Marino Institute of Education

Title:

Can curriculum itself be an instrument for change in transitions practices from preschool to primary school?

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions from others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. This research was carried out under the guidance of Ms. Rhona McGinn at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Claire Dooley

Date: 2nd June 2020

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Declaration..... i

Table of Contents ii

Acknowledgments vi

Abstract vii

List of Appendices viii

Abbreviations ix

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Background to the study 1

Focus and objectives of the study 4

Content of the study 5

Chapter Two: Literature Review 7

Curriculum and transition 7

Theoretical framework 8

Curriculum and transition from a sociocultural perspective 11

Community 12

Curriculum and pedagogy 12

Primary school frameworks and curriculum 13

Pedagogy in ECE 15

Curriculum continuity 17

International perspective of curriculum continuity 18

School readiness 19

Curriculum continuity in Junior Infants 20

School environment 21

Teacher eduction and adult's role in play.....22

Transition practices 23

Intrapersonal 23

Partnership with children 24

Partnership with parents 24

Partnership with preschool 25

Personal 25

Perception of teachers 26

Learners' skills and dispositions 27

Summary 28

Chapter Three: Research Methodology……...29

Research design 29

Paradigms 30

Research Methods 33

Semi-structured interviews 34

Role of the interviewer.....34

Interview schedule 35

Videoconferencing media 36

Conducting the interview 36

Sampling 37

Data Analysis 38

Transcription.....38

Coding 39

Ethical Considerations 39

Anonymity and confidentiality 39

Limitations 41

Summary 42

Chapter Four: Discussion and Analysis……..43

Community 44

Tensions between formal learning and play-based learning 44

Curriculum and pedagogical continuity 45

Integrated curriculum 47

School structure 48

Schoolification 51

Teacher eduction 52

Intrapersonal 53

Partnership and interactions with children 53

Sustained shared thinking 56

Adult role in children's play 57

Partnership with parents 58

Partnership with preschool 58

Personal 61

Perception of teachers 61

Guided participation..... 63

Summary 65

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations.....66

Major Findings 66

Limitations 71

Recommendations 72

In Conclusion 73

References.....75

Appendix A 95

Appendix B 97

Appendix C 98

Appendix D 101

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that play-based curricula have provided a meaningful context for children's learning and are understood to promote long-lasting positive influences on future academic success (Justice & Pullen, 2003; Whitebread et al., 2017). Despite high expectations in relation to the introduction of *Aistear* into primary schools, teachers found it difficult to achieve curricular objectives through the play-based framework, it was discovered that some of the main perceived barriers to a play-based learning curriculum in Ireland are; lack of awareness and training, large class sizes, lack of resources and funding, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios (Gray & Ryan, 2016). In order to address such tensions, the Junior Infant programme is now being questioned and studied, examining if formal traditional primary school curricula are serving children well, and whether this type of pedagogy is suitable for learning and development in young children (Dunphy, 2007; Dunlop, 2014; Hayes, O'Flaherty, Kernan, 1997). Consequently, radical change to Junior Infant practice has been proposed by The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2016) recommend a revision of the Irish education system via the development a more integrated curriculum for three to six year olds, with the aim of greater supporting child learning and development in a more meaningful and purposeful way.

From the perspective of teachers and taking a qualitative approach, this study explores such contexts to gain fresh insights into early childhood eduction, to further develop policy and practice, working towards supporting appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland.

List of Appendices

Appendix A Letter of Information 95

Appendix B Consent Form 97

Appendix C Interview Schedule 98

Appendix D Exert from an Interview Transcript 101

Abbreviations

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECE	Early Childhood Education
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VCM	Videoconferencing Media
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter One – Introduction

The importance of developing effective practice in relation to child development and learning has been widely acknowledged and studied. The links between holistic child development and play have been broadly attested to in early childhood literature (Stagnitti, Bailey, Hudspeth Stevenson, Reynolds & Kidd, 2016; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, 2013). Research points to playful approaches to teaching and learning as a means through which children can best be developed and supported. Social constructivism guided this study from the perspective that human development is formed through individuals' participation in collective cultural practices and their use of cultural tools (Ratner, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978, 1998). Chapter one presents the background to this research, the focus and objectives of the research and the content of the study is outlined.

Background to the Study. Internationally, Early Childhood Education (ECE) tends to range from birth to six years of age, and in some instances up to eight years of age (Shuey, et al., 2019). Ireland has a split system of ECE provision which stretches through both preschool settings and Junior and Senior Infant classes within primary schools (Moloney & Pope, 2015). Pre-schools and primary schools have developed as very much separate entities that vary in many ways in terms of their objectives and approaches to education (Dunlop, 2013). In the past, primary schools were mostly interested in academic duties, defined by a culture which priorities cognitive skills above other elements of learning and development (Frede and Ackerman, 2007; Moss, 2012). Therefore, primary school's pedagogies tend to target skill based and academically concerned pedagogical activities (Frede and Ackerman, 2007). Historically ECE in Ireland is associated with preschools and with care, in recent years there has been great change acknowledging educational elements in ECE preschool education (O'Kane, 2007). Subsequently, long-established contrasting practices in preschool and primary school settings, i.e. classroom environment,

child-teacher ratios, pedagogies, has resulted in the pathway to education in early years to be understood differently in each setting (O'Kane, 2007). Curriculum is considered a central discontinuity in transition practice supporting appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland, particularly because of the physical, social and philosophical differences in settings (Fabian, 2001). Studies suggest that transition practice needs to be designed as a more seamless practice where children continue holistic child learning and development that is supported by curriculum (Dunlop, 2013; McCartin, 2016; Docket & Perry, 2013; Shuey, ., et al., 2019). Research on transition has placed a spotlight on schools, guiding schools to adapt policies and practices to become more child ready (O'Kane, 2016). This research examines both national and international literature to explore curriculum as a vehicle to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland.

The age at which children transition from pre-school to primary school is deemed relevant by many (Dunlop, 2013). Even though the compulsory age of education in Ireland begins at six, many children start formal schooling as young as four and five years (OECD, 2002). In comparison to other OECD states, children in Ireland are transitioning to formal education one or two years younger than most children in other states (OECD, 2002). In line with international research, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009 (NCCA, 2009).* The Aistear framework seeks to enhance early childhood education in Ireland through play-based pedagogy for children from birth to six years. It promotes social, interactive learning experiences and emphasises adult-child interactions during play. The framework spans early childhood and pre-school settings as well as infant classes in primary schools, potentially bridging continuity in learning and development. Research has demonstrated that play-based curricula have provide a meaningful context for

children's learning and are understood to promote long-lasting positive influences on future academic success (Justice & Pullen, 2003; Whitebread et al., 2017). *Aistear* aims to complement and extend the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) and the Primary Language Curriculum introduced (PLC) (DES, 2019) in infant classes and to provide a national curriculum framework for all early childcare settings in supporting appropriate child learning and development.

Despite high expectations in relation to the introduction of *Aistear* some research indicates that its overall implementation was slow (Wolf, O' Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2013) and that teachers found it difficult to achieve curricular objectives through the play-based framework discovered that the main perceived barriers to a play-based learning curriculum in Ireland are; lack of awareness and training, large class sizes, lack of resources and funding, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios (Gray & Ryan, 2016). In order to address such tensions Singer, Nederend, Pennix, Tajik and Boom (2014) argue the need for those working in early childhood education to look at new ways of understanding play. Pramling, Samulesson, and Carlsson (2008) propose a sustainable pedagogy for the future which does not separate play from learning but rather seeks to integrate playful approaches to teaching and learning in all aspects of early childhood education. In addressing this, education experiences for young children in Junior Infants is now being questioned and studied, examining if formal traditional primary school curricula are serving young children well, and whether this type of pedagogy is suitable for learning and development in young children (Dunphy, 2008; Dunlop, 2014; Kernan, 1997). Consequently, radical change to Junior Infant practice has been proposed by The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2016) recommend a revision of the Irish education system via the development a more integrated curriculum for three to six year olds, with

the aim of greater supporting child learning and development in a more meaningful and purposeful way.

Focus and Objectives of the Study. This research in turn reflects on this proposal by the NCCA (2016) and examines curriculum as a vehicle to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland. From the perspective of primary school teachers and focusing on curriculum and pedagogy as an instrument for transition practice, this research will investigate implementing a more integrated continuous curriculum into Irish primary school infant classrooms as a tool for supporting child development and learning in Junior Infants.

In identifying current policy recommendations that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) should be interconnected with the delivery of the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999; 2019) and the Primary Language Curriculum introduced (DES, 2019), the following study aims were recognised:

- To gain understanding of how curriculum and pedagogical continuity and transition is understood, implemented and managed in the Junior Infant classroom.
- To build on systems of practice to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland.
- To contribute to the area of policy implementation in the infant classroom.

Therefore, the overall aim of this study is to give Junior Infant teacher participants the opportunity to voice their opinions, describe their personal experiences and to answer the research question*:* What are our aspirations for young children's learning and development in Juniors Infants and what type of experiences are needed to facilitate this? What kind of interrelated curricular, pedagogical and structural environment do we need to enable this?

From the perspective of teachers and taking a qualitative approach, this study explores such contexts to gain fresh insights into early childhood eduction, to further develop policy and practice, working towards supporting appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland.

Content of the Study

There are five chapters within this dissertation. This chapter presents the background, the focus and objectives and an overall description of the content of the study. Chapter Two begins with a definition of transition and curriculum as well as the theoretical framework which guides this research. Following on from this, a framework developed by Rogoff (1990, 2008) is used to consider the community, interpersonal and personal factors which impact upon transition, curriculum and pedagogy for children in the Junior Infant classroom. Firstly, community factors which influence Junior Infant children will be examined, such as curriculum and pedagogy continuity, tensions between formal learning and play, integrated curriculum, issues relating to schoolification, transition activities and teacher education. Next, significant interpersonal factors highlighting the centrality of relationships affecting children, including; teacher partnership with children, teacher partnership with parents, and teacher partnership with preschool teachers. Then, personal factors including teacher's perspectives and learners skills and dispositions.

