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Teacher experiences of using the Aistear early childhood curriculum framework to support inclusion for autistic pupils within Irish mainstream primary schools

This study explores the experiences of primary teachers utilising the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) to support inclusive education for autistic children within mainstream primary schools. Ireland has moved increasingly in recent decades towards providing education for autistic pupils within mainstream school settings, with 86% of such students being enrolled in mainstream schools and classes in 2016 according to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2016, p.5). Autistic pupils enrolled in early intervention classes are commonly supported using Aistear, a holistic play focused early childhood education curriculum. However, there is little research exploring the experiences of primary teachers with implementing this curriculum to support inclusion within mainstream classes for autistic children, nor what supports or access to professional development are available. Interviews were conducted with 10 primary school teachers who have worked with autistic pupils using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The interviews were conducted using Zoom and were between 30 and 60 minutes in duration. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, with two themes emerging. The first was "Using Aistear to Support Inclusion" which had two sub-themes, "Tailoring the Curriculum" and "Tailoring the Environment". The second theme was "Aistear and Whole School Approaches". Findings show that, while participating teachers were often positive about using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) to inform their lesson planning and practice, they pointed to the lack of support and guidance within Aistear to inform their approach to differentiating to support inclusion. This had implications for teacher collaboration and use of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in primary school settings.

Keywords: *Autism; Aistear, early intervention, whole school inclusion*

LAURA MCGRATH is a primary level teacher working in an autism class setting in Dublin. She holds a B.Ed from Froebel College and Trinity College Dublin and a Master of Education in Autism from DCU. NEIL KENNY is a

member of the School of Inclusive and Special Education at DCU's Institute of Education and is a Research Fellow at the National Anti-Bullying Research Centre. He is Programme Chair for the Master of Education in Autism at DCU.

Corresponding author: *neil.kenny@dcu.ie*

INTRODUCTION

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition which can be characterised by repetitive and restricted interests/behaviours and differences in communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association; DSM-5, 2013). However, more recently understandings of autism have emphasised the level of diversity and heterogeneous presentations within the autism spectrum (Norwich & Lewis, 2005) and doubts have emerged regarding models that emphasise deficit or commonality of impairment ascribed to autistic children. For example, 70% of young people diagnosed with autism were also diagnosed with at least one comorbid condition, while 41% were diagnosed with two, leading to significant diversity of presentation within the autism diagnosis (Green et al., 2018). In addition, differences in reported prevalence rates of autism across jurisdiction also emphasises differing understandings of its presentation, with prevalence in the Republic of Ireland reported to be 1.5% (Boilson et al., 2016) while its prevalence in Northern Ireland is stated as being 4.5% (Rogers & McCluney, 2020).

In Ireland, as has been the case in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Education systems (Kenny, McCoy, & Mihut, 2020), there has been a growing trend towards inclusive education leading to schools in Ireland experiencing a substantial increase in the number of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) receiving education in mainstream classroom settings (Anglim, Prenderville & Kinsella, 2018). The NCSE (2016, p.5) reported that "86% of students on the autism spectrum are enrolled in mainstream schools, of which 63% attend mainstream classes and 23% attend special classes in mainstream schools". Figures from 2019 show 1067 special classes and 131 early intervention classes for autistic pupils in primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education and Science (DES) Inspectorate, 2020). However, research has shown significant diversity in how provision for autistic students is organised across schools (DES Inspectorate, 2020; Banks et al., 2016), with some authors suggesting the fragmented development of specialist provision for autistic pupils has led to inconsistent implementation of inclusive policy (Shevlin

& Banks, 2021). Additionally, inconsistent planning for inclusion and a lack of teacher continuous professional development in schools has also been highlighted (Government of Ireland (GOI), 2004).

