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Teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play.

Tess Breslin

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Professional Master of
Education (PME) in Primary Education

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Abstract:

This dissertation examines teacher perspectives on using Aistear to support oral language development, implement play, and support the PLC in infant classrooms. Primary school teachers were surveyed using a paper questionnaire. The responses (n=20) were analysed using a primarily quantitative methodological approach. This study's findings show that Aistear contributes to meaningful oral language interactions and helps implement play-based approaches such as role-play, free play, construction play, small world play, art play and integrated play. The study indicates that most participants believe that play is applicable to teaching the PLC to explore language and communicate (100%), compared to understanding the content of language (40%). The study recommends further research into the use of play to develop reading and writing and the centring of playful pedagogy.

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Acronyms and Glossary:

BERA British Educational Research Association

DE Department of Education

DES Department of Education and Skills

DCEDIY Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools

EAL English as an Additional Language

ECCE Early Childhood Care and Education

ESL English as a Second Language

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

L1 First Language

L2 Second Language

LO Learning Outcome

MFL Modern Foreign Language

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PLC Primary Language Curriculum (2019)

PSC Primary School Curriculum (1999)

SEN Special Educational Needs

SET Special Educational Teacher

SNA Special Needs Assistant

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the research

Play has increasingly been identified in educational research as a tool for learning, and the experience of play creates connections for children between oral language and written expression (Roskos and Christie, 2001; Vedeler, 1997). Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework designed for the education of children aged 0-6 in Ireland. Play-based learning is increasingly being adopted in primary education internationally and Aistear fits into this wider global context. However, Aistear is a framework intended not to replace the primary curriculum but to operate within the scope of the curriculum. There are four themes used within the framework to identify children's learning and development. This research will focus on the 'Communicating' theme of the framework.

This thesis is a research dissertation studying teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes. This research aimed to establish how the Aistear framework is used to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play, according to mainstream primary school teachers. Language is a social tool, but it also enhances children's ability to self-regulate, learn, imagine, connect with peers, and achieve learning outcomes, meaning that language can enhance play (as well as play-enhancing language) (Cregan, 2019, p.2).

1.2 Origin of the dissertation

The initial idea for this dissertation stems from the experience of working abroad as an ESL teacher in 2020. Teaching preschool/infant classroom-aged children (3-7) in Spain provided valuable opportunities to observe the use of play for developing oral language skills in English (L2 for the children in the language school). Subsequent experience working in Irish primary schools highlighted the importance of play and the use of the Aistear framework to teach communication skills.

1.3 Background to the project

This study follows and is informed by previous research literature and policies regarding language and play. Play has long been considered a vehicle for development and learning. Piaget's (1962) theory of play links the cognitive development of children to the playful activities they engage in, as one avenue of constructing knowledge about the world. Research on behalf of the Department of Education has found that play can be a key pedagogical strategy in supporting language development and emergent literacy (Kennedy, et al., 2023, p.118). Rand and Morrow (2021)

recommend sociodramatic play particularly, as a framework for teachers to develop a wide range of written, reading, and oral literacy.

1.4 Rationale and aims

This research project examines how Aistear supports the development of communication skills and oral language through play in the infant class setting. This research therefore explores how play in Aistear supports Element 1: ‘Developing communicative relationships through language (Communicating)’ of the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum (PLC). This research project aims to gather a sample of teacher perspectives on the possible ways of using Aistear to develop communicative relationships in infant class settings. The research aims to give insight into the perspectives of professional primary school teachers and how they perceive, understand, and use Aistear to support the PLC and develop key communication skills with their students.

The Research Aims are:

- To identify how Aistear can be used to create opportunities for communication and oral language development.
- To investigate how the Aistear framework helps teachers to teach oral language skills through play.
- To identify how the Aistear framework can facilitate the teaching of the primary language curriculum (PLC).

1.5 Guide to research methodology

This research is a quantitative study conducted using paper surveys. These questionnaires focus on teacher experience and perspectives of using the Aistear framework, play, and language development. Patterns and connections that arose from open-ended questions are mapped out thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Chapter three outlines the methodology of the research and delves into the decision to use a positivist approach.

1.6 Dissertation layout

The dissertation is set out in six chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion. Each chapter is organised by subheadings to provide clarity and structure. In Chapter Two, theories of language learning that are evident in the Aistear framework are explained through interactionism and play-based learning theories. The policies and frameworks surrounding Aistear are discussed as well as the current research into teacher perspectives on the framework. The general role of play-based learning is also considered, and the communication skill development facilitated by Aistear is outlined.

Chapter Three describes the methodology and research approach of this dissertation, including the ethical considerations, piloting, rigour, and sampling method. In Chapter Four, the findings are presented. Chapter Five then interprets and discusses the findings of this study in relation to the existing body of research. Lastly, Chapter Six summarises the findings of this research, outlines the limitations of the study, and makes suggestions for further research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the topic and themes of this dissertation as well as briefly outlining the origin and background of the research. Therefore, this introduction has started to contextualise the research by considering the existing literature and background of the study. The following chapter further contextualises this research in the policies of the PLC and Aistear as well as reviewing previous research on language and play.

Chapter II: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the benefits and challenges of the Aistear framework as a means of teaching the primary curriculum and particularly the use of the framework to develop oral language skills. Chapter II evaluates the existing literature that researches the perspectives and experiences of teachers in teaching oral language and communication skills, teaching infant classes using the Aistear framework, and play-based methodologies in the primary classroom.

Theoretical perspectives on play-based and language learning are analysed in this portion of this dissertation. Overviews of the PLC and the Aistear Framework are also provided, pertaining particularly to the teaching of oral language. Teacher perspectives are explored in this chapter in terms of the perceived benefits of Aistear in instilling skills or facilitating the primary school curriculum. This chapter aims to establish the existing literature and to locate this research in the context of the research of the DES, the NCCA, and independent academic research.

2.2.1 Overview of the Aistear Framework

Aistear is Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework for children from birth to six years old. The 'Ready to Learn' whitepaper identified the need to develop skills and expertise among primary teachers in the 'development of very young children, learning through play' as well as in more traditional education theory (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p.31). Following this publication, the NCCA funded research around early childhood education and play. In 2007, the NCCA commissioned Dr Margaret Kernan to research play as a context for learning, with the resulting key characteristics of play going on to underpin Aistear's development. Play is characterised in Kernan's research by its 'voluntary nature', meaningfulness according to the children, low stakes, 'spontaneity and openness to the surrounding world', symbolic nature, engagement, 'activity, sociability, joy, and sense of fun' (2007, p.3). Similarly commissioned by the NCCA prior to the publishing of Aistear in 2009, French (2007, p.5) presents a view that effective play must balance activities initiated by the adults/teachers and the children. French (ibid.) also describes the role of adults in play as one of planning for interactions designed to scaffold learning and development for learning outcomes and goals.

Through the theme of communication, the Aistear framework asks that teachers encourage Pretend Play for children to work through challenging emotions including worry, fear, or jealousy with the support of symbolic props, costumes/dress up clothing, and specialised equipment to represent different characters, situations or roles (NCCA, 2009a). Children are also to be encouraged to orally predict and imagine the future through play and to express themselves creatively (ibid.).

2.2.2 Overview of the Primary Language Curriculum

The 2019 Primary Language Curriculum was developed following the separate 1999 Gaeilge and English curricula. The introduction of the PLC in 2019 followed the phased introduction of the new curriculum for stages 1 and 2 (junior infants to second class) from 2015. The full curriculum was introduced at all stages in primary schools from the 2019/2020 academic year. Unlike the previous 1999 curriculum, the PLC is an integrated curriculum for both Gaeilge and English, comprising of the same structure and strands across both languages. The language curriculum has three strands: oral language, reading and writing. The PLC also introduced three elements for language learning: understanding, communicating, and exploring language.

The integration between languages in the PLC seeks to aid teachers in planning for and supporting progression in both the child's first language (L1) and second language (L2), regardless of whether Gaeilge or English is the L1 or L2. This is evident from the PLC's emphasis on transferable language skills and the transfer of concepts between L1 and L2. Importantly, the PLC highlights the role of interactions in language learning, particularly playful experiences and interactions that enable children to engage in 'meaningful communication' (NCCA, 2019, p.9). Similarly to the Aistear framework, the PLC is concerned with creating dispositions and aims to 'promote a positive disposition towards communication and language by fostering...a(n) interest in and a love of language learning' (ibid., p.13).

2.3 Theoretical perspectives on play-based learning

Walsh and Fallon's (2019) research on play-based pedagogical approaches, though limited in its small rural sample, provides insight in terms of teacher and student beliefs and understanding of play. Walsh and Fallon's findings acknowledge the importance of play but show little evidence that Aistear has transformed classroom teaching. They also found that didactic, teacher-led teaching approaches remain more prevalent, whereas play is a more peripheral method. The study provides an original insight into the challenges teachers experience in meeting competing curricular demands between the Aistear framework and the PSC (ibid.).

Creaghe, Quinn and Kidd (2021, p.980) explored how the symbolic nature of play provides 'a fertile context for language acquisition' due to 'its inherent ambiguity', thus enhancing language development by eliciting communicative behaviours. The results of their study suggest that symbolic play is an important context for fostering language development as symbolic play involves the use of objects, spaces, and bodies to symbolise or represent other imagined contexts. However, a limitation of their research is that it is based on pre-school language development compared to the primary school focus of this dissertation.

Understanding how children learn requires an understanding of the psychology of children and constructivists like Piaget argue that children should be facilitated in actively building up their understanding of the world. Piaget’s (1962) stages of cognitive development would place junior and senior infant students in the ‘Preoperational stage’ (from 2 to 7 years old) and therefore capable of developing symbolic thought. This age group, therefore, should be encouraged to engage in symbolic play and, as they become less ego-centric, engage in make-believe and role-play. However, even if one accepts these stages, it is important to note that depending on social and cultural variables, children may go through the stages at ages differing from those presented by Piaget (Winstanley, 2023).

Constructive play and social play, in which children build using materials and interact with adults or children, have been shown to enable children to develop self-regulatory skills (Whitebread, 2017). However, ‘pretend play’ includes progressively complex systems of ‘symbolic representation’ using oral language skills (ibid., p.331). Zosh et al.’s (2018) research also presents play in the form of a spectrum. Figure 1 illustrates forms of play in terms of the initiator, director, and participants in the play and highlights which forms of play can have explicit learning outcomes. While ‘guided play’ is structured by an adult, and therefore planned based on a learning goal, Zosh et al. (ibid.) maintain that it is essential that the child maintains agency to direct the activity involved in the play.

This presentation of play as a spectrum is highly significant for this research, as the types of play are not necessarily concrete, and this dissertation study refers to a wide range of play forms. Classroom play using the Aistear framework may be initiated by the teacher in a guided manner, nonetheless, the play can then transition into free play or, conversely, into co-opted play. The Aistear framework embraces this multiplicity of play, acknowledging that although there are multiple types of play, children can conduct two or more forms of play simultaneously. The framework illustrates this with an example of children playing with a construction game whilst also playing at pretending to be builders (NCCA, 2009b, p.53).



