: ‘Many pupils whose first language is not English have started attending the school.’ Participant 5 believes she has ‘to play as well with these pupils due to the fact that the children do not speak English.’ She uses prompts with these children such as ‘will you make dinner for me please? I want five potatoes and sausages.’ Participant 5 says, if she does not use this approach she finds ‘they are playing in the kitchen but they are all speaking Ukrainian.’

4.5 Teacher perception of the benefits and challenges of play in the infant classroom

In this section, teachers' interpretation of the benefits and challenges of play are analysed. All of the participants articulated that children benefit both academically and socio-emotionally from play-based learning in the infant classroom. All of the teachers were in agreement about the well-being aspect of play which, of course, is one of the themes of Aistear.

4.5.1 Socio-emotional benefits of play

Participant 1 commented that play is good for children's mental health, 'Overall it makes kids happier to be honest.' Participant 5 said through observing and communicating with the child during play, 'we can get to know the child better and have a greater understanding of their interests and needs which makes for a happier pupil.' Participant 3 saw all round benefits: 'Socially, definitely and their oral language.' Participant 2 felt 'it develops their social skills such as turn taking, listening and attentiveness as well as school attendance.' Participant 4 also commented on social enhancement associated with play, 'It benefits the wider community as it teaches children to take turns, teaches children to share, to be able to speak on something, to give them self-confidence, leadership and develop their confidence.'

Participant 4 posited play-based learning 'develops communication skills and social interactions.' Similarly, Participant 3 articulated that 'play lends itself well for group work which leads to developing social skills.' Furthermore, Participant 5 stated there are 'some very disruptive pupils in my class.' She found during play-based activities such as Lego and Art 'they all sit around together. There are no behavioural issues. They are happy. They are content.' Participant 1 concluded their remarks by stating 'the aims and learning goals of the wellbeing theme are really important for infants especially since Covid.'

Participant 1 commented that as well as social benefits, play-based learning has personal well-being benefits 'It helps with their self-esteem to be involved at an equal level with their peers. It allows children to explore and develop their emotions through play in a safe environment.' Similarly, Participant 5 posited that 'some children may be more confident speaking in small groups rather than in front of the whole class and over time you can see them grow in confidence.'

4.5.2 Academic benefits of play

Participant 4 referred to the academic benefit of play: 'Say in maths, you'll be teaching number and I do it now through story. They're learning by what they see and they're doing

and playing and that's really important.' Again, Participant 2 saw a particular academic benefit for his EAL group, 'it's also extremely beneficial for those children who are coming to school with an international background and not from Ireland, so it helps develop their vocabulary and give them key words and key life skills in dealing with everyday life situations.' On a universal design for learning, Participant 3 commented that 'it is easier to meet children at their learning, where they are at right now' and the teacher can provide 'more meaningful experiences.'

Participant 1 and Participant 4 saw another benefit as 'children are learning without realising it.' Participant 1 said 'you have a two-way conversation and you have it about something the child is very interested in so they are motivated and engaged and they are learning without knowing that they are learning.' Participant 2, Participant 1 and Participant 5 cited problem solving skills as one of the benefits of play. Participant 3 said 'for instance you could give them a range of materials and see what is the best material for building the wall or if they are building a bridge how can we do it?' Participant 4 recognised the speech and language benefits of play-based learning 'a child that is articulate can be paired up with someone who is struggling with their speech and language.' Participant 4 also believed 'that they learn better sometimes from their peers.'

4.5.3 Community benefits of play

Another finding of the benefit of play-based learning is that it enhances parental involvement: Participant 5 feels parents can be involved as they 'can be informed of the theme the children are working on.' Parents can help to reinforce this learning by using vocabulary relating to that theme. Similarly, Participant 3 believed the use of play-based learning in an infant classroom can improve home school links. She believed, 'parents are aware that there is an approach to play now.' She believes the fact that 'children are going home and saying that they are doing something' that is brilliant.' Participant 2 believed play-based learning 'leads to a smooth transition to junior infants from pre-school. They are building on previous experiences so it is not this big scary thing that they are starting in Junior Infants.'