Autistic pupils enrolled in early intervention classes are commonly supported using the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) which adopts a play focused approach that strategically forgoes the use of more traditional models of teaching, aiming to support individualised holistic development in younger pupils in early education class settings (Woods, 2019). However, given the differences in how autistic pupils engage in play, it is unclear how teachers utilise and adapt the Aistear Curriculum Framework to support educational inclusion for autistic pupils in these classes. The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives and experiences among both mainstream class and autism special class primary teachers regarding implementing the Aistear Curriculum Framework to support educational inclusion of autistic pupils within mainstream settings. Participants' views regarding the availability of training and continuous professional development (CPD) relevant to the Aistear framework were also sought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) (which will be referred to as Aistear hereafter in this article) was launched in 2009 and sought to extend and complement the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (1999) at infant class level in Ireland. Aistear is modelled on the New Zealand Curriculum of Te Whariki (Churchill Dower, French, Rogers & Sandbrook, 2013) and advocates the important role of play in early childhood. Aistear comprises a framework of four interconnected themes that overlap with each other to shape children's learning and development; well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking (NCCA, 2009). Aistear, therefore, provides a reference point for teachers to implement a holistic curriculum that is child-centred and values sustained and meaningful interactions for the developing child (NCCA, 2009). Teachers may provide multiple opportunities for autistic pupils to access the PSC using play-based lessons in Aistear to further develop and enhance learning. Play is used within Aistear to address a whole spectrum of cross-curricular objectives outlined in the PSC (1999) in the areas of Social, Personal and Health Education and well-being, literacy, communication and language, mathematics, art and social skills. Within this context, it is imperative that a holistic approach to play is embraced by teachers in Early Childhood Education classrooms (French, 2019) and should consider the child's emotional, social, physical and spiritual well-

being. Play has been acknowledged as a valuable method to improve children's communication and language skills (Papacek, Chai & Green, 2016).

Approaches and Strategies to Support Autistic Pupils in Play in Mainstream Settings

Given the increasing inclusion of autistic children within mainstream early childhood and early primary class settings, they are more often accessing opportunities to inclusively participate in play with non-autistic peers. The use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) in early childhood or early primary class settings therefore provides autistic children with access to child-led, play-based learning settings. Play may provide positive opportunities for autistic children to learn about their world through different relationships, developing skills such as co-operation, problem-solving and conflict resolution. Therefore, it is hoped that autistic children may benefit from positive early experiences of play to enhance and develop their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development (French, 2019). These early play interactions may offer these children opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills which may provide the foundation for later learning (NCCA, 2009).

Similarly, Lieberman and Yoder (2012) documented the positive relationship between communication and play in young autistic children. Play can be used as a method to bridge communication and social skills differences between autistic children and their peers in an inclusive environment (Wolfberg, 2015). O'Keefe and McNally (2021) highlighted the importance of play in intellectual development and in assisting children's achievement of learning objectives outlined within the curriculum. Research has shown that the naturalistic teaching of social interaction skills through play has been effective when teaching young autistic children (Wong & Kasari, 2012). In addition, according to Wolfberg et al. (2015), it is fundamental to maximise the developmental potential of autistic pupils by supporting their inclusion in play with typical peers. Facilitating interactive activities with a more socially able peer provides autistic children with an opportunity to improve their social interaction and communication skills within the classroom environment (Papacek, Chai & Green, 2016). Furthermore, by utilising suitable peer groupings and buddy systems within play-based lessons in Aistear, positive interactions with other peers can promote the development of peer relationships (Bierman, 2004).

However, due to often common characteristics of presentations of autism, autistic children often present with differences in their social interaction and approaches to social play activities relative to their non-autistic peers (Hobson, Lee and Hobson, 2009; Rutherford, Young, Hepburn and Rogers, 2007; Williams, Reddy

and Costall, 2001). Additionally, differences in social presentation are common among autistic children which can frequently impact the creation and maintenance of peer relationships (Milton, 2012; Sigman et al. 1999:). In addition, Conn (2014, p.143) noted that, while autistic children do engage in play similar to their peers, their play differs, showing "less sophistication" and "playing at a slower rate". Autistic children show a preference for engagement with sensory-motor physical play but are also less likely to engage the playful interest of their non-autistic peers (Conn, 2014). There is a strong evidence base showing autistic pupils in schools experience very high levels of social isolation, bullying and social rejection (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Based on understandings of the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), there is an emerging literature of evidence suggesting that relational interactions can present challenges for groups comprising mixed autistic and non-autistic individuals (Crompton et. al., 2020). In the context of lessons which involve peer play, autistic pupils can find play settings involving groups of non-autistic children a challenge. Due to these complexities and commonly noted differences in social and communication abilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), teachers may often be faced with increasing challenges in adopting play-based approaches to learning. This is particularly important to enable autistic pupils to access Aistear within mainstream settings to support their educational inclusion. Learning the social skills required to initiate, join or maintain social play successfully may support an autistic child's engagement in this form of play (Carter, Davis, Klin & Volkmar, 2005; Matson & Wilkins, 2007). This is, however, both complex and often involves challenges for both autistic and non-autistic pupils within the group.