Figure 1. Play as a spectrum (Zosh et al., 2018, p.4).

2.4.1 Theoretical perspectives on language learning: Interactionism

Interactionism posits that language acquisition takes place through interactions with adults and other children. This theory views interaction as the means of learning language due to the belief that

language serves a communicative function. This approach, grounded in sociology, regards language as symbolic in that it ‘transcends the concrete limitations of stimulus-response reactions’ (Atkinson and Housely, 2003, p.6). This ability to use language to express hypothetical or imagined feelings provides humans with the unique opportunity to develop language through play. In terms of scientific approaches to linguistics, an interactive approach can also aid in studying how the ‘phenomena of language’ transgress the boundaries and barriers of phonetics, phonology, semantics, and syntax (Falands et al., 2020, p.543). Such neuroscientific analysis reveals interaction between different forms of linguistic information and interaction with non-linguistic sensory modalities (vision and action) in language processing. Play involves verbal, visual, and physical elements and it therefore may develop language through the interactive nature of play communication. Vygotsky (1978, p.26) presents the idea that children problem-solve practical tasks using language or ‘speech’, vision or ‘their eyes’, and action or ‘hands’ in what he names the ‘unity of perception, speech and action’ that forms human behaviour.

2.4.2 Theoretical perspectives on language learning: Play-based language learning

With specific reference to language learning, theories of play-based learning are central to this research project. Play is used in language development from infancy, with infants engaging in types of vocal play ‘defined as melodies and rhythms encompassing gurgles, coos, hiccups, and screeches’ which then progresses to social play with parental figures involving reciprocal vocal noises (Brooks and Kempe, 2014, p.468). In the primary school setting, children also play with language through ‘rhymes, jokes, (and) nonsense syllables’ which all help in facilitating an understanding of the manipulatable system of language (NCCA, 2019, p.9). The PLC carries this importance through to the learning outcomes of oral language with ‘playful and creative use of language’. As outlined in the PLC, ‘playful and engaging experiences are an important part’ of language learning so that communication is meaningful for the child (ibid.).

As previously noted in relation to Zosh et al. (2018), play is defined in many ways and can be referred to free, adult-led, or adult guided play. Guided play can be regarded as a way for teachers to model vocabulary and scaffold learning. Therefore, it is essential to model all parts of language required for the child to engage in meaningful play. Pepper and Weizman (2004, p.89) suggest using a variety of words including question words, nouns, possessive adjectives, spatial prepositions, or social words to scaffold the child’s use of the new vocabulary. Guided play can increase and develop children’s oral language in terms of vocabulary as play necessitates communication from the participants (Concannon-Gibney, 2019).

2.5 Examining the Aistear Framework in terms of oral language and communication skills

Aim four of the Communicating theme of Aistear states that children will ‘use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences’ (NCCA, 2009a, p.35). Cresham (2021) explores the language development opportunities presented by the social context of Aistear. Cresham’s research took a mixed methods action research approach, and its findings identified the benefits of the social context of Aistear to support students of different language abilities. The language development opportunities created by social interaction with both peers and adults were noted in the findings (ibid.).

One important aspect of Aistear as a means of facilitating oral language skills is the disparity in language opportunities at home. Cresham states that ‘some pupils start school having been exposed to rich, varied language at home, while others have not’ (2021, p.21). Play is highlighted in this research as one of the ways that pupils ‘of varying language abilities’ are enabled to engage in peer learning and to try out language in a ‘naturalistic environment as modelled by peers and scaffolded by practitioners’ (ibid.). The NCCA highlights the importance of the learning environment in Aistear, stating that learning communication skills throughout early childhood is influenced by both the ability of the child and their environment (NCCA, 2009a). Hence, this small-scale research study will include teacher perspectives on developing communication skills through Aistear regarding the impact of the learning environment.

The learning environment is also impacted by whether play is present in the classroom as a discrete play time, or whether it is integrated throughout the day. Integrating play across the school day has been linked to positive general and learning attitudes (Moyle, 1989). The kind of play-based language learning experiences recommended by the PLC (2019) and Brooks and Kempe (2014) are also reflected in the Aistear framework with language games, nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, storytelling and retelling, and the use of nonsense words in rhyming all outlined in the Communicating theme (NCCA, 2009a).

2.6 Teacher perspectives on the teaching of the PSC and PLC through Aistear

Teacher perspectives on the teaching of the curriculum through the Aistear framework have been examined in research, including that of Gray and Ryan (2016). Gray and Ryan aimed to report on the experience of Irish primary school teachers in the dual approach to teaching junior and senior infants using the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (PSC) and the Aistear framework. Illustrating the differences between the Aistear framework and the primary school curriculum, Gray and Ryan (ibid.) outline the holistic, practise-oriented approach of Aistear in contrast to the PSC which is subject-based. The research also highlights the key difference that Aistear is a practise-oriented approach, while the PSC is theory-based.

The limitations of Gray and Ryan's study stem mostly from the updating of the primary curriculum (ibid.). The surveys, observations, and interviews conducted in their research focus on the dual approach of teaching the 1999 PSC (which is now outdated since the introduction of the PLC) with the Aistear framework. Unlike the PSC, the PLC follows on from the introduction of the Aistear framework and builds on the principles and dispositions set out within Aistear (NCCA, 2019). Though Gray and Ryan's (2016) research is useful in examining teacher perspectives on the challenges of balancing Aistear themes and curriculum subjects, teachers may consider the PLC to be more supportive of this as it incorporates the communication theme of Aistear into its elements. Additionally, the draft published of the updated Aistear framework focuses on further aligning the framework with the Primary Curriculum Framework to ensure 'continuity of experience' (NCCA, 2023, p.5).

The Aistear framework highlights three key aspects of the role of the adult in play. These are: planning for play, supporting play, and reviewing play (NCCA, 2009b, p.56). French's research, (2007) on behalf of the NCCA, assigned a planning and assessing role to adults in play which was then formerly adopted by Aistear in 2009. While the role of the teacher has been defined in Aistear, there is room for challenges. Woods, Mannion and Garrity (2022) found that while teachers and early-year educators reported benefits for developing language and social interactions, significant concerns regarding training, ratios, and resources were raised by those interviewed. It is important to note that Woods, Mannion and Garrity's study, though thematically relevant to this dissertation, is a small qualitative study with a sample size of 13 participants, including only seven primary school teachers.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, while Aistear and the primary school curriculum differ in approaches as a practise-based framework and a theory-based curriculum, respectively, both documents focus on the development of communication skills and recommend play-based methodologies. The existing literature has identified mixed teacher perspectives on the effectiveness of Aistear as a way of facilitating the curriculum. However, this research will focus on the ways that Aistear can be used to support oral language skills and communication skills through play. The next chapter will examine and outline the methodological approach used to conduct this research. This dissertation will focus on the interactionist theory of language learning in terms of examining communication opportunities and language learning in play. Based on the existing literature and both the challenges and benefits identified in research of a dual approach (the curriculum and the Aistear framework), the question emerges; how does the Aistear framework help teachers to teach oral language skills through play in junior and senior infant settings?

Chapter III: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken through the ethical considerations, sampling, rigour, analysis, and limitations of this research project. A quantitative methodology is used in this study according to the selected positivist approach. This meant that the study required the collection of observable and measurable data, which could then be quantified using analysis.

3.2 Methodology and approach

Positivists argue that a quantitative approach is the objective means to examine the properties of the ‘externally’ existing social world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002, p.28). Taking a positivist approach to this study means that the research mostly focuses on observable, and factual-based knowledge. Therefore, this study uses questionnaire surveys to gather data for analysis using descriptive statistics to provide rigour through validity and reliability. The use of survey or questionnaire studies to conduct research using quantitative methodology is typical as it yields measurable data from participants for the researcher to then analyse and interpret. In such research, the researcher’s role is that of an ‘external observer’ who studies the ‘parts of a social phenomenon’ in an objective manner to gain understanding of the entire system (Kuada, 2012, p.73).

Additionally, a limited social-constructivist approach is incorporated by the research through open-ended questions. The purpose of this is to allow for additional input by participants, as they express their experience or attitudes around language teaching through play in Aistear. This provides participants with the scope to explain why they do/do not believe that Aistear creates opportunities for meaningful interactions. It also provides space to further express their views on using Aistear to support language learning through play. This study’s approach reflects the methodologically pragmatic approach to educational research recommended by Foster (2024). As a result, the analysis and discussion of the data from these open-ended questions will emphasise words rather than numbers (Scott and Morrison, 2005). Though this study is limited in its scope, the addition of selected qualitative analysis may add to the value of the study as it incorporates the perspectives of the stakeholders. This partial inclusion of open-ended questions resulted in the need for limited thematic analysis of the topics that arose in responses.

3.3 Research methods

This researcher selected paper questionnaires to collect the data as the study takes a quantitative approach. A questionnaire is defined as a set of pre-prepared questions written by the researcher with the aim of ‘obtaining data for statistical analysis’ (Nind, Curtin and Hall, 2017, p.18).

Questionnaires were selected, rather than interviews, to gather data from a wider group of participants in the context of a small-scale research dissertation. Paper surveys were selected as this

researcher has been working as a substitute teacher and on placement in primary schools with direct access to participants in consenting schools. Paper surveys were convenient to the participants, who were able to fill in the surveys at their convenience before the researcher collected the paper questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed to include a variety of questions and begins with straightforward factual questions about their history of teaching before moving on to opinion or comment-based questions (see Appendix 7.5). The questionnaire was also designed to take teachers a maximum of ten minutes to complete to avoid imposing a considerable time demand on participants. To aid in the design, the survey questionnaire was briefly piloted and then refined further in consultation with this researcher's dissertation supervisor. The final questionnaire and a copy of the information sheet and consent forms are included in the appendices of this dissertation.

3.4 Piloting

Before data collection commenced, a brief and informal pilot study was conducted with the voluntary participation of a senior infant class teacher known personally to this researcher. This volunteer was then excluded from the final study. Informal piloting can help assess the feasibility of research plans in the phases where modification is still possible (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). The informal piloting of this study led to minor layout changes to improve visual clarity and it also supported the further development and the final inclusion of two open-ended questions, the 'why/why not' section in Question 4 and the additional comments section at the end of the questionnaire. The pilot study supported the inclusion of open-ended questions to give further scope for participants to express their perspectives through the surveys and to allow the study to explore a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

3.5.1 Sample and participants: sampling methods

It is typically necessary when carrying out any research project to select a sample for logistical reasons. As outlined by Pickard (2017), this is because it is neither possible nor practical to survey the entire population relevant to the research. In this case, it is not possible for this study to survey all primary school teachers who have taught the PLC to junior and/or senior infants. Selecting the sample group from the general population when conducting a research study is vital as the 'methods used ... determine the nature and validity of the findings' (Scott and Morrison, 2005). The sample must be chosen objectively and fairly and must represent the general population of the research group.