4.5.4 Challenges of play

All of the teachers commented too on the challenges of Aistear. A consistent theme was Continuous Professional Development. Participant 5 feels she would benefit from 'talking to other teachers so I could see exactly what it looked like in other people's schools.' Participant 1 stated additional training would provide 'the expertise to teachers that they need: he feels he would benefit from real practical examples of how to implement it.' Participant 3

ascertained: ‘it would be great if inspectors came in and guided us rather than the fear factor that exists, they were teachers too and just got out of the classroom. They must see good practice, why not just share that?’ [throws hands in air in a questioning manner]. Another challenge that Participant 4 stressed was curriculum overload ‘It is very difficult. There is so much packed in. There are so many things being brought into schools that it makes it very difficult to fit everything in.’ Participant 2’s view differs from Participant 4’s ‘Aistear is not so much a challenge if you view it as ‘I can teach all my subjects through this theme now,’ it can actually save time.’

4.6 Conclusion

On analysing the first theme of teacher understanding of Aistear, it is significant that all participants value play-based learning, however, initially on its introduction the implementation and understanding of Aistear seemed to depend on the teachers’ teacher-training. It is significant that even though three teachers graduated in the last six years, there was no uniform interpretation of the understanding or the implementation of play-based learning in the infant classroom. The two teachers who had graduated over twenty years’ ago depended on the expertise of the younger teachers but only one of this cohort of younger teachers said they were clear and confident of their expertise in Aistear. It is noteworthy now that the ‘Aistear Room’ has been disbanded and in the past two years there is now an ‘Aistear hour’ in each classroom each day. On the second theme of the teachers’ role in play, similarly, there was no consensus amongst the population sample: each teacher had their own view on what their role was in play-based pedagogy: some felt it was observation, some felt from time-to-time they intervened especially with EAL children and some felt it was an opportunity to get other planning done. The benefits of play were articulated by all the sample and ranged from socio-emotional to academic to enhancing parental involvement. However, one cannot ignore the challenges raised by teachers, the lack of time, training, expertise as well as curriculum overload. The next chapter compares these findings with those outlined in the literature

Chapter 5

5.1 Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the findings of this research in relation to the research questions and to the secondary sources in the literature review. Recurring themes, exceptional points and new findings are interpreted in relation to key issues identified in the literature review. The chapter is presented thematically under the headings of teacher training, continuous-professional development and the changing understanding of Aistear. This is followed by a discussion on the implementation of Aistear. Third, the teacher's role in play-based pedagogy is critically analysed and finally teacher's perceptions of the benefits and challenges of play in the infant classroom is presented.

5.2 Teacher training, CPD and the changing understanding of Aistear

One of the clear themes to emerge from the literature review in this dissertation was that play-based learning has emerged as a major pedagogical approach in curricula across the globe: evidence of this finding was also articulated from all participants in this research (French, 2019; Gray and Ryan, 2016). In the literature, much of the paradigm shift from more traditional, formal, chalk and talk methodologies to play-based pedagogy is attributed to nations who signed up to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)'s treaty that recognized the right of every child to engage in play and recreational activities (U.N. 1989).

5.2.1 Teacher-training in Aistear

In 1992, as a signatory to the above-mentioned international accord, the Irish Department of Education's delayed response manifested as The Aistear Framework in 2009. Delayed response was also a finding in this research. Findings from this research on the implementation of Aistear are consonant with several reviews from the Irish literature on the implementation of Aistear. It was in 2015 that the infant department in the research school first introduced Aistear, this finding is reflective of Murphy's findings whose research found that because Aistear was not compulsory from the outset, implementation was slow (Murphy, 2015). Also, French, found that the implementation of Aistear was dependent on whether or not schools encouraged teachers to avail of Aistear training (French, 2019). Indeed, the lack of clarity and understanding on what play-based pedagogy should look like, was not unique to this school and findings from this research also demonstrate the lack of a concise message on what play should look like in the classroom. In fact, teachers' interpretation of Aistear as a

play-based methodology depended on how it was taught in the Colleges of Education as well as how it was delivered in CPD courses. Two out of the five teachers, on their own volition, attended a summer course on Aistear which they stated allowed them to avail of EPV Days (Extra Personal Vacation) Days. One teacher attended a face-to-face course and one an online course they described as ‘only ok.’