If autistic pupils are to gain access to both Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the PSC (1999) to support successful inclusion within classes, teachers play a vital role in the educational and social inclusion of these pupils. In this context, it is perhaps unfortunate that there is limited research in Ireland regarding the use of play-based approaches by teachers to support the educational inclusion of autistic pupils. Previous international studies investigating the opinions of teachers regarding the teaching of play skills have indicated that autistic children need to be supported in play skills and that the teaching of these skills support a range of developmental areas (Cesur & Odluyurt, 2019). Teachers need to actively scaffold play if children are to develop and enhance their play skills. A study conducted by Chang and Shire (2019) concluded that teachers are essential agents who have a pivotal role in facilitating and promoting skill development in the play of autistic children. A study investigating the area of play for autistic children in autism special classes reported that teachers felt worried and concerned about what they should teach and how they should teach it through play (Corbett, 2017).

Using a play-based approach benefits teaching and learning and additionally, promotes inclusion. However, teachers working with autistic pupils are required to use methodologies based on the characteristics of autism, the individual strengths and areas for development of each autistic child and recommendations made by the DES (Corbett, 2017). This further emphasises the need for adequate teacher training to meet the needs of autistic children within inclusive school environments. Kenny, McCoy & Mihut (2020) highlighted concerns about teachers' engagement with and availability of professional development opportunities as teachers' roles have been impacted significantly by the move towards fostering more inclusion within mainstream class settings.

Teaching Education and Professional Development

Research has shown the positive impact of teacher engagement with autism specific training to further enhance and develop inclusive practices. This may be important regarding implementing Aistear, given a recent study of primary teachers in supporting the inclusion of autistic pupils reported that the majority of teachers were anxious and lacked confidence at the prospect of teaching an autistic child (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018). Another study reported that teaching and support staff had little or no training in understanding the needs of autistic children (Reed, 2019). Indeed, given how complex the area of play can be and the diversity of social skills, interests, and communication profiles among autistic pupils, differentiation of lessons by teachers will be vital to support inclusion (Ravet, 2009). Similarly, the lack of understanding of the needs of these pupils can have a major impact on teachers' abilities to use and implement effective strategies to support inclusion within play using Aistear. While the Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning (Teaching Council, 2016), recognises the professional growth of teachers through reflection, collaboration and learning, there is little research exploring the impact of CPD on teacher practices in using Aistear to support inclusive educational provision for autistic pupils in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilised detailed semi-structured interviews with a participant sample of primary school teachers to address the following research questions:

1) What are the experiences and views of primary teachers regarding using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework to support educational access for autistic pupils?
2) What are the views of primary teachers regarding the availability of supports and opportunities for continuous professional development

relevant to using the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework with autistic pupils?

Participants and Recruitment

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit ten primary teachers from a range of rural and urban mainstream primary school settings who had experience using the Aistear curriculum framework with autistic pupils. Emails were sent to principals which requested the study recruitment letter be shared across their school staff to participate in interviews. Nine of the ten participants had completed the Aistear introductory course while two participants had received some form of CPD in the area of autism.

Procedures

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Each interview was conducted using an encrypted password protected Zoom account from the researchers' host higher education institution which allowed for face-to-face interviews to occur using the video option. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour approximately and were recorded via Zoom. The interviews were anonymised during transcription with the transcript being sent to the participant inviting them to read and review the data for accuracy as part of a process of member checking to support data credibility (Tracy, 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.314) suggest member checks are one of "the most crucial techniques for establishing credibility" in qualitative research. Participants were given pseudonyms from this point forward to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data which sought to "identify some level of patterned response or meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). The data was analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2006) 6-step framework and the 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis was utilised to support rigour. The analysis was supported with reference to a detailed audit trail of field notes, minutes and reflections maintained by the principal researcher across the duration of the data collection. Akkermman, Admiral, Brekelmans and Oost (2006) suggest audit trails represent a means of assuring design quality and methodological rigour in qualitative research studies. The field notes enabled the research team to monitor feelings and allowed for personal reflection to ensure accurate collection of data to further enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the higher education Institutions the researchers were affiliated with. The research also

adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines of the Code of Good Research Practice (BERA, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study will be presented according to two themes, one of which had two sub-themes.