Non-probability sampling methods were used during this research's data collection process. During the collection of data using questionnaires, a convenience sampling method was used whereby the most conveniently available participants were recruited to answer the questionnaires. Convenience sampling was selected for use due to the limited time for data collection, the small scale of the study, and the criteria of only surveying mainstream teachers who are currently or have taught

junior or senior infants within the past 2 years. As the PLC (2019) is still relatively recent, it was important that the participants had taught language through play and Aistear within the past two years.

3.5.2 Sample and participants: setting and participants

Four school principals from four different large urban primary schools (with and without DEIS, status), known professionally to this researcher were first contacted to establish consent for teachers in their schools to participate in questionnaires as part of this research project. An information sheet and an information letter were provided to each principal. When consent was granted, 7 questionnaires and participant consent forms were given to each principal's school, along with a box for teachers to post questionnaires into upon completion. It was stated that the researcher aimed to get a return of c.5 questionnaires from each school where possible and this was obtained with 21 surveys returned in total.

One returned survey was discarded from the study due to the respondent not meeting the inclusion criteria of having two years of experience teaching infants. This left the total number of participants at 20. As the study focuses on the teaching of the PLC (2019) through Aistear in mainstream infant classrooms, the inclusion criteria required that participants were all fully qualified Irish primary school teachers currently working, or who have worked, in the mainstream infant classroom setting for a minimum of two years and who have taught in that setting within the past two years.

3.6 Data analysis

To analyse the quantitative data collected in this research, statistical analysis was used to examine frequency distributions. For the limited qualitative data collected in the survey (in the open-ended question and comment boxes), limited thematic analysis was used to fully represent the answers of the participants beyond what numerical analysis would allow. To thematically analyse the response given in the open-ended questions, it was necessary to keep a log of quotes and reoccurring themes that emerged. Doing so enabled this researcher to sit with the information, without drawing conclusions, prior to analysis (Russell and Kelly, 2002). This assisted in finding connections and patterns that emerged into the overarching themes that this researcher mapped from the responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding was initially implemented before the themes were identified, and samples of this can be found in the appendices of this dissertation.

Conducting preliminary analysis of the quantitative data was beneficial as it provided insight and a 'basic understanding of the characteristics of the dataset' as well as assisting in 'identifying outliers and other possible errors' within the data set (Xiaohong-Chen, 2012, p.20). This step in the research was essential to the data analysis as it provided an opportunity to clean the data by identifying and correcting any errors, inconsistencies, outliers, or duplicates. Any cleaning or correction that arose

from the preliminary analysis of the data was then recorded and noted in the researcher's records to ensure transparency.

3.7 Rigour

This quantitative study is an objective project with no intention to obtain specific results, no vested interest in the type of data obtained, and constant efforts made to interrogate this researcher's own expectations to maintain the utmost rigour and honesty. This researcher has also employed robust measures in terms of validity and reliability by obtaining consent from participants to securely store the collected data for three years following collection. The data is also available to the research supervisor, in accordance with participant consent, to ensure and corroborate the validity of the results. Given the small-scale nature of the research and the small number of participants (n=20), there is, to a degree, a lack of generalisability and transferability to the entire population of infant teachers in Ireland. In terms of reflexivity, biases have been kept in check through piloting of the questionnaire and the use of a reflective journal which records all decisions in the cleaning of data. Quantitative methods can be 'incorporated into critical frameworks of thought and analysis' and choosing quantitative methods has provided objective, statistical data to critically analyse and discuss in this dissertation (Zwiener-Collins et al., 2023, p.5).

3.8 Limitations of the research

This study is a small-scale investigation, it has a small sample size of 20 participants across four schools. While this dissertation has been conducted to a highly professional standard, it may not be generalisable due to the limitation of the sample size and scope of the study. Although the study did briefly use a qualitative approach to thematically analyse the responses to the open-ended questions, it may have insufficient triangulation given that it is primarily a quantitative study and is based solely on surveys.

Furthermore, the research related to four primary schools in the south and east of Ireland in only urban schools. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire population. However, the study may provide insight into play-based language learning and the facilitation of the PLC through the play-based learning approaches of Aistear. This insight may be further explored and might benefit from large-scale studies.

3.9 Ethical issues regarding the research

This dissertation has received full ethical approval from Hibernia College's Ethics Committee. This research is in line with the BERA guidelines (2018) and the Hibernia College Policy for Academic Good Practice and Associated Procedures. As such, it upholds the integrity and reputation of educational research. This study complied with the ethical standards of BERA (2018), Hibernia College's data protection policy, and GDPR through the provisions made for anonymity,

confidentiality, the secure storage of data, a clear process of withdrawal, and the removal of identifiers and respondent names.

Explicit informed consent was obtained from all participants and school principals before data collection commenced. Informed consent requires considered preparation, explanation of the research to participants, and consultation with participants before the commencement of any data collection (Bell and Waters, 2014). Participants were made aware of what was expected of them if they agreed to participate in the study. Each participant received a copy of the Information Sheet (see Appendix 7.1) attached to a consent form (see Appendix 7.4). The Information Sheet made participants aware that any responses would be anonymous and that no identifying information regarding the participants or schools would be shared. Data from this study will be stored for three years after data collection in line with Hibernia College's privacy policy, after which, all data will be safely and securely destroyed by this researcher in line with GDPR. All participants were informed of this and gave consent in their participant consent forms.

This study ensured that the anonymity of the schools and teachers participating was upheld by removing any geographical references, using pseudonyms and generic identifiers, and not disclosing any information regarding participants to third parties. Participants were made aware of this. The study has also maintained confidentiality and privacy by safeguarding all information gathered formally and informally as part of this dissertation. All surveys were stored securely in a locked cabinet and participants were informed, verbally and through the participant consent form, that they had the right to withdraw from the study for up to one month from the date of data collection. The minimum level of personal information was collected and included only relevant information.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter provides a complete overview of the research methodology, sampling, and ethical considerations of this study. Chapter III also describes the positivist approach taken, the use of questionnaires for data collection, the limited social-constructivist approach element using open-ended questions, and piloting. Sampling methods, participant selection, and data analysis procedures are detailed. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on the importance of rigour and ethical standards. The research's limitations, including the sample size and ethical considerations regarding confidentiality and informed consent, are also addressed. In the following chapter, the findings gathered using the methodological approach outlined above will be presented and analysed.

Chapter IV: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out to present the findings of this study and to critically outline and map the results from the questionnaire surveys of 20 participating primary school teachers. The questionnaire was designed to investigate teacher perspectives on the use of Aistear to create opportunities for oral language learning through interactions, communication, and play.

Chapter three described the methodologies used to collect the data for this project using a positivist approach, the quantitative data gathered, and the limited thematic analysis of the open-ended questions from the survey. In this chapter, the background of the participants will be presented, the opportunities for meaningful interactions that arose in responses will be outlined, and the findings on the role of play as a methodology will be critically analysed. Playful methodologies will be examined in relation to learning language as part of the PLC and learning language through Aistear. Findings will be presented as simple statistics in the form of bar charts, cluster charts, tables, and pie charts.

4.2 Background of participants

Participants in this study have experience teaching junior/senior infants ranging from 2-10 years. The study's participants have a mean score of 4.225 years' experience teaching stage 1. Participants currently teach in mainstream classrooms, though not all are currently teaching infants. All of those surveyed answered 'yes' to question 2, confirming that they have taught infants over the course of the past two years. This is essential to ensure that this study is informed by current perspectives and that the participants have experienced the teaching of the Primary Language Curriculum, introduced in 2019, alongside the Aistear framework. Fifty-five percent of respondents to the study have taught junior and/or senior infants for between 2 and 3 years, while a smaller portion (15%) have taught the class groups for 8 years or more. As a result, this study is mostly comprised of teachers with a background of less than four years' experience of teaching in infant classes.

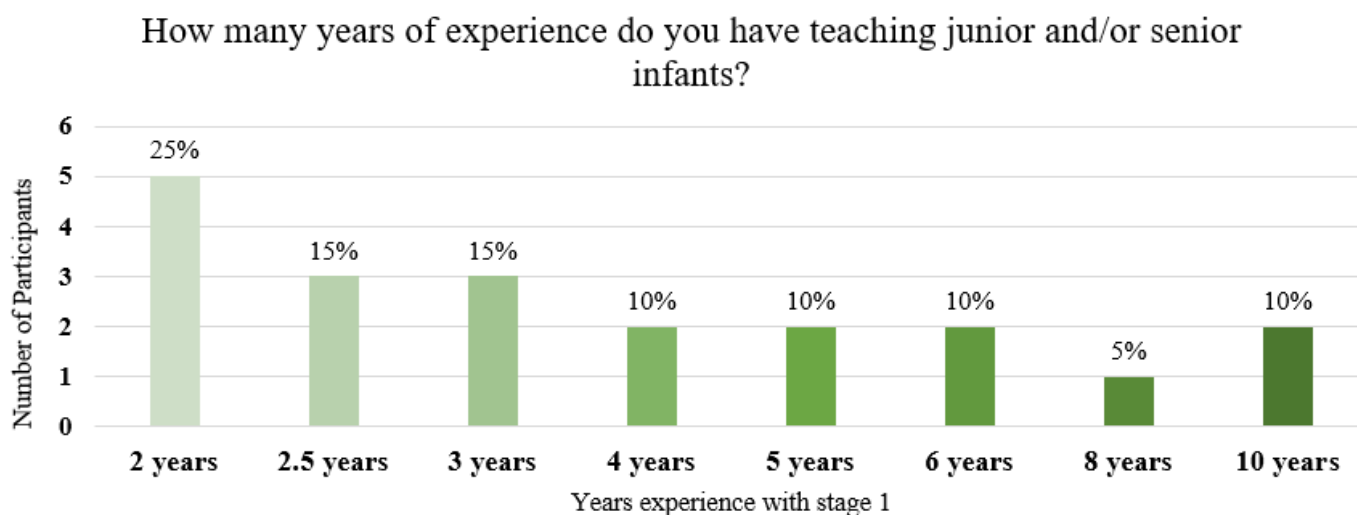


Figure 2. A bar chart depicting the number of years spent by the participants teaching junior and/or senior infants.

4.3 Opportunities for meaningful interactions

In response to the statement ‘Aistear helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students’, participants in the study responded positively with all responses stating that, at a minimum, Aistear creates opportunities ‘often’ (40%). While the majority (60%) stated that Aistear ‘always’ creates opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students. No participants reported that Aistear creates opportunities for meaningful language interactions ‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’, or ‘never’. The absence of these answers suggests that Aistear is mostly perceived as successful in creating opportunities for genuine use of communicative language for students. The word ‘meaningful’ is significant as it ensures that the participants are considering the type of language interactions rather than establishing a baseline of any interaction, the communication must have meaning for the students.

Answer choices:	Percentage of responses:	Number of responses:
Always	60.00%	12
Often	40.00%	8
Sometimes	0.00%	0
Rarely	0.00%	0
Never	0.00%	0

Table 1. A table showing participant answers to the statement ‘Aistear helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students’ in percentage and raw data form.

