



Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
Understanding its Place in Junior and Senior Infant
Classrooms in 2021 and Beyond.

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Declaration

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10th May 2021

Abstract

This study seeks to understand the perspectives of teachers on the *Aistear* framework for early years learning in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021, and considers the relevance of this framework in classrooms in the future. Despite the many benefits associated with this early childhood curriculum, recent studies revealed gaps in the framework, particularly in relation to its implementation. This quantitative study adopted a survey method of online questionnaires to uncover if the perspectives of infant teachers in 2021 of the *Aistear* framework were in line with current published literature.

This study revealed that *Aistear* does hold a place in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021 and there is a future for this framework in these classrooms. There was also widespread recognition that more support is needed and improvements made to the current set up. It was identified that infant teachers today had a greater appreciation of *Aistear* than the current literature suggests. The researcher identified that ITE and the emphasis it puts on play-based learning and *Aistear* in recent years, is having a positive impact on Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) as it appears they are implementing the *Aistear* framework in their classrooms upon finishing their degrees. This could also explain why respondents indicated a relatively high level of confidence when it comes to the implementation of *Aistear* and their role as teacher. However, issues identified by respondents relating to *Aistear* concur with recent studies. In order to overcome these challenges and improve the implementation of this framework in primary infant classes, the researcher recommends that; teacher training is provided for all infant teachers who wish to avail of it, *Aistear* is made compulsory for all infant classes, additional funding and resources are made available to support schools and teachers provide a suitable, stimulating learning environment for children during *Aistear* and finally, *Aistear* will be subject to inspection as part of a Whole School Evaluation (WSE).

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Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MIE	Marino Institute of Education
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
SERC	Student Ethic in Research Committee
WSE	Whole School Evaluation
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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Introduction

Context and Rationale

It is widely recognised that young children learn a lot through play. According to the psychologist Vygotsky (1967), as cited by Leong & Bodrova (2015, p. 371);

In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour (p. 16)

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and was designed for children from birth to six years in Ireland. *Aistear* marks the beginning of a child's lifelong learning journey and "celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold" (NCCAa, 2009, p.6). The *Aistear* curriculum was designed to be used across a variety of early years settings such as the home, preschools and infant classrooms. It was also anticipated that *Aistear* could complement and extend existing curricula in these settings. While it was never introduced to replace any curricula already in place such as the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (Gray & Ryan, 2016), there are a number of gaps in how this framework is being engaged.

Moloney (2010) reported *Aistear* was introduced at a time when the Irish economy was suffering under economic recession. At that time, French (2013) reports that no funding was available to train early years practitioners and educators on the framework in a manner that it could be translated into everyday practice. Now, twelve years after its introduction there has been little progress in the implementation of this framework. A study conducted by Gray & Ryan (2016) revealed that infant teachers in Ireland had a lack of awareness of *Aistear*, with some respondents completely unaware of what *Aistear* was. The study identified issues with the role of the teacher during play, lack of training, class size and the value placed on play-based learning. The authors concluded that play was often side-lined by teachers in classrooms and was only allowed in the morning before the 'real' work would begin.

Research Aims and Questions

Taking the above into consideration the researcher of this particular study wanted to identify if anything has changed since this literature was published. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to seek perspectives from infant teachers on whether *Aistear* holds a place in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021 and if there is a future for this framework in these classrooms.

The research questions for the study are as follows;

1. Does *Aistear* hold a place in the Junior and Senior Infant Classrooms of 2021?
2. Is there a future for *Aistear* in these classrooms?

This study implemented the use of a quantitative approach, using a survey method and tools in the form of online questionnaires.

Presentation of the Research

Chapter one outlines the context of the study as well as providing the research aims and questions. A review of current national and international literature pertaining to how children learn, the use of play as medium of learning and an in-depth exploration of *Aistear* is presented in chapter two. Chapter three outlines the research method and study rationale as well as justification for the quantitative approach. It will explore the data collection process, the data analysis, ethical considerations and the strengths and limitations of this study. The analysis of the findings are presented in chapter five, followed by a summary of the main findings from the study in chapter six. Here, recommendations based on the findings that emerged from the data collected during this study will be presented.

Literature Review

This study seeks to explore the perspectives of primary school teachers on the relevance of the *Aistear* framework in current infant classrooms and considers if there is value for the inclusion of the curriculum in classrooms in the future. In recent years there has been a wealth of research carried out into how children learn; from the activities they undertake to the environments in which the learning happens. The literature reviewed here examines how children learn, reviews curricula and child development when play is used as a learning medium.

Play as a Medium of Learning

There is an abundance of literature to support the position of play as an effective medium for learning. Whitebread, Basilio, Kvalja & Verma (2012) describe play as “one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of these other achievements would be possible”.

Progressive and child-centred views of education curricula have been influenced by early years theorists such as Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori and Dewey (Soler & Miller 2003). Early ideas of a progressive curriculum emanated with Rousseau who believed that children should learn what they want when they are ready and that play was enhanced when facilitated by an unobtrusive adult or teacher. Rousseau's ideas evolved and by the nineteenth century Froebel created a specialised early childhood curriculum, which saw play as a key component.

By the twentieth century, play had become central in the learning of young children. Dewey first suggested that classrooms should be reflective of real life situations, enabling children to participate in learning activities flexibly and interchangeably (Dewey, 1938; Williams, 2017). The work of Maria Montessori also emerged at this time and her theories

have influenced all early childhood programmes to date (Gahart-Mooney, 2002) and provided a foundation for later theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky. She believed that child-centred environments were crucial but that these ‘environments’ related not only to the space and resources with which children engaged but with also the adults and other children who were present.

Leading child development theorists

The literature on child learning and development is dominated by two leading early years theorists; Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Both theorists were constructivists and conformed to the notion that “humans construct their own knowledge, intelligence and morality through a series of stages and often in collaboration with others” (French, 2007, p. 7). Piaget and Vygotsky were both concerned with how children acquire knowledge but adopted different approaches in their understanding of how this knowledge is obtained. Piaget’s theory centres on the idea of supporting the child’s learning, while Vygotsky’s theory focuses on providing the necessary experiences in order for learning to occur.

Piaget

Piaget’s primary interest was in how people construct their knowledge through interactions with their environment. He developed the term ‘schema’ to explain how children construct their understanding of the world. A schema is “an internal framework that organises incoming information, thought and action.” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 49). Schemas support active development as they alter in response to an experience (Lindon, 2005). When children encounter a new item, object or information, they must use their schema to process this information.

Lindon (2005), explains that Piaget identified three processes of adaptation for how children learn; equilibration, assimilation and accommodation. In order for learning to occur when a child experiences a new event, they must feel a sense of 'disequilibration' before being able to assimilate and accommodate the new information and to attain equilibrium. Disequilibration occurs "when an experience occurs that does not fit their existing thinking: the child becomes dissatisfied with their original thinking and must adapt in order to process the new piece of information." (O'Brien, 2011, p.49).

Piaget also proposed four key stages that occur in the cognitive development of children. The sensori-motor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage. He concluded that all children will go through these four stages in the same order, but maintained that they may not necessarily go through the stages at exactly the same time as others.

Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky was a renowned contemporary of Piaget. Also a constructivist, he proposed an alternative view on how children learn.

Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist, widely recognised for his work on social development theory and its impact on cognitive development (Nell, Drew & Bush, 2013). While he agreed with Piaget's theory that children's knowledge is constructed through personal experience, Vygotsky's view was that personal and social experience could not be separated. He maintained that children's lives were shaped by their family, community and their education (Garhart- Mooney, 2000) and as such he regarded children's peers and adults as invaluable assets in their learning experience.

From this belief Vygotsky developed his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as

determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration of more capable peers.” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86 as cited by Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013, p.513). He proposed that learning takes place in a child through the help of a ‘learned’ more experienced other. This ‘other’ who has a better understanding and a greater ability than the person learning is referred to by Vygotsky as the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The process of including a MKO, such as a teacher or more capable peer to assist a child in their learning, is known as ‘scaffolding’.

Vygotsky was a firm believer that children learn and develop language skills as they speak and listen to one another (Gahart-Mooney, 2000). He proposed that a young child’s use of speech was used to guide themselves, and that words were used to accompany their actions. Overtime, language would proceed the actions and children would be able plan what they do next (Lindon, 2005). He believed that cognitive development was the result of social interactions that children had.

Vygotsky and Piaget were aligned on the significance of play on children’s learning. Piaget's theory explains how a teacher - broadly speaking - knows what is expected of a child of a certain age and how to work through the process in order to move to the next stage of learning when they are ready. Applied practically, Vygotsky’s theories can help understand how children learn in the social setting, knowing when to step in to assist and when to allow for independent learning.

The International Perspective

At an international level, there has been great political interest in the value of play as a medium for young children's learning in recent years (Walsh & Fallon, 2019). Research highlights the need for high-quality early childhood education as evidence suggests that there are economical, societal and educational dividends for countries who invest in childhood education (Hunter & Walsh, 2014). However, the nature of 'high quality' has been contested (Whitebread et al., 2012). The approach in some European countries is to provide young children with rich, stimulating experiences within a nurturing social context. In other countries, emphasis is placed on formal learning in the areas of literacy and numeracy for young children as early as possible.

Many nations that support a play-based curriculum in the early years. New Zealand, has received recognition for the advances they have made with regards to their early childhood education and a play-based curriculum, '*Te Whariki*'. Originally introduced in 1996, the programme was regarded as being very progressive (Mutch, 2004) and New Zealand became one of the first countries to develop a national Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum integrating care and education (Blaiklock, 2017). However, Blaiklock (2017) suggests that there is little evidence to prove that the ECE curriculum is enhancing children's learning and wellbeing.

There is strong empirical evidence internationally to suggest that ECE of quality has huge benefits, but particularly for disadvantaged children (Blaiklock, 2017). A study conducted in Victoria, Australia with children from low socioeconomic areas looked at the difference between a school with a play-based curriculum and a school with a traditional curriculum. Results found that those who attended the school with the play-based curriculum

scored higher in areas of play, social skills and language than those who attended the traditional school (Reynolds, Stagnitti & Kidd, 2011).

The Irish Context: the Aistear Framework

In 2004, findings presented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), observed that teaching in Irish infant classrooms in primary schools was too formal (OECD, 2004; Flynn, 2018) and similar results were reported from studies in Northern Ireland (Hunter and Walsh, 2014). This was considered problematic as research suggests that a too-formal pedagogical approach is not appropriate in infant classrooms. In 2009 the government recognised the need for the introduction of an ECE curriculum and the NCCA launched *Aistear*: the early childhood curriculum framework. The Irish word ‘*Aistear*’ means journey, and symbolises early childhood as the beginning of a child’s lifelong learning journey (NCCA, 2009a).

The development of the *Aistear* framework was underpinned by four commissioned research papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007 & Dunphy, 2008). The NCCA also reviewed national and international literature when developing the *Aistear* framework to incorporate curriculum experiences and lessons from other countries (NCCA, 2009b). The *Aistear* Curriculum was developed in line with international recommendations for educational models.

The curriculum framework of *Aistear* was the first of its kind in Ireland (Walsh, 2016) for all children from birth to six years old. Its primary focus is to provide appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children (Murphy, 2015) with a view to them becoming confident and competent learners (NCCA, 2009a). The *Aistear* curriculum was designed to be used across a variety of early years settings such as the home,

preschools and infant classrooms, to complement and extend other curricula (e.g. Montessori and the PSC).

Aistear is a child-led, holistic learning experience that caters for all children of all interests and abilities. The curriculum is not subject-driven but has four main themes; well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking. These themes are interwoven and underpinned by twelve principles of early learning and development.

According to French (2013);

Developmental domains such as cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, spiritual and physical cannot be separated out; neither can subjects such as mathematics, science and art. The themes bridge towards a more integrated approach, which is more in tune with how children learn and develop (p. 3).

