STER Student Article

Aistear: A Journey Under Construction and Every Voice Matters

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Marziya Fazal is a graduate of the BA in ECCE in Mary Immaculate College. Her love for education developed ten years ago in a small Montessori classroom in London. She believes learning experiences have the potential to transform thinking and has bee fortunate enough to be able to work and study in various countries including London, Ireland, her home country Tanzania and currently Tokyo, Japan. She has grown in many different ways and her passion for Education continues to escalate. Her interest in Aistear stems particularly from college placements and part time work in preschool contexts.

KEYWORDS: Policy, Early Childhood Education;

INTRODUCTION

This research study sets out to investigate Early Years Teachers' (EYTs') engagement with *Aistear* - the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings in Ireland. It will explore perspectives and understanding of how EYTs' implement Aistear when working with young children. The primary research question for this study was, '*What are EYTs' engagements with Aistear as a curriculum framework for/in the Early Years?*' The purpose of this research is to investigate the voices of EYTs' and the impact of Aistear in their practice. This article is only a snapshot of a larger and more in-depth piece of research conducted during the researchers' programme of study.

CONTEXT

In Ireland, there is currently a remarkable focus on policy and quality provision in education and care for young children. Evidence in research shows that high quality ECCE is powerful and impacts children's holistic and academic development than any other period in education (Whitebread, Kuvalja and O'Connor 2015). Before 2009, Ireland did not have a national curriculum for the early years. Building upon various policies and reports such as United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) and *Síolta* - the National Quality Framework (2006), the National Council for

Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), along with other stakeholders developed a curriculum framework to support the education of children from birth to six years.

Aistear, an Irish word meaning 'journey', was developed by the NCCA and set into motion in 2009. It was a significant milestone in curriculum development and was the outcome of an eight-year partnership with the NCCA and various early childhood sectors (NCCA 2004, Daly and Forster 2009). This outcome brought to life the development of the framework. Aistear marks the beginning of a lifelong journey for children, parents and EYTs' in learning and development (NCCA 2009). The framework highlights the significance of early childhood as a distinct period of every child's life and supports adults to provide the best possible learning provisions for all children. Aistear focuses on providing children with enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning experiences to grow into confident and competent learners (NCCA 2009; French 2013). The framework takes on a thematic approach and includes four sets of user-friendly guides. These contain suggestions and practical exemplars of practice to support EYTs' to provide quality learning experiences for young children. Research has shown that the role of the EYT is central to children's learning and development. The benefits of a high quality ECCE experience is determined by the EYTs' knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop (Ashiabi 2007; NCCA 2009; French 2013).

Since the publication of Aistear, there hasn't been a national body allocated to support services in using the curriculum. From 2009, there have been numerous settings that have started to use Aistear to guide their practices. However, there is still a weakness and lack of implementation of the framework due to services having limited opportunities for Continuous Professional Development (CPD). In light of making Aistear more visible and to support its implementation, Ireland introduced the first Free Pre-school year (ECCE scheme) in 2010 and a second year in 2016. This universal scheme aims to provide access to all children to two free pre-school years of appropriate programme based learning (Moloney and McCarthy 2010). Preschool settings are now contracted by the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs and must be in agreement to implement the quality and curriculum frameworks of *Siolta and Aistear* (Neylon 2012; French 2013)*.* Ireland's change to investment in the early years resulted from numerous findings and research where evidence shows the value and importance of ECCE. The scheme has proved to be successful through the rise in the number of children availing of it. In the year of 2015/2016 there was a 13% increase in the number of registrations of the program (Neylon 2012). Furthermore, as a result of the expansion on the ECCE scheme, a 63% increase was seen in the year of 2016/2017 in the number of children availing of it (DCYA 2017).

Aistear demonstrates the capacity to be a curriculum framework that recognises and respects the rights and needs of every child. Research is evident that a play based, emergent curriculum is paramount in enhancing children's learning and development in all spheres of life (NCCA 2009, McMonagle 2012; French 2013; Whitebread *et al.* 2015). The development of Aistear in Ireland is a huge milestone for the ECCE sector. However, while there has been some research on Aistear and its benefits, little has been

conducted on the voices of EYTs' who implement and engage with it on the ground. As EYTs' begin shifting their focus from structured programs to more emergent play-based approaches, it is likely to bring some resistance and questions about Aistear as they try to figure out how to do things 'right'. While there are many benefits of Aistear and its resources, there may be variation or weaknesses in its implementation in ECCE settings (McMonagle 2012; French 2013; Whitebread *et al.* 2015).

METHODOLOGY

For the study, six participants were randomly selected from the list of registered services on the Tusla Website in one county in Ireland. Four settings participated; all four had availed of the ECCE scheme. Two of the settings provided sessional care and the others provided both sessional and full day care. The sample size was small in order to collect quality data, but it should be acknowledged that the findings represent the participant's views only and should not be considered generalizable.

The study takes on a qualitative approach as it was concerned with the quality of data it produces; by asking participants to explain their knowledge and opinions on the topic. It investigated how the participants engaged with Aistear and as a result gathered detailed descriptions about their understandings (MacNaughton et al., 2001).

Six face-to-face semi structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in a written document. Ten open-ended and closed questions were asked with the use of follow up questions. From the patterns that emerged, the data collected was analysed by using thematic analysis, developing a list of codes and categories (MacNaughton *et al*. 2001; Moore 2006; Thomas 2009; Mukherji and Albon 2015). These emerging patterns were coded by similarity, frequency, and sequence that resulted in the emergence of three key themes; *Aistear, Play and the Role of the EYT.*

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The six settings that participated in the research study avail of the ECCE scheme and offer a sessional day care for the children. From the data it was observed that majority of the settings follow the Montessori methodology and principles as their curriculum for teaching and learning. Settings were weaving in and implementing Aistear alongside the Montessori pedagogy. Most of the participants demonstrated a positive attitude towards the framework and felt they could use it as a guide in supporting children's learning and development:

> I think Aistear is fantastic because I think it kind of gives you an idea of trying
> to create a curriculum to suit each child's individual needs and development.
> (Participant B)

> The four themes help you focus on what you are trying to teach the children
> and you can link it with observations and helps us better plan the curriculum.
> (Participant F)

Nonetheless, more than half of the participants indicated challenges and fears of implementing the framework.