From the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire’s open questions, theme 6 (Play provides opportunities for children to interact meaningfully using language) was generated, based on the number of codes that arose indicating the participant perspective that play gives opportunities for meaningful language interactions. Responses highlight the role of play in creating opportunities for meaningful interaction through pupil discussion of play, asking each other questions, sharing their thinking with others, taking turns, interacting in-role, working collaboratively, and observing modelling from peers and teachers in play contexts. Considering Aistear’s role in generating opportunities for meaningful interactions, one participant stated that Aistear ‘promotes huge opportunities for meaningful language interactions as children are given a wide variety of ways to use new vocabulary in a play-based way’.

4.4 Playful methodologies

When asked which play-based methodologies they have used in the infant classroom, respondents indicated that they have all used construction, and almost all (95%) have used free play, imaginative play with props, and art or drawing play. No participant chose ‘none’ in their response and 11 responses named additional ‘other’ play-based methodologies.

Of the 11 respondents that named ‘other’ play-based methodologies, seven responses named ‘messy’ and ‘sensory’ play involving soil, sand, or water. Four participants also described ‘puppet’ and ‘role-play’ as play-based methodologies. For the purpose of this study, these methods would fall within the named category of play: ‘imaginative with props’ which also can refer to symbolic play with props representing or symbolising other objects. ‘Small world’ play arose five times in participant responses and will be considered as separate from ‘imagination with props’ due to the scope for small world to involve multiple forms of play (construction, art, free, and imaginative using objects). The responses indicate that a wide range of play-based methodologies have been used by participants and that they have experience teaching infant classes through numerous playful approaches. This finding is evident from all participants selecting multiple types of play-based methodologies, 0% selecting ‘None’, and from the high proportion (55%) who named additional ‘Other’ forms of play that they have used to teach.

Response choices:	Number of responses:	Percentage of responses:
Free Play	19	95.00%
Construction play (building)	20	100.00%
Imaginative with props	19	95.00%
Art/drawing play	19	95.00%
Dress up play	14	70.00%
Games with rules	15	75.00%
Word/nonsense/rhyme play	14	70.00%
None	0	0.00%
Other	11	55.00%

Table 2. A table of the data in response to the question: ‘Which of the following play-based methodologies have you used in the infant classroom? (Please tick all that apply)’.

When asked about the use of Aistear to implement play-based learning methodologies in the classroom, all respondents indicated that they believe Aistear does help. Seventeen stated that they strongly agreed with this, and the remaining 15% agreed. This is the highest level of agreement from the five Likert scale questions included in the questionnaire, indicating a prevalent attitude amongst the study participants that Aistear helps implement play in the classroom, regardless of whether the play is designed to develop language or not.

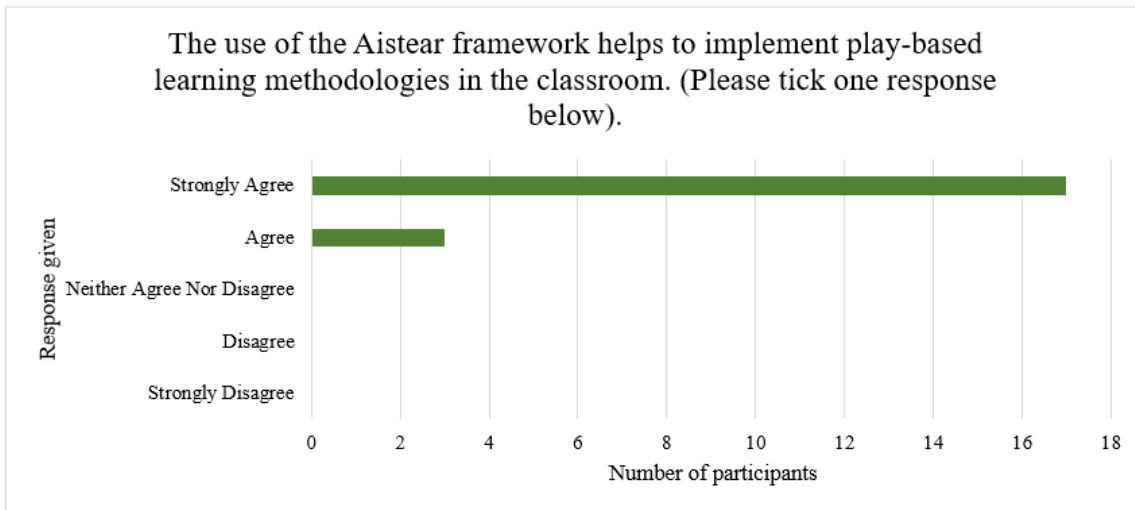


Figure 3. A graph chart of responses on whether the use of Aistear helps in implementing play-based learning methodologies in the classroom.

4.5.1 Play and the PLC: Play and teaching language

When asked more specifically about methodologies for teaching oral language in infant classes, 85% of the teachers surveyed expressed a preference for ‘play’. The participants indicated that groupwork and collaborative learning is also a preferred approach to teaching oral language with 80% of participants choosing that as a preferred methodology. Non-play-based active learning was also preferred by 75% of participants and 70% expressed that teacher-led talk and discussion is also a preferred method for teaching oral language. Additionally, one-quarter of those surveyed named ‘other’ methods as preferred. Of these five responses, one named ‘problem-solving’, one described free play, another response stated ‘role-play’, another participant stated that teacher-in role is their preferred method, and one participant stated that they find ‘everyday activities’ and integrated learning to be one of their preferred methods to teach oral language.

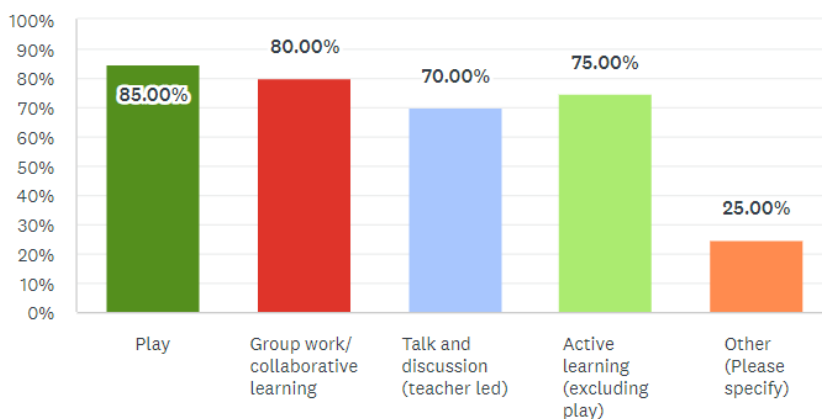


Figure 4. A bar chart outlining the responses from participants naming their preferred methodologies when teaching oral language to infant classes.

In response to question 9, 100% of the respondents answered that play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills. This general agreement with the statement is also reflected in the choice of fifteen of the twenty respondents to select that they ‘strongly agree’ with the assertion on the Likert scale.

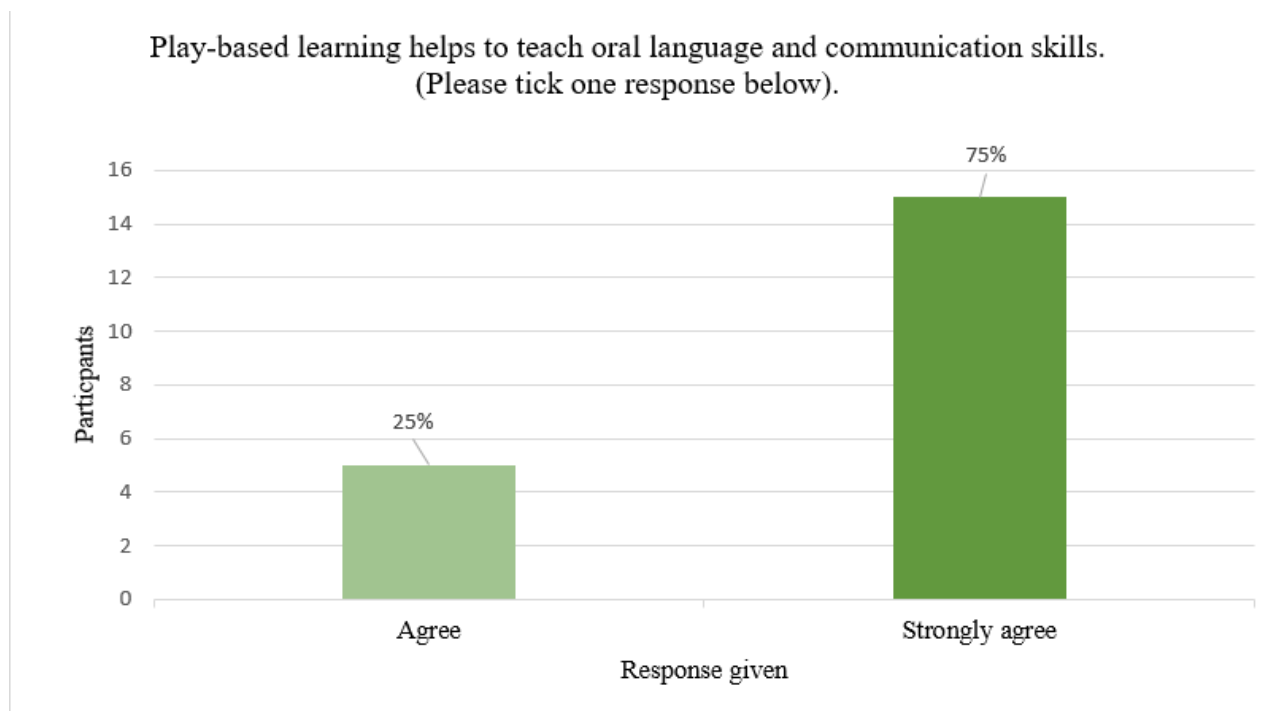


Figure 5. A bar chart showing responses to the statement ‘play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills’.

4.5.2 Play and the PLC: Aistear and the PLC

Looking at the question of inclusion and support for the diverse language needs and backgrounds of students, most participants in this study (95%) stated that they strongly agree that the use of play delivered through Aistear can support language development in classes where students have a variety of language backgrounds. Only one participant stated that they ‘disagree’ with the statement and expanded on this, stating that ‘EAL students or student(s) with communication-based difficulties’ can face challenges participating in Aistear ‘as they firstly do not understand instruction from the teacher and find it hard to mix and social with others’. However, the same participant also noted in their response that pre-teaching vocabulary and teacher support can ‘improve their (EAL students) experience’.

This response is an outlier in that it differs from the data collected from the other participants, as 80% answered that they strongly agree and 15% agreed that play in Aistear supports language development for students with different language backgrounds. Furthermore, the thematic analysis of the open-ended answers resulted in Theme 2: Accessibility of language through Aistear. Codes emerged from the analysis of this theme regarding the use of language to support all abilities in Aistear, the benefits for EAL learners, and the support of EAL students in language learning

through Aistear. Four participants shared their perspectives on the ‘positive impact’ of Aistear on EAL learners. Notably, teachers in this study expressed the view that Aistear can provide ‘equal access’ to language as language is ‘promoted for all levels or abilities in the classroom’.