Rooted in the work of early theorists, Langford (2010) and Brennan (2012), as cited in Gray and Ryan (2016) affirm that the framework for *Aistear* draws upon Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Vygotsky's theory of social development. "Within *Aistear*, children are supported to grow and develop socially, physically, creatively, cognitively, linguistically and so on, but in a way which is natural, meaningful and enjoyable." (French, 2013, p. 3).

Aistear and the PSC

The *Aistear* framework was designed with the intention of being used to “complement and extend areas of the Primary School Curriculum” (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p.189) in infant classrooms. Although both the *Aistear* curriculum and the PSC place emphasis on play, they differ in the approach to how play is implemented. *Aistear* centres on the development of attitudes, values and learning dispositions while the PSC focuses on subject-based knowledge and acquisition of age-appropriate skills. In line with the theories of Vygotsky, both *Aistear* and the PSC acknowledge the important role of the adult in the learning process (Gray & Ryan, 2016). With *Aistear*, the focus on a reciprocal relationship between child and adult, the adult knows when to step in to offer guidance and also, when to step back and let the learning happen. Leong and Bedrova (2012) reveal that without the support of an adult, some children will not reach their full potential in the learning process. Meanwhile, with the PSC model the adult is regarded as more of an instructor in the child’s learning (Gray & Ryan, 2016).

One of the intended aims of the *Aistear* framework is to provide continuity across settings, raise standards and improve quality (NCCA, 2004) and this is emphasised in the new primary curriculum framework (NCCA, 2020). In the new curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants there is a strong move towards aligning it with *Aistear*, to provide greater consistency. The proposed curriculum areas will “support younger children’s learning and development in stages 1 and 2 (Junior Infants to 2nd Class) by building on and extending their earlier learning experiences in preschool through *Aistear*.” (NCCA, 2020, p. 11). It is hoped that the new primary curriculum will align the approaches and methods in the infant classes with those of *Aistear* as recommended under The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy; Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life which was developed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2011 (DES, 2011).

The first move towards the new curriculum was reflected in the introduction of the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) which was phased in for Junior Infants- 2nd Class from September 2016 (NCCA, 2015). As of September 2019, the PLC was introduced to all stages in all primary schools (DES, 2019) and central to achieving its learning outcomes the PLC acknowledges the importance of interactions with peers and child-led play for Junior and Senior Infants.

Organisation of *Aistear* in the Infant Classrooms

It is recommended that junior and senior infant children engage in *Aistear* for one hour every day (Murphy, 2016). This hour usually involves 5 minutes of planning, 40/45 minutes of playing, 5 minutes to tidy-up and 5 minutes to review the play session. The *Aistear* framework suggests the use of 'Plan, Do, Review' which was adapted from the High Scope model of play where children take control of their own learning (Flynn, 2018). The most common stations in the *Aistear* set up include; small world play, construction play, sensory play, socio-dramatic play and creative play (Keane, 2014).

Typically, the children are placed in groupings of mixed abilities and they rotate from one station to another over the course of the week. While children may favour a certain type of play it is crucial that they experience a variety of different types of play to support their learning and development (NCCA, 2009a; Keane, 2014). Teachers often make use of a visual timetable which clearly shows the children which station they are moving to with their group each day. The groupings are usually changed throughout the school year, this allows the children to learn from different social groups (Murphy, 2016).

The use of mixed ability groups in *Aistear* can also be related back to Vygotsky's theory of the MKO where children can extend their learning through social interactions with a more capable peer or teacher. Keane (2014) outlines the importance of the role of the

teacher in *Aistear*, as she explains that play is carried out at the level of the children in her classroom by engaging in conversation with the children and playing with them, rather than instructing the children and questioning them.

The Challenges of Implementing the *Aistear* Framework in Infant Classrooms

Evidently, implementing the *Aistear* curriculum in primary school classrooms has significant benefits for children including directing their own learning, interacting with peers and engaging in new experiences through meaningful play. However, teachers are faced with challenges when implementing the framework into the classroom setting. Gray and Ryan (2016) in their study outline the challenges that infant teachers experienced with *Aistear*, which included; lack of awareness about *Aistear*, lack of confidence when it came to organising play-based activities, misunderstandings surrounding the role of the teacher during play and identified that more training was needed for teachers. Other barriers to successful implementation of *Aistear* in the classroom included the size of the class, the value parents put on play and the lack of resources available in the school. Despite the fact that teachers and schools are often concerned by the lack of toys and equipment available, literature suggests “arranging and resourcing a quality play environment need not be expensive.” (NCCA, 2009a, p. 103).

The challenges that Irish primary teachers presented to the Gray and Ryan (2016) study have been echoed by teachers internationally. Hunter and Walsh (2014) identify issues regarding play in the classroom in a number of contexts from Australia and New Zealand where difficulties with changing teachers’ attitudes towards play were identified, to the US where the quantity and quality of play practices, and, Hong Kong where teachers were still directing and instructing children’s learning through play. When synthesised these findings

identify distinct problems with the implementation of play in the classroom and questions if the quality of play is being compromised and if it is being implemented correctly.

Current National-Level Implementation of *Aistear*

A review of the literature has revealed many challenges and issues with the implementation and the lack of implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum framework in infant classes and early years settings. Since its introduction in Ireland, there has been no national, coordinated plan to support teachers and educators using the curriculum (NCCA, 2013).

Each curriculum area in the PSC is subject to external inspection by the DES but *Aistear* is not, nor has it ever been, mandatory or inspected upon in the primary school setting (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Many teachers and schools have opted to implement the framework in their infant classrooms in recent years, however no data exists on how it is being put into practise and what quality of play is arising from this implementation nationally. Additionally, the ambiguities and inconsistencies around the framework means that *Aistear* is not being implemented to the same extent in all infant classes and in some cases is not being implemented at all (Murphy, 2016).

In preschool settings in Ireland where *Aistear* is not statutory nor underpinned by legislation the case is similar (French, 2013). However, a fundamental difference at this level is that *Aistear* must be implemented in preschools in order to get access and or to retain state funding for the Early Childhood and Care (ECCE) scheme (Gilpin, 2020). Preschools involved in the scheme must demonstrate that they are adhering to the principles and standards of *Aistear*, as they are subject to inspection by TUSLA and the DES, and are also required to use Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2012). Other pre-school services who do not receive state funding are under no commitment to implement *Aistear* (Gilpin, 2020).

. Without a statutory body mandated for the implementation of *Aistear* it should be considered what future this framework holds, if any. The NCCA (2013) affirm that “the framework highlights the critical importance of the first few years of these journeys and the need for children to have rich and varied experiences from which they can learn and develop.” (p. 6). Despite this however, twelve years on from its introduction, advances in the implementation and development of this curriculum framework across all settings remain to be seen.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed, provides the rationale for its use and explains the methodology with reference to relevant literature. In addition, this chapter explores the data collection process, data analysis, ethical considerations, the piloting of the study and its strengths and limitations.

Research Objective and Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the place *Aistear* holds in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021 from a teacher's perspective, and if there is a future for *Aistear* in these classrooms. While the development and introduction of *Aistear* in 2009 by the NCCA was very much needed and welcomed by the early years sector in Ireland, it appears that this curriculum framework is not being implemented as best as it could. A study conducted by Gray & Ryan (2016) identified that early years primary teachers were aware of the importance of play but that play predominantly took a back seat in infant classrooms, instead, a more traditional approach to teaching was implied.

The research questions were designed to investigate if *Aistear* hold a place in junior and senior infant classrooms of 2021 for teachers and, if there is a future for this framework in these classroom or is it just a "journey without a roadmap" (French, 2013).

Research Design

This study implemented the use of a quantitative methodology to collect data relating to the research questions posed by the researcher. Quantitative research is defined as “explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods.” (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2000, as cited by Muijs, 2011, p. 1). Replies to the questions can be measured or quantified, to allow the research to consider the relationship between variables, providing statistical data that can be analysed to draw conclusions.

For the purpose of this research a quantitative approach was appropriate to engage large samples, leading to a broader view point from respondents. A range of closed-ended and open-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. For the open-ended qualitative questions, a quantitative approach was utilised in the analysis. The researcher implemented the use of Braun & Clarke’s six steps of theoretical thematic analysis to identify common themes that appeared in the responses collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When the common themes or words had been identified the researcher then quantified repetitions and patterns. This approach allowed the researcher to transfigure qualitative data into quantitative data for the purpose of this study.

Research Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey methodology and employed a questionnaire instrument for data collection. A descriptive survey sets out to investigate what people from a certain target population think and do. (Albon & Mukherji, 2018). This approach was relevant for this study as it asks “a set of pre-formulated questions in a predetermined sequence in a structured questionnaire to a sample of individuals drawn so as to be representative of a defined population.” (Hutton, 1990, as cited by Albon & Mukherji, 2018, p. 8).

The researcher opted to use a web-based questionnaire to collect the data from respondents using Google Forms ([google.com/forms](https://www.google.com/forms)), an easily accessible online platform for respondents.

According to Denscombe (2014) the purpose of a questionnaire is not to change people's own attitudes nor provide them with new information, but rather to collect information which can be used for data analysis.

When designing the questionnaire, careful consideration was given to the type of questions that should be asked, paying particular attention to the strengths and limitations of each style of question. This ensured that data collected was as relevant and effective as possible in answering the research question. A range of open-ended and closed-ended questions were included. Closed-ended questions give the researcher answers that are easy to count and convert into numbers and can be compared and analysed easily (Simmons, 2008, as cited by Albon & Mukherji, 2018). This data allows the researcher to make comparisons across groups in the sample based on the answers provided (Oppenheim, 1992, as cited by Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). However, closed questions do not provide any scope for respondents to give their own opinion, and consequently some open-ended questions were included. Open-ended questions elicit qualitative data, however, if a number of similar responses to a question are provided by the respondents the researcher can extract data and can count how many times the same answer appeared. This results in what was once qualitative data being converted into quantitative data (Albon & Mukherji, 2018). This technique was used to identify common words that appeared in responses to the same open-ended question.

Sample and Size

The target population for this study were primary school teachers who are currently teaching in an infant classroom. Due to limited resources and the fact that this is a small-scale study conducted by a lone researcher means that it is not physically possible to survey the whole infant teacher population of Ireland. Therefore, data was collected from a subset of the population which is known as a sample (Briggs & Coleman, 2007). A sample of 54 completed the online questionnaire. The participants represented a wide cross-section of infant teachers in the Irish primary school context.

Data Collection Procedure

Denscombe (2014) highlights the importance of planning and preparing prior to beginning data collection as researchers generally do not have the time or resources to repeat a piece of research if unsuccessful the first time. When the appropriate questionnaire had been designed and approved it was then piloted, issues were eliminated and any criticism provided by respondents was taken on board (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). The purpose of the piloting phase is to remove any errors or oversights from the chosen data collection instrument so that respondents in the main study will experience no difficulties in completing it (Bell, 1999). Following the pilot, some modifications were made to the wording of some questions which may have appeared ambiguous to respondents and also, the length of some questions were minimised. Finally, a questionnaire containing twenty-five open and closed-ended questions was finalised and administered to primary school teachers who are teaching in junior infant, senior infant or multigrade infant setting during the current academic year to obtain the most up to date data available to the researcher.