> I think the biggest challenge is that you are implementing it properly. I know there
> is probably no wrong way to do it but you will always have that fear. The only thing
> about Aistear is they tell you all about it but they don't show you how to use it.
> Which is the worst. (Participant B)

> It can be kind of overwhelming and daunting at the same time because you are
> trying to incorporate it and you are trying to do the best of everything. I find it very
> difficult because my full degree is Montessori, we didn't do nothing   about
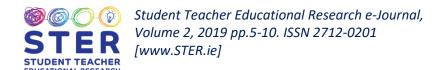> Aistear, very little about Siolta as well. (Participant C)

Out of the three themes, the role of the EYT and the sub theme of CPD occurred most frequently throughout the data. The qualifications of the participants varied from Montessori diplomas, FETAC Level 6 in Childcare, Level 7 Montessori degree to Level 8 degree in ECCE. All participants have childcare experience ranging from 2 to 18 years. In contrast to the findings, five out of the six participants indicated that Aistear did not support them as EYTs' in building on and extending children's learning. Pressure and time constraints of documentation were other major concerns. Participants felt they did not have enough time during their working day to allow them to observe, assess and plan to gather and record information about the children.

> I think you are not given the time to plan, or to document and when you are
> inspected you are supposed to have all this documentation and have everything
> ready for them. Where are you supposed to get the time to do this? It's all in your
> own time, so I think that is the only unfair thing about it. (Participant A)

> I don't feel we are really being supported. I just feel it's a bit vague at the
> moment; we could really do with help. (Participant D)

> To be honest, I feel like it puts me under a lot of pressure inside in the room
> because you want to please everybody, you want to make sure you know where
> every child is and you are also trying to think on your feet to appeal to everybody.
> It puts a huge amount of pressure on you. I don't feel supported by it. (Participant
> C)

CPD and training was a very conspicuous reoccurring theme in the data, surprising to say the least as the participants demonstrated a strong opinion about it. Five of the six participants felt they did not receive adequate training or appropriate practical CPD to engage and implement the framework successfully. Participants suggested that there should be more in-house or in-service days allocated for Aistear training

sessions similar to the Primary School teachers. Evidence in research shows the value and benefits of CPD to ensure quality in ECCE. CPD is a life long process of learning which supports EYTs' to foster excellence in their teaching practice, develop knowledge and skills for effective pedagogy and enhance their professional image (Ho-Lin n.d.).

> I think yeah there should be a lot more training on it. I think as well if they all had observation sheets, curriculum templates, everything straight across the board. So every center on the same level would be great. No matter how many years you are doing Aistear, I think it's important to get refreshed training on it every 2 to 3 years. (Participant B)

> I suppose we really need more training basically and practical training. I don't feel we are really being supported. When we implemented the Síolta program we had a mentor and she would come in on a regular enough basis so we were able to bounce off ideas off her and she was giving us a little bit of guidance which was great and again that was very new to us at the stage so that was very productive. But we don't have any mentoring or any system in place for Aistear. (Participant D)

> To be honest, the first I heard of Aistear was we had our HSE inspection. I mean it's really self-taught, you look it up and the first few times you look at it I didn't even understand it. (Participant E)

CONCLUSION

The data gathered and the themes that emerged concur with the literature regarding the benefits of the framework and the value of play in children's learning and development. However, it was noted that participants experienced various challenges in engaging with Aistear. They indicated that there was an inadequacy of CPD and a weakness in the continuity of its implementation. It was evident from the findings that participants felt Aistear was beneficial in enhancing and extending children's learning and development. Participants acknowledged the benefits of the framework for them and for the children. Most of them agreed that it was a useful guide in assisting them to better understand children's needs and interests.

Practitioners are experiencing some challenges with implementing Aistear in their practice. In particular, the fear of implementing it appropriately and the lack of uniformity within the sector. Many conveyed that its implementation was self-taught and the understanding of the delivery of the framework was upon every individual. They addressed that this challenge was due to the lack of CPD and practical training. Time management was a huge challenge and EYTs' endured a substantial amount of pressure with documentation. Participants indicated that the shortfall of carrying out the framework to its fullest was due to the lack of training in Aistear. The need for CPD/training was a consistent theme that emerged

from the findings. EYTs' emphasized the shortage of CPD in Aistear as a major drawback in the sector, which resulted in the weakness of its implementation.

Despite the fact that settings have to be in agreement to use Aistear, the framework is not underpinned by legislation. Its implementation depends on the settings themselves. This is also due to the inconsistencies of support from national organisations, county childcare committees and further educational institutions (French 2013). Therefore, without allocating a specific organisation to support settings in providing detailed plans, clear directions and appropriate training of the implementation of Aistear; how can the sector ensure uniformity and quality services for young children? Furthermore, if both Aistear and Síolta are interlinked and crucial in quality provision, is it not logical to think that they should be seen as one entity of equal importance? Successful implementation of Aistear can produce high outcomes in relation to children's holistic development. However, unless there is a direct engagement with Aistear in every setting with the support and guidance from knowledgeable mentors and organisations, EYTs' will not be able to truly embrace the invaluable practices that Aistear encompasses (French 2013).

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