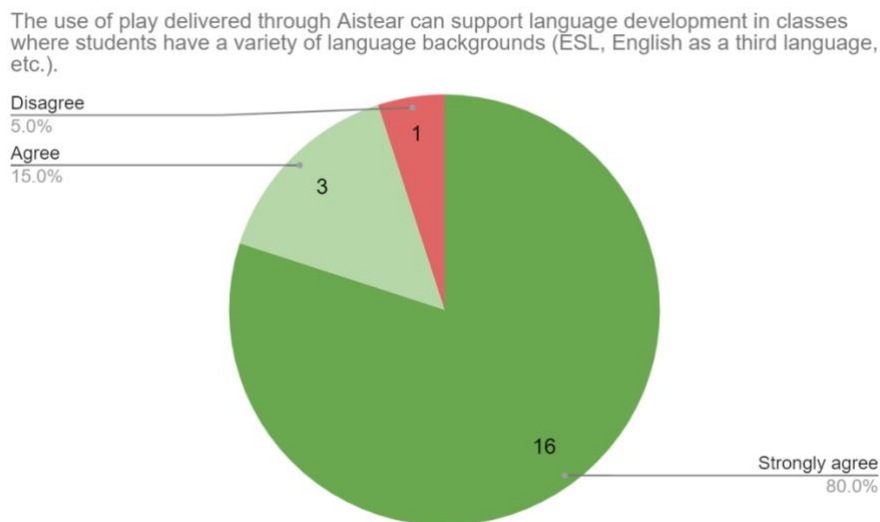


Figure 6. A pie-chart showing participant responses to the statement ‘the use of play delivered through Aistear can support language development in classes where students have a variety of language backgrounds.’

Notably, the respondents all (n=20) answered that they believe Aistear improves and contributes to the teaching of oral language and communication skills and most (60%) strongly agreed.

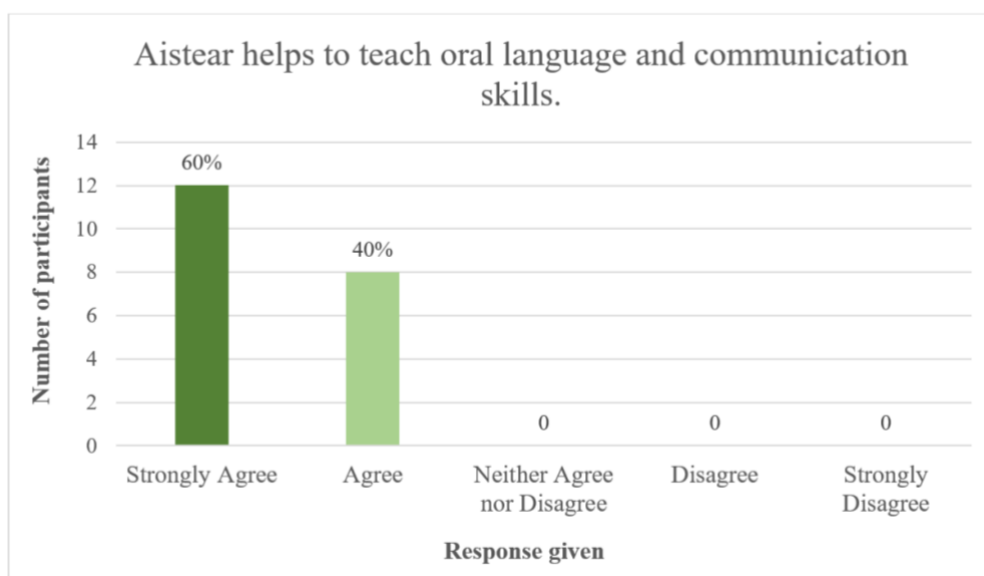


Figure 7. A bar chart showing responses to the statement ‘Aistear helps to teach oral language and communication skills’.

When asking participants to expand on their use of play to teach the PLC, 100% of participants answered that they use play in relation to ‘exploring and using language’ and ‘developing communicative relationships through language’. In contrast, only eight of the teachers surveyed

(40%) stated that they use play relating to ‘understanding the content and structure of language’. No participants skipped this question, as all of those surveyed answered ‘yes’ to question 6, stating that their use of play does relate to the teaching of the English language per the PLC.

If you answered yes to question 6, which elements of the Primary Language Curriculum did the use of play relate to? If you answered ‘no’ to question 6 then skip this question. (You may tick more than one answer).

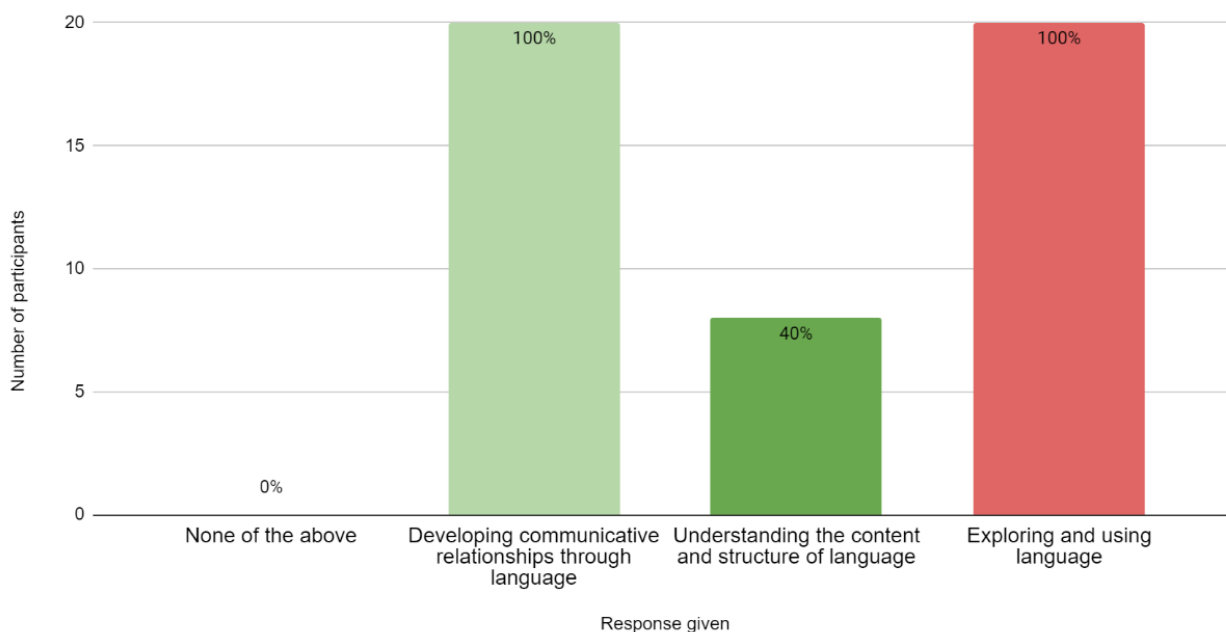


Figure 8. A bar chart showing which elements of the PLC participants answered that their use of play relates to.

The results of this study indicate that while play is commonly used to teach language, it is least utilised when addressing the element of ‘understanding’ from the PLC. The findings suggest that teachers may be more likely to use play for the elements of communication and exploring when teaching language through play. This may indicate a lack of clarity about how play can be used to teach this element, or it may suggest that it is less obviously addressed through the play-based methodologies the surveyed teachers use.

4.6 Themes emerging from participant answers

From the open-ended questions in the study, six central themes emerged from the codes. These are outlined below in Figure 8. After studying and becoming familiar with the questionnaire data, initial codes were drawn out from the data and the six themes were generated from the codes (as shown in Table 3 and Appendix 7.6).

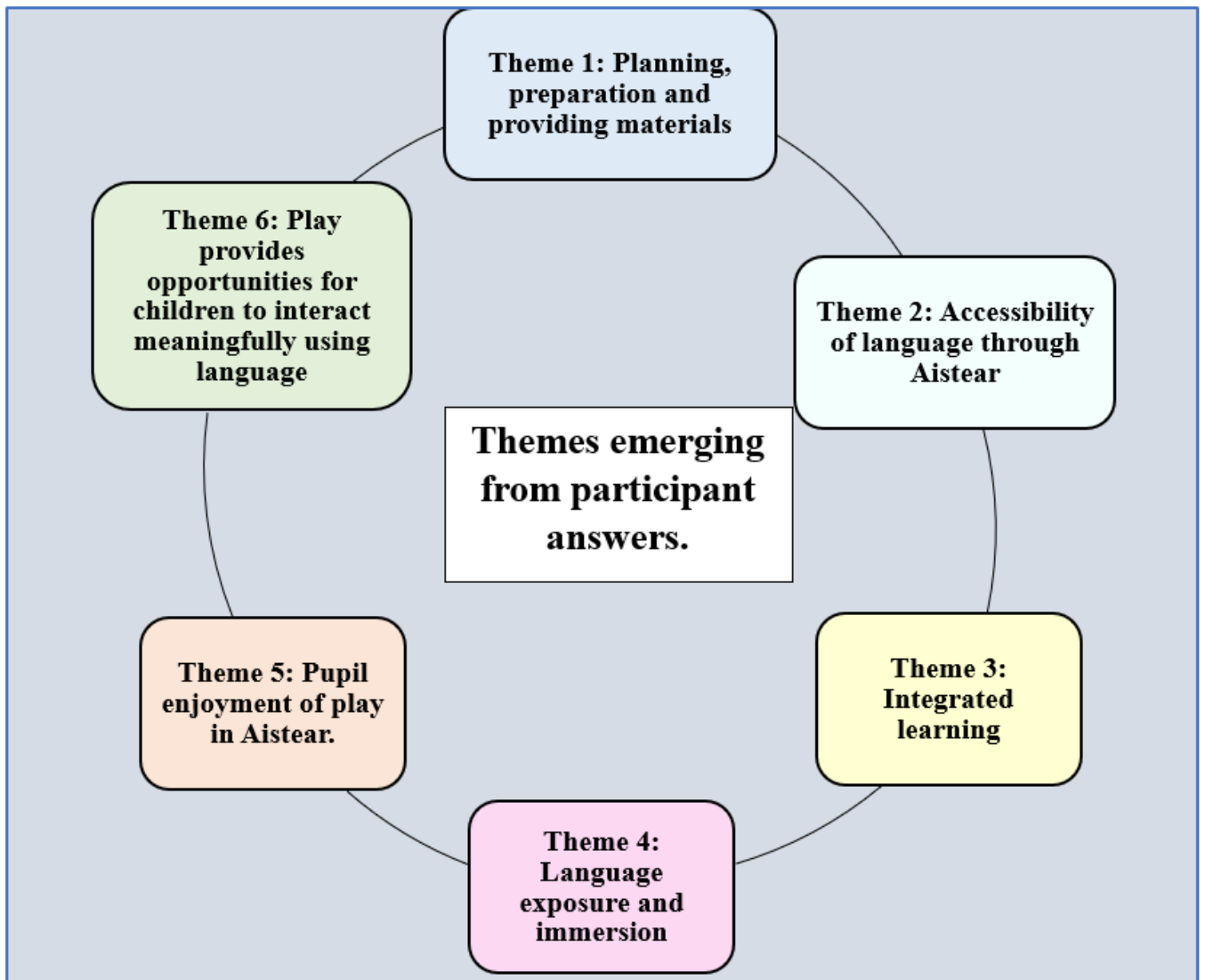


Figure 9: A graphic showing the six themes that emerged from the analysis and coding of participant responses. These answers were given in response to the 'further comments on Aistear and language' section and the 'why/why not' explanation to question 4 about whether Aistear helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions.