Chapter Three illustrates the context of the study and the approach utilised to gather suitable data connecting to the research question. The interpretive paradigm which was employed is discussed as well as the rationale for the use of the chosen qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews. Research design elements, research analysis methods including transcription and coding are also outlined, and finally, the ethical considerations and limitations of this research are presented.

Chapter Four outlines the findings and analysis emerging from the data accumulated. This data has been gathered and organised and is presented in themes aligned with those discussed in Chapter Two. Chapter Five concludes by presenting the main findings collected during this research, limitations of this research and proposals for possible future research opportunities are summarised, and recommendations are made emerging from this study.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter puts forth a review of both national and international literature in order to create a contextual and conceptual foundation for this study. This research aims to examine how curriculum plays a significant role in providing continuity for a child's development and learning when starting primary school. This review of relevant research will begin with a definition of curriculum and transition, followed by the proposed theoretical framework and is used as a structure to present the potential factors that impact upon curriculum and transition in the Junior Infant classroom according to both national and international literature.

Curriculum and Transition

This dissertation examines how curriculum occupies a critical role in providing continuity for a child's learning and development when starting primary school. Reports have identified how quality transition practices guided by aligned curriculum, have positive lasting impacts on young children's learning and development, resulting in long term outcomes for children both in their educational success and in terms of social and emotional development (Shuey, et al., 2019; Margetts, 2009; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young Peoples Services, 2010). Bridging curricula is frequently referred to as a key element upholding successful transition from preschool to primary school (OECD, 2017a; Margetts, 2002, 2007).

Transitions are recognised as significant in children's lives (Shuey, E., et al., 2019), defined by Fabian (2007) as ''leaving the 'comfort zone'', a time where children construct their own meaning as they negotiate old and new. A continuity of culture from one setting to the next, is recognised as great importance in achieving continuity of learning for children during the transition process, and is recognised internationally in studies carried

out in Japan and New Zealand that demonstrate curriculum continuity resulting in positive experiences and developmental outcomes for children (Shuey, et al., 2019; OECD, 2017b). Research recognises that individual transition practices are not stand-alone entities and that aligned continuous curriculum alone does not ensure a continuous experience for children (Shuey, et al., 2019). The success of continuous curricula is broadly influenced by links and connections between a web of stakeholders (O'Kane, 2016; OECD, 2017a).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical assumptions that base this study draw on the concepts developed by Rogoff (1990, 1995, 2003) and Vygotsky (1978). This section reviews these theories and explores how they can be used to conceptualise how curriculum plays a central role in providing continuity for a child's development and learning when starting primary school. Rogoff (1990, 1995, 2003) and Vygotsky (1978) discuss the role of culture in development and highlight the importance of interactions that happen between participants in learning.

It is argued that there is a need within the field of developmental research to focus more on the cultural paradigms of children's lived experiences, paying greater attention to children's participation in the settings of their own lives (Rogoff, Dahl, Callanan, 2018). Rogoff has carried out many studies of young children's learning and development in diverse communities and ascertains that 'humans develop through their changing participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities' (Rogoff, 1994, p.368). This sociocultural theoretical perspective views children's development occurring in the process of participation of everyday cultural practices and experiences (Callanan & Valle, 2008; Cole, 1996; Corsaro, 1985). Community educational goals contribute to school/classroom curriculum and engagement in routines and play familiarises children with local traditions and practices (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff posits that participation involves

children observing, discussing and contributing to cultural practices, which further results in children growing and transforming their ways of being. Development is a process of transformation through participation rather than of acquisition. Participation is not perceived as an independent feature, but viewed as a collective entity in the processes involved in a person's growth (Lave & Wenger,1991; Ochs,1988). It is contended that personal development is inseparable from interpersonal and community processes.

The guiding sociocultural theoretical questions in this study resonates with the three planes of analysis proposed by Rogoff (1995). Building on Vygotsky's theory of joined relationships between community, cultural and individual activity, she proposes that in order to get an inclusive perspective of the child's participation in Junior Infants, we must engage three different lens or planes of analysis. Each plane vanguards a perspective but recognises the necessary role of the other planes. Firstly, the Community or Apprenticeship Plane, addresses the community and institutional features of activity, such as the economic, political, and material aspects (Rogoff 1995). The community analysis in particular considers the wider and immediate guiding frames. In this study, it offers a lens to analyse curriculum, pedagogy, educational goals and values, the school environment, government policy, teacher education and philosophy (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, Goldsmith, 1995). Secondly, the Interpersonal Plane or Guided Participation Plane, focuses on 'the mutual involvement of individuals and their social partners communicating and coordinating their involvement in socioculturally structured collective activity'' (Rogoff 1995: 146). It is guided by cultural and social values identified in the community plane, while also emphasising the importance of relating to others within cultural practices (Rogoff, 1995). Thirdly, the Personal or Participatory Appropriation Plane. 'Participatory appropriation is the personal process by which, through engagement in an activity, individuals change and handle a later situation in ways prepared by their own participation

in the previous situation' (Rogoff 1995: 142). Through joint participation people extend their understanding to fit with other perspectives in accomplishing an activity together. Rogoff proposes that child development can be better understood as a process of personal growth during participation (Rogoff, Dahl, Callanan, 2018). Rogoff's framework offers an inclusive perspective for understanding the transition from pre-school to primary school and how all of these elements are important factors in providing a comprehensive curriculum for continuity between the sectors.

Similar to Rogoff's (1990) perspective, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory has a core focus on the relationships between social relationships and individual cognitive development, particularly involving concepts of; internalising higher order thinking, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP), abstract and everyday concept formation, language, and play (Leonard, 2002). Vygotsky proposed that it happens between people as an "interpsychological category and then within the individual child as an intrapsychological category" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). The concept of internalisation as Vygotsky portrayed it has essential meaning for this study, notably when paired with a theory by Goldstein's (1999) that ascertains internalisation is the prominence on higher functions first occurring on the social level. This is valuable when examining classroom practice and exploring opportunities available for supporting children. Perhaps the most prominent of Vygotsky's work to educational psychology is the contribution of ZPD, and defined as; ''the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The ZPD defines the zone in which children learn and form new skills, illustrates that this is where higher order thinking takes place on the social level and then on the individual level. Furthermore, internalisation happens as a result from

guidance contributed by adults and more-able peers that, the use of more abstract concepts in company with everyday concepts supports children's understanding of what is being learned (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). This also suggest that the presence of adults is not always necessary for learning to take place. Viewing this through Rogoff's (2003) theory of guided participation, the learning that happens in the ZPD is not always planned by the teacher, and is notably appropriate for when children are involved in child-initiated play. A further distinguished concept by Vygotsky (1978) was that learning is viewed as a social collective activity involving language "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge" (p.24).

In summary, sociocultural theory will be used to conceptualise this study. It has identified sociocultural theory that derive from the particular perspectives of two theorists, Rogoff (2003) and Vygotsky (1978). Equally as Rogoff clarified that personal, interpersonal and community factors cannot occur or be examined alone separate from the other, so too the concepts explained by Vygotsky. These concepts by Rogoff (2003) and Vygotsky (1978) donate to each other, as both propose a child is more inclined to retain knowledge, skills and strategies during experiences and apply learning to other situations, than those that are just verbal and with no meaning attached.

Curriculum and Transition in Junior Infants from a Sociocultural Perspective

The socio-cultural concepts considered in this chapter highlight linkages between relationships, context, activity and learning. Learning and development occurs inside the ZPD during activities of shared relationship between expert and novice (Rogoff, 1990, 2008; Vygotsky, 1987; Goldstein, 1999; Elder, 1999). Sociocultural theory maintains children learn to use the cultural tools of their community to co-construct meaning and

understanding, and during such interplay participants add to the process associated in sociocultural activities, while simultaneously acquiring practices created by others (Santrock, 2012). For Junior Infant children, this cultural community involves the network they are in immediate connection with (Berk, 2000). Although principally related to child development, Rogoff's recognised that ''people develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities…as people develop through their shared use of cultural tools and practices, they simultaneously contribute to the transformation of cultural tools, practices, and institutions'' (Rogoff, 2003, p. 52). Therefore, this study seeks to draw on Rogoff's (1990, 2008) sociocultural perspective and Three Planes; Community, Interpersonal, and Personal as a model extended to frame a comprehensive examination of how curriculum plays a central role in providing continuity for a child's development and learning when starting primary school.

Community

The Community Plane offers a lens to analyse administered curriculum, pedagogy, educational goals and values, the school environment, government policy, teacher education and philosophy (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, Goldsmith, 1995). This presents a backdrop of information essential to support the interpretation of learning and development experiences for children in Junior Infants.

Curriculum and pedagogy. The OECD defines curriculum through a socio-cultural lens in the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project as a political policy and technical agreement among the various institutions and stakeholders, from both inside and outside the education system, on why, what, how, when and where to educate and learn (Shuey, E., et al., 2019). In research, curriculum and pedagogy are sometimes discussed as interwoven terms (Sylva et al., 2016). Whilst curriculum commonly states the knowledge,

skills, values and attitudes children are proposed to progress with, pedagogy can be cited as the practice, craft or art of teaching (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2016). Pedagogy is therefore often then seen to be the day-to-day practices involved with applying curriculum (Bélanger et al., 2018). A curriculum framework, frequently referred to as an over-arching document, regularly offer principles to assist practitioners in planning their pedagogical activities to meet curricula learning goals and standards (Shuey, E., et al., 2019).

Primary school frameworks and curriculum. Published by the DES in 1999, the PSC consists of twelve subjects within seven curricular areas. It drafts particular teaching time recommended to every subject, however still advocates subject integration and "flexible use of the suggested time frame" within the short infant school day (DES, 1999, p.69). The PSC declares its ambitions are to honour the uniqueness of children, to enhance and nurture the individual child in all facets of life, meeting the child's current and future life demands (DES, 1999).

