UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN CONTEXT AND CURRICULUM CHANGE IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

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THE STUDY

- Examined the implications of two policy documents: **Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early childhood curriculum framework, and the new primary language curriculum (DES, 2016).**

RESEARCH AIMS

- The new primary curriculum has both implicit and explicit links with Aistear.

- Aistear advocates a pedagogy that involves learning through play and allows the child some autonomy in the learning process.

- Given the policy recommendation that the principles of Aistear be integrated into enactment of the primary curriculum, this study formulated two research questions:

- *How do primary school teachers understand and implement Aistear?*

- *How can primary school teachers be supported to enact the new primary language curriculum in relation to Aistear within their contextual settings?*

AISTEAR (PRONOUNCED ASH-TER)

- Aistear (NCCA 2009) is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years which encompasses the junior and senior infant cycle of primary schooling.

- Aistear (NCCA 2009) supports a socio-cultural view of learning and development and promotes the child as a competent learner from birth and as an active agent in his/her own development through his/her interactions with the world (NCCA 2009).

AISTEAR
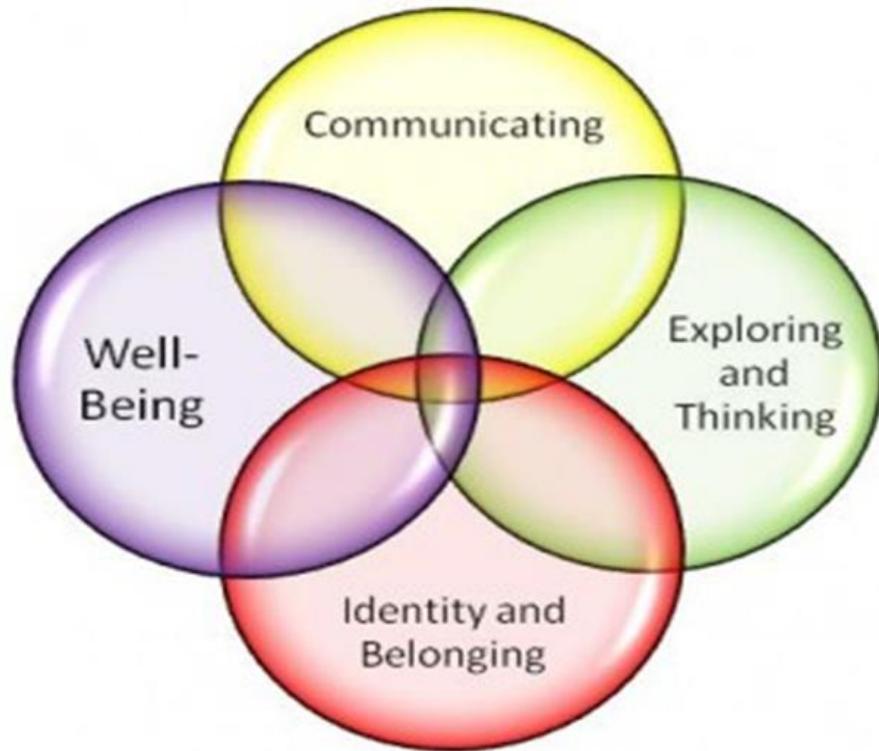
- The framework is set out under **four themes**

- Well-being

- Identity and belonging

- Communicating

- Exploring and thinking.

- **The four themes** provide a flexible framework for early childhood education and 'conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner and the totality of his /her learning needs' (NCCA 2004, p.22).

STUDY FINDINGS

- The findings underline the need to identify and consider seriously the contextual factors that can affect the enactment of ECE policy as these are central to developing our understanding of the nature of practice (Unwin et al. 2007).

FINDINGS

Three key contextual dimensions to be considered in the enactment of policy:

- **Teachers' understanding of Aistear and play**

- **Teachers pedagogical approach**

- **Leadership**

TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING OF AISTEAR

- The study found that the teachers and the principals understood Aistear to be something separate from the curriculum which they described and enacted as **"Aistear Hour" or "Aistear Time".**

- A gap was identified between the teachers' descriptions of their pedagogical approaches and the practices observed in their classrooms.

TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING OF AISTEAR

While the study participants in both schools acknowledged the importance of play in enhancing children's learning experiences, they doubted that the children were **'really'** learning through play and tended to direct the play towards activities that would meet the curriculum objectives.

TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING OF AISTEAR

- Rather than Aistear being understood as a flexible framework, it was understood as something apart from the curriculum that was enacted within an allotted time which the teachers variously referred to as: **"Aistear Time"; "Aistear Hour"; "a curriculum"; "a programme"; and "a block with a name".** Aistear was interpreted as an hour of play each day where the children were directed to one of four individual **"Aistear Stations"** which the teachers would have chosen and set out in advance. So, rather than Aistear supporting an integrated curriculum, it had become reified within a discourse of understanding it as something separate.

AISTEAR STATIONS
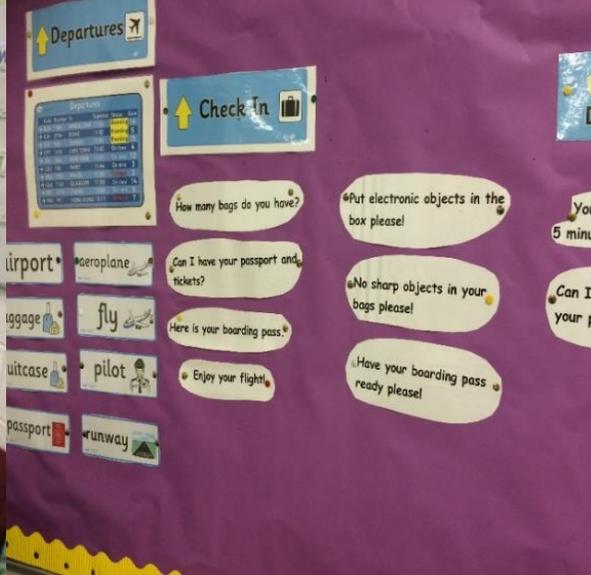
TEACHERS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- Crucial to effective pedagogy that ECE teachers understand children's learning and developmental theories and how that knowledge is applied in practice, but also how the practice is informed by teachers' **values, beliefs and understandings** (Nutbrown, 2018).

TEACHERS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- The new primary language curriculum states that **"an engaging environment supports all children to explore, make discoveries, solve problems, express themselves and interact with others"** (DES, 2016, p. 20). This is a powerful statement, but studies have shown that teachers lack an understanding of what **"an engaging environment"** might look like. For example, Gray and Ryan (2016) found that 64% of teachers who taught infant classes (children aged four to six) said that they did not feel confident about organising play-based learning activities within Aistear.

- The findings from this study were similar**. T3(B)** acknowledged the important role of play in children's learning but said that she could not "trust that the children would learn through play" and thus she needed to direct the children's learning within the play to cover the objectives of the curriculum.

TEACHERS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- The reality for the teachers in Schools **A** and **B** was that Aistear provided a space to cover aspects of the curriculum that had not yet been covered.

- These findings point to the need for teachers to be supported through guidance and training on the implementation of a play-based approach within the new primary language curriculum so as to understand that learning objectives can better be reached through responsive and reciprocal pedagogical approaches than through an imposed prescriptive pedagogy.

TEACHERS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- As a curriculum framework, Aistear does not impose an outcomes-driven curriculum, whereas the new primary language curriculum does.

- It is not difficult then to understand how the teachers of both schools conceived Aistear as something separate from the primary curriculum.

TEACHERS PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- The lack of guidance on how Aistear and the new primary language curriculum correlate at policy level could lead to a dilution of the principles of Aistear and of the vision and aims of the new curriculum.