Data Analysis

The data collected from this study was analysed in five stages, as outlined by Denscombe (2014). Stage one was data preparation, the researcher collected the data and categorised the information gathered. Stage two was initial exploration of the data, in this stage the researcher looked for obvious trends or correlation that appeared between answers provided by respondents. This stage also involved the coding of open-ended questions contained in the questionnaire the researcher used Braun & Clarke's (2006) six step process of theoretical thematic analysis. Using this model, the researcher identified common themes/words that appeared in the responses collected which was then converted to quantitative data by counting how many times a common word/theme appeared. Stage three was the analysis of the data, the researcher implemented the use of statistical tests to organise and analyse the data collected in a quantitative and measurable way. Stage four was the presentation and displaying of data, the researcher used a variety of charts and tables to display results in a clear and accessible way. Albon & Mukherji (2018) say that clear communication at this stage is paramount and that complexity should be avoided at all costs as it will not help the researcher nor the reader understand the findings. The final stage is to check the validity and reliability of a data. According to Denscombe (2014) "validity refers to the accuracy and precision of the data" while "reliability refers to whether a research instrument is neutral in its effect and consistent across multiple occasions of its use." (p. 271).

Ethical Considerations

The ethics relating to this study were carefully considered. Prior to commencing an application for ethical approval was sought and approved by the Student Ethic in Research Committee (SERC) by Marino Institute of Education (MIE). Throughout the study, the MIE Ethics in Research Policy was consulted regularly to ensure the study was compliant with recognised ethical standards.

The study was explained in detail, and respondents willing to take part completed the consent form before commencing. All respondents involved were over eighteen and were able to voluntarily consent to taking part. Voluntary informed consent is defined as “the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway” (British Educational Research Association, 2011, p.5). All questionnaires distributed to the respondents were accompanied by a detailed cover letter which stated the nature of the study, the option to refuse to answer, their right to withdraw from the study and finally, the assurance of strict confidentiality. All data relating to the study was stored on Microsoft OneDrive. This OneDrive was registered directly to the researcher’s MIE email address which was password protected at all times.

Positionality of Researcher

According to Savin-Baden & Howell Major (2013) positionality “reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (p. 71). The researcher of this study is a strong advocate for the implementation of *Aistear* in the primary infant classes. The researcher, drawing on her own experience during ITE, observed inconsistent implementation of *Aistear* which interested her to further study the place it holds in infant classrooms for teachers. With this in mind, an understanding of research bias is important. Smith & Noble (2014) suggest that bias exists in all types of research and is difficult to eliminate, they also

state how bias can occur in all stages of the research design and that ultimately it can impact on the validity and reliability of a study. The researcher of this study made every effort to reduce bias.

Strengths and Limitations

Using a quantitative method of research, allowed the researcher to engage a much larger sample size to draw conclusions from than if a qualitative method was used.

The use of questionnaires allows the respondent to be as honest as they like, due to anonymity attached to this method (Muijs, 2011). Further, Denscombe (2014) highlights the fact that by using questionnaires to gather data, the delivery of questions is standardised for all respondents. As all respondents are posed the same questions, the data collected is less likely to be affected by interpersonal factors. Web-based questionnaires further eliminate the scope for human error as the data collected is directly fed into data files minimising the risk associated with manual data entry.

Given the limitations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, online questionnaires proved to be a very responsible and safe choice for both the researcher and the respondents. Despite the fact that all primary schools in Ireland were closed for an extended period of time in the first quarter of 2021, the researcher was able to gather the data as originally planned as respondents were able to complete the questionnaire from home. Further, given the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on teachers and students, it is clear that the implementation of *Aistear* has been adversely affected. Respondents may have answered questions relative to the changes in classrooms dynamics as a result of these restrictions. Where possible the researcher has sought to clarify the specific role of COVID-19 restrictions on the responses.

Naturally, a small-scale research project is going to have its limitations. The researcher of this study recognises the fact that the survey methods make it more difficult to

get a deeper and richer understanding of the data collected (Muijs, 2011). However, the researcher utilised both open and closed-ended questions in the questionnaire, which were both ultimately quantifiable and provided the data needed to answer the research questions.

The study had significant financial and time constraints. By using online questionnaires the researcher minimised any financial costs associated with doing the study. Further, because the research project was small-scale and required a very specific sample of respondents the sample size was small. Although the inclusion of more infant teachers to increase the sample size and reliability of the data (Cohen et al., 2007) would have been preferred, the data collection, analysis and reporting was conducted in line with what was feasible for one sole researcher.

Finally, the researcher was very aware and conscious that respondents may have been subject to 'questionnaire fatigue' and their responses may have been progressively based on minimising the effort required to answer questions (Denscombe, 2014). Efforts were made to overcome this by outlining openly the duration of the questionnaire, avoiding questions of high complexity and a varied use of open and closed-ended questions throughout.

Analysis and Discussion

This chapter explores the findings, analyses the data and discusses issues that arose in greater detail. The findings from the data collected is analysed and discussed under a range of different headings in order to answer the two research questions;

1. Does *Aistear* hold a place in the Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021?
2. Does it have a future in these classrooms?

For the purpose of referring to the data collected from respondents throughout this chapter, the questionnaires are referred to using their own unique code that was created by the researcher. Each questionnaire was coded from 001 to 054.

Respondent Profile

The purpose of the first set of questions was to gather demographic data on the profile of the teachers included. This was to provide context and to identify if teachers of similar profile had similar views across different variables.

Of the respondents included, 50 identified as female and 4 identified as male (See figure 1.). According to nationally available data, primary school teachers in Ireland are predominantly female. In statistics published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2015. Only 13% of primary school teachers were male (CSO, 2016). This data is also in compliance with that of Gray & Ryan (2016) study who state that there is an under representation of male teachers in early years education.

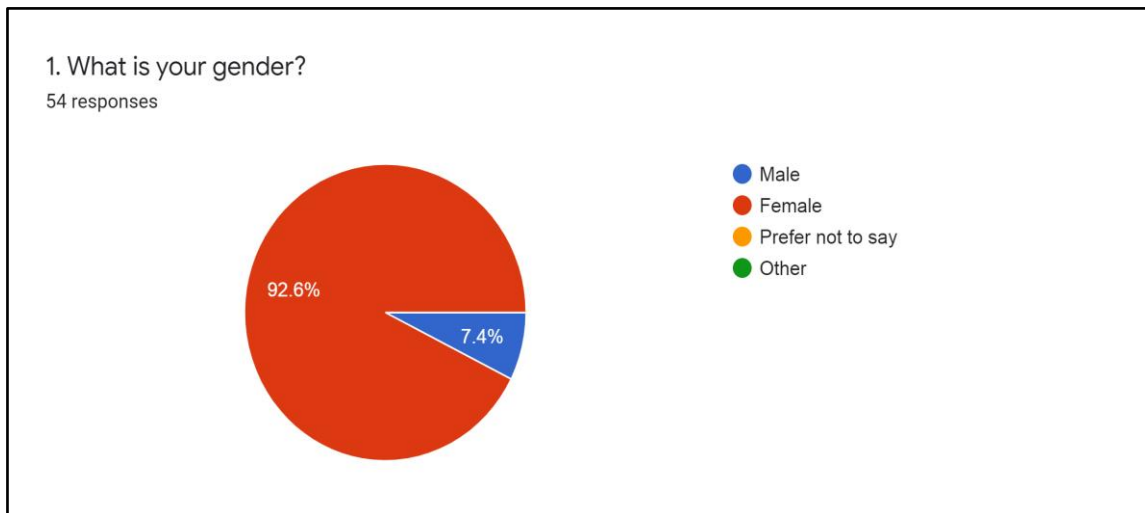


Figure 1.

Research Question 1: Does Aistear Hold a Place in Junior and Senior Infant Classrooms of 2021?

The first research question aimed to explore if *Aistear* holds a place in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of 2021. This question is discussed under the following areas; the implementation of *Aistear*, the benefits of implementing, the challenges of implementation and teacher confidence.

The Implementation of *Aistear*

While the majority of respondents indicated that they have had some form of formal *Aistear* training, there were some who have never had any training. Interestingly upon analysis of the data, of those 15 respondents who answered 'no' to having any formal *Aistear* training, 10 had been teaching for over 12 years (See figure 2.). This coincides with the introduction and development of the *Aistear* curriculum which was launched in 2009 and highlights the importance of ITE and the role it plays in educating student teachers on the *Aistear* and its implementation in the classroom.

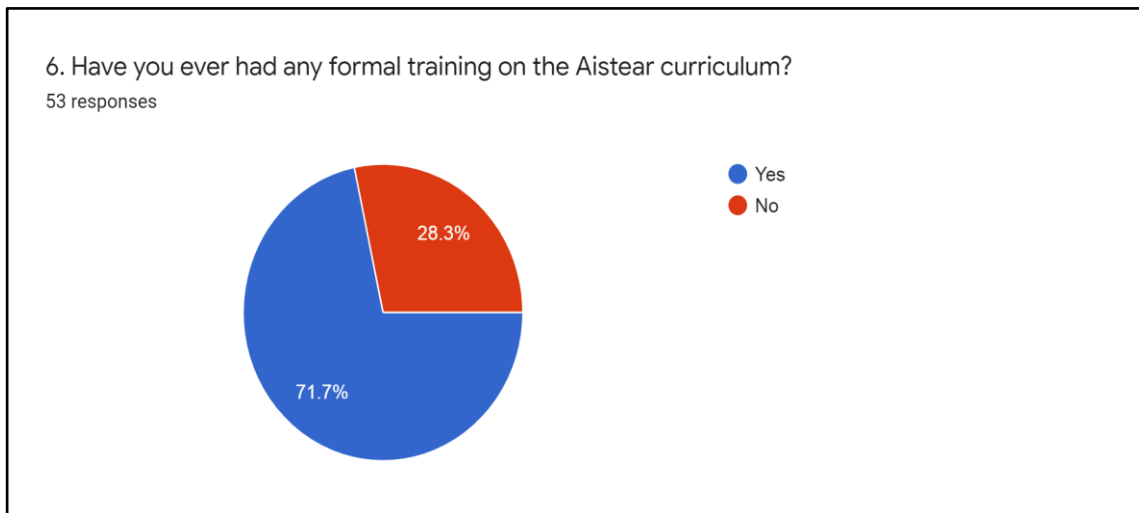


Figure 2.

When asked where they received their formal *Aistear* training, 19 of the 41 respondents indicated that it happened during their ITE (See figure 3.). For those respondents who qualified prior to 2009, there is no way that they could have received formal *Aistear* training during ITE and it would have been up to themselves to source their own training elsewhere.

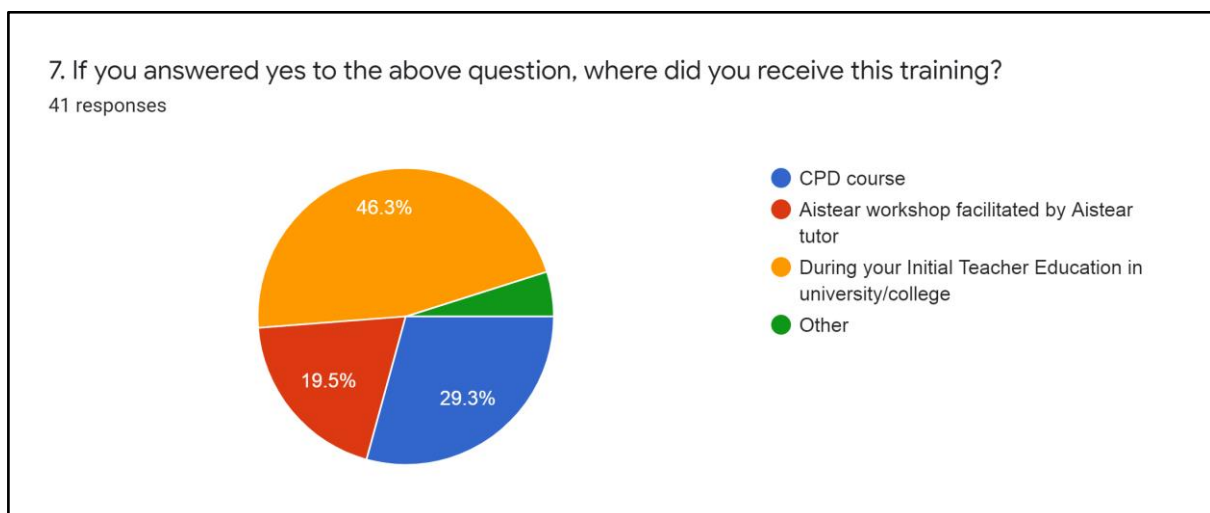


Figure 3.