Aistear published by the NCCA in 2009, offers a holistic, practice-oriented approach, is a choice feature in Junior Infants and no compulsory in-service training is supplied for teachers by the DES (Moloney, 2010). The PSC and *Aistear* share some similarities in principle, but there are significant conflicting differences to note. The foundation theory *Aistear* is influenced by is socio-cultural theory (NCCA, 2015) and in contrast, the PSC is influenced by developmental theory such as Piaget's four stages of cognitive development evidenced by the use of separate, age-graded curricula (DES, 1999). Other aspects of the framework support a partnership approach focusing attention to importance of reciprocal relationships between adult and child (Vygotsy, 1979; Rogoff, 1990, NCCA, 2015), the PSC prioritises the adult's role as instructor (Gray & Ryan, 2016). A further difference is how *Aistear* utilises a practice based approach, prioritises the

development of children's knowledge, skills and dispositions and emphasises the use of a holistic and integrated approach to children's learning (Vygotsky, 1979, NCCA 2015, the PSC utilises a theory orientated approach, outlines details of specific learning outcomes and objectives for children of four to six years of age (O'Connor & Angus, 2014). Additionally, *Aistear* values the process rather than the product of learning and encourages assessment to aid the progress of the child (Rogoff, 1996; NCCA 2009), and the PSC describes assessment as deserving a "central position" within the process of teaching and learning (DES, 1999, p.11). One of the key differences between Aistear and the PSC concerns the content of children's learning. While both prioritise knowledge, skills and attitudes, Aistear places equal importance on the development of dispositions, defined by Katz (1999, as cited in NCCA, 2009c, p. 2) as 'habits of the mind'.

Domestic and international research broadly reveals strains between meeting the requirements of play based approaches and more formal curriculum demands (Gray & Ryan, 2016; OECD 2004; Margetts, 2002; Wood, 2013). Infant teachers in Ireland are battling to involve the child-led, play-based learning approach endorsed by *Aistear* while simultaneously operating and assessing compulsory content and learning goals for children as expected by the PSC within a shortened school day (Gray & Ryan, 2016; O'Connor & Angus, 2014). Correspondingly, international evidence is emerging on the difficulties practitioners are experiencing completing play-based and curriculum demands (Brooker and Edwards 2010; Wood 2013). Results showed from one study that kindergarten teachers in America feel pressured by their colleagues to meet academic goals, therefore limiting the time available and resulting in more formal learning and didactic experiences for young children (Miller and Almon 2009).

Many curricular developments and reforms have occurred relating to Junior Infants education as a response to reviews reporting difficulties in implementing school documents

in practice. The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (DES, 2019) was first introduced in 2015 by the Department of Education and Skills, advocating an integrated approach to the teaching of language, and includes and expands upon the principles and methodologies of Aistear, therein providing more appropriate experiences for children (NCCA, 2015). This new curriculum document echoes a sociocultural perspective supporting children's learning in recognising adult-child and child-child interactions as vital for language teaching and learning, and recognising play as a significant aspect of language learning (DES, 2018; Vygotsky, 1979).

Pedagogy in ECE settings. International studies steadily advocate play-based learning as being most suitable pedagogy for children to develop essential skills and learning dispositions in the early years (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009; Lundgren, 2000). ECE pedagogy broadly highlights the significance for children to immerse in experience and small group activities that allow for active discussions and interactions, practices such as these are often connected to high quality practice in ECE settings (Sylva et al., 2016). Socio-cultural theory greatly underpins play pedagogy as playing children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community (Vygotsky, 1979; Rogoff, 1990).

The theory of transformation of participation (Rogoff, 2003) would suggest that transformation occurs based on the sociocultural activity children participate in, and a combination of child-led and adult-led learning is essential (Early Childhood Australia, 2015, Vygotsky, 1987). French (2007) recommends practitioners using *Aistear* to facilitate child-led learning throughout the day at class and small group level. Teacher-guided experiences offer children with the chance to engage in activates where the rules have been set by others, which is a central process in internalising rules of certain behaviour (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). In other words, it is viewed as essential for children

to engage in these activities as they contribute to the development of important skills and dispositions. The involvement of adults is deemed necessary for learning to take place, however research warns in classrooms that only administer teacher-guided experiences will restrict children's opportunities to learn and practice a spectrum of developmental skills (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, 2013; McLachlan, Fleer, Edwards, 2018).

Sustained shared thinking (SST) is also frequently emphasised in ECE pedagogy as an event in which two or more people work together intellectually to resolve a situation (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, Aistear 2009; DES, 2019). McInnes, Howard, Crowley & Miles (2009) insist this co-construction of learning, where modelling, questioning and explaining are essential, and emphasise that adult take a combination of roles, from managing activities to ones where the child takes the lead.

As reflected in *Aistear*, Hayes (2006, cited NCCA, 2009b, p.3) describes quality pedagogy in ECE as incorporating 'children's feelings and dispositions such as motivation, confidence, perseverance and how they see themselves as learners,' whilst developing 'communication, thinking and problem-solving skills'. Katz (1999) interpreted dispositions as enduring habits of mind, and essential for children to be ready, willing and able to engage and learn. Results from the Walsh and Gardner's Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh & Gardner, 2005) report supports this in citing that children with opportunity to learn through play had more incidents of independence, more challenging endeavours, greater positive dispositions toward learning, and displayed increased levels of overall well-being.

Despite the many positive endorsements of play for play pedagogy, research also points to tensions which exist at the play-pedagogy interface (Wood, 2013). Many researchers argue that there is an increasing movement to make play more academic in

relation to curriculum goals in early childhood education (Fleer, 2015) and that this top-down push in accomplishing academic targets has narrowed the diversity of play-pedagogy (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Curriculum Continuity. Domestic and international research have for some time questioned whether formal traditional primary school curricula is serving young children well, and whether this type of pedagogy is suitable (Dunphy, 2007; Dunlop, 2014). Bruner (1977) once suggested that curriculum is more for teachers than it is for pupils. When children begin primary school, they are expected to quickly adjust to a very different culture inhabited by formal instruction including; rules, routines, sitting and listening for long periods of time and teacher academic expectations (O'Kane, 2007). A substantial body of research supports the idea that an integrated curriculum connecting pre-school and the first year of primary school would respect the needs, interests and autonomy of children at that age (Walsh, 2010), and that the more formal approach seen in primary schools should begin to move to a play-based for more age appropriate learning and development for the purposes of a 'smoother' transition (Petriwskyi, 2013). In connecting pre-formal and formal education environments, pedagogical continuity can be reinforced through frameworks (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007), some examples of these include; *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and second example is New Zealand's *Te Whariki* (New Zealand Ministry of Eduction, 2017). The *Te Whaiki* Framework aims is to provide children with a clear vision of continuity, where the first year of primary school is a recognised as a transition year. An overarching curriculum framework, reinforcing socio-cultural theory that human development is a social, cultural process, prioritising children's dispositions, knowledge, experience, skills and interactions with aspects of the environment. *The New Zealand Curriculum* plan is woven through it creating a continuous integrated curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Eduction, 2017).

International perspective on curriculum continuity. There seems to be limited shared understanding internationally about what practices can best support continuity and reinforce children's learning. Many questions exist on the advantages and possible disadvantages of different methods of curricular integration or alignment between pre-school and primary school sectors (Shuey et al, 2019). Similar to Rogoff's (1990) sociocultural perspective, the OECD (2017a) posit the view that curricula integration does not function independently from education systems, it is noted that the success of an integrated curriculum enhancing continuity as a tool for transitional cannot succeed in isolation. This is further illustrated by a study conducted by Education Scotland (2018), suggesting that transition practices such as; collaboration between parents, teachers and pupils, sharing ideas on pedagogy and curriculum, and cross-sectoral understanding of learning environments, are being hailed as significant practices with power to impact on curriculum and its implementation in primary school. This study indicates the individual child benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration, the sharing of knowledge, building on what children already know, contributing to smoother transition experiences for the children (Education Scotland, 2018). Rogoff's (1990) work remains to be helpful here, highlighting the links between the different systems a child employs, and the great possibilities within their inter-relationships in building individual child development.

Opposing views to a continuous curriculum argue for recognition of differences associated, and that solving the problem lies with offering suitable support to facilitate children, parents and educators involved (Peters, 2010). Docket and Perry (2014) acknowledging that the two components are vital to adequate and rewarding transitions, and propose the questions 'How do we do both continuity and change as children start school?'. In addressing this problem, the concept of formally connecting preschool and primary school curriculum is frequently discussed in literature, however Gibbons (2013)

cautions reworking of the seams between preschool and primary school as it may result in a downward shift of knowledge and practice. He argues that the attention to the early years that advocates have championed for comes at a cost, as the different educational aims of primary and early childhood cause tensions. Some countries have attempted to align curricula but not without problems. Denmark, for instance, have tried to connect their two curricula, which has resulted in a ‘’push-down in academic learning’’ into preschools (Jensen, 2013). This perceived formalisation known as ‘schoolification’, where children are being primed for a more formal learning setting (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 2) is being observed in many western countries, and is also a recognised pressure Junior Infants teachers face with in order to prepare young children to meet academic outcomes within the PSC, and getting children ready for the following academic year (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Gunnarsdottir (2014) contends that pressure for measuring children’s learning, like assessment methods seen in the PSC, results with the use of more formal teaching approaches shifting down the years. Graue (2010) further argues that academic expectations of children at this level have developed without any real purpose or the thought for children’s needs and rights, and Hirsch-Pasek et al. (2009) warns on the erosive nature didactic methods can have on play in areas like literacy acquisition.

School readiness. Many researchers have questioned the concept of school readiness, and most contemporary researchers agree that the transitioning to school framework has replaced the concept of school readiness reconceptualising relationships (Snow, 2007). This modern ECE view on school transitions highlights the relationship between the child’s readiness for school and the school’s readiness for the child (Graue, 2006). Creating continuity for children between preschools and primary schools ‘context’ is a defining characteristic for ready schools, the greater the gap between the preschools and primary schools, the greater the challenge for the children in terms of transition

(UNICEF, 2012). The philosophy of school readiness is connected to school's practices and policies ensuring children and families transition to school is a positive and smooth experience (Dockett and Perry, 2007). Although contemporary international research maintains this view of school readiness, Ring et al. (2016) implies that that within an Irish context there is a ''maturationist'' perspective which holds the responsibility of the child to show readiness for school.