- The findings point to the need for policy makers to consider the contextual realities within which teachers work; without this, the expectation that the teachers will be able to align the new primary language curriculum with Aistear is unlikely to be realised.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- Aistear and the new curriculum promote the individuality of children's cultural identity and the need for teachers to support and celebrate the language of children for whom English is an additional language.

- The study found that the teachers did not have the time to get to know these children and their priority was to get the curriculum objectives covered.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- A predominantly didactic approach was adopted by the teachers in both schools. The children were given very limited choice or voice in guiding their learning, and any choices they were given were teacher-led.

- The teachers were given limited training on how the principles of Aistear might be integrated into the curriculum, and were afforded limited opportunities for collaborative discussion.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- During a lesson on the weather **Teacher 1(A)** asked the children what the weather was like today. One child suggested that if the window was opened they could look out to see if it was windy. This response presented an opportunity for **T1(A)** to be guided by the child's interest but the opportunity was not taken up.

- Instead the lesson continued with a discussion of what clothes would the children need to wear for today's weather and the opportunity to let the children guide their own learning, to engage in what Siraj-Blatchford (2005) refers to as "shared sustained thinking", was missed.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH - EXAMPLES

- **T1…** I had nothing in my plan about a rainbow… I put 'I can sing a rainbow' on Youtube and we sang it … I asked them 'how do we get rainbows' like what do you need to have a rainbow and some of them knew that it's rain and sunshine, so I did a whole lesson on rainbows and they drew their own rainbow, it is in the folder actually and they were gorgeous. I probably should have hung them up, they were gorgeous. They did a great job on them, I think it was because they had just you know they were excited.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH EXAMPLES

- **T1** …I am trying to give them a blank page and let them do it themselves, like with the rainbow, you know, give them the freedom to produce their own work… I think if I had gone home and planned to do a lesson on rainbows, I wouldn't have thought they would have turned out like that, because there was no template, there wasn't a colouring in exercise, they drew their own rainbows and they did great, they were brilliant.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- **T 2 …**I find, we are trying to get the curriculum covered but if they never go to 'the creative station' **how are they doing Art, because I only do art in playtime, I don't do it at any other time of the day, unless it is like looking or responding to a picture. The actual art lesson is playtime, drama is playtime. So, if they don't get to 'that station' then how can I say I am getting the curriculum covered with them**? …you know, even though I know the idea is they choose themselves where they play and if they don't like somewhere, they can go somewhere else… I find that hard.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

- The need to understand what Ball et al., (2012) refer to as the "messy realities" of school policy was highlighted when **T 4** spoke about the beginning of the school year when there were times she felt that she was simply **"crowd controlling".** She said she found it difficult to stay out of the children's play at this early stage as she felt pressure to develop the language skills of the children with English as an additional language (EAL).

…So, like they are learning, and they are active, but myself I am like, I'm kind of thinking – 'oh but I need to get in there and teach them the vocab', especially with all the (EAL) kids.

FINDINGS

- **Teacher 3 …** I always kind of struggle with Aistear with the playtime aspect of it, like I have them on a rota, so they move every day and they do have to stay at that station. I know that what you are really supposed to do is let them choose everyday where they play. But then I find, when I let them choose where they want to play every day, I find that boys especially will go to blocks every single day and they won't go anywhere else and like there will be three or four days of blocks.

LEADERSHIP

- **School principals** play a crucial role in ensuring that policy change is integral rather than peripheral to school development planning (Harris and Allen, 2009).

- Leaders who successfully advocate change build a supportive workplace that encourages and empowers everybody during potentially stressful processes of change (Rodd, 2015, p.7).

LEADERSHIP

- It was evident from the research data that all the teachers experienced pressure to complete the curriculum objectives, and these objectives were a given priority over Aistear.

- It was not clear from the data whether the principals were aware of the pressures the teachers articulated, although **Principal(A)** did refer to the school's challenge on how they were going to measure the learning milestones in the new primary language curriculum.

LEADERSHIP

- Both principals described how Aistear had been first introduced to the teachers in the school.

- They described a cascade model (Hayes, 2000) whereby one teacher in each of the schools was allocated the responsibility of taking on the role of 'Aistear coordinator'.