From the responses received, it is clear that an overwhelming majority do implement *Aistear* in the classroom, 41 respondents of 53 (See figure 4.). This is a very positive statistic indicating that teachers in 2021 appreciate and recognise the value of *Aistear*.

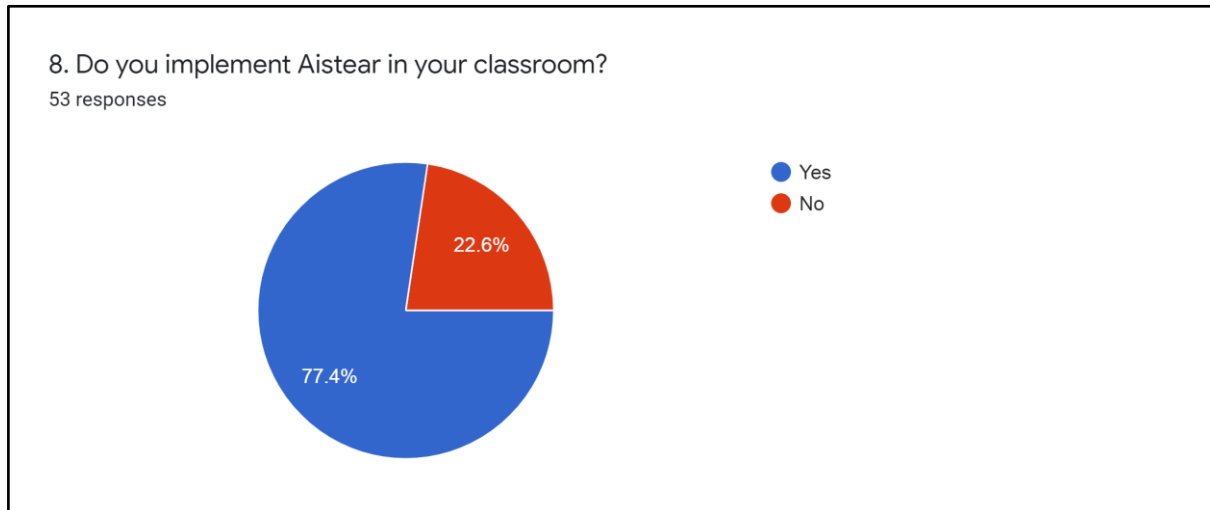


Figure 4.

Upon deeper analysis of the data, the researcher discovered that of the 12 respondents who do not implement *Aistear*, 4 suggested that COVID-19 was the sole reason why. Respondent 024 stated “we are not implementing *Aistear* this year due to COVID-19 restrictions and concerns about compromising pods within the classroom. We are restricting use of shared resources as much as possible.” Therefore, the researcher would assume that the number of teachers who do implement *Aistear* would be greater if the COVID-19 pandemic wasn’t such a pertinent issue this year. Of the remaining 8 respondents, the researcher discovered that 6 of them were teaching for 12 years or more. This interested the researcher as one must wonder does the lack of implementation by teachers who qualified over 12 years ago before the introduction of *Aistear* impact on their attitude and thoughts towards the framework. Only one 1 respondent from the sample didn’t see a need or value for *Aistear* in the classroom

The study also revealed that *Aistear* is implemented by the majority of respondents 5 days a week, in line with current recommendations (See figure 5.). There was also no respondent who engaged with *Aistear* for less than 2 days per week.

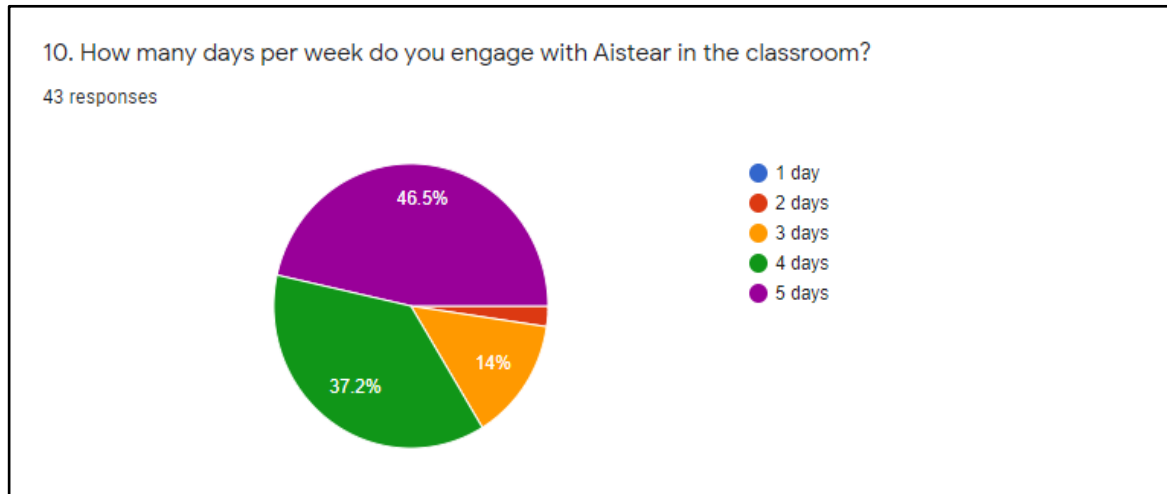


Figure 5.

However, the average time spent on *Aistear* per day was 31-40 minutes (See figure 6.). This is considerably lower than the recommended one hour per day (Murphy, 2016). While it is accepted that infant teachers find themselves under severe time constraints in trying to balance *Aistear* with the PSC, one must wonder if teachers are still placing greater emphasis on traditional teaching methods over play-based learning as found in the Gray & Ryan (2016) study.

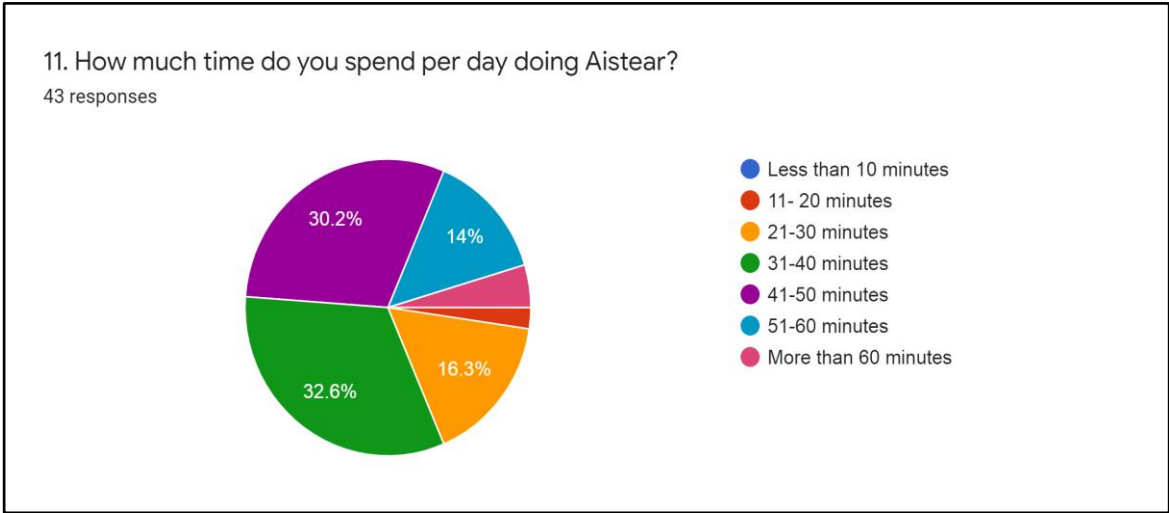


Figure 6.

The Benefits of Implementing Aistear in the Classroom

The respondents of the questionnaire identified a huge variety of different benefits associated with Aistear. The most common themes included; development of social skills, language development, learning through play, collaborative learning and the inclusive nature of Aistear (See figure 7.).

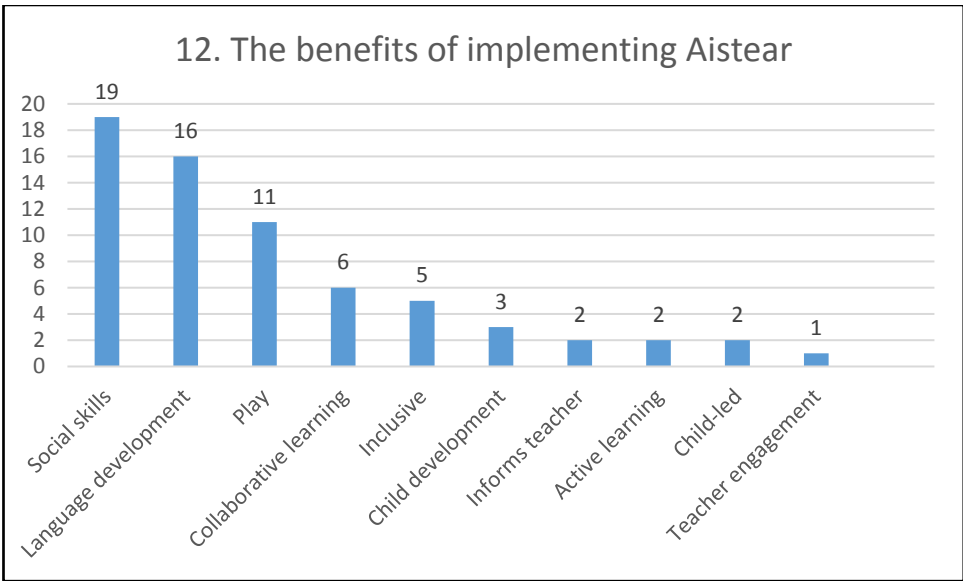


Figure 7.

The majority of the responses recognised that the development of social skills was the greatest benefit of implementing *Aistear*. Respondent 013 said that during *Aistear*, childrens' "social skills are improved as they have to learn to compromise, agree, disagree and overcome dispute". This was followed by language development, closely followed by the importance of play and finally how *Aistear* allows for collaborative learning. It is evidently clear from the four main benefits identified that they can be linked back to the teachings of Piaget and Vygotsky and reinforcing their beliefs that children learn best through play.

However, in this instance Vygotsky's theories are particularly relevant based on the responses given. He said that children learn through their social interactions with other children, he also emphasised the importance of play for language development. He thought that when children play they are constantly using language, they decide on conditions for make-believe play, they discuss roles and directions and they correct each other (Gahart-Mooney, 2000). His theory of the MKO is also very relevant as some respondents identified collaborative learning as a benefit of implementing *Aistear*. Respondent 041 said that "the peer tutoring is great, the more able children really bring the weaker children along as a result of mixed ability groupings".

Finally, some respondents also raised the inclusive nature of *Aistear* as being a benefit of implementation. Respondent 038 said that "*Aistear* is very inclusive of all children's abilities and the things they enjoy/ do not enjoy.", while respondent 051 said that *Aistear* is "inclusive of all children, especially those with SEN or EAL - provides children with common ground". These responses support the claim made by the researcher in the review of literature when they stated that *Aistear* caters for all children of all interests and abilities. The researcher does recognise that there is a possibility that *Aistear* could possibly restrict children who have limited language and social skills to engage in meaningful play and get the

most out of *Aistear*. However, there is evidence to suggest that play can enhance language development and social skills. Therefore, while it is possible that some children may temporarily feel excluded, ultimately, engaging with *Aistear* will only strengthen and improve their language and social skills.

The Challenges of Implementing *Aistear* in the Classroom

The data also highlighted challenges that are associated with the implementation of the framework. The two challenges that were to the forefront of all responses were ‘*time and resources*’ which were identified 17 times each respectively by the 42 respondents who answered question 13 (See figure 8.).