5.2.2 Teachers’ changing understanding of Aistear

Another significant finding from this research was that the traditional didactic approach to infant education dominated daily practice in this school until 2021. Until then, all teachers visited the separate ‘Aistear Room’ in the adjacent Community Centre once a week on a rotational basis and until 2019 ‘play’ was viewed as a separate subject. Therefore, findings from this research are reflective of Gray and Ryan’s Irish research when they articulated that for most infant teachers, play was afforded a peripheral status in their classroom (Gray and Ryan, 2016). Gray and Ryan explained further that while teachers acknowledged and recognised the value of play there was little evidence it had transformed practice (ibid.). Findings in this research are also reflective of some of the cohort of Irish primary school teachers in Ó Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle’s (2023) small scale study in which some teachers understood *Aistear* as something to be ‘done’ and ‘separate.’

It was very significant in this research that teachers’ understandings of play-based pedagogy had undergone a substantial transformation in the past few years. In 2019, the idea of the separate Aistear room was disbanded and there was a dawning realisation that play-based learning should be classroom based and practiced daily. This transformation was largely attributed to one teacher who had attended Marino College of Education. When this participant was made permanent in the school they pushed for change. This finding would mean that the OECD review of 2004 which was critical of an overly didactic approach prevailing in Irish infant classrooms has somewhat changed in the research school (Nic Craith and Fay, 2019, citing the OECD Report, 2004). The sample population in this research moved from their initial concept of Aistear to it currently being a play-based pedagogy which is practiced for one hour each day in all infant classrooms. This shift in thinking in the sample’s findings seems to be reflected in the latest updated version of Aistear in September 2023 which describes educators as ‘competent, confident, agentic and reflective’ practitioners (NCCA, 2023). However, findings from this research clearly show that play-based pedagogy is still not a dominant philosophy in the infant classroom for the majority of the sample population, but is confined to the Aistear hour reflecting the call from the Irish literature on

clarity on the practice of play-based learning in Ireland (O'Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle, 2023).

5.3 The implementation of Aistear in the infant classroom

All the sample population in the school now host play-based learning in their own classrooms for an hour each day. The themes for the fortnight or month are selected by the teachers. Four stations are set up with various aspects of play aiding understanding and extending the children's knowledge of the theme. Some of the rotations include construction, small world, role play, sensory play, drama, art, painting, clay, and reading. The stations are reflective of both Piaget's constructivist theory and his theory of cognitive development where the children can integrate new information into their already existing schemas (Piaget, 1962).

In this research two of the teachers intervene to stretch the pupils from beyond their current understanding. Vygotsky posits that children, in this manner, internalize new concepts and skills in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1967). Only one of the teachers was an advocate of free play, which was promoted when they were in college in the 1990's: this is resonant of Froebel's advocacy of free play for children in kindergarten (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). All of the teachers, in their daily play-hour, reflect some aspects of the Montessori approach to play by incorporating meaningful purposeful play in their practice. However, Montessori practice would push this boundary even further by ensuring that through targeted play children learn functional independence and self-regulation to develop essential life skills such as cooking and fixing (Lilliard, 2022).

In concluding this section, findings from this research show all of the teachers' practice reflects Piagetian constructivist and cognitive theory. A minority of the sample's practice align with Vygotskian theory of the more knowledgeable other to stretch the zone of proximal development. In Froebel style, free play is now incorporated as one of the rotational stations. All of the teachers' practice reflects some aspects of Montessori's theory of incorporating purposeful play into their classroom.

5.4 The teacher's role in play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom

Findings from this research show that teachers' perceptions of their role in play is not defined, is open to personal interpretation and differs between teachers. The lack of clarity on teacher and child's role in this school reflects the continuum of perspectives of play-based pedagogy in the literature (McGrath and Kenny, 2022; Pyle and Daniels, 2017).

Three out of the sample of five in this research saw their principal role in play as that of preparer, facilitator and observer. The other two participants felt they intervened when it became necessary, for example, when EAL children began speaking their native language at the stations. In Vygotskian theory, the development of the zone of proximal development is dependent on the role of 'the more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1967). Vygotsky argues that play activities should represent the space between what the child is capable of unsupported and what they can do only with the support of the teacher. Findings from this research show conflicting interpretations of teacher roles and may suggest that Vygotskian theory is not fully implemented by all the sample.