Curriculum Continuity in Junior Infants. Aistear is used by many infant teachers in the primary school classroom (NCCA, 2009), and is often viewed as a tool for providing a continuation of appropriate learning experiences into the infant classes (Ring et al., 2016). The NCCA (2015) suggest that 'through appropriately playful learning experiences' the children in infants should be able to achieve all of the curriculums learning outcomes (p.11). These experiences may be through adult-child interactions or through meaningful interactions with their peers (NCCA, 2015). In reality however, tensions between the practice of a play-based curriculum framework and together with a formal curriculum in the Junior Infants classroom is widely discussed. Dunphy (2007) and O'Kane (2007) have collectively questioned the system in place and whether the current pedagogy occurring in the junior infant classroom is suitable or is the most beneficial for children's learning, with research citing that the majority of engagements happening in the infant's classroom as teacher-led. Gray and Ryan (2016) state that in reality didactic teaching methodologies continue to be prominent in Junior Infant classrooms with play awarded "periphery" status (p.200), and although teachers do value play, they are not confident in extending and developing learning through it (Hall, 2015; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Walsh, 2017; Whitebread, 2012; Wood, 2013).

Nonetheless, change may be approaching as the NCCA (2016) recommends revising the Irish education system via the implementation of a three-stage model to

combine preschools and the infant classes within primary schools. However, mirroring the previous concerns mentioned, Moloney (2017) states that without pedagogical understandings of common connected experiences from both sectors, it is doubtful that a continuous curriculum created for 3 – 6 year olds will ease the transition experience.

The lack of statutory requirement for practitioners to implement *Aistear* into ECE settings is termed by some as being ‘’soft policy’’ (Moloney, 2010, p.185). French (2013) identifies that the weakness of *Aistear's* implementation prevails in the truth that it is not mandatory and maintains that primary school teachers will instinctively prioritise the statutory Primary School Curriculum over the elective and less well-known play framework which is *Aistear*.

School Environment. Research has identified many structural and practical problems faced by teachers when attempting to meet competing curricular demands. The OECD (2004, p.61) reported that Irish large class sizes are a considerable barrier to ‘quality since they militate against meeting young children's learning needs in any meaningful way’, and are amongst the most overcrowded in Europe with classrooms of more than thirty children (Donnelly, 2016). This conclusion is in contrast to the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999) which asserts the informal and play-rich environment of the infant classes is suited to the unique developmental needs of young children. In addition, Moloney & Pope (2015) emphasise the significant difference in class size existing between preschool and primary school, both structures responsible for children of similar age. Further barriers proclaimed were classroom layout and equipment as inappropriate, nodding towards more formal primary schooling as opposed to meeting the specific needs and learning patterns of early learners (INTO, 2005).

Teacher education and adults' role in play. Following a review of current literature, research suggests that Irish infant teachers require additional training in play-based methodologies (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017; Gray & Ryan, 2016; INTO, 2006; O'Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh et al., 2013). Johnson, Christie, and Wardle (2005) note that teacher involvement in play activities has been increasing, however, it is suggested by many that the quality of this involvement is questionable and has been shown to be more concerned with managing and monitoring, rather than on supporting development and co-constructing activities with children (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Pramling Samuelsson, and Johansson 2009; Rogers and Evans 2008). Walsh (2017) highlights how important interactions between teachers and children are ones that are skilful and playful in nature, including an effort to create fun yet challenging opportunities. Yet, Martlew, Stephen & Ellis (2011) emphasise how educators view play as important, but some primary teachers are unsure about how to plan a play-based curriculum and find it challenging, and Hall (2015), Hunter & Walsh, (2013), Walsh, (2017) and Whitebread, (2012) declare that there were varying levels of understanding around play pedagogy. Wood (2013) emphsises that the teacher's role is to enrich and extend the children's play, and that it is through the teacher's involvement that play can be extended and taken to the next level and less about the outcome of the task. Studies have repeatedly shown that many teachers are not comfortable with play and child-led activities, and that play is held in low esteem compared to activities which are seen as work (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; King 1978). Children are provided with fewer child-initiated activities and less choice than is often stated and adults tend to involve themselves in work, rather than play activities (Linklater 2006; Sylva, Roy, and Painter 1980; Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun 1980). Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh (2016) recommend professional development

education should occur across all the early years in primary school illustrating examples of how to teach curriculum content using playful pedagogies.

Transition practices. The aim of many transition programmes are declared as ‘’smoothing’’ or ‘’easing’’ the transition process, and as suggested by Dockett & Perry (2014), imply that the start of school is difficult for children. While transition programmes vary somewhat, many contemporary programmes tend to extend over time instead of concentrating on the first week or day of school, emphasising the importance in continuity of children’s experiences (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler 2005). Recommendations reported from Irish studies such as NCCA (2016), and studies carried out on continuous curriculum in practice internationally, such as Japan and New Zealand, suggest that integrated continuous curricula are an essential element in transition programmes.

A second practice featuring in many transition programmes is the use of transfer documentation from preschool to primary school (Evans, George,White, Sharp, Morris, and Marshall, 2010). This document is recognised as a key element in transition supporting continuity in learning and development for children, strengthening alignment between of curriculum and pedagogy between sectors (NCCA, 2016), developing relationships between practitioners to engage in cross-sectoral dialogue influencing continuities of learning (Fabian, 2013). In Ireland *Mo Scéal* has recently been developed by the NCCA (2019) consisting of reporting templates with a sentiment to bridge communication between ECE providers and primary schools, assisting with the exchange of information between settings (NCCA, 2019).

Intrapersonal

Behaviour that occurs in the interpersonal plane is said to be guided by cultural and social values characterised in the community plane (Rogoff, 1995). Sociocultural

philosophy of the interpersonal plane in human development highlights the importance of relating to others within cultural practices (Rogoff, 1990, Vygotsky, 1979).

Partnership with children. On an interpersonal level, Goldstein (1999) affirms the importance of a positive relationship by teacher and child during the learning process and reports an increase in a child's motivation and pursuit achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). When children feel they belong, they are more likely to engage in interactions that have a shared affective space (Goldstein, 1999). Positive teacher-child relationships create a shared affective space, allowing the ZPD to occur at any time (Goldstein, 1999). Quality interactions between the child and teacher are viewed as central in child development and learning, and fundamental to Rogoff's Three Plane approach (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Rogoff, 1990).

Partnership with parents. Parents play a significant role in the transition process and should be viewed as essential collaborators in coordinating and supporting children transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Rogoff (2003) recognised that parents knowing how to support children from their home environment will enhance and reinforce children's learning at school. However, in some studies it has also asserted that parents' expectations can encourage academic 'schoolification', and many parents don't fully comprehend the benefits of play in school (Darmody, Smyth and Doherty, 2010). This could suggest potential problems for children in the transition to school within a more contemporary framework and a need for further support and education for parents on contemporary education findings and the importance of play. In terms of parents concerns, large class sizes, formal and inflexible pedagogy, and the level of teacher care a supervision were pointed out as causing apprehension for parents (Ring et al, 2016).

Partnership with preschools. Petriweskyj et al. (2005) suggests that transition to school is an opportunity for pre-school and primary school teachers to work together and receive support from each other in order to facilitate a continuity of learning and implement best appropriate practice for child development and learning. Research by O'Kane and Hayes (2006) implies that communication between pre-school and primary school teachers in Ireland was reported to be low, however both groups of practitioners were open to greater levels of communication. As a result, a substantial lack of communication is evident regarding the implementation of *Aistear* between pre-school and primary school practitioners resulting in discontinuities of practice (Smyth, 2018). Both international and domestic research suggest that in order for curriculum to align successfully there is a need for preschool practitioners and primary school teachers to have opportunities to gain a greater understand each other's working ideologies and environments (O'Kane, 2016; New Zealand Ministry of Eduction, 2017). Cross-sectoral curriculum alignment is central to Aistear. Cross-sectoral Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is therefore encouraged to develop knowledge and of the curriculum and pedagogy in both sectors (O'Kane, 2016).

Personal

In considering Vygotsky's view on development being an internal process, the participation perspective carries it beyond this idea, where Rogoff (1997, 2003) proposes that child development can be better understood as a process of personal growth during participation (Rogoff, Dahl, Callanan, 2018). Echoing this, The OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care* report indicates that high quality learning experience for young children are far more likely where there are service and conceptual integration, involving shared goals and values, as well as a common understanding of children's learning and development.

Perceptions of teachers. Research has identified that teachers want children to be healthy, confident, active and attentive, communicative, curious, the ability to follow directions and show sensitivity to others when they begin school (Arnold et al, 2007). Additionally, other studies have found that teachers prioritise the importance of physical motor, self-help and language skills than with cognitive abilities such as reading and writing (Abu Taleb, 2013). Similarly, O'Kane (2007) examined teacher's perspectives in relation to the skills necessary to succeed in formal schooling with participants indicating social skills, independence, language and communication skills as well as the ability to sit, listen and concentrate. Along with this, O'Kane (2007) showed how the value placed on a skill set can vary depending on the teacher's personal beliefs as well as the educational context the child enters during transition. Moloney's (2011) research exploring perspectives from primary school teachers, pre-school teachers and parent's highlights great differences in these stakeholder's views on school readiness. In this study teachers prioritise children's ability to sit down, follow orders and take turns. However, even though preschool teachers recognise children's social and emotional development as being most important, they put a sizable emphasis on assisting children to into getting used to sitting down and doing worksheets, learning the alphabet, and getting them used to routines and schedules.

In connecting to a teacher's role and curriculum, studies exploring teacher's perspectives on their role have described teachers being forced with daily challenges balancing responsibilities to accommodate particular governmental standards, along with caring for each child (Nias, 1989). Upholding this view, many researchers declare that the rise in paperwork and broadened academic goals for young children has affected classroom relationships, in decreasing time for teachers and children to connect more naturally unconstrained (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Moyles, 2017). Research maintains that the

workload expected from Junior Infant teachers is not reasonable or manageable (Campbell, Evans, Neill and Packwood, 1992), and opposing roles and curricula place teachers feeling under pressure, guilty, and inadequate (Margetts, 2002; Wood, 2013).