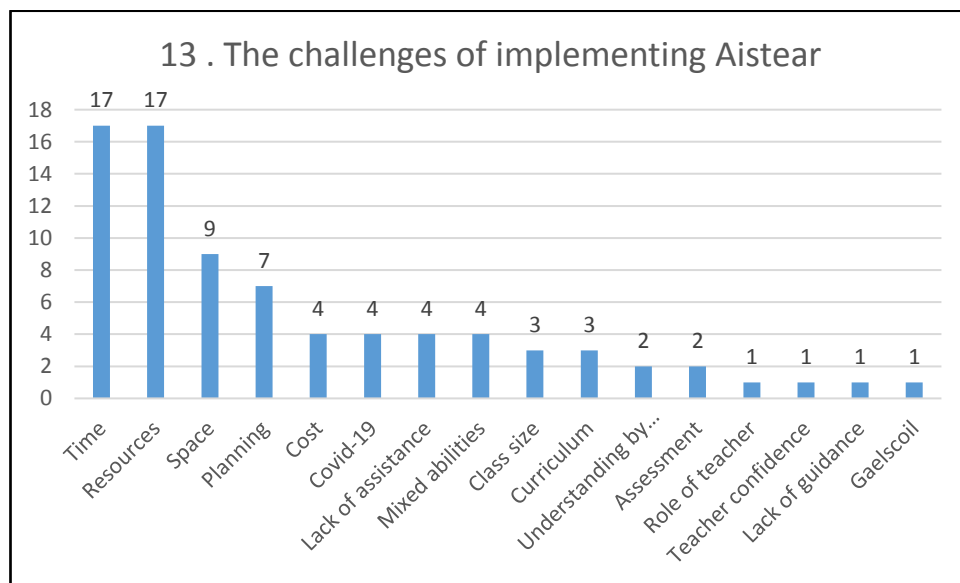


Figure 8.

Respondent 003 said that *Aistear* is “time consuming each day (preparation- set up and clean up) and reduces the time left in the school day to teach other curricular subjects”. This response was echoed by a number of other respondents who also said that time was a huge issue they faced when implementing *Aistear*. While the researcher accepts and appreciates that time can be a major drawback for teachers when implementing *Aistear* as

they try to get through an already packed PSC, respondents were overall in an agreement that *Aistear* complements and extends the PSC. Many of them stated that they integrate subjects such as SESE, drama, visual arts with *Aistear*. Therefore, if this is the case then timing should not be such a big an issue as subjects from the PSC can be taught through *Aistear*

Many respondents indicated that a lack of resources can present as a big challenge when implementing *Aistear* in the classroom. Respondent 054 said that “having enough resources for all stations and the theme being explored each month” is a challenge. Interestingly, the researcher learned that of the 17 respondents who teach in a DEIS school, 7 said that lack of resources was one of the greatest challenges of implementing the framework. This compares with 15 of the 37 respondents who teach in a non-DEIS setting that made reference to lack of resources.

This year it would be difficult to ignore the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic in which the world is currently faced with. The issue of COVID-19 and its impact on the implementation of *Aistear* in the classroom cannot be disregarded. Some respondents indicated that they are not engaging with the *Aistear* framework this year at all due to COVID-19. While a number of respondents highlighted the fact that they are finding implementation more challenging as a result of extra precautions and factors that need to be considered this year in order for *Aistear* to be done safely and successfully. Respondent 010 said that “at the moment, Covid is a huge challenge. Having enough resources for each pod, so that they do not play with the same resources during the week”.

Teacher Confidence

Gray and Ryan's (2016) study identified that the majority of respondents who took part in their research said that they were not confident in organising play-based learning activities in the classroom nor their role as teacher during this time. However in this study, respondents were asked to rate their own confidence of implementing *Aistear* in the classroom. They used a Likert scale from 1 to 5 to do so, with 1 being no confidence and 5 being extremely confident. The results show that most respondents chose 4 as the number that represents them best (See figure 9.).

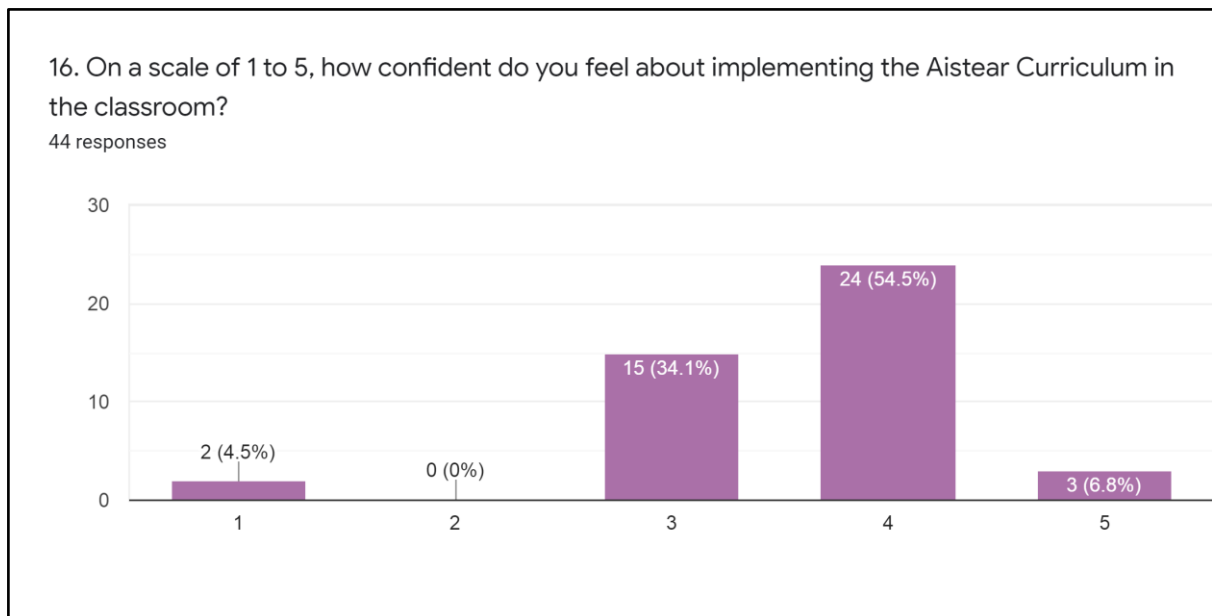


Figure 9.

The case was the same when they were asked to rate their confidence in understanding their role as teacher during *Aistear*, where 4 was the number chosen by the majority of respondents (See figure 10.).

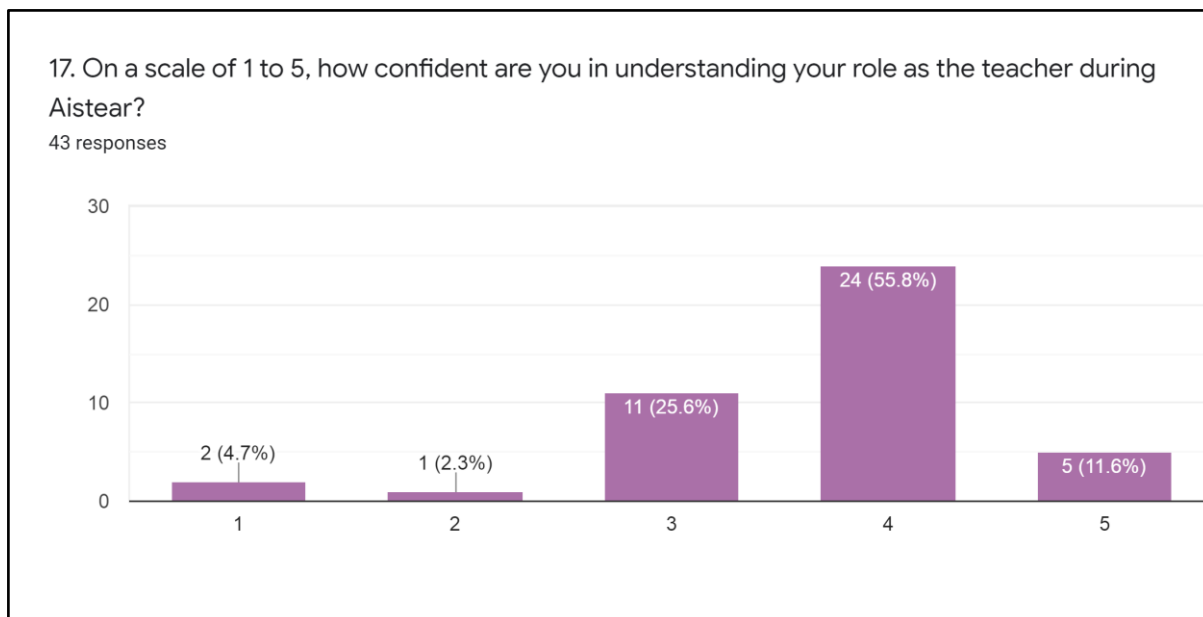


Figure 10.

These results surprised the researcher as they seem to greatly contrast with that study conducted by Gray and Ryan in 2016. That said, the majority of respondents who responded to this questionnaire had 0-2 years qualified teaching experience and also, it was indicated that ITE was the place where the most respondents received their formal *Aistear* training. Therefore, the question must be asked whether the emphasis on *Aistear* and play-based learning during ITE is directly positively impacting on the confidence of teachers as they implement the *Aistear* framework in infant classrooms. This analysis is further strengthened by a response given to a question asked on the greatest challenge of implementing *Aistear* in which respondent 034 said “my own confidence in implementing *Aistear*, I never had formal training so I find it hard to engage with.” This respondent happens to be teaching between 18 and 20 years and also, never had any formal *Aistear* training.

Research Question 2: Does Aistear Have a Future in these Classrooms?

It is clear from the data collected that many infant teachers in Ireland do value the *Aistear* Curriculum and would welcome improvements and changes being made to strengthen the framework.

Formalisation of *Aistear*

A little over 75% of all 54 respondents said that *Aistear* should be made compulsory for Junior and Senior Infants across Ireland (See figure 11.).

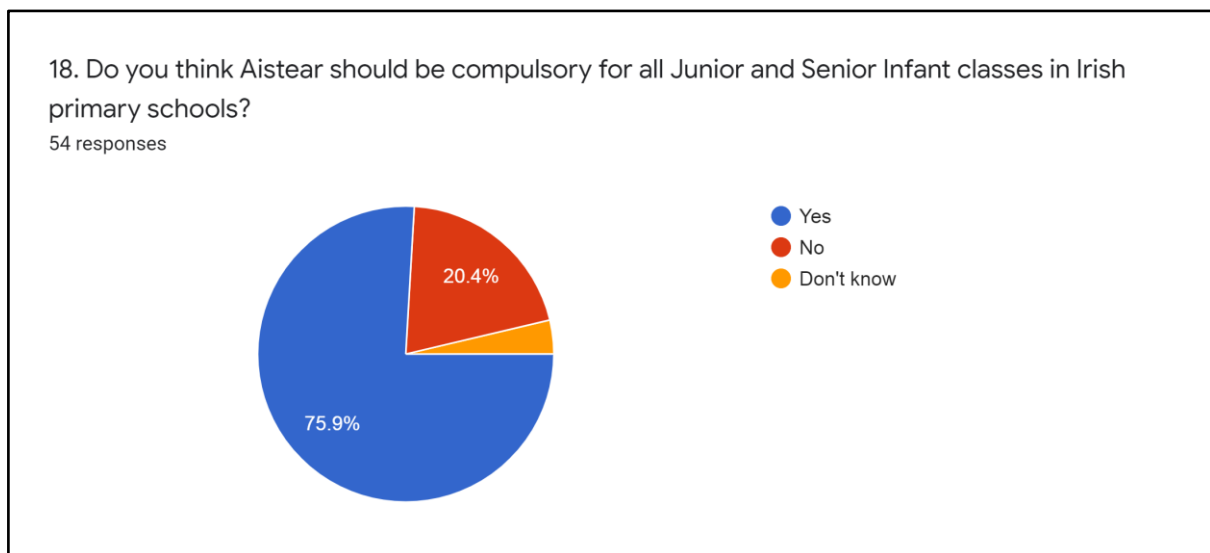


Figure 11.