Pyle and Danniels outline three different types of play evident from current research in education: children's pretend play, adult-guided play and child-play. Both Pyle and Danniels (2107) as well as Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2013) make the point that even though the play may be adult-guided, if the activity is child-led the locus of control is firmly the child's. The experience of children in the research school reflects the latter approach for play-based learning: the children experience play-based learning for an hour each day at four stations that are set-up by the teachers following a collaborative specific theme. In this respect, the child is leading the play for the duration of the hour, however, Samuelsson and Carlsson's Swedish research points out that knowledgeable, informed training is essential if play-based pedagogy is to dominate the day and prevent teachers from reverting back to 'teachy' ways after the play hour (2008, p.625).

O'Sioráin, Kernan and McArdle, in an Irish context call for a more cohesive understanding of 'Structure and Agency' in play-based learning (2023). Indeed, Wallerstedt and Pramling's research insists that training for teachers should clarify what teacher actions are included in the activity, why children engage in it, and how it impacts learning and development (2012). Findings from this research are resonant of the lack of clarity from the literature on the role of the teacher in play-based learning. In play-based pedagogy the question still remains what is

the role of ‘the more knowledgeable other’ (Vygotsky, 1967) and structure and agency (O’Sioráin, Kernan and McArdle, 2023).

5.5 Teacher perception of the benefits and challenges of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom

5.5.1 The socio-emotional benefits of play-based pedagogy

Findings from this research demonstrate that all teachers in the sample commented on how play-based learning was very important for children’s social development and well-being. All teachers remarked how collaborative play develops children’s personal social skills such as turn-taking, listening, sharing, self-regulation, communication and attentiveness. All of the sample population articulated that play-based learning also helps young children in problem-solving and learning to collaborate. This is significant as it demonstrates that infants can learn, at an early age, to assimilate into societal norms and are less likely to display difficult externalizing behaviours (Pyle and Bigelow, 2015). Findings from this research are also reflective of Vygotskian theory, which posits that, as children learn about their social environment they imagine scenarios beyond their current reality and this aids their intellectual, social and ethical development (Vygotsky, 1967).

Wellbeing is one of the most prominent themes in education today as is evidenced with the Department of Education and Skills ‘Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023’ (Wellbeing Framework, Department of Education and Skills, Revised Edition, 2019). All of the participants in this research described how play-based pedagogy enhanced student self-esteem, self-confidence and leadership skills. This finding is reflective of Dickey et al. when they suggest that teachers have an immense capacity for actively building children's knowledge about wellbeing and sustainability concepts through play-based learning, as opposed to top-down approaches (Dickey, Castle and Proyer, 2018).

5.5.2 The sociocultural benefits of play-based pedagogy

Two of the participants also highlight that play-based learning enables parental awareness of what is happening in the classroom with children telling parents about the themes they are working on. This is reflective of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of development when he emphasized the importance of social interactions and cultural context in a child's development (Vygotsky, 1967).

5.5.3 The academic benefits of play-based pedagogy

As well as socio-emotional benefits, all of the participants remarked on the academic benefits of play: some referred to problem-solving in maths, others to enacting real life scenarios in drama, the significance of relevant stories or poetry. This finding is consonant with evidence from Parker and Thomsen's research which revealed that that learning through play not only cultivates children's social, emotional, physical and creativity skills it also enhances both literacy and numeracy skills significantly (2019). Similarly, Dickey, Castle and Proyer (2016) inform us that play not only supports a child's physical, social and emotional development but also increases a child's attention span and promotes their concentration skills. All of the sample articulated this point.