Learner's skills and dispositions in ECE. The individual changes children make due to their participation in sociocultural activities is symbolic of participatory action that occurs in the personal focus of analysis (Rogoff, 1995). The recognition and value on dispositions and learning is seen internationally in many contemporary policies. For instance, New Zealand's *Te Whairiki* national curriculum document for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises dispositions such as; confidence to take risks, persistence with difficulty, developing trust, asking for help and the ability to get along with others as central to a child's learning and development. Modern international research highlights the elemental role of social competencies and interpersonal skills, and the impeding need for early childhood programmes to provide a balanced curriculum supporting the development of children's knowledge, skills and dispositions. Furthermore, Whitebread et al. (2017) reported that children are born to learn through play, that it should occur along a continuum from free to structured, and involving experiences of playful learning through many forms, deeming learning through play as an essential practice in order to best prepare children for future uncertain life demands.

For this reason, research now widely recognises skills, knowledge and dispositions as a pivotal and crucial element in supporting children in transition to primary school. O'Kane (2007), observed that the skills recognised as being important to children were; self-esteem, social skills, independence, language and communication skills, and concentration. It was noted that these skills scaffold children when experiencing new types of negotiation and rules necessary to adapt to in the primary school environment and other future times of natural change and transition. Comparable findings were recognised

internationally, highlighting the connection between social and emotional skills, future wellness and long-term educational outcomes (Brooker, 2008; Jackson and Cartmel, 2002). Experiences that foster curiosity, self-confidence, engagement and satisfying reciprocal relations have been connected to high levels of self-esteem and socialisation (Farrar, Goldfield, Moor, 2007).

Summary

In conclusion, this review of the literature indicates that there are many community, interpersonal and personal plane barriers impacting processes within the Junior Infant classroom affecting child learning and development. This chapter has shown that examining curriculum as a vehicle to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland is a complex and multifaceted topic with Rogoff's Three Planes model (Rogoff, 1990, 1995) providing an ideal lens through which to examine it. As referred to throughout this chapter, supporting appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland face a number of challenges with limited training for teachers, pedagogical and structural issues with implementing play-based curricula, little guidance on integrating three curricula together, and lack of communication between preschool and primary school settings. All of which impact greatly upon meaningful learning experiences for children.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the methodology employed within this research in order to answer the research question: What are our aspirations for young children's learning and development in Juniors Infants and what type of experiences are needed to facilitate this? What kind of interrelated curricular, pedagogical and structural environment do we need to enable this? This chapter describes the research design, the paradigm which underpins this research, the research method, the sample, the utilised approach for data analysis and the limitations and ethical considerations within this research.

Research Design

Qualitative and quantitative research have come to be recognised and represent contrasting beliefs and practices in relation to research. The former often associated with small scale, interpretive research and the later with lager scale, objective based work (Denscombe, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Research on curriculum and transition has used a variety of methodological approaches to do important studies around the world. Quantitative studies have focused on a number of factors involved during this time of change such as academic performance, influence of transition policies, teacher child interactions, parental involvement (Wildenger & McIntyre, 2012), while qualitative research has focused on researching perspectives and perceptions of stakeholders including; children, parents and teachers (DiSanto & Bernan, 2012; Hatcher et al., 2012). Qualitative methods seem to be an appropriate method for this study to collect a balanced view of curriculum, pedagogy and transition from a range of perspectives. According to Basit (2010), qualitative research is important in terms of showing several experiences or paradigms and could provide insight to individuals working in a field. Bryman (2012)

further contends that qualitative research design allows for the exploration of transition through the eyes of the people being studied, the junior infant teacher, and also the related goal of probing beneath surface appearances. It also places an emphasis on context which resonates with the socio-cultural nature of this research.

This thesis will aim to investigate the perspectives of Junior Infant teachers in order to generate fruitful and relevant data descriptions of the experiences of principal stakeholders involved with curriculum and school transitions in the first year of primary school. It is recognised that the data on the practices of teachers in connection to curriculum and transition could have been collected using quantitative methods, however, this research aimed to explore more than statistical patterns and allow for comprehensive analysis on the views of teacher and current practices in relation to children's first year in primary school.

Paradigm

A paradigm is a particular set of assumptions about the world and is used by the researcher to guide their research (Punch, 2009). Two common paradigms utilised within educational research are positivism and interpretivism (Denscombe, 2014). Positivism is an approach which uses a scientific model of research to examine the social world and rules of behaviour (Cohen, Mannion, Morrison, 2018). The interpretive paradigms endeavours to understand the world from a human perspective, a socio-cultural constructivism perspective, nonetheless, researchers have their own values and views which effect their analysis (Habermas, 1984). Critical theory seeks to change society and individuals to a social democracy, it not only seeks an account of society and behaviour, but it also proposes to unshackle disempowerment, to amend inequality and to advocate sole freedoms within a democratic society (Crosley, 1995). It is suggested that critical

theory and critical educational research have agendas to questions establishments like schools and their relationships with society, and interrogate whose interests are served by education and how legitimate these are (Cohen et al. 2018). The use of critical theory perspectives is reflected in the principles in a number of contemporary frameworks, such as Te Whariki and Aistear, in the guidelines in how to promote equitable practices with children, parents and the community (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017; NCCA, 2009).

It is argued that there is a need within the field of developmental research to focus more on the cultural paradigms of children's lived experiences, paying greater attention to children's participation in the settings of their own lives (Rogoff, Dahl, Callann, 2018). Rogoff posits that participation involves children observing, discussing and contributing to cultural practices, which further results in children growing and transforming their ways of being. This sociocultural theoretical perspective views children's development occurring in the process of participation of everyday cultural practices and experiences (Callanan &Valle, 2008; Cole, 1996; Corsaro, 1985). Therefor from a socio-cultural paradigm and interpretative perspective, it is suggested that individual views and ideas will impact on the way we consider and construct social research, and what we know is determined by personal experiences, interactions and values (Matthews & Ross, 2010). In this view, integral analysis of practice is important to support teachers into using quality pedagogical interactions (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002) and therein, to develop practice further to order to support young children's learning and development in primary school.

Building on Vygotsky's theory of the integrated relationship between individual, community and cultural activity, Rogoff's (1990, 2008) three conceptual planes of analysis; sociocultural perspective three analytical planes of the community, is adopted in

this study in order to analyse multiple perspectives. Rogoff's (1990) Three Planes offers an inclusive framework for understanding the transition from pre-school to primary school and how all of these elements are important factors in providing a comprehensive curriculum for continuity between each sectors.

The Community Plane focusses on the community and institutional aspects of activity, such as the economic, political, spiritual and material aspects (Rogoff 1995). This thesis will examine curriculum, pedagogy, school environment, teacher eduction and transition practices in junior infants as a basis of the analysis of development in the community plane, in particular considering the enablers and barriers relating to this context that influence the implementation of an appropriate pedagogy for young children in Junior Infants. The contextual dimension of the community plane of analysis also demonstrates how policies such as *Aistear* are executed in different physical conditions, with variable resources, an in establishments that are already enacting other obligations (Braun et al, 2011).

The second plane by Rogoff, the Interpersonal Plane of Analysis, focuses on the participation model of development, highlighting the importance of relating to others within cultural practices. This includes both the micro level of face-to-face interaction such as play, and the more distal macro transactions with cultural values, goals and practices of teachers. Studies carried out by Rogoff develops the sociocultural philosophy of apprentice and guided participation within cultural communities (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996) a philosophy seen underpinning the *Aistear* curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). During the process of participation, mastery is shared between group members and apprentices mature into roles of more proficiency and expertise. Similarly, Wenger (2008) observes apprenticeship as the engagements of a novice in activities by more accustomed community members, highlighting the importance of relationships between teacher,

parents and outside agents, a practice supporting quality and meaningful interactions between people encouraged by *Aistear*.

The final plane is the Personal Plane of Analysis Rogoff (1997, 2003) proposes that child development can be better understood as an individual process of growth during participation within their natural environments in a process of ‘’transformation of participation’’ (Rogoff, Dahl, Callanan, 2018). Echoing core values found in *Aistear* and in the PLC (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2019), Rogoff posits that participation involves children observing, discussing and contributing to cultural practices, which further results in children growing and transforming their ways of being (Rogoff, 1990). Children’s skills in applying learning learned in one setting and transferring it to another with flexibility is discussed with great significance within the theoretical realm of curriculum and transition, in this context it is the curriculum framework *Aistear* that is recognised as supporting a smoother transfer from preschool to primary school. However, it is suggested by Rogoff, Dahl & Callanan, (2018) that adaptive flexibility is an invisible area of research.

These elements are deemed important by many contemporary researchers, who recognise how people are connected into systems of individual, institutional and society level activity (Hedegaard, 2008). Rogoff’s combined model of these three concepts brings together a single model to help understand the complexities of implementing pedagogy in connection to context, and furthermore guides the analysis of data in this thesis, permitting key questions about the important linkages between curriculum and context.

Research Methods

Interviews were used to investigate the perceptions of teachers and the practices of schools during transition in the first year of primary school. Interviews are a favourable tool for gathering data as it enables participants to discuss their perceptions of a topic, the

world they live in and express how they regard a situation from their own point of view (Bell, 2010). Interviews are necessary when we cannot observe behaviour, feelings or how people see the world (Merriam, 2009). Descombe (2014) argues that interviews are notably useful when used in inquiry of an intricate situation as they allow the researcher to develop understanding or opinions, feelings and experiences. For this reason, the interview was chosen to emphasis the complexities of curriculum, practice and transition, and acquire insight into the individual perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers in relation to transition.

Semi-structured interview. Three types of interviews are generally recognised; structured, semi-structure and unstructured (Bell, 2010). A semi-structured interview was chosen as it allowed more freedom on matters to be discussed and allowed for two-way communication between interviewee and researcher. This form of interview is used when the research is looking for more unique, personalised, non-standardised data (Cohen et al., 2018), with a clear list of issues to be addressed and yet allows flexibility to elaborate (Dencombe, 2014). Along with this, it enabled the interviewee to extends on matters where necessary and allowed for the emphasis to be on how the interviewee shaped and comprehended subjects and happenings (Bryman, 2012). Interviews have many benefits in qualitative research, however many researchers warn that that they are time consuming, open to interview bias and subjectivity, and is impossible to ensure complete anonymity (Bell, 2010).