The most common reason why respondents said it should be made compulsory is because the importance of play for young children is recognised by teachers (See figure 12.). Respondent 008 said that *Aistear* should be made compulsory as it “highlights the importance of play for young children's early learning and development, and offers many suggestions for different types of play, as well as advice on how to integrate play into classroom learning.” The statement can be supported by many theorists and experts who argue that play is essential for children’s learning and development in the early years. Other respondents

suggested that the benefits to the child was an important reason why *Aistear* should be made compulsory.

Some respondents stated that by making *Aistear* compulsory there would be consistency between schools and classes. At the moment, *Aistear* is an optional framework that individual teachers or schools can choose to engage with or not. This means that some infant teachers are spending up to an hour, 5 days a week doing *Aistear* while other teachers in the same school or other schools are not implementing the framework in their classroom at all. Therefore, some children and teachers are reaping the benefits of implementing *Aistear*, while other children are completely missing out on the opportunity. Respondent 054 said that “if *Aistear* was made compulsory, there would be so much more consistency between schools.”

Respondent 002 voiced that “*Aistear* helps to bridge the gap between preschool and primary school”. The researcher found this opinion gripping as the literature review raised the issue of the current state of *Aistear* in early years settings in Ireland at the moment which found that only those pre-school settings who offer the ECCE scheme are required to implement *Aistear*. Preschools which do not partake in the scheme and are not state-funded are not under obligation to implement *Aistear* (Gilpin, 2020). Therefore, there are some children who will have done *Aistear* in preschool and seamlessly move to primary school and know how to engage with *Aistear*, other children who will start *Aistear* in primary school who will not have any previous experience with the framework, and then other children who will have no exposure to *Aistear* whatsoever. This is due to the fact that *Aistear* is not underpinned by legislation nor statutory across early years settings in Ireland (French, 2013). Moloney (2010) refers to the implementation of this policy type as ‘soft policy’ as there are no statutory requirements in place for the initiative *Aistear*.

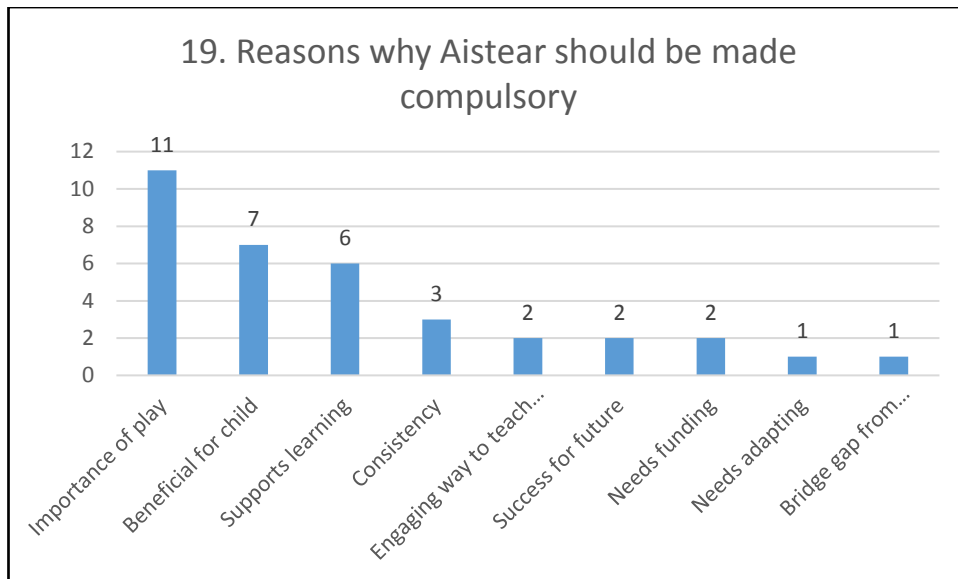


Figure 12.

The researcher does acknowledge the reasons why some respondents said that *Aistear* should not be made compulsory (See figure 13.). The researcher is acutely aware that there is already a prescribed PSC in place and that there can be many issues and challenges associated with the implementation of *Aistear*. However, in order for improvements and advances to be made with *Aistear* in the infant classrooms the researcher believes that making *Aistear* compulsory for all is the only way that any real improvements and advances will be made.

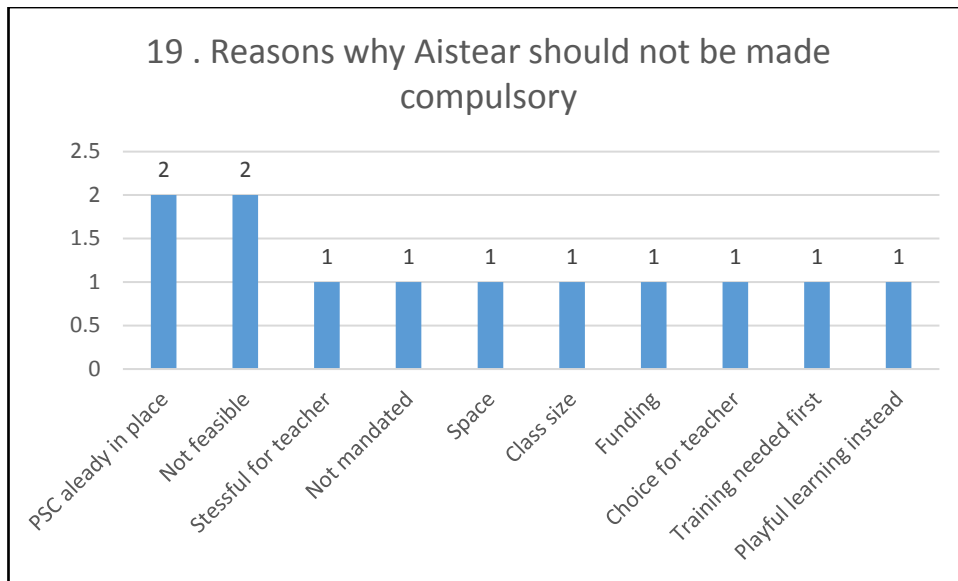


Figure 13.

Inspections

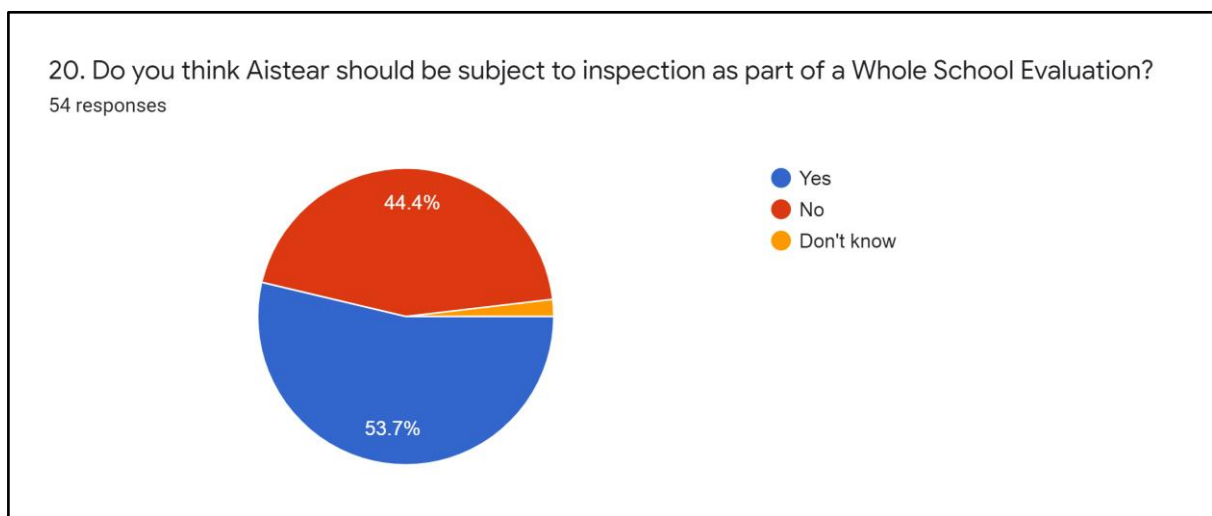


Figure 14.

More than 53% of 54 respondents said that they believe *Aistear* should be subject to inspection as part of a WSE. There were also 24 respondents who didn't believe that *Aistear* should be subject to inspection as part of a WSE, and the 1 who didn't know (See figure 14.).



Figure 15.

The most common theme that emerged in favour of inspection was that *Aistear* should be treated the same as any other subject in the PSC (See figure 15.). Respondent 043 said that “it is planned for in the same way as core subjects and would be beneficial for inspectors to see the learning that takes place during *Aistear*”. This response echoes the beliefs of others who felt that as *Aistear* requires considerable planning and preparation like the rest of the subjects then infant teachers should be given the opportunity to show this to inspectors.

Respondents also felt that inspections of *Aistear* would provide them with constructive feedback and criticism, while also closely monitoring how the framework is being implemented. The main themes that emerged from the question relating to the inspection of *Aistear* constantly referred back to the implementation of the framework and how inspections would strengthen and encourage implementation. Respondent 002 said:

Yes, especially in terms of guidance and regulation. As it stands, the rollout and implementation of *Aistear* is different in every school. Its success rests on the enthusiasm levels of the class teacher. *Aistear* can work really well if the teacher is dedicated to the

cause but it can also be poorly implemented if the teacher shows a lack of interest, which defeats the purpose of *Aistear* altogether. I think if there was some sort of evaluation, teachers would be more inclined to put the effort in.

This response really encapsulates the current state of *Aistear* at primary school level and emphasises the need for the monitoring of the framework and for the constructive criticism for teachers from the inspectorate.

Further, many respondents felt that *Aistear* should be inspected upon for improved teacher accountability. Because it is open to interpretation when it comes to the implementation teachers can choose how they conduct *Aistear* in the classroom with little to no accountability. Respondent 007 noted “inspections would ensure that infant teachers are accountable for the *Aistear* experience they provide for the children in their class” agreed respondent 037 stating “teachers would be kept on their toes if *Aistear* was subject to inspection like all other subjects, which isn't a bad thing!” Greater accountability mechanisms would be in line with *Aistear* at preschool level where services offering the ECCE scheme are subject to inspection by both the DES and TUSLA (Gilpin, 2020). The responses highlight over half of the respondents are open to the idea of *Aistear* being inspected as part of a WSE.

However, 24 respondents suggested that *Aistear* should not be subject to inspection. The most common theme that emerged from these responses was that all schools are different in terms of funding and resources etc. and that *Aistear* is moveable and changeable due to the spontaneous nature of child-led play (See figure 16.). While these are two accepted points, one must consider if the inspectorate would have to be consciously aware of these issues in the first place.