<p>Theme: Pupil enjoyment of play in Aistear</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children enjoy and learn through play. • Children relate to the learning through play. • Playful pedagogy means the child can relate to and enjoy the learning. • Pupil enthusiasm makes it a valuable tool for teachers. • Pupils love Aistear • Children feel more relaxed. • Fun situations to learn from peers. <p>Subtheme: Play provides a safe, fun way to practise new language.</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal setting to practise language and vocabulary. • Gives a variety of ways to use the language in a play-based way. 	<p>Theme: Planning, preparation and providing materials</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aistear requires a lot of preparation to be successful. • Good planning is necessary for stations to ensure communication. • Preparing themed boxes of props and materials every month. • Need choices of props for children to choose what resources they want. • Having access to hands-on materials and props offers more communication opportunities. 	<p>Theme: Play provides opportunities for children to interact meaningfully using language</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupils discuss their play. • Asking each other questions • Play sparks interest and children want to share their thinking with others. • Pupils share • Turn taking. • Role-play interactions. • Group and pair work. • Free play encourages the use of vocabulary freely by students. • Collaborative activities require interactions. • Language modelling from peers and teachers.
<p>Theme: Accessibility of language through Aistear</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modelling language in fun ways supports EAL students. • SET support for EAL students during Aistear. • Offers equal access to language. • Can support students with additional needs. • Opportunity to communicate at their level and in smaller groups. • Can aid language development for EAL students. • Promotes language for all levels. • Enhances language skills for those who already have a good level of ability. • Supports shy students 	<p>Theme: Integrated learning</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic teaching • Subjects can be integrated through topics. • Worthwhile learning opportunities are created by integrating subjects and methodologies through topics. 	<p>Theme: Language exposure and immersion</p> <p>Codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The immersive nature of thematic play encourages topic-specific language use. • Immersion in language through displays, pre-teaching, and play contexts. • Navigating social interactions and problems using the vocabulary. • Aistear creates a context to promote language. • Playing in role using puppets or role-play. • Immersion in the topic's language (oral and written) shows real-world relevance. • Exposure to themes/topics that they may not access in their own lives.

Table 3: A table showing thematic analysis and codes of the open-ended responses collected in the questionnaire.

The patterns that emerged from the open-ended questions, shown in Table 3, appear to support the data's finding, identifying benefits in Aistear and play around pupil enjoyment, language exposure

and immersion, meaningful language interactions, and accessibility of language learning for different learner backgrounds. Additional themes arose with respondents expressing experiences about the challenges and organisational requirements associated with planning, preparing, and providing materials for successful Aistear as well as the benefits of Aistear play in supporting integrated learning.

4.7 Conclusion

This study has received a varied range of thoughtful and reflective responses to the questionnaire from the participating teachers. The responses and comments made have generated data that has been highly interesting to analyse. Most responses indicate a belief that the Aistear framework and play-based methodologies are useful and beneficial in developing oral language and supporting the PLC. Meaningful interactions, equal access to language, immersion and exposure to topic-specific vocabulary featured heavily in comments made by the respondents. Role-play also emerged as a highly effective tool in the opinion of those surveyed. Challenges were also identified in the responses, regarding communication barriers, the demands of planning Aistear, and the need for a wide range of physical resources for each Aistear topic. Chapter 5 will further discuss and comment on the findings of this study, by looking at the broader research context and with reference to contrary and supporting literature.

Chapter V: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the data and findings that the previous chapter presented through graphs, tables, and outlines of themes that emerged from the questionnaire responses during data analysis. This chapter will restate the significance of the findings, comment on the findings in the context of the larger body of research on play, language, and Aistear, and evaluate the contribution and credibility of the study. The literature that informed the conception of this study will be discussed regarding the findings, and new relevant literature will be introduced to further analyse the study's findings. The literature will be compared to the findings of this study to determine whether the findings are corroborated by or contradict the existing literature. To discuss the above, it is necessary to return to the three aims outlined in this study's introduction.

1. To identify how Aistear can be used to create opportunities for communication and oral language development.
2. To investigate how the Aistear framework helps teachers to teach oral language skills through play.
3. To identify how the Aistear framework can facilitate the teaching of the primary language curriculum (PLC).

This is to answer the central question of this study, which emerged after reviewing the existing literature; how does the Aistear framework help teachers to teach oral language skills through play in junior and senior infant settings?

5.2 The significance of the findings

The current study overwhelmingly found that respondents consider play to be beneficial for children when learning language and developing communication skills. Of this study's participants, 100% believe that play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills. Examining the points selected on the Likert scale, this study also indicates that this is a firm belief, as 75% strongly agree and 25% agree that it helps teach oral language and communication skills. This reflects existing research asserting that playful activities and relationships facilitate children in improving their oral language and developing communication, social and interaction skills (French, 2007).

Additionally, this study shows that 100% of respondents use play relating to the teaching of language as part of the PLC and consider such play to relate to 'exploring and using language' and 'developing communicative relationships through language'. This study indicates that Aistear is useful for teachers when teaching language and providing play opportunities. According to the results of this study, 100% of the participants believe that Aistear helps to teach oral language and

communication skills and implement play-based methodologies in the classroom. This contrasts the findings of Walsh and Fallon (2019), whose research showed little evidence of the impact of Aistear on classroom teaching and reported that play is secondary to teacher-led learning experiences. This difference may indicate a shift in teacher perspectives following the introduction of the PLC in 2019 or may be due to this current study's focus on the teaching of language rather than the entire curriculum.

The results of this study show that participants use a wide range of play-based teaching methodologies to teach stage 1 in the context of mainstream Irish primary school classrooms (see Table 2). When asked which play-based methodologies they have used when teaching junior and/or senior infants, all respondents selected more than two forms of play. Furthermore, the responses show a high level of engagement with play, with answers ranging from 70% to 100% for each form of play listed. A further 55% of responses named other forms of play in addition to the selected options. Even the least popular options (word/nonsense/rhyme play and dress up play) have each been used by 70% of respondents. The results of this study did not show that any participating teachers consider any one playful approach to be far more advantageous than others. However, small-world and role-play did arise frequently in participant answers, particularly in the open-ended questions, when identifying opportunities for meaningful interactions.

5.3 Using Aistear to create opportunities for communication in role-play

Typically, in educational settings, the understanding of sociodramatic play involves the adult or teacher suggesting the setting, suggesting the theme, and providing the materials for role-play to occur (Rand and Morrow, 2021). Through these provisions, teachers are enabled to guide the language used in sociodramatic play such that the children experience immersion and exposure to the target language. In this study, 95% of respondents use 'imaginative play with props' as a form of playful teaching methodology in infant classrooms and 70% use 'dress up play'. Four respondents also went on to describe more specific examples of sociodramatic play (puppet play and role-play) when considering their preferred playful methodologies.

The theme 'Language exposure and immersion' identified by this study is heavily linked to the use of sociodramatic play as participants described the use of role-play to create specific play contexts to be immersed in the topic-specific language. Participants referenced the significance of using real-world topics and themes in Aistear in their questionnaire answers. Respondents highlighted the perceived benefit of introducing, through Aistear role-play, language that the child may not typically be exposed to and then offering opportunities for the children to make use of the language. Vedeler (1997) found that children's language is significantly more complex and literate (i.e. more syntactically complete) in sociodramatic play when compared to any other form of play or play-based activity. This is supported by the findings of this study, as role-play gives children

opportunities to experiment with the target language through in-role interactions, problem-solving, negotiations and pretend-play.

Creaghe, Quinn and Kidd (2021) highlighted similar benefits of pretend play due to the symbolic nature of play. Children engaging in role-play and symbolic play must constantly communicate to their peers the symbolic meaning of the objects, space, or people involved in the play. For instance, a child putting a piece of paper into a box must orally communicate to their peers that these objects symbolise a letter being posted in the post-box for the postal worker to collect. This is a natural part of play and is necessary for peers to engage and respond accordingly in the play. Aistear's 'Communicating' theme aims for children to 'use non-verbal communication skills', 'use language', 'broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language', and 'express themselves creatively and imaginatively' (NCCA, 2009a, p.35).

Role-play is explicitly named and recommended as a methodology in both the learning goals and the sample learning opportunities of the Aistear framework (ibid.). Sawyer (2023) found that by framing play activities with imaginary scenarios and roles, adults support children in taking on other perspectives that are established through the context of sociodramatic play. This reflects the perspectives of teachers outlined in the findings of this study, with the context of play central to the theme 'Language exposure and immersion' that arose from responses. Most participants (85%) named play as one of their preferred methods for teaching language to infants and two respondents who answered 'other' also stated that 'role-play' and 'teacher-in-role' are their preferred methods. These responses indicate that play and sociodramatic play are among the most popular methodologies for language teaching in junior and senior infants. By adopting a role in sociodramatic play, the teacher can guide the play, model the language, and can increase children's vocabulary through communication (Concannon-Gibney, 2019).

5.4 Using the Aistear framework to teach oral language skills through play

According to this study, 60% of participating teachers strongly agree that Aistear helps to teach oral language and communication skills and the remaining 40% agree that it does. These results are consistent with existing studies that demonstrate the use of play requires children to use symbolic thinking, narration, and oral language to 'inform, hypothesise and imagine' (Hill, 2010, p.5). This may be unsurprising, given that the Aistear framework's guidelines focus on 'learning and developing through interactions' and 'learning and developing through play' (NCCA, 2009b, p.5). The oral language strand of the PLC strives to develop the 'reciprocal skills' of listening, speaking, comprehension, and expression through meaningful interactions (NCCA, 2019, p.16).

All respondents in this study answered that they believe Aistear contributes to creating opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students 'often' or 'always' (see Figure 10 below). These opportunities would support language learning according to Interactionist theory in which

children acquire language through adult-child and child-child interactions (Atkinson and Housely, 2003). Most participants (n=18) commented further, explaining the reasons for their beliefs. One respondent wrote that Aistear ‘creates a context to promote language used’ as ‘many activities are collaborative and require pupils to interact with each other and use topic-specific language’. Five of the respondents reflected on how children share their thinking or discuss the play itself, while a sizeable portion of the participants (8) specifically named role-play in their explanations of how Aistear gives rise to meaningful language interactions for children.