Role of the interviewer. Lichtman (2010) cites that the role of the interviewer is to interpret the reality of the participant being interviewed and act as “the filter through which the information is gathered, processed and organised” (p.140), whilst remaining non-judgemental, unbiased and detached (Denscombe, 2014). Recommended tactics employed throughout each interview within this research included being attentive and

sensitive to the needs of participants, ensuring they remained on track by reposing questions or through the use of prompts and enduring silences as necessary to allow participants time to gather their thoughts rather than interrupting and rushing the process (Denscombe, 2014). Despite being challenging at times to remain detached and neutral throughout the interview process due to the researcher's interest in the topic, in doing so it was ensured the researchers own preconceptions and bias did not interfere with the data generated. Nonetheless, the researchers personal experience as a Junior Infant teacher was advantageous during the interview process as it allowed, as Yin (2009) declare, to utilise a "firm grasp of the issues being studied" (p.69) to ask relevant, probing questions and seek clarifications from participants as appropriate.

Interview schedule. The schedule was created by implementing a process recommended by Bryman (2012). Firstly, the general research area was chosen leading to a specific research question. Interview topics were then selected leading to a specific question. Interview topics were compiled based on themes relevant to curriculum and transition identified in the literature review, such as; curriculum continuity, relationships and pedagogy. Interview questions were then formulated utilising a range of question types such as introductory, probing, direct and interpreting questions (Byrman, 2012). Drever (1995) further recommends when creating questions to avoid stereotypes and bias, double negatives, long complicated sentences and leading questions. Following this, pilot interviews were undertaken. Piloting the interview is often viewed as an essential task as it allows the researcher tests out the schedule, along with practicing their interviewing skills (Merriam, 2009). The interview schedule was piloted with one primary school teachers. Cohen et al. (2011) explain some rules of interviewing within research.

The research design began with face to face interviews as the primary method of collecting data, however, because of a global pandemic person to person contact was

immediately prohibited by the Irish Government. In following social distancing rules, the research design shifted to videoconferencing media (VCM) as a means to conduct interviews. More commonly researchers accredit in-person face-to-face interviews as the ‘’gold standard’’ of data collection (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006), finding suggest in contemporary research the arguable benefits of using such technology in modern times (Nehls, Smith, Schneider, 2015; Archibald, Ambagsheer, Casey, Lawless, 2019).

Videoconferencing media. VCM accommodate real-time communication with both audio and video (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Video-conferencing holds a high degree of social presence with the ability to channel both verbal and non-verbal cues as appose to telephone interviews (Nehls, Smith, Schneider, 2015). Recent studies have suggested that the quality of responses in face to face online interviews generates much the same rapport as traditional interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009), and the researcher found this was the case during this study. In contrast, this method is not without weak spots. All participants in this study had access to appropriate technology, broadband connection and experience using VCM, common recognised problems found in studies when using VCM (Nehls, Smith, Schneider, 2015).

Conducting the Interviews. Following the pilot online video conferencing interview via Zoom, a number of questions were modified and the sequence of the questions were amended, leading to the finalised interview schedule. This pilot interview was also used by the researcher as an opportunity to test run technical equipment, Zoom software technology, Zoom recording feature, and also test ensuring the interview setting background, lighting and sound quality were suitable. To strengthen interview rapport, as recommended by research Salmons (2010), the researcher made efforts to maintain good eye contact clear speaking and hand gestures throughout the interview process. The interviews took between 25 and 50 minutes depending on the participant’s responses and

took place at the researcher's home and in homes of the participants. Consent will be sought to record, and all recordings and transcripts will be stored in a password protected computer belonging to the researcher.

Sampling

Due to the socio-cultural nature of the research and the focus on contextual factors, non-probability snowballing sampling was chosen as the sample method. The importance of choosing the correct sampling strategy is said to equally effect the quality of a piece of research as much as the appropriateness of methodology and instruments (Cohen et al., 2018). Non-probability sampling frequently is the sampling method recommended to utilise during qualitative research as it does not aim to produce a ''statistically representative sample or draw statistical inference'' (Wilmot, 2005, p.3). The sampling strategy chosen must be fit for purpose, and mindful of the projects design, methodology, constraints and timescales (Cohen et al,. 2018). Snowball sampling allowing participants social networks and personal contacts for gaining access to people, gaining access to more specific expertise (Brown, 2005).

Non-probability sampling allows the researcher to focus on a singular group, junior infant's teachers, in the full knowledge that it did not symbolise the broader population (Cohen et al., 2018). A sample of 14 teachers were chosen including 1 pilot interview. All of the teachers who took part were Irish and female, it is believed that this is unavoidable due to the general profile of the Irish teaching profession and therefore representative of the staff profile of Junior Infant teachers in many schools (O'Toole, 2016). Teachers involved varied in their levels of eduction, ranging from newly qualified teachers to teaching with 15 years' experience. Junior infant teachers were chosen as the participants as they would yield understanding into both school and classroom practice.

The primary parameters included teachers from urban, urban-deis schools and rural schools. As the interviews proceeded, the snow-ball effect in recruiting participants was utilised. Through using the medium of online interviews, it became feasible to involve Junior Infant teachers from the west, east, midlands and mid-west of the country in this study.

Data Analysis

Interviews were analysed drawing on a subjective interpretation of the content of data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This interpretive thematic approach as advised by that thematic analysis involves a progression from description, where the data have simply been organised to show patterns, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorise the significance of the pattern, and highlight broader meaning and implications of the date. In order to analyse multiple perspectives, the data was reflected on and interpreted through applications of three analytical planes of the community, interpersonal, and personal plane of analysis Rogoff's (1990, 2008). Data analysis use of computer coding software can be used, however the relatively small sample size allowed for manual coding involving the colour coding of themes and the extraction of significant statements made by the participants whereby the interview transcripts were read line by line and codes were attributed to the data based on the themes in the literature review in Chapter Two (Punch, 2009).

Transcription. Once completed, interviews were uploaded to my own password protected laptop to facilitate the transcription process whereby audio recordings are converted into text (Bell & Waters, 2014). Appendix D provides an anonymised exert of an interview transcript to demonstrate the layout utilised including a wide margin, large

spacing to enable annotations to be made and each line was assigned a number to assist with identification during data analysis (Denscombe, 2014).

Coding. The transcription process allowed the researcher to thoroughly immerse in the data and yield an initial, in-depth comprehension of it, followed by a process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts in order to assign codes to the data. Punch (2009) describes coding as the process of ascribing labels to categories of data, single words, sentences or entire paragraphs. The interview transcripts were then studied again to detect growing themes which were already found and required updates to be made to the literature review. The third advanced cycle coded more complex themes exploring the connections between concepts, attempts to theorise participant's statements and situating them within the categories of community, interpersonal, and personal plane of analysis (Rogoff's,1990, 2008). The planes were often relevant to more than one category, which mirrors the work of Rogoff (1990, 2008) viewing planes not by themselves, but each plane foregrounds a perspective but recognises the integral role of the other planes. Finally, meaningful and significant statements made by participants during the interviews were extracted to support a detailed discussion of the relevant themes as seen in Chapter Four (Punch, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Initially ethical clearance was requested from, and granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Marion Institute of Eduction prior to beginning the research. Based on conducting interviews with adults, the three main areas of ethical consideration are informed consent, confidentiality and adequately addressing possible risks to participants (Bell, 2010, Cohen et al., 2018; Denscome, 2014). Cohen et al (2018) propose that

informed consent involves the measures in which individuals choose to participate in research after being in research after being informed of all the facts which are likely to influence their decision. Many actions were undertaken to inform participants prior to partaking in the research. Participating teachers were given clear literature about the nature of the research, briefed on the purpose of the research and assured through an information letter emailed that the participation was voluntary (Appendix A). They were given sample questions and considerable notice in order to prepare their own ideas on the topic. Prior to commencing the interview, via their personal email address, participants signed consent to partake in the research (Appendix C).

Anonymity and confidentiality. Cohen et al. (2018) suggest anonymity and confidentiality as an approach to safeguarding participants right to privacy. They stress that the crux of anonymity relies on information supplied by participants to no means reveals their identity. The act of conducting face-to-face interviews essentially involves the participant foregoing anonymity with the researcher. Participants were therefore granted confidentiality to the best of the researcher's ability, ensuing that the information they were providing was in no way made publicly known. Anonymity within the research for the participants and their schools are being maintained through the use of identification codes. After the connection online was established, and before the interviews began, the statement was then reviewed by the researcher and verbal affirmation was given by participants. Participants were once again informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time prior to publication, and permission to record was sought. Therefore, it can be said that informed consent was sought, and given by participants prior to participating in the research. There is a general research consensus that people should not suffer as a consequence of partaking in a piece of research (Denscombe, 2014), and adequately addressing possible risks to participants is a high priority. For this reason, a number of

strategies were considered in order to protect the interests of the participants and minimise stress. The time, day and location were chosen by participants.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that resound with criticism of qualitative research design. Fundamentally, this work is a small piece of research with a limited number of participants. It is acknowledged that qualitative methods can lead to difficulties with generalisation of results, however, this view point is contended by Byrman (2012) as he stresses that it is the strength of theoretical reasoning which is decisive in qualitative research. He suggests that the ‘’findings of qualitative research are to generalize to theory rather than to populations’’ (p.406).

A second limitation observed is that qualitative research is criticised for being subjective and relying too heavily on the researcher’s views on what is important (Bryrman, 2012). On this subject, the research may have benefited from undertaking in a multi- methods approach, permitting greater data collection and triangulation of data. The methodology was influenced by contextual factors, a global pandemic, influencing the design, but research with children would be helpful.