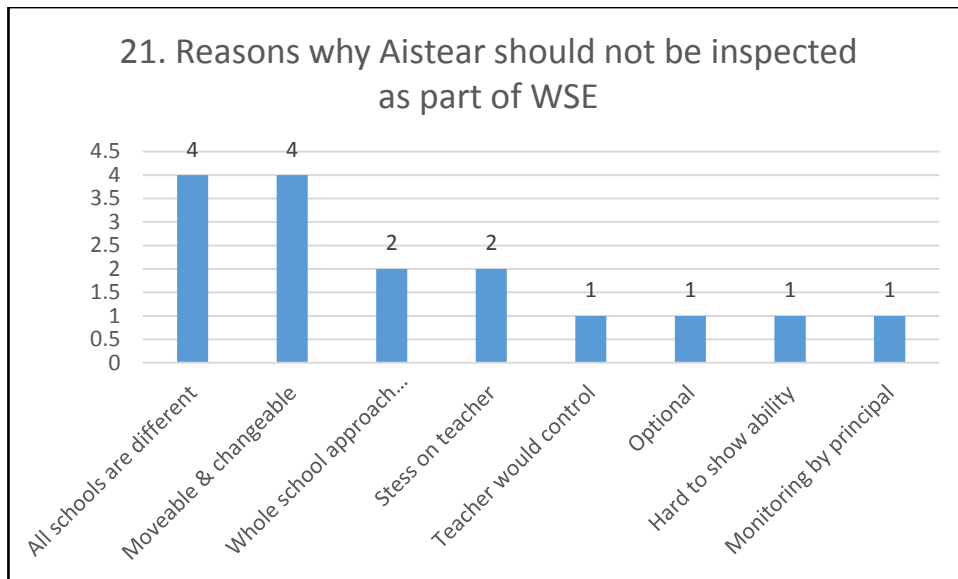


Figure 16.

Training

A staggering 96% of all 54 respondents said that all infant teachers should receive the same training on how to effectively implement *Aistear* in the infant classroom, demonstrating a strong demand and need for training (See figure 17.).

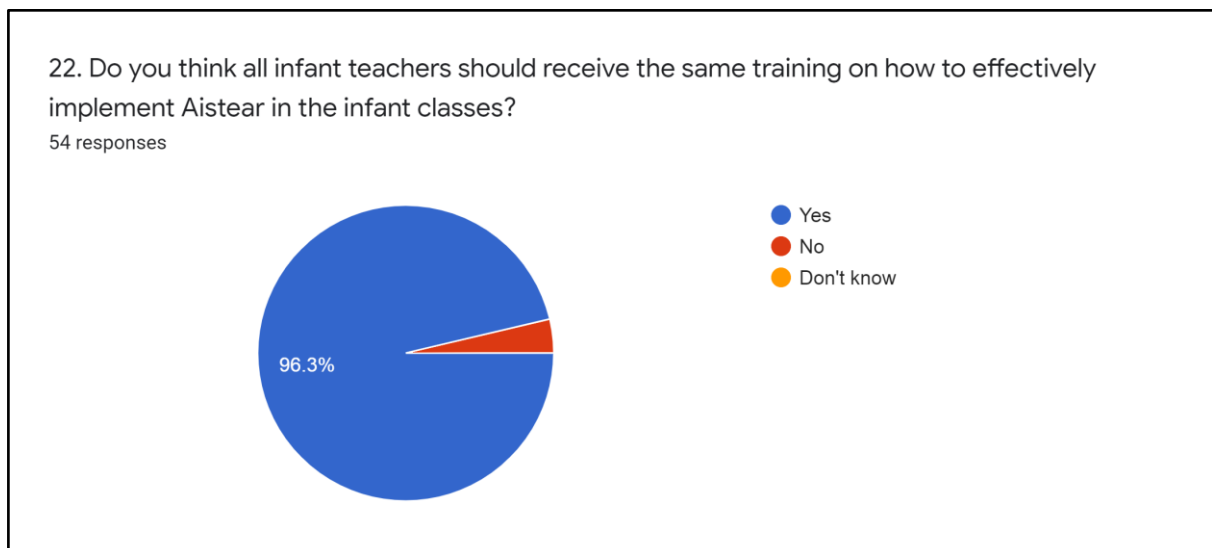


Figure 17.

As concluded by Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlson (2008) and Gray and Ryan (2016), lack of training can be problematic and teachers can fall back on their old ‘teachy’ ways if they fail to see the relationship between play and learning. If teachers are so willing to receive training on *Aistear* it begs the questions, why has nothing been done to support teachers with the training they desire and how can some teachers be expected to implement a framework without having received formal training?

When asked to comment on why *Aistear* training should be provided for all infant teachers, respondent 051 said:

I find it crazy that infant teachers haven't been given formal *Aistear* training yet! ...I know some teachers who implement *Aistear* but have never had any training or teachers who are afraid to implement *Aistear* because they don't know how it works.

This response adequately captures the issues associated with the roll-out of *Aistear* entirely and highlights the need for changes to be made as soon as possible. While it is through no fault of the teachers themselves, it seems absurd that there are teachers who have never had any *Aistear* training but are still implementing the framework anyway.

This point also refers back to Moloney’s (2010) point that *Aistear* is a ‘soft’ policy in that it is not statutory but also that there are no mandatory training requirements for the practitioners and educators of this framework.

The main themes that emerged from the responses given by respondents when asked why all infant teachers should receive the same training can be seen below (See figure 18.).

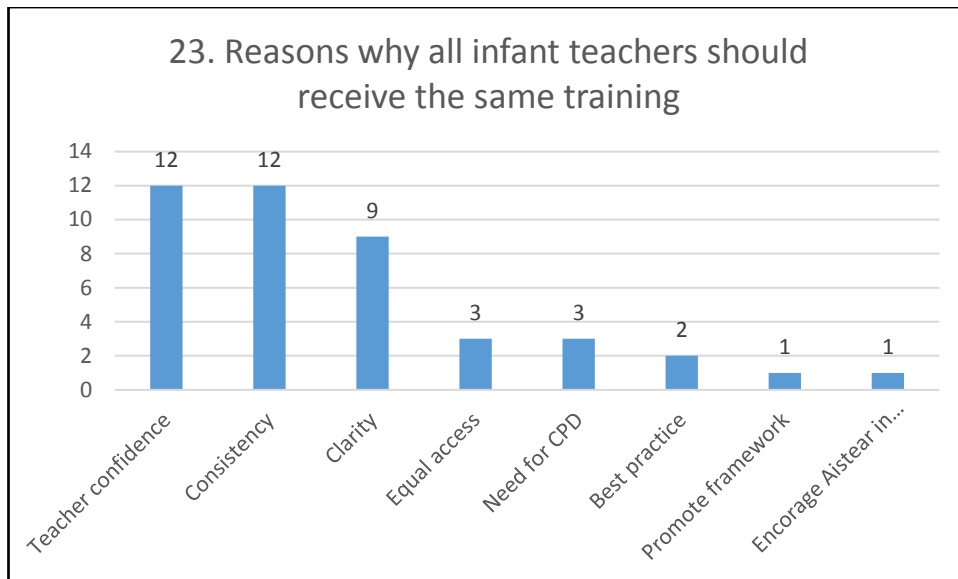


Figure 18.

Of the 4 respondents who did not believe that all teachers should receive the same training on how to effectively implement *Aistear*, the reasons provided included; it should be the teacher's own choice, teachers should be shown how to do playful learning instead of *Aistear* specifically and finally that training should be differentiated for Gaelscoileanna. It would be very possible for formal training to be provided to all teachers while still remaining optional for teachers to decide if they would like to partake in said training or not. However, the training needs to be offered in the first instance in order for any improvements to be made in the implementation of *Aistear*.

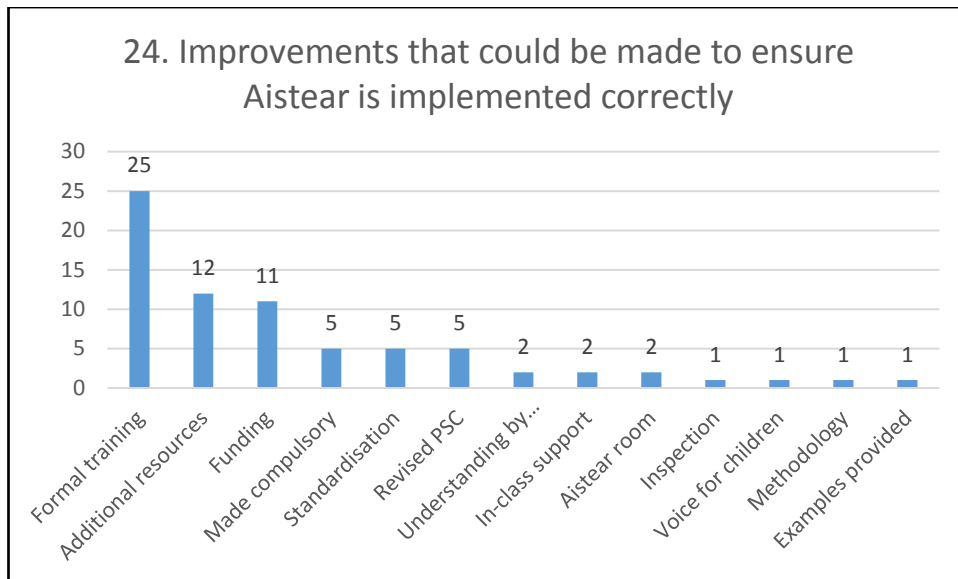


Figure 19.

Further Improvements to Support the Implementation

While teacher training was to the forefront of improvements that could be made to ensure *Aistear* is implemented correctly in infant classrooms, inspections and *Aistear* being made compulsory were also recurring in the responses. Other improvements that respondents identified included; increased amount of resources, additional funding, revision of the PSC, in-class support and an increased understanding by school management (See figure 20.).

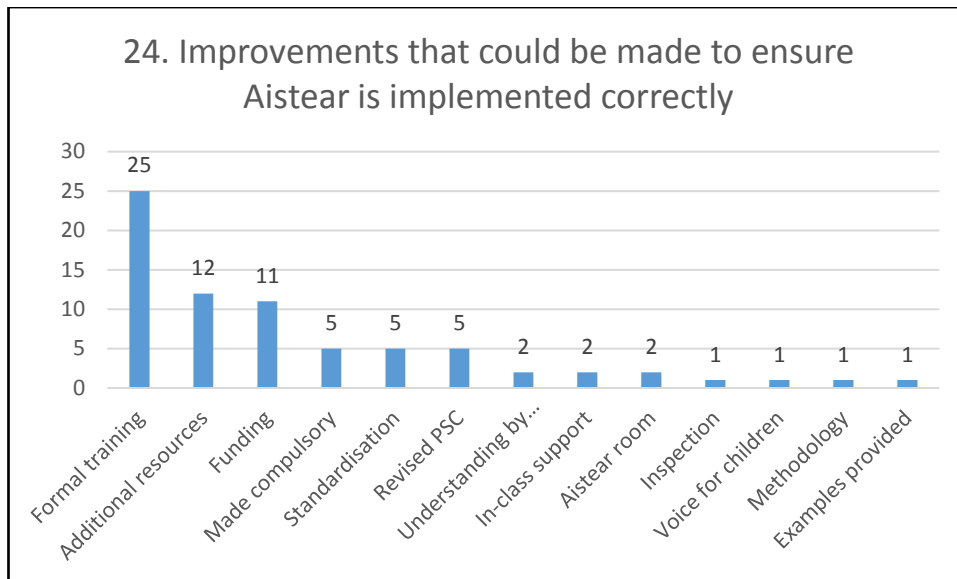


Figure 20.

A number of respondents (12) said that there needs to be an increased amount of resources available to schools for *Aistear* and a lack of resources was a clear challenge for implementing the framework. However, as mentioned in the review of literature, according to the NCCA (2009a) resourcing and organising a high quality play environment doesn't have to be expensive. Classrooms don't have to be equipped with lavish and modern toys and resources, teachers can use their creativity and imagination to make and source cost-effective resources. For example, instead of buying a play tractor for socio-dramatic play area a teacher could improvise and make their own tractor with cardboard. However, in some instances there is a need for additional funding to support and assist schools resources their classrooms appropriately for *Aistear* to ensure the children have a suitable environment to engage in meaningful play.