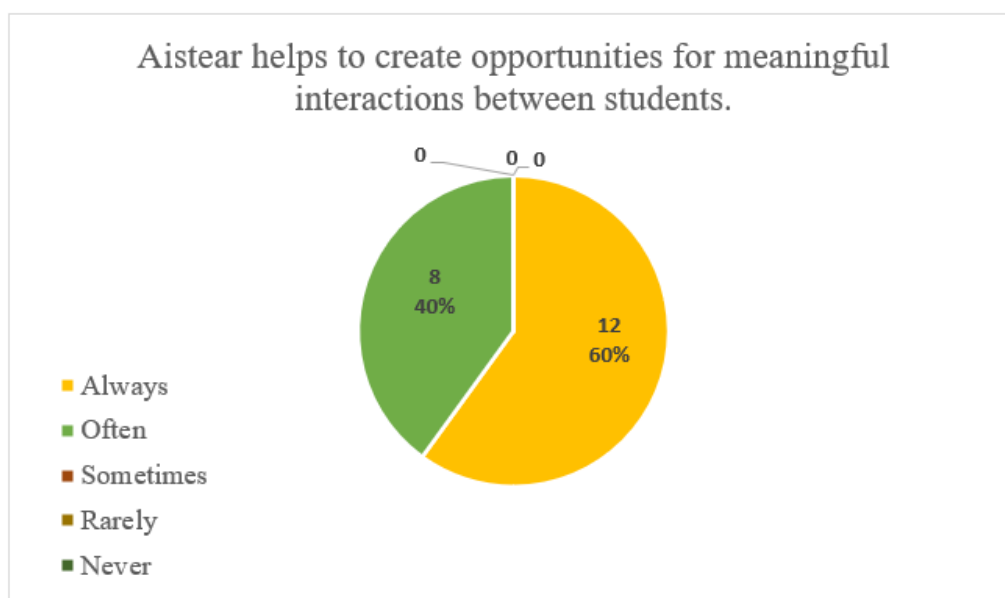


Figure 10. A pie-chart depicting the participant responses to the statement ‘Aistear helps to create opportunities for meaningful interactions between students’.

5.5 Facilitating the Primary Language Curriculum through play in Aistear

Research on the role of play in the Australian curriculum to develop oral language indicates that play-based environments deliver rich and meaningful language-learning experiences, with significantly high engagement in addition to well-being benefits for learners (Hogg, 2023). These findings are consistent with the results of this Irish study, with respondents reporting that pupil enjoyment and engagement with Aistear creates an informal, ‘fun’, and ‘safe’ way to use oral language (see themes outlined in Table 3).

Walker’s (2023) research on the use of drama to aid language acquisition among young EAL students found that sociodramatic pedagogical methodologies help in the development of language skills and positive dispositions of EAL learners in a New Zealand context. Chung (2023) noted the role of physical tools in pretend play to increase children’s engagement. By exploring context-specific materials for settings like the doctor’s office, farm, or shop children are enabled to ‘assimilate new knowledge and skills for future activities’ outside of the pretend play’s context (ibid., p.9). This supports the themes ‘Planning, preparation and providing materials’ and ‘Language

exposure and immersion’ that reoccurred throughout responses in this study. The PLC reflects this, stating that the reciprocal skills involved in communication are further advanced by providing the child with opportunities to use words and phrases in the original context and then to generalise and apply the language ‘to contexts beyond those in which they were originally heard and used’ (NCCA, 2019, p.16).

5.6 Planning to support all language learner abilities through Aistear

In this study, one participant noted in their response that they believe Aistear does not guarantee language learning and requires ‘a lot of preparation’ for it to successfully provide opportunities for playful learning of language. This view expresses the idea that not all play-based activities are equal in value; they must be well-planned and meaningful. Walsh and Fallon’s (2019) research with student teachers across Northern Ireland and Ireland echoes these findings, arguing that only play experiences of quality will encourage and result in actual learning for the child.

French (2007, p.3) asserts that adults have a responsibility when delivering Aistear to ‘provide rich environments’ for children to have opportunities to ‘explore, touch, manipulate, and experiment with a variety of real life and diverse material’. This study expresses that responsibility through theme 1 (Planning, preparation and providing materials), with participants recurrently noting the challenge of organising rich environments for Aistear. The challenges involve providing a wide range of props and materials for children to choose from and in-depth planning to adapt the framework to the curricular demands (see Table 3). Woods, Mannion and Garrity (2022) corroborate this perspective, finding that there is a need for further availability of training and resources to support teachers in adapting Aistear to the curriculum. The ‘Draft Updated Aistear’ framework signifies a shift in policy to prioritise the role of resources in inclusive practices, acknowledging that certain children ‘may need extra support or resources’ to be included as active participants (NCCA, 2023, p.31).

Most respondents (95%) indicated that they believe Aistear supports language learners of diverse backgrounds such as EAL students (see Figure 6). These results support the findings of Cresham (2021) which found that Aistear’s social context supports students of different language abilities. Respondents stated that modelling of language in Aistear, additional SET support during Aistear time, smaller group sizes, and the freedom to use language at their level of ability, all support students in developing language, whether they are ‘EAL students’, ‘already have a good level of ability’, or have ‘additional needs’. Interestingly, this differs from Woods, Mannion and Garrity’s study (2022) which suggested that ratios and group size were a barrier to implementing Aistear. The more positive experiences of participants in this current study may indicate an improvement in the availability of additional adult support, through SETs, for implementing Aistear in the classroom. These participant responses gave rise to the recurring theme (2) ‘Accessibility of language through

Aistear' which is significant in that it affirms the perspective of teachers that Aistear creates equal access to language learning for students of different abilities.

5.7 Conclusion

The results of this study are supported by existing literature examining the importance of play and playful methodologies for language development. Points where the findings differ from prior research have been highlighted, regarding the efficacy and ease of implementing Aistear. However, these differences may arise from changes in policy and practice over time and from this study's focus on language teaching, rather than whole curriculum integration with Aistear. The importance of role-play emerged from the findings, highlighting the importance of 'social interactions' and 'playing with identity' in sociodramatic play which aligns with the best practices outlined in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's (DCEDIY) national play policy (2004, p.11).

Answering this study's central question, there is evidence that the Aistear framework helps teachers teach oral language skills through play in stage 1 settings by supporting the use of role-play, immersive language experiences and enjoyable opportunities to use language playfully. This study is unusual in that it critically analyses teacher perspectives on the role of not just play, but also the use of the Aistear framework to develop language and create opportunities for meaningful language interactions for children in infant classrooms. There is room for further development and the next chapter will discuss the limitations of this study's scope and make recommendations for further research, policy, and teaching practice.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore teacher perspectives on the use of Aistear to implement play-based methodologies and create opportunities for meaningful interactions resulting in oral language development. This chapter notes the key findings presented in the previous two chapters, outlines the limitations of this study, and makes recommendations for future research, policy, and teaching practice.

6.2. Key Findings/Summary of Findings

The findings of this study conclude that Aistear supports play and language interactions in the infant classroom, which positively impacts language development and learning. This research also suggests that teachers find play beneficial when teaching oral language and the PLC. However, the findings also indicate that using play and Aistear requires thoughtful planning and availability of resources to ensure that the play experiences are meaningful for the child and support all abilities.

6.3 Limitations

This data must be interpreted with caution due to the small-scale (n=20) nature of the study and the non-probability sampling methods. Therefore, the research findings cannot be generalised to the whole population and can only be considered representative of research participant perspectives (Stratton, 2021). Examining the design of this study, the themes that emerged from the limited use of thematic analysis for open-ended questions indicate the opportunity for further thematic analysis if interviews were conducted in conjunction with the questionnaire surveys. Despite the promising results of this study, there is further scope for exploring the research aims through interviews. It may also be valuable to examine the frequency of play, and the time allocated to play in future research on this topic as these were not addressed in this study.

Additionally, Foster (2024) has put forward the argument that educational research should take a methodologically pragmatic and flexible approach. Foster's (ibid.) novel methodology contends that all research, both quantitative and qualitative, must be interpreted and that all data is open to the same threats to validity. This research, though not wholly a mixed-methods dissertation, pragmatically approaches the data. This study strives to identify and summarise the patterns that emerged by adopting aspects of qualitative research. However, due to the emphasis on quantitative analysis in the findings chapter, the research can maintain a greater degree of objectivity and avoid the risk of researcher bias guiding the interpretation of data when analysing the results.

6.4.1 Recommendations for further research

This study focused on the role of play in developing oral language specifically, rather than examining all forms of language development. Therefore, an area for further development is research into teacher perspectives on the role of play and Aistear in developing writing and reading literacy, as the other two strands of the PLC. Examining the role of play in developing reading skills, sociodramatic play has been found to generate increasingly advanced ‘syntactic utterances and sentence expansions that are linked to reading success’ (Roskos and Christie, 2001, p.76). Looking at the role of Aistear in supporting playful methodologies in teaching reading and writing is a logical next step following this dissertation’s contribution. Further research is also valuable for participants as participation in research can contribute to reflective practice. Engagement with researcher questions can be mutually beneficial as it can deepen understanding and insight into the role of play, both for researchers and participants (Russel and Kelly, 2002).

6.4.2 Recommendations for policy and practice

Woods, Mannion and Garrity (2021) identified the need for further research to identify the cause of the discrepancy that exists between research literature and legislation on the place of play in primary education in Ireland. The Ready Steady Play policy (DCEDIY, 2004) designed to set targets for play from 2004 to 2008 has not yet been replaced. This study supports the existing literature in highlighting the role of play as a valuable and effective means of learning for infants in Irish primary schools. Given the frequency with which role-play arose in responses and its importance in creating opportunities for meaningful interactions, role-play practice could be centred in support documents or future revisions of the language curriculum for stage 1 (junior and senior infants).

To resolve the issue of balancing academic focus and play, Walsh (2017) recommends that play be reimagined as a pedagogical practice, with active adult involvement in the play. Such a shift is beginning to occur and the draft Modern Foreign Language Curriculum, published in March 2024, reflects this. The draft MFL curriculum highlights the role of play and Aistear in using language enjoyably and ‘spontaneously’ for authentic communication when ‘interacting with others in real-life situations’ (NCCA, 2024, p.59).

6.4.3 Recommendations to inform further teaching practice

There is a risk that play can be utilised superficially (Walsh, 2017; Walsh and Fallon, 2019) due to external pressures and lack of supports. Therefore, it is essential when adopting a play-based approach to teaching to treat it as the central way children learn, rather than as an addition to the learning experience. For the future teaching practice of this researcher, play will be positioned as the key pedagogical approach when teaching junior or senior infant children.

6.5. Concluding remarks

It is evident from this study that teachers value play as a highly effective tool for teaching oral language to infants, with 85% of respondents preferring ‘play’ as a methodology to teach oral language. The study also indicates strong teacher engagement in a wide range of playful activities with infant classes. It is evident from this study that the Aistear framework supports the PLC through role-play, pretend-play, and small-world play. As one participant noted, Aistear ‘creates a context to promote language’. Participants credited language immersion, play contexts, materials (Chung, 2023) and collaborative learning with the enhancement and efficacy of Aistear in supporting students of all abilities, especially EAL students, in oral language development.