Table 1: Outline of Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Using Aistear to support inclusion	1.1. Tailoring Aistear
	1.2. Tailoring the Environment
2. Aistear and Whole School Approaches	

1. Using Aistear to support inclusion

A complex and nuanced picture emerged from across participants regarding the use of Aistear within mainstream school settings to support inclusion for autistic pupils, with acknowledgment of both the benefits and challenges of implementing Aistear. Some participants regard Aistear as foundational to their approach to inclusive education for their autistic pupils, with Ann remarking that Aistear *"underpins"* a lot of what she does. She stated that she wouldn't know how to "*operate without it"*. Additionally, some teachers also noted improvements in the social and interaction skills of their autistic pupils as a result of frequent engagement in play-based lessons. Jill viewed Aistear as an effective way for all children to interact with their fellow pupils and also noted that they *"learn very well from their peers"*.

While some participant teachers in the current study expressed positive views regarding Aistear, its successful implementation was noted as a challenge. While Aistear was developed to conform to international recommendations regarding supporting children to develop and learn holistically, the available literature suggests its implementation is an area of potential weakness (French, 2013). Echoing this dissonance, Michelle stated that while *"the framework is great"*, she was unsure of the efficacy of the implementation of Aistear in mainstream class settings. She spoke about Aistear being *"too structured"* and children with

additional needs *"can't access that"*. Two other participants, Eileen and Ellen, were of the opinion that autistic pupils need a *"certain level of skills"* in order to engage and benefit from Aistear. For example, Eileen spoke about autistic pupils needing play skills and without these play skills, it can make *"Aistear very inaccessible for them"*. Ellen agreed with these concerns, stating that she found it both *"inaccessible and impractical"* and further commented that *"Aistear is definitely not suited for all children with ASD"***.** Similar views were expressed by Michelle who remarked that Aistear has not supported her planning for *"teaching the children the skills they need for Aistear"*. Ellen echoed this point, remarking that *"there is little to no guidance"* within the Aistear framework, in her view, regarding how it can be applied for children with SEN. Indeed, she had to research her "*own materials in order to inform*" her teaching, she reported.

The participants commented on important common features of how their autistic pupils presented which needed careful consideration in planning for the differentiation of Aistear-informed education. All ten participant teachers acknowledged that social communication differences among autistic pupils can make cooperative play challenging, specifically during *"simple game playing, pretend play and role play"* (Jill and Michelle). There is an existing research literature outlining how autistic children exhibit differences in their social play development (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000). Wolfberg et al. (2015) suggest that "social communication, as the foundation that allows for peer interaction and building relationships" (p. 843) is a key area of difference between autistic children and their non-autistic peers. Equally importantly, teachers noted such communication and language differences or challenges often functioned as a barrier to the inclusion of autistic children in play and impacted on creating and developing friendships with peers. Some participants in the current study highlighted the importance of assessment to ensure that teachers "*are targeting at the right level"* and have *"an awareness of the developmental milestones"* in order to start autistic pupils at the appropriate level in play.

1.1. Tailoring Aistear

Several teachers highlighted the importance of tailoring Aistear to meet the individual needs of autistic pupils (n=7). Bridget commented that there is no *"set program that you can use with every child with ASD"* and that no *"one magic program is going to fit everyone"*. Five participants discussed the essential role of assessment in planning for and tailoring the Aistear framework to support autistic pupils in play. Formal and informal observation was reported as the main assessment tool used by all participant teachers when planning for the inclusion of autistic pupils in Aistear. For example, Jill spoke about her use of the Assessment

of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS) (Partington, 2010) and the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP) (Sundberg, 2008) to assess autistic pupils' basic language, learning and play skills. However, she commented that even if those *"autism-specific assessments' '* aren't available, *"observation will tell you a lot"* and felt that observation was a valuable assessment tool.