A point raised by some respondents and also mentioned in the literature review is the revising of the PSC. The new PSC is working towards aligning the curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants with that of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2020). Hopefully, this will allow for a more seamless integration between the two curricula as opposed to looking at them as two

completely separate entities. However, there is no mention of making *Aistear* compulsory for all infant classes nor providing essential training for teachers on the curriculum framework.

The Future

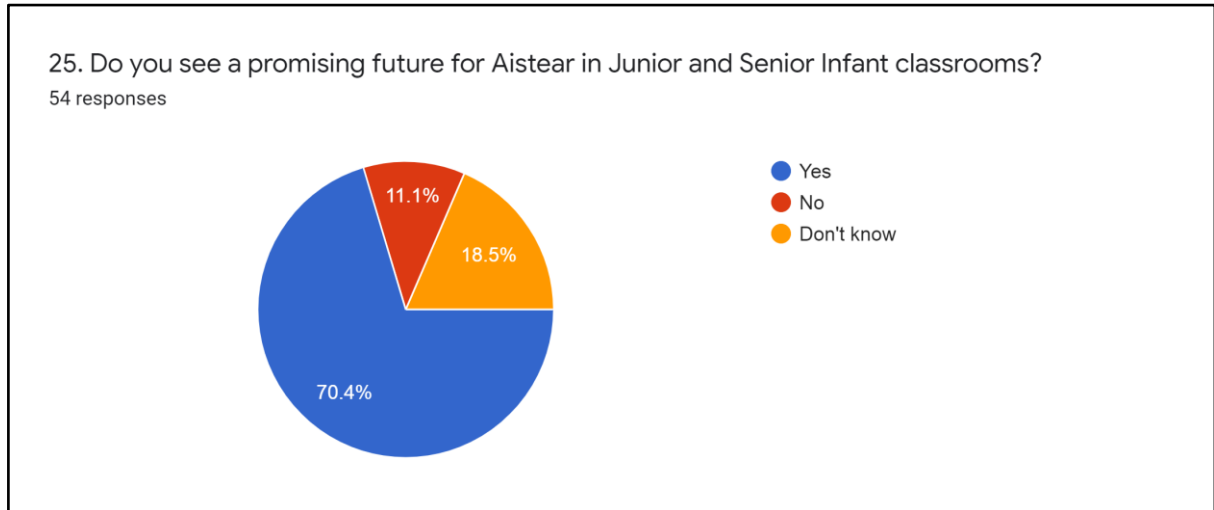


Figure 21.

The majority of the 54 respondents who answered question 25 indicated that they saw a promising future for *Aistear* in the infant classrooms (See figure.21). However, as outlined previously, it can be said that they also recognised the changes and improvements that are needed to support the implementation of *Aistear* now and in the future.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Prior to the introduction of *Aistear* in 2009 by the NCCA, the OECD reported that the teaching in Irish infant classrooms was too formal in comparison to our European counterparts (OECD, 2004; Flynn, 2018). It was hoped that the introduction of *Aistear* would encourage more playful learning in the early years settings. Despite the careful research and planning that was invested into this initiative (NCCA, 2009b) the implementation of the *Aistear* framework presents a number of challenges. French (2013) acknowledged this weakness and Gray & Ryan in their 2016 study revealed a number of barriers to successful implementation. They found that play was given a peripheral status in the classroom, with traditional teaching methods favoured the majority (66%) of the time. Moloney (2010) referred to *Aistear* as a 'soft' policy referencing the fact that there is no statutory requirement to implement the framework nor are there any training requirements for practitioners and educators of the early years.

Summary of findings

1. Does *Aistear* hold a place in the Junior and Senior Infant Classrooms of 2021?

This study revealed that Irish infant teachers of 2021 value play in their classrooms, with over 77% of respondents indicating that they implement *Aistear*. Of the 12 who do not, 4 stated that COVID-19 was the reason why they didn't. Therefore, if this study was carried out in normal circumstances one could assume that the number of respondents implementing *Aistear* would be greater. While this is a very positive finding, the respondents of this study also recognised that they need extra support to strengthen and sustain the practice of *Aistear* in their classrooms.

It seems that *Aistear* is becoming increasingly more valued. This study found that the emphasis and training provided to student teachers during their ITE positively impacts on

their decision to implement the framework in their classrooms. This reinforces the need for standardised training to be made available for all infant teachers and correspondingly the introduction of *Aistear* training in ITE should positively influence NQTs who engage with the framework in practise.

The most common themes that emerged when asked about the benefits of implementing *Aistear* for teachers included; the development of social skills, language development, learning through play, collaborative learning and the inclusive nature of *Aistear*. The primary barriers that emerged included; time constraints, lack of resources, space, planning, cost and COVID-19.

The study also found that in contrast to recent other literature, the majority of respondents felt relatively confident about implementing *Aistear* and facilitating its implementation. As noted previously, the majority of respondents who completed the questionnaire had between 0-2 years of qualified teaching experience; most respondents received their formal *Aistear* training during ITE. This supports the early argument, relating to the positive impact ITE is having on NQTs and their practice and opinions of *Aistear*.

2. Does *Aistear* have a Future in these Classrooms?

This study also revealed that while the majority of respondents saw a future for *Aistear* in the classroom, they also said that improvements and changes need to be made to how the framework is rolled-out and implemented to ensure ongoing success and sustainability.

Over 75% of the 54 respondents felt that *Aistear* should be made compulsory across all infant classes in Irish primary schools. The main themes that emerged to support this idea were that; play is important in early years, *Aistear* is beneficial for the child, *Aistear* supports learning and that making it compulsory would facilitate greater consistency across schools and classes.

Over 53% of the 54 respondents also felt that *Aistear* should be subject to inspection as part of a WSE. The key themes to support this idea were that; *Aistear* should be treated the same as the PSC, teachers would be provided with constructive criticism on their practice, inspection would allow the implementation of *Aistear* to be monitored and teachers would be accountable for the learning experience they provide.

Teacher training appeared to be the overarching request amongst respondents when considering successful implementation of *Aistear*. An overwhelming 96% of the 54 respondents were in favour of infant teachers receiving the same training on how to effectively practise *Aistear* in the classroom. Respondents concluded that training would give teachers increased confidence, would mean more consistency and would provide greater clarity.

Other improvements that were noted by respondents included; increased resources made available to teachers for *Aistear*, increased funding and a revision of the PSC in order to accommodate *Aistear* in the school day. In line with the data collected, the researcher is satisfied that sufficient evidence was gathered to answer the research questions and to draw the conclusion that *Aistear* does, in fact, hold a place of value in infant classrooms both now in 2021 and for the future. To ensure sustainability, implementation of the framework needs to be considered on a national level.

Recommendations

Following evaluation and consideration of the findings of this study, a number of recommendations are presented below.

1. The overarching theme that emerged from the whole study was the need for teacher training. While this has also been recommended in previous studies, it is a crucial element that still has not been addressed. The study highlighted that ITE is having a

direct positive impact on NQTs outlook on *Aistear* and its implementation in their classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary that all infant teachers are given the opportunity to complete training within their schools without having to find it elsewhere. This would greatly support those teachers who have never had any input on how to implement *Aistear* in the classroom, as well as supporting teachers who may need refresher courses.

2. More funding needs to be provided to schools and teachers each year to ensure that they have adequate resources and materials available for the children. This would ensure that the children are provided with a suitable stimulating, learning environment to engage in meaningful play. Additional funding to that mentioned above, should also be made available to those schools who do not implement *Aistear* at all so they could be encouraged to begin introducing the framework into their schools. The creation of a strong link between schools and homes would also be beneficial, this would allow schools to identify used resources of good quality from parents and guardians. This would be an inexpensive way of sourcing an abundance of resources suitable for *Aistear* in the classroom.
3. *Aistear* was never intended to replace the PSC, however, based on the data collected the researcher recommends that *Aistear* be made compulsory across all mainstream infant classrooms in Ireland. By formalising *Aistear* and making it compulsory, all children would reap the positive benefits of this framework that was designed specifically for children in the early years. Adequate training for teachers, along with *Aistear* being made compulsory would provide greater consistency in the roll out and uptake of the framework. If it were to be made compulsory, it would bridge the gap between preschool and primary school for the majority of children who will have had

experience doing *Aistear* due to their participation on the two year ECCE programme prior to starting primary school.

4. Finally, if *Aistear* was to be made compulsory it is recommended that the framework be subject to inspection as part of a WSE. The majority of respondents who participated in this study were in favour of inspections. Currently, *Aistear* is being implemented in classrooms with little to no monitoring of how the framework is being implemented. By making it an inspected component, teachers would be accountable for the learning experience they are providing to children. Constructive criticism and feedback would also be beneficial to teachers to help them improve their practice. Teachers who implement *Aistear* already have to plan and organise it, therefore, it would be a great opportunity to show the inspectorate the child-led, active learning opportunities they are providing the children with.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Letter and Consent for Respondents

Questionnaire for Junior and Senior Infant teachers

Dear Teacher,

The purpose of this study is to investigate the place Aistear holds in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms of today from a teacher's perspective. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire that will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

I hope you will be willing to participate because your responses are important and a valued part of the study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate, and should you choose to do so you can refuse to answer specific questions, or decide to withdraw from the study. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. IP addresses will not be collected at any point, meaning the data you provide cannot be traced back to you. You maintain the right to withdraw from the study at any stage up to the point of data submission. At this point your data will be collated with that of other participants and can no longer be retracted.

If you agree to participate in the research, please complete the consent question below. Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact me by email at shealypme19@momail.mie.ie.

Thank you for your time and contribution to this study.

Do you consent to participate in this study? *

Yes

No

Appendix 2: Template of Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Other

2. How many years have you been teaching as a qualified primary school teacher?

- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-8 years
- 9-11 years
- 12-14 years
- 15-17 years
- 18-20 years
- More than 20 years

3. Please select as applies to your current school type.

- DEIS
- Non-DEIS

4. Which infant class do you currently teach?

- Junior
- Senior
- Multigrade

5. What county in Ireland do you currently teach in?

Short answer text

6. Have you ever had any formal training on the Aistear curriculum?

- Yes
- No

7. If you answered yes to the above question, where did you receive this training?

- CPD course
- Aistear workshop facilitated by Aistear tutor
- During your Initial Teacher Education in university/college
- Other

8. Do you implement Aistear in your classroom?

- Yes
- No

9. Based on your answer above, can you please explain why you do or do not implement Aistear in your classroom. (If you do not implement Aistear, you can skip to question 18 after you have answered this question and continue from there.)

Long answer text

10. How many days per week do you engage with Aistear in the classroom?

- 1 day
- 2 days
- 3 days
- 4 days
- 5 days

11. How much time do you spend per day doing Aistear?

- Less than 10 minutes
- 11- 20 minutes
- 21-30 minutes
- 31-40 minutes
- 41-50 minutes
- 51-60 minutes
- More than 60 minutes

12. What is/are the greatest benefit(s) of implementing Aistear in the classroom?

Long answer text

13. What is/are the greatest challenge(s) of implementing Aistear in the classroom?

Long answer text

14. In your opinion, does the Aistear curriculum complement and extend the Primary School Curriculum?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

15. Please comment on your answer above.

Long answer text

16. On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel about implementing the Aistear Curriculum in the classroom?

- | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Not confident | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Extremely confident |

17. On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you in understanding your role as the teacher during Aistear?

- | | | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Not confident | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Extremely confident |

18. Do you think Aistear should be compulsory for all Junior and Senior Infant classes in Irish primary schools?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

19. Please comment on your answer above.

Long answer text

20. Do you think Aistear should be subject to inspection as part of a Whole School Evaluation?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

21. Please comment on your answer above.

Long answer text

22. Do you think all infant teachers should receive the same training on how to effectively implement Aistear in the infant classes?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

23. Please comment on your answer above.

Long answer text

24. In your opinion, what improvements could be made to ensure Aistear is implemented correctly in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms?

Long answer text

25. Do you see a promising future for Aistear in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know