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VII: Appendices:

Appendix 7.1: Information Sheet

Research Information Sheet	
Researcher	XXX
Organisation (Name and contact details)	Hibernia College, Dublin (01) 661 0168
Title of Study	Teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play.
Outline of research study: As is the case across all areas of primary education, the teaching of language has undergone significant changes in the past few years. This is evident in the Primary Language Curriculum's (NCCA, 2019) approach to how language is taught in the classroom. The introduction and adoption of the Aistear framework into primary schools has also centred play-based learning in the infant classroom in a significant way. In this study, I aim to explore the use of the Aistear framework to support students in developing their oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play within the context of the Irish primary language curriculum. This study will aim to research the perspectives of teachers on the ways Aistear can be used to facilitate language learning through different kinds of play.	
Objectives of the project The objectives of this project are: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To identify how Aistear can be used to create opportunities for communication and oral language development.2. To investigate how the Aistear framework helps teachers to teach oral language skills through play.3. To identify how the Aistear framework can facilitate the teaching of the primary language curriculum (PLC).	
What would I need to do? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your participation in this research project is appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin.• If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire in relation to the use of the Aistear framework to teach oral language in the junior and senior infant class settings.• Any information that you provide in relation to your own identity, or the identity of the school will be kept anonymous and confidential. Answers from the questionnaire may be used or be published in the research however, participant names and the name of the school will not be published. The questionnaire answers may be made available to related participants on request.• This research will be used in a publication of a dissertation for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time during the month following signing the consent form.	
What is the purpose of this research? The purpose of the research is to complete small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Masters of Primary Education with Hibernia College Dublin.	

Appendix 7.2: Principal Letter

[Principal's name & school address]

[Date]

Dear Principal,

As part of my Professional Masters in Primary Education with Hibernia College, I am seeking your permission and consent to carry out research for my dissertation with members of your teaching staff. The title of the dissertation is 'Teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play'.

As is the case across all areas of primary education, the teaching of language has undergone significant changes in the past few years. This is evident in the Primary Language curriculum's approach to the teaching of language. The introduction and adoption of the Aistear framework into primary schools has also centred play-based learning in the infant classroom in a significant way. In this study, I aim to explore the use of the Aistear framework to support students in developing their oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play. This research project will inform my future practice as a teacher, and I would be immensely grateful for the participation of your school in the study.

With your permission, I would like to distribute questionnaires to mainstream classroom teachers currently teaching junior and senior infants, or to teachers who have taught infants within the past two years.

Please find enclosed for your consideration, a copy of the information sheet and consent forms. Only the teachers who return a signed copy of the consent form will be selected to take part in the study. The college's ethical code of conduct will underpin all data collected. No students or parents will be involved in the study.

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 and the data will be securely held in accordance with Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

I appreciate your time and consideration. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher: XXX

Email address: XXX@hcstudent.net

Mobile: XXX

By signing below, you are confirming consent to participate in this study.

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin. Tel (01) 6610168.

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Principal's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 7.3: Principal Consent Form

Principal Consent Form	
Researcher's Name:	XXX
Organisation:	Hibernia College, Dublin (01) 661 0168
Title of the Study:	Teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you read and understood the Letter of Information provided to you by the researcher? Yes/No • Do you agree that to conduct research in your school the researcher may contact and distribute questionnaires to consenting teaching staff in your school? Yes/No • Are you aware that participation is voluntary and that there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the 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 • Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Are you aware that your name, the names of your staff and the name of the school will not appear in the research report? Yes/No 	
Principal's Name (printed): Principal's Signature: Date:	
Researcher's Name (printed): Researcher's Signature: Date:	

Appendix 7.4: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form	
Researcher's Name:	XXX
Organisation:	Hibernia College, Dublin (01) 661 0168
Title of the Study:	Teacher perspectives on the use of the Aistear framework in infant classes to develop oral language, communication skills, and communicative relationships through play.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 up to one month (four weeks) after data collection, without giving a reason for withdrawal, 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 • Are you aware that all hard copies of data must be stored in the researcher's secure filing system for three years after data collection, in line with Hibernia College's privacy policy, after which all data must be safely and securely destroyed in line with GDPR. Yes/No 	
Participant's Name (printed): Participant's Signature: Date:	
Researcher's Name (printed): Researcher's Signature: Date:	

Questionnaire

1. How many years of experience do you have teaching junior and/or senior infants?

2. Have you taught junior and/or senior infants in the past two years?

Yes

No

3. Which class are you currently teaching?

Junior Infants

3rd Class

Senior Infants

4th Class

1st Class

5th Class

2nd Class

6th Class

4. According to the Primary language Curriculum’s rationale 2.4, ‘children learn language through interactions’ (NCCA, 2019, p.8). Read and respond to the statement below:

Aistear helps to create opportunities for meaningful language interactions between students.

(Please tick one response below).

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

Why/Why not?

5. Which of the following play-based methodologies have you used in the infant classroom?

(Please tick all that apply).

Free Play

Word/nonsense/rhyme play

Construction play (building)

None

Imaginative with props

Other (Please specify and describe them below)

Art/drawing play

Dress up play

Games with rules

6. If you use play, does the use of play relate to the teaching of the English language as outlined by the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC)?

Yes

No

7. If you answered yes to question 6, which elements of the Primary Language Curriculum did the use of play relate to? If you answered 'no' to question 6 then skip this question.

(You may tick more than one answer).

Developing communicative relationships through language

Understanding the content and structure of language

Exploring and using language

8. Which methodology do you prefer when teaching Oral Language to infants? (Tick all that apply).

Play

Group work/collaborative learning

Talk and discussion (teacher led)

Active learning (excluding play)

Other (Please specify)

These are the final 4 questions. They will ask you to choose how strongly you disagree or agree with statements:

9. **Play-based learning helps to teach oral language and communication skills.** (Please tick one response below).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. **Aistear helps to teach oral language and communication skills.** (Please tick one response below).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

11. **The use of the Aistear framework helps to implement play-based learning methodologies in the classroom.** (Please tick one response below).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

12. **The use of play delivered through Aistear can support language development in classes where students have a variety of language backgrounds** (EAL, English as a third language, etc.). (Please tick one response below).

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Further Comments:

Do you have any additional comments about using Aistear and/or play methodologies to teach language in the infant classroom?

Thank you very much for your participation in responding to this questionnaire! You are free to withdraw from this study at any time up to four weeks after data collection without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you.

Appendix 7.6: Coding Samples for Thematic Analysis.

The following coding sample is compiled from all participant answers to the open-ended questions included in the questionnaire.

Codes and colours:

Theme 1: Planning, preparation and providing materials
Theme 2: Accessibility of language through Aistear
Theme 3: Integrated learning
Theme 4: Language exposure and immersion
Theme 5: Pupil enjoyment of play in Aistear
Theme 6: Play provides opportunities for children to interact meaningfully using language

- Children feel much more relaxed when chatting in role/through puppets. They learn from each other in a fun, meaningful way.
- Lots of social interactions, role-playing social situations using specific language and vocabulary, navigating social interactions and problems that arise.
- Children are immersed in the language through display, pre-teaching, context of the play (role-play, small world).
- Aistear promotes huge opportunities for meaningful language interactions as children are given a wide variety of ways to use new vocabulary in a play-based way.
- Aistear affords children the opportunity to practise language and vocabulary learned in an informal, play setting. It also exposes them to other themes and topics they might not access in everyday life.
- The immersive nature of the thematic play encourages children to interact and use language that they wouldn't ordinarily get to use.
- Through Aistear stations/groups, language is promoted for all levels or abilities in the classroom. Vocabulary is used and encouraged.
- Learning through role-play absolutely facilitates meaningful language exchange and the relevant vocabulary development.
- In the small world and role-play especially, the children have lots of opportunities to interact, discuss things, make decisions and learn new language.
- The students discuss what they are doing, ask each other questions and play with each other- all using language.
- It creates a context to promote language used - many activities are collaborative and require pupils to interact with each other and use topic specific language.

- Roleplay station promotes language use.
- Play sparks interest and imagination and many children want to share their thinking with others. Some however prefer to play in solitude.
- When playing together in a more structured environment such as an Aistear station, pupils tend to discuss their play and what they want to do more than when playing outside or in other environments.
- Stations such as small world, role-play and construction can offer more/greater opportunities for communicative interactions than others through the use of hands-on materials, items, or props where the children are sharing, speaking, and playing in role with each other. Stations such as art, SESE (unless well planned out to ensure interactions between pupils) can have very little communication at times.
- I've used Aistear with infants for years. It was so useful and effective when I worked in a school which was 98% EAL. Modelling language vocabulary/grammar in a fun meaningful way made such a difference to the children's progress. In my current school, we've set up an Aistear room 10 years ago. We had huge boxes for each theme and used these props/materials each month. All 6 infant classes used the room on rotation. Once we needed the classroom back, we continued Aistear in the separate classrooms which also had advantages as children could find and use resources as they wanted. I love thematic teaching, props, costumes and role-play as well as free-play and discovery learning. SET also come in to model language during Aistear for EAL students.
- I love using Aistear in the classroom. It gives students the opportunity to communicate at their level in smaller groups. It is a great teaching tool for language.
- In classrooms that have EAL students or student with communication-based difficulties it can be challenging for them to participate as they firstly do not understand instruction from the teacher and find it hard to mix and social with others. Pre-teaching vocabulary and guidance during the lesson from the teacher helps to improve their experience.
- All children can enjoy and learn through play. In infants, play is the child's language and how they learn best in my opinion. Using playful pedagogy engages the child and they can relate to and enjoy the learning. For e.g. we engaged in the post office Aistear theme and the children loved writing letters, using envelopes, stamps, and the post box. Language greatly improved after, and they had loads of questions to ask when the postman visited us!
- Aistear requires a lot of preparation for it to be successful. Aistear alone doesn't necessarily 'teach' concepts but supports them and allows for exploration.
- I am a big advocate for Aistear. I have seen first-hand the impact this has had on children with EAL and those children who are shy. It also enhances language skills for those who already have a good level of language.
- Having a few EAL students over my years of teaching I can see how important language and the use of Aistear has been in aiding their language development.
- Just that children not only benefit from the integration of the academic curriculum into the play activities, but also from a rich model of language and social interaction from both the class teacher and from interactions with their peers.

- Aistear can support students with additional needs massively and it is a very equal way to offer students access to language.
- Language should be mastered through receptive and expressive phases. For pupils in infant classroom who are new to the focus language (whether that be English or Irish) Aistear allows opportunities to hear meaningful communication and interesting repetition. For those who have some phrases and vocabulary Aistear allows opportunities to use language in meaningful and fun situations and to learn from peers.
- Incorporating letter learning or other key elements of the language curriculum into Aistear can really help pupils make long lasting connections. Getting to use the letters or words they learn during Aistear shows them the real-world uses of ‘concepts’.