Teachers acknowledged their crucial role in planning for and tailoring Aistear to support inclusion and meet the needs of autistic pupils. Through the use of observation and other aforementioned assessment tools, teachers discussed a range of strategies and approaches that they have implemented to tailor the curriculum to support the individual needs of their autistic pupils. The use of visual supports was reported by the majority of teachers as a beneficial approach in supporting the inclusion of autistic pupils during play-based lessons (n=9). Examples were displaying *"vocabulary"* and *"pictures"* in the role play area, using visual *"scheduling"* and *"timetables"* to establish a set routine, or visual storybooks. In addition, "*buddy systems"* and peer modelling were also used as a strategy to include autistic pupils, as participants found autistic pupils *"actually learn very well from their peers"* and noted this as being an *"advantage of Aistear"*. Giving a central role to the preferred interests of pupils in planning was also essential.

1.2. Tailoring the Environment

The majority of teachers highlighted the significance of adapting the environment during play-based lessons in Aistear to reduce pupil distress and support the inclusion of autistic pupils (n=7). It was clear from the findings that teachers acknowledged their role in adapting the environment to suit the individual needs of autistic pupils rather than the autistic pupils adapting to suit the environment. Some felt this was essential as they said that *"Aistear could be such a noisy time"* and that was a huge problem for autistic pupils with sensory sensitivity to noise. Bridget explains that having structure in the room and the *"access to sensory stuff"* benefitted the autistic children during Aistear and reiterated the importance of thinking about the *"classroom environment"* and *"how you can adapt it"*. Jill spoke about the fact that *"even though there's structure within Aistear, it's a very unstructured environment"*. Adapting the environment to the profile of the pupils involved was seen as important to avoid autistic pupils becoming *"totally overwhelmed"* and support inclusiveness in lessons.

2. Aistear and Whole School Approaches

Participating teachers felt that the implementation of Aistear is heavily dependent on whether the school wishes to incorporate the framework and encourage teachers

to avail of the introductory training. However, there are barriers, such as Aistear not being underpinned by any legislation, viewed as *"actually not compulsory"* (Jane) by teachers or principals, nor allocated funding being available for the training of educators to "translate Aistear into everyday practice, planning and supervision" (French, 2013, p.4). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some participants in the current study noted segregation still exists within mainstream settings for autistic pupils, with some suggesting autistic pupils would still struggle to cope within the mainstream class setting without effectively informed staff or appropriate supports.

Four teachers expressed the view that Aistear worked more effectively within the autism special class setting due to adaptations of the environment and additional supports available. Jill was of the opinion that reverse integration whereby the mainstream children joined the autism class setting "*can be better in a sense*" to effectively target individual needs due to the fact that it is a "*smaller environment*" and has a higher staff pupil ratio which may be more suitable for the autistic child. Other participants stressed the importance of collaboration in planning for the successful inclusion of autistic pupils in play-based lessons in Aistear. Mary remarked that "*collaborating with the learning support teacher is essential*" along with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) who "*know the intimate needs of the child*". Time to collaborate was identified as a challenging factor, along with training in working collaboratively with peers.

Lack of sufficient training and CPD in the use and implementation of Aistear with autistic pupils was also identified by primary teachers within this study as one of the main barriers to the successful inclusion of these pupils. This resulted in teachers lacking the confidence to provide sufficient and meaningful experiences for autistic pupils within the mainstream play environment.

CONCLUSION

Participating teachers in this study were often positive about using Aistear to support using play as a pedagogy for autistic pupils in early class settings. However, they pointed to the lack of support and guidance provided within the Aistear curriculum to inform their teaching and differentiation to support inclusion. An individualised approach to using Aistear and planning to differentiate the lesson, the teaching approach, and the learning environment were viewed by participants as very important. This was reported to have significant impact on levels of collaboration with colleagues, whole-school planning, and the transitions of pupils from early intervention class settings, or autism class settings to mainstream inclusive provision.

The results of the current study emphasises a number of key implications for practitioners using Aistear to support inclusion and access for autistic children within school settings. The provision of sufficient focus on the use of Aistear within pre-service teacher education and access to appropriate applied CPD for practicing teachers is vital. In addition, it is important teachers are supported in recognising that, while providing a rich, child-led environment that fosters learning, individualised planning is essential to ensure participation and access with Aistear-informed lessons. Access to CPD for teachers in how to assess autistic children holistically to inform appropriate individualised planning and differentiation of teaching would support teachers in using Aistear effectively with this peer group. Finally, the role of collaboration and whole-school planning in sharing an understanding of how Aistear can be used to support inclusion for autistic children across schools is important. This is particularly the case in supporting transitions for autistic children across classes within schools.

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