5.6 Conclusion

One of the clear findings to emerge from this research is that that play-based learning has emerged as a relatively new pedagogical approach in the infant classroom. This phenomenon is clearly evidenced too in the literature. However, findings from this research qualify the teachers' articulated belief in play-based pedagogy by showing that a traditional, didactic approach to infant education dominated daily practice in this school until 2021. Until then, all teachers visited a separate Aistear room for one hour a week. Evidence from several Irish researchers show that viewing play as separate or something to be done is not unique to this school. The majority of participants in this research learnt about Aistear from their Initial Teacher Education Colleges. However, the messages from the various the Colleges of Education as well Continuous Professional Development Courses all differed, were not consistent and only one of them transmitted the philosophy that play-based pedagogy was a philosophy rather than a discrete subject. Due to one participant's firm belief in their training in Aistear and since they became more senior in the school, the practice of play-based pedagogy has now changed from being a once-a-week separate practice to being a daily hour in the classroom. However, a play-based pedagogy still does not dominate the entire day for the majority of the participants, again, echoing all the Irish research emerging in the last decade which calls for mandatory play-based learning and clear, unambiguous teacher training.

Findings from this research also show that the practice of play-based pedagogy is now carried out for one hour a day with teachers collaboratively deciding on a thematic approach. Four

stations are established the children rotate to each station for fifteen minutes. There is clear evidence that both Piagetian theory of constructivism as well as cognitive theory is advanced in this practice. Montessori's advocacy for meaningful purposeful play is also in evidence although the practice described stopped short of Montessori's call for targeted functional independence and self-regulation in order to develop essential life skills. However, a minority of the sample articulated socio-emotional regulation as well as academic performance were enhanced incidentally through play. The enhanced inclusion of parents/ guardians by play-based pedagogy was a finding in this research and this is resonant of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as the importance of social interactions and cultural context in a child's development is known in the home (1967).

Finally, findings from this research on the teachers' role in play are resonant of the lack of clarity from the literature on the role of the teacher in play-based learning. The majority of the sample regarded their role as facilitator and observer whereas the minority regarded their role as the more knowledgeable other as described in Vygotskian practice (1967).

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this dissertation was to explore teachers' perspectives on the practice of play-based pedagogy and the Aistear framework in the infant classroom. The two research questions to emerge from conducting an extensive literature review were:

1. What are teachers' understandings of play/play-based learning and Aistear in the infant classroom?
2. What are teachers' understandings of the structural and agentic aspects of play in the Irish infant classroom?

On methodological consideration of the research questions it was evident that the interpretive qualitative paradigm was the most appropriate to ascertain teacher perceptions on this subject. Consistent with the qualitative paradigm, data collection was enabled through five semi-structured interviews. A thorough thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework reveals the findings below (2021).

6.2 Summary of Findings from this research

- Play-based practice is now practiced in each infant classroom in the research school for one hour each day. Play is organised collaboratively by all teachers following appropriate and relevant themes. Play is structured around four stations which involve activities such as construction areas, small world, role play, sensory play, drama, art, reading, cutting, pasting and free play. Current practice reflects Piaget's theory of constructivism and cognitive theory (Piaget, 1962). As well as Piagetian practice, Montessori's theory of incorporating purposeful play into the classroom is also evident in the classrooms (Lilliard, 2022). Free-play is regularly incorporated at one of the stations, reflecting Froebel's advancement of free play as a critical component of childhood development (Smedley and Hoskins, 2020). Vygotskian socio-cultural theory is also reflected in practice and in some cases the zone of proximal development is realised (Vygotsky, 1967).
- Current practice, as described above, has recently replaced visiting 'The Aistear Room' in the adjacent Community Centre, this demonstrates a shift in teachers' perceptions of play and its centrality in the infant classroom. However, this perception, for the vast majority of the sample population, does not extend to a view of play as an all-encompassing

philosophy dominating the infant school day. This resonates with recent Irish peer-reviewed research (French, 2019; Gray and Ryan, 2016).

- Teachers' perceptions of play-based pedagogies came from their initial teacher education or from attending continuous-professional-development courses. The varied, heterogeneous and messages from the institutions were reflected in the variations, perceptions and practices of teachers in the classroom. O'Síoráin, Kernan and McArdle (2023) as well as French (2019) also call for clarity of practice from institutions of education.
- Findings from this research on the teachers' role in play are resonant of the lack of clarity from the literature on the role of the teacher in play-based learning. The majority of the sample regarded their role as facilitator and observer whereas the minority regarded their role as the more knowledgeable other as described in Vygotskian practice (Vygotsky, 1967).