LEADERSHIP

- If a cascade model of training is to be successful it needs to be decentralised, experiential and reflective and not the responsibility of one teacher to transmit their understanding of the policy (Hayes, 2000, p. 138).

- Rigid adherence to prescribed ways of working does not represent good practice.

LEADERSHIP

- Successful implementation of policy and reform needs to include: a focus on the classroom context, opportunities for teachers to engage in active learning, and an emphasis on a shared or whole school participation (Desimone et al., 2002). These practices were not evident in either school.

- Desimone and colleagues (2002) stress the need for professional development and training to be extended, with opportunities for teachers to lead change as well as respond to it, as opposed to the one-off workshops which the teachers in both schools spoke about.

LEADERSHIP

- The context of leadership needs to be considered in supporting school principals too. **Principal (B)** expressed disappointment that her school received very little support from the Department of Education and Skills, and that it was left up to individual schools as to how they would implement the new primary language curriculum.

LEADERSHIP

- Any reform made in the education system must consider what teachers feel about those changes in the light of their understandings of the practical implications in relation to a curriculum (Yero, 2002).

- The implementation of the new primary language curriculum must be supplemented by policy strategies that include comprehensive training to ensure that those given the responsibility to implement it understand what it is they are implementing.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- The absence of a coherent structure between policy documents is problematic, guidance about developmental goals and the content of children's learning is at best inconsistent.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- ECE is constructed along a continuum, where at one end of the continuum Aistear constructs children as active agents with rights to guide their own learning, and at the other end of the continuum the new primary language curriculum constructs children as objects which need to move through set stages of development having achieved specific knowledge and learning outcomes. **This lack of coherence is problematic for teachers.**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- The findings support Ball's (2006) argument that the process of translating policy into practice is problematic. The enactment of policy is not something that can be done at one point in time and space, but rather it is always a process of becoming (Ball et al., 2011, p.3).

- Policy can be "morphed as it moves from player to player" through a process of human sense- making Spillane (2004, p.8).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- The findings demonstrate that the teachers were constrained by the inherent tensions between wanting to allow the children time to learn through play (Aistear) and the need to complete the learning outcomes set out by the primary curriculum (DES 1999).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Changing how teachers teach will only happen if teachers believe that the change can support their curriculum objectives and include some form of checklist that the children are completing the curriculum learning outcomes.

- If one school makes changes in their practice, they can then become role models or exemplars for other schools. Teachers need to see examples of where a school like their own is using a child-centred rights-based approach and that it is working.

NEW MODEL OF PRACTICE FOR TEACHERS IN THE INTEGRATION OF AISTEAR WITHIN THE NEW PRIMARY LANGUAGE CURRICULUM
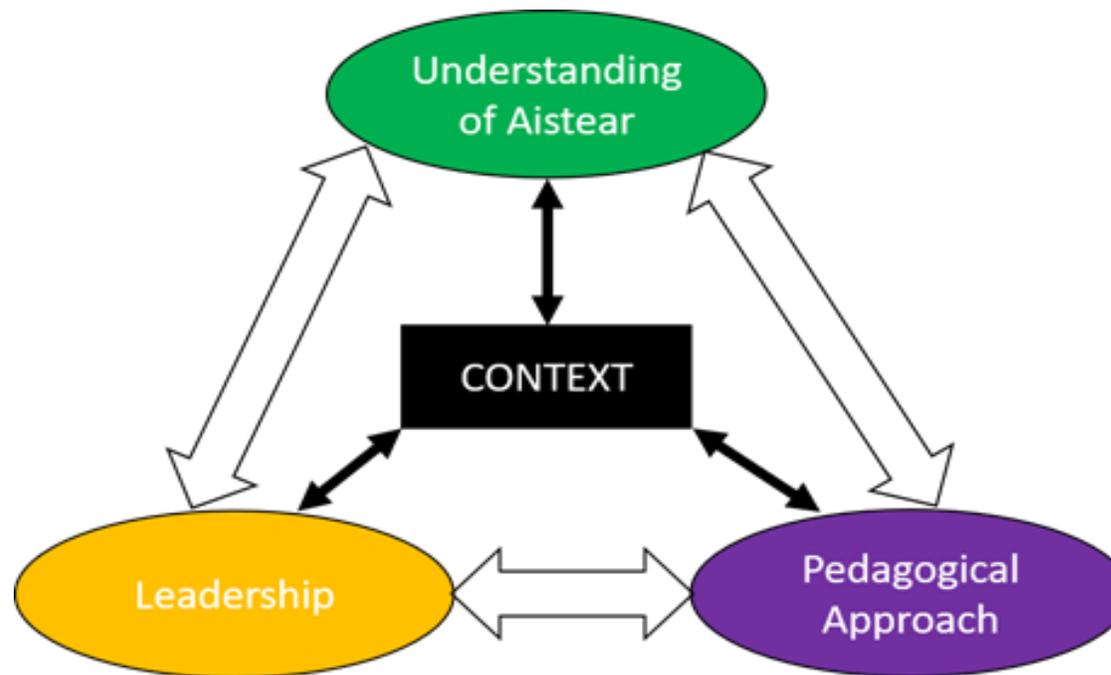
CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