A third limitation noted was the ‘interviewer effect’. This implies that the researcher as the interviewer will unavoidably have influence upon the data gathered (Denscombe, 2014). This has a multitude of connotations in affiliation to educational research. Causes of bias encompass the attitudes, characteristics and expectations of the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2018). With this in mind, and as suggested by Cohen et al. (2018) in order to achieve greater validity in the research and to minimise the amount of bias in research, a number of steps were taken. Firstly, if the participants are known to the researcher they may feel they have to give the response they assume the researcher wants,

participants may also feel that evaluation or criticism is being implied. Where possible the participants were not directly known by the researcher. The use of online video conferencing interviews and the snowball effect, supported the ability to interview more teachers that the researcher had never met before. In this respect, snowball sampling reduces power relationships between researcher and participants (Noy, 2008). Secondly, the researcher also highlighted that there were no right or wrong answers during the interview process., and finally, in order to avoid the interview effect, the researcher did not discuss personal values and attitudes during the interview and refrained from using language which would have been suggested as a critique.

Summary

This chapter investigated the qualitative methodology employed in this research and placed it within a paradigm of interpretive theory. Ethical considerations and research limitations were also addressed, and the semi-structured interviews afforded data which was coded applying an interpretive thematic approach. Data is discussed and analysed in Chapter 3 in context of existing literature on educational transition.

Chapter 4 – Analysis & Discussion

This dissertation sets out to examine curriculum and pedagogy as an instrument for supporting appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland. In pursuit of this, the following research questions were proposed; What are our aspirations for young children's learning and development in Juniors Infants and what type of experiences are needed to facilitate this? What kind of interrelated curricular, pedagogical and structural environment do we need to enable this?

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews of 14 teachers, within the paradigm of the framework of the literature in Chapter Two. Using Rogoff's (1990) Three Planes of analysis framework, this analysis examines the interrelated, multifaceted relationship between child development and learning, and curriculum, pedagogy and transition in the current context of the Junior Infant classroom in Ireland. The analysis of the interview transcripts produced overarching themes and these consequently are explored. Chosen quotations from interviews are presented to highlight and illustrate the themes. This section will provide a discussion critically analysing findings in reference to current international and national literature on child development and learning and curriculum, pedagogy and transition in primary school. Participants recognised a number 'community', 'interpersonal' and 'personal' factors, central to this field of study. Within the Community Plane, this research explores curricular and pedagogical continuity, school environment and teacher education. Within the Interpersonal Plane, teacher's relationships with children, parents and preschool teachers, teacher participation in play, and sustained shared thinking is discussed, and finally within the Personal Plane of analysis, guided participation, teacher's perspectives of disposition and skills, and school readiness is examined.

Community

Tensions between formal learning and play based learning. Domestic and international research broadly reveals strains between meeting the requirements of play based approaches and more formal curriculum demands (Gray & Ryan, 2016; OECD, 2004; Margetts, 2002; Wood, 2013). Echoing this, participants had mixed views on the implementation of *Aistear* alongside the PSC and PLC, and the strain between play and formal learning was apparent throughout the interviews. Many found the PLC and PSC ‘’in theory’’ (Teacher 3) fits well with *Aistear*, but there was an overall sense by the researcher that most teachers in this study were feeling overwhelmed and trying to tick all objectives or ‘’boxes’ from three documents; ‘’ With the primary language curriculum, I think it works quite well, especially the oral language strand of it. Ticking more boxes without having all this work to do. It's great in that sense, but honestly the whole curriculum is just overloaded’’ (Teacher 6). Some participants emphasise the work-play dichotomy;

> ‘’I just feel children are ready for formal learning in junior infants, there is only so much play they can do’’ (Teacher 12), ‘’We find it really tricky to fit Aistear into an hour a day every day, we don't have that much time so between all of that I do Aistear 4 days a week for about 40 minutes’’(Teacher 8).

These results are mirrored by many researchers where teachers appear to see some subject as separate areas, and not as an all-encompassing methodology through which they can teach all subjects (Murphy, 2004). This could also reveal a lack of understanding by some teachers in how to lead a playful pedagogy that maintains high expectations of young children, and reflective again of how pre-schools and primary schools have developed as

very much separate entities that vary in many ways in terms of their objectives and approaches to education (Dunlop, 2013). This data suggests that there appears to be a great discontinuity on the integration of learning with play, with some primary school teachers holding greater value and expectations of formal learning and formal pedagogy over play pedagogy in day-to day practice.

Curricular and pedagogical continuity. Consistent with the work of (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hyvonen, 2011; Moyles, 2010), there was a broad agreement by participants that *Aistear* facilitates children's learning through play, and all agreed on the value of using play pedagogy for young children's holistic learning and development in Junior Infants. Participants suggested a range of benefits with *Aistear* and appeared mostly positive and enthusiastic about the framework; ''I mean children learn best when they're engaged and they're motivated to learn, and play is a great way to get the children involved'' (Teacher 7), ''It allows children to act out real life scenarios and use language they didn't previously have'' (Teacher 8).

Coherent with dominant discourse which places play in the centre of learning Kernan (2007), all teachers reported an understanding of the philosophy underpinning play, affirming play as an appropriate and necessary methodology to support young learners. However, on further examination, and consistent to the work of Hall (2015), Hunter & Walsh, (2013), Walsh, (2017) and Whitebread, (2012), there were varying levels of understanding around play pedagogy.

> '' I think Aistear is amazing but it takes a lot of time and resources and organisation. I sometimes wonder is the payback worth it because when I think of the effort you put into the class and all the stuff you get and then it's done in seconds'' (Teacher 2).

This participant seemed to focus on outcome rather than process during Aistear, an outlook on play notably different to many contemporary pedagogies. Wood (2013) for example states that the teacher's role is to enrich and extend the children's play, and that it is through the teacher's involvement that play can be extended and taken to the next level and less about the outcome of the task. Participants reflected research suggesting that although teachers do value play they are not always confident in extending and developing learning through it, as Teacher 1 commented ''I know myself it's taken me a long time to become comfortable with Aistear and with my own idea of it what Aistear is''. The quality of teacher pupil engagement can be questionably more concerned with managing and monitoring, rather than on supporting development and co-constructing activities with children (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997; Pramling Samuelsson,and Johansson 2009; Rogers and Evans 2008). Many factors influenced the perspective of teachers understanding of play pedagogy, and how *Aistear*, the PLC and the PSC are best implemented, as interview findings suggested that some participants had a deeper understanding of socio-cultural theory and child development, gave greater clarity on what this looks like in practice during *Aistear*, and so illustrated a greater understanding of the development of lasting and transferable 'personal' skills which can occur during play.

> ''So I always had a learning support teacher in a classroom, with smaller numbers then there would always be a guide there for the children to learn from. Not necessarily always guiding them, but overseeing them or scaffolding them or ensuring that they are using their skills in the best way that they can'' (Teacher 9).

This statement not only highlights a teacher's understanding of play pedagogy and socio-cultural practices, but it also draws attention to the effects Community Plane school provisions have on how the teacher interacts with pupils, and consequently the individual learning experience a child has in Junior Infants. It might also be worth noting that this

particular participant has a master's degree qualification, perhaps a reflection on the connection between deeper pedagogical understandings and higher eduction qualifications.

Integrated curriculum. The frustration from working off three separate documents was expressed by all participants, leading to a general plea for an integrated curriculum from one single curriculum document. Most participants felt a lack of guidance in supporting the collective implementation of the PLC, PLC and *Aistear* on a day to day basis was a major barrier to supporting children's learning, and that the onus is on the teacher to find out how to implement them together properly.

> ''I give the course on Aistear in the education centre, and they come to me and I can talk about the theory of play and the benefits of play and all the different types of play. But what teachers really want is a framework and here is your theme and here are the types of play and here are the resources you need, they want guidance on it. Once you have done the course and using play as a pedagogy, you end up hardly looking at the Aistear booklet'' (Teacher 1).

This piece of data represents thinking from majority of participants in this study looking for an integrated curriculum and guidance on it. Some teachers were open to the idea of it being a play-based curriculum with *Aistear* as the overarching framework; ''So if they were to bring that in I would fully be in agreement with that, because I think children can learn the curriculum through play'' (Teacher 9'). Participants merited it ''important to strike the right balance'' (Teacher, 5) in an integrated curriculum, one that includes play pedagogy practices, but one that also incorporates PSC learning content. It was also suggested that an integrated curriculum needs to be guided by clear skills, dispositions and academic goals; ''If you were using a play based pedagogy throughout the day you would

need to look at more in the skills and dispositions. What the children would typically know now in Junior Infants and by the end of the year might not necessarily be the same. You would have different expectations for them, and different goals. And we look at, okay they can use their imagination and come up with the plan for their play, they're much more social they're much more independent they are much more confident''(Teacher, 1). A vision similar perhaps to New Zealand's *Te Whariki* 'Reception' year, reinforcing socio-cultural theory woven through their primary school's formal curriculum, creating a continuous integrated curriculum (Ministry of Eduction, New Zealand, 2017).

Participants in this study also showed a strong sense of value for a curriculum that supports solitary tasks, involving children sitting in a quiet environment getting activities done by themselves. Concerns were made cautioning a play based curriculum centred around *Aistear* would prohibit this from happening; ''I think it's very important that they are able to sit on a chair, open the book and listen and not be working in pairs and groups all the time'' (Teacher 2). Contending to this position nonetheless is the Montessori method, where independent play is a key feature and its benefits are greatly valued (Lilliard, 2013).

School structure. Overall there was a strong sense of openness for the implementation of a play-based curriculum framework like *Aistear* in tandem with established curriculum, however a clear message from participants cautioning the ''unsatisfactory'' and ''inappropriate'' primary school environment already curtailing young children's learning experiences, would affect the ''realistic'' implementation of *Aistear* as a central touchstone to the integrated curriculum. Resources, space, funding and adult to teacher ratios were some issues participants discussed;

> ‘’ I think it would be a fantastic opportunity for the children to learn through a play based curriculum and based on research from other countries too, but I think in reality the financial resources support teachers CPD all of the above is going to cause a huge challenge to teachers. So in principle it sounds like a fantastic idea but we need to have current class sizes of junior infants changed, it’s too big, all those obstacles will prevent it from being implemented properly but I do think it is a very good idea’’.

As was suggested here, if appropriate Community Plane changes were put in place, many teachers confirmed that they would be open to the idea of *Aistear* as the overarching framework in an integrated curriculum. Participants echoed finding in a report from the OECD where it cited that curricula integration does not function independently from education systems, and that the success of an integrated curriculum enhancing continuity as a tool for transitional cannot succeed in isolation (OECD, 2017a).