6.3 Limitations of this research

On conducting a non-funded, small-scale research as part of a Master's Programme it is incumbent to acknowledge overall project limitations as well as methodological limitations. However, as far as possible, strategies were used to mitigate limitations. Overall project limitations included that fact this research has limited generalizability and transferability. However, this was mitigated, from the outset by acknowledging its limited generalizability (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009). Cohen et al. explain that the context-dependent nature of interpretive research as well as the small, convenience purposive sample means that findings are deeply rooted in specific settings so the findings of this research may not be applicable or transferable elsewhere (ibid.). Other overall project limitations included ethical considerations and rigour. The researcher had to be fully cognisant of and compliant with The Research Council UK Code of Conduct in Britain (RCUK, 2013), the British Educational Research Association Code of Ethics (BERA, 2018) as well as all GDPR requirements (Data Protection Act, 2018) and also to Hibernia College's Code of Conduct for Research.

Methodological limitations were also apparent. Cresswell advises that the researcher has to acknowledge their own bias as a person (Cresswell, 2009). Following Cresswell's advice, and in order to mitigate researcher bias the researcher journaled their personal beliefs, experiences, and perspectives (ibid.). Another limitation was the complexity of data analysis which is also acknowledged in this research. Ensuring the rigor and trustworthiness of

interpretations requires systematic coding and constant comparison was difficult (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Systematic coding and constant comparison on the second draft of chapter four, after the supervisor's initial critique, was time-consuming and methodologically demanding but ultimately worthwhile. By being aware of limitations and using mitigating strategies to address them, researchers can enhance the robustness and credibility of their small-scale interpretive studies (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2009).

6.4 Recommendations for Teacher Practice, Policy and Further Research

6.4.1 Recommendations for further research and teacher practice in play-based pedagogy

From the outset it has been outlined that this small-scale research in the interpretive paradigm does not claim generalizability. Therefore, it is recommended that similar studies in different contexts or with different populations and perhaps different paradigms test the applicability and transferability of the findings be undertaken. A longitudinal study to examine how the phenomena evolve over time and to understand long-term impact of play-based pedagogy would be very beneficial to teachers

6.4.2 Recommendations for future policy in play-based pedagogy

Based on insights from findings on play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom it is recommended that teachers are offered the opportunity to attend workshops and continuous-professional-development courses from expert trainers who have the most current understanding and clarity on play-based pedagogy. It is also recommended that teachers adopt a positive, proactive, reflective approach to ongoing learning that enables them to stay informed about emerging insights and adjust practices accordingly. A final policy recommendation is that play-based pedagogy is made a mandatory philosophy in the infant classroom so there is no room for misinterpretation that play-based pedagogy is a philosophy that must underpin all practices in the infant classroom.

6.5 Conclusion

This dissertation was undertaken as part fulfilment of the Professional Masters in Education. Part of the function of the dissertation is to improve the researcher's classroom practice. By engaging in this research process, nuanced insights into how different teachers engage with

and practice play-based learning have been revealed. The importance of engaging with continuous professional development is realised through the process. This dissertation has also enabled the researcher to become a reflective practitioner, able to assess teaching practices, assumptions, and beliefs. This reflection, it is hoped, can lead to more thoughtful and effective pedagogical strategies with positive classroom dynamics and ultimately increased socio-emotional and academic performance by the students in the infant classroom.

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Appendices

1. Research Information Sheet for teachers

Researcher: XX

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin

Supervisor:

Title of study: **An Investigation into Teachers' Perception's and Practice of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom.**

Outline of research study:

This aim of this research is to investigate the nature of play and play-based pedagogy in the Irish infant classroom. The Aistear Framework, introduced in Ireland in 2009, represents a significant advancement in early childhood education: its aim is to provide quality early childhood education to young children from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009). Aistear is implemented in all early childhood settings across Ireland, including preschools, crèches and childminding services. This is a significant area to research.

Objectives of the project:

From the critical analysis of the multifarious definitions and outlooks of current play-based pedagogy it is evident that play in the infant classroom is intricate and often misunderstood by classroom practitioners and academics alike. However, the literature revealed that the benefits of a play-based pedagogy not only enhance cognitive development but augment the holistic development of the child's socio-emotional, wellbeing and psychological life. Following this extensive literature review the emergent research questions are:

1. What is the nature of play/play-based learning and Aistear in the infant classroom?
2. What are teachers' understandings of the structural and agentic aspects of play in the Irish infant classroom?