- The new primary language curriculum presents an important opportunity for teachers to explore how Aistear can support the new curriculum, and how it can impact positively on children's learning experiences.

- It cannot be assumed that the introduction of a new primary language curriculum will bring about a change in teachers' pedagogical approach in relation to Aistear.

TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING OF AISTEAR

- In the absence of compulsory training, the expectation that teachers without training in Aistear will be competent to act as conduits of curricula change is unreasonable and unfair.

PUBLICATION
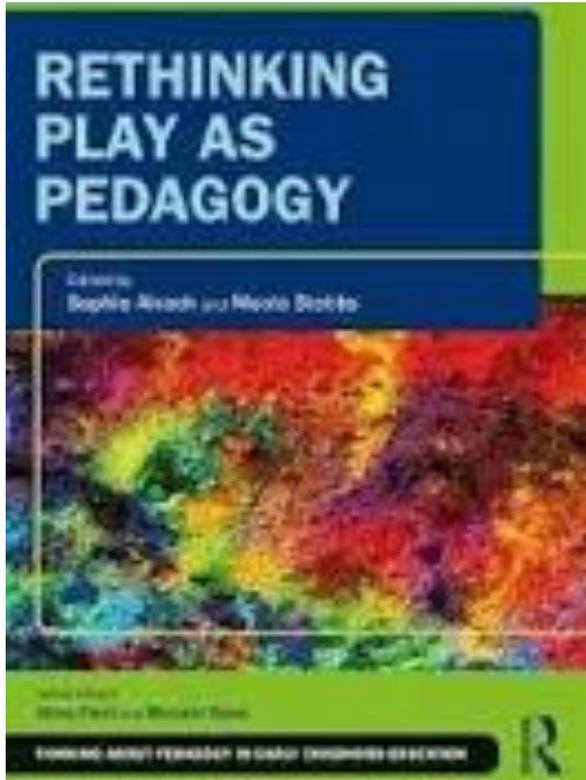
- Arising from my EdD I have published a chapter entitled: The role of context within early childhood education in Ireland. In S. Alcock & N. Stobbs (Eds.) Rethinking Play as Pedagogy. Volume 4 in the series Thinking About Pedagogy in Early Education (Eds. A. Fleet & M. Reed).

- https://www.bookdepository.com/Rethinking-Play-as-Pedagogy-Sophie-Alcock/9781138319226?redirected=true&utm_medium=Google&utm_campaign=Base2&utm_source=IE&utm_content

Table 18 New conceptual model of Contextual Dimensions
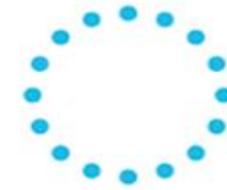
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