What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research. However, your name and the name or location of the school will not be published/identifiable. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time up to one month after data collection.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of the research is to complete a small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Master of Education (Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

2. Research Information Sheet for Principal

As part of my Professional Master's in Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating the nature of play and play-based pedagogies in the infant classroom. This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview five infant teachers in your school. The staff members will be asked to partake in a semi-structured interview of twenty-five to thirty minute duration to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study.

Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's and Hibernia College's robust Ethical Code of Conduct ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and all data will be securely held in adherence to Hibernia College Research Ethics Guidelines.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time up to one month before the submission date. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher: XXX Email:XXX

This research study has received Ethical Approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person you may contact: Hibernia College Dublin. Tel XXX

Signed

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date:

Name and Signature of the Principal: _____

Date:

3. Consent Form

Researcher's name: XXX

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin

Title of study: An Investigation into Teachers' Perception's and Practice of play-based pedagogy in the infant classroom

Please circle your answers below:

Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? Yes/No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you? Yes/No

Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published or presented at a conference? Yes/No

Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher? Yes/No

Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and the name of the school will not appear in the research report. Yes/No

Participant's name

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

4. Play-Based Pedagogy Interview Questions (Semi-Structured interviews of approx. minute duration) X 5 interviews

1. Tell me about your teaching career to date (years of experience/ and especially your experience and training in the delivery of Aistear and play-based pedagogies in the infant classroom? (Prompts: Teacher-training/ CPD/mentoring/experience)

2. Can you tell me what does the teaching of/ delivery of play-based teaching and learning look like in your classroom? (Prompts (a) practice/ (b) strategies/themes (c) classroom organisation (d) how was Aistear set up initially/ (e) has Aistear changed in your school? (f) if so how?

3. What do you see your role as a teacher in play-based learning?

4. What does school policy/school approach to the teaching of play-based learning look like in this school? (strategies/ interpretation of 'play')

5. What do you see as the benefits of Aistear and play-based learning?
(Prompts: the benefit to children/ (social/emotional/academic/behavioural) the benefit to school ethos/ the benefit to other stakeholders i.e. staff/ parents/ anyone else?

6. What do you see as the challenges of implementing a play-based learning pedagogy in the infant classroom?
(Prompts: lack of understanding of 'play' (supported or free (from the literature) lack of support/ lack of time/ lack of expertise/ lack of CPD/ lack of teacher-training/ lack of resources/ class-size/ organisational issues etc.)

5. Extract of transcript showing thematic analysis

Interviewer: Ehm so what do you see then as the benefits of play-based learning in the infant classroom? (1)

Interviewee: Well...Ehm... As I said before they're learning without realising they're learning. Ehm they're learning how to problem-solve too so... for instance, you could give them a range of materials and see what is the best material for building the wall or if they are building a bridge how can we do it?' (2)

Interviewer: Yes that's excellent... and any other benefits you can think of?

Interviewee: Well... let me see. Well through the themes in play parents can be informed of the theme the children are working on. The parents can reinforce this learning by using vocabulary at home relating to that theme

Interviewer: That is a great advantage

Interviewee: It is and parents are aware now that there is an approach to play and the children are going home and saying we are doing something specific and that is brilliant (3) (4) (5)

Interviewer: Yes, yes it is. I am sure there are lots of benefits...

Interviewee: Say in maths, you'll be teaching number and I do it now through story. They're learning by what they see and they're doing and playing and that's really important.

It's also extremely beneficial for those children who are coming to school with an international background and not from Ireland, so it helps develop their vocabulary and give them key words and key life skills in dealing with everyday life situation

(1) (6) (7)

And socially too it helps them. It's good for their self-esteem to be involved at an equal level with their peers. It allows children to explore and develop their emotions through play in a safe environment.

Code

1. Academic
2. Problem-solving
3. Parental involvement
4. Extending vocabulary at home/ parents
5. Parent awareness of content being taught at home
6. Inclusive for EAL children
7. Key life skills for EAL Children
8. Wellbeing /self esteem
9. Develop their emotions