Participants from this study also reflected the structural and practical problems found in research by Gray & Ryan (2016), where they proclaim that the main perceived barriers to a play based curriculum are; lack of awareness and training, large class sizes, lack of resources and funding, and high pupil-to-teacher ratios. Class size is highlighted by O’ Kane (2007) as a great problem facing Junior Infant classes. Participants in this study remarked on difficulties with large class sizes and problems ‘’realistically’’ (Teacher 8) implementing the active participation learning methodologies proposed by the PSC, the PLC and *Aistear*.

> ‘’So last year in junior infants the ratio was 1 adult to 32 children, now they have reduced it this year I think it's 1 adult to 28 children. That is still a huge ask of any teacher to deal with 28-29 kids on their own’’ (Teacher 1),

> ‘’yeah definitely class sizes and manpower is quite a problem when doing Aistear for like for non-DEIS and bigger schools’’ (Teacher 8), ‘’In this way it would be great to have even one adult in the classroom so I could be able to observe them, and right notes on each group how they are developing. It's all on me this year’’(Teacher 6).

These declarations seem opposing to the NCCA (2015), where they affirm that children in infants should be able to achieve all of the curriculum learning outcomes through appropriately playful learning experiences. This concern by participants is a discontinuity echoed in contemporary research, where The OECD (2004, p.61) have reported that Irish large class sizes (twenty-nine to one) are a considerable barrier to ‘quality since they militate against meeting young children’s learning needs in any meaningful way’. Some participants in this study have further questioned why preschools educating children of the same ages, 4 and 5 year olds, have an 11 to 1 ratio and primary school ratios for children of same age are so drastically different. This once again may be a consequence of the ‘split’ education system between preschools and primary schools.

Along with this school based problem, research suggests that the classroom environment and space must be organised so active learning can take place. Siraj-Blatchfor et al. (2002) describes this as ‘pedagogical framing’, which includes of the arrangement of space and the provision of resources. Overall many participants expressed concerns over space and resources as a problem for integrated play-based curricula, and find space and resourcing *Aistear* a barrier to delivering it appropriately as intended by the NCCA (2009), and possible a great discontinuity from continuing the *Aistear* curriculum framework as it is carried out in preschool.

> ‘’ And in a small classroom it’s difficult to have the space and I think resourcing Aistear can be a little bit difficult sometimes…I think an outdoor Aistear space would be fantastic, a space for children to get messy too…if we had outdoor space, space where they could plant and grow things would be fantastic (Teacher 7).’’

As suggested by NCCA (2009) well-resourced, well-planned and predictable indoor and outdoor spaces help children see the opportunities that are available for play.

A number of participants indicated a potential barrier to an integrated play-based curriculum could be primary school teachers. ‘’I don't think it will go down too well with primary school teachers around Ireland to be fair’’ (Teacher 6), and Teacher 1 suggested that open mindedness from teachers is what is needed; ‘’We would have to be much more open minded and less attached to the primary school curriculum with its certain objectives we are expected to meet’’. This perspective puts individual teachers as a principal resource central to the implementation of an integrated play based curriculum, mirroring Pyle & Danniels (2017) as they declare that educators’ practices are decisive factor in children’s learning, and consequently directly impacting upon the learning environment for children. Further research is required here to examine this in more detail, as many questions exist on different methods of curricular integration (Shuey et al, 2019).

Schoolification. Reflecting Nicolopoulou’s (2010) perspective on schoolification, participants’ discussed preparing children for the culture of more formal learning demands from Senior infants and First Class. Some participants described the push for ‘formal learning’ as a teaching technique for phonics learning. As one participant explained:

> ‘’When it comes to things like phonological awareness, sounds, handwriting, all the very formal things, it is very old school with teachers

> teaching at the top of class. But it's important to have them ready for senior infants at the end of the year too I think'' (Teacher, 6).

This data collected emulated research by Gunnarsdottir (2014) that warned of top-down pressure for measuring children's learning, can result with the use of more formal teaching approaches shifting down the years, and as a consequence, didactic methods can have an erosive nature on play in areas like literacy acquisition (Hirsch-Pasek et al. 2009), creating questionable learning experience for young children in Junior Infants.

Teacher Education. Following a review of current literature, research suggests that Irish infant teachers require additional training in play-based methodologies (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017; Gray & Ryan, 2016; INTO, 2006; O'Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh et al., 2013). This study found that teachers starting out teaching junior infants were broadly unfamiliar and unconfident with the *Aistear* framework, and even with experience behind them, most teachers would welcome a more comprehensive and practical training on it.

> '' When Aistear started first I was completely winging it, and I was trying to figure it out, making it up as we went along really'' (Teacher 2), ''we need more training'' (Teacher 6), ''training needs to be face-to-face so it can be as practical as possible…it means how you can set up play as a pedagogy to the best of your ability, because it can be very foreign some teachers'' (Teacher 1).

Barriers emphasised by participants were recognised problems by participants in providing appropriate learning opportunities for young children, an issue also found in many studies showing that a shortfall in ECE pedagogy training can result to children provided for with fewer child-initiated activities and less choice than is often stated and adults tend to

involve themselves in work, rather than play activities (Linklater 2006; Sylva, Roy, and Painter 1980; Wood, McMahon, and Cranstoun 1980).

Participants also highlighted how individual teacher's motivation and interest to learn is key to the success of a play based curriculum '' Like anything, experience just teaches you how you do it and how you plan for it'' (Teacher 4). Individual educators' practices once again are highlighted as a key factor in children's learning and development (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

Interpersonal

The second plane by Rogoff (1995), the Interpersonal Plane of Analysis, focuses on the participation model of development, highlighting the importance of relating to others within cultural practices. Three patterns arose from the interpersonal plane; relationship with children, sustained shared thinking, relationship with parents and relationship with preschools, and how they affect child learning and development in Junior Infants.

Partnerships with children. In keeping with Katz (2003) and O'Donoghue (2019), participants named a number of essential pedagogical engagements which are recognised as a key element of quality ECE, in agreement that teachers should give considerable attention to their interactions with children, offering them experiences that are interesting, engaging and meaningful.

Child-led and adult-led interactions. Resonating with McInnes, et al., (2013), there was a clear sense by participants that purposeful pedagogy in the early years is recognised to be one where the adults take a combination of roles, from directing activities to ones where the child takes the lead.

All participants shared an interpersonal understanding that involved children partaking in teacher-led group routines and activities at particular times. For many

teachers these daily routines included children listening to each other, turn taking, following instructions and the development of ‘’important skills’’ like ‘’fine motor’’, ‘’language’’, ‘’social’’, and ‘’academic skills’’. Echoing Rogoff (1990), participants cited how children showed signs of increasing mastery and persistence at completing tasks as the year went on, and that there was a ‘’huge’’ difference in children’s abilities by the end of Junior Infants, ‘’You know when I look back when they started writing the letters the room was so noisy so busy…by the end of the year they are able to focus on something quietly for a longer length of time and do it properly. Never would have happened at the start of the year’’ (Teacher, 8). It was noted by two teachers that some of the more novice children would finish quickly, return to some choice of play or ‘’early finishers box’’. These classroom practices seem to resound *Aistear’s* emphasises on a sense of belonging, along with the importance of choice for the agentic child sociocultural theory (NCCA, 2009, Vygotsky, 1979).

Aistear was commonly referred to as an opportunity for child-led learning by many teachers in this study, as described by Teacher 12 as ‘’ It is child-led learning so it doesn't have to be based on what you have taught’’. Most participants pointed out the potential of mastery in the development of skills and dispositions within child-led activities during *Aistear*. Teacher 8 for example believed ‘’sociodramatic play is really important as a lot of language is going on in the stations allowing kids to develop’’, and Teacher 7 deemed the construction play area as ‘’brilliant’; ‘’…because they really get involved and they love building and creating. And you can talk about shape and space and length. And there's so much mathematical language that you can talk about it and other language, you know, buildings and other things’’.

Echoing Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), some participants highlighted that child-led learning requires adult interaction in order to build on children’s learning, ‘’I think getting

down and getting stuck in with play is a massive one'' (Teacher, 4), ''and as a teacher you join in as well and develop it and bring their play in a different direction. You would go in with a problem and they would have to try and solve it'' (Teacher, 8). However, because of the large adult to child ratios reported during Aistear, this research therefore questions the quality of interactions happening during child-led learning activities as suggested, and as Teacher 8 cited ''I just find sometimes it can be hard to do with just one person…it can be very difficult to play and engage with the group all the while keeping an eye on everyone else as well so that can be quite tricky''.

In contrary to this, and highlighting the distinctive different approaches happening in Irish junior infant classrooms, a small number of teachers from the same school described a very structured and teacher led approach to *Aistear,* as their school had provided an adult in the classroom at every station.

''In our school you would have 4 teachers going into the classroom for *Aistear*. So teachers each take a station, for example, one would be in sociodramatic play developing the language around the theme, another teacher you would teach a big book then another teacher would work on literacy skills or junk art depending on the theme. So for that reason the children are supported'' (Teacher 3).

In this instance, the appropriate level of autonomy given to students for child-led learning could be questioned, and if there was a balance of child led activities happening as envisioned in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Research suggested concern for this approach, as adult presence can be an inhibiting factor for learning through play McInnes et al. (2010). Additionally, in cases similar to these, it is argued that children are likely offered less child-initiated activities and less choice than is generally claimed (Linklater 2006; Sylva, Roy, & Painter 1980; Wood, McMahon, & Cranstoun 1980).

Sustained shared thinking. Similar to findings by O'Donoghue, (2019), all participants praised processes involving sustained shared thinking, and discussed this in the shape of pair work and group work where children were guided by a teacher, working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem or extend learning. 12 participants discussed station teaching group learning taking place in classrooms supported by learning support teachers to carry of ''intensive maths'', 'literacy stations'' or *Aistear* as opportunities where sustained shared thinking took place. However, as Teacher 6 expressed not all schools were equal;

''Yeah I think so I tried a couple of lessons myself where the sounds were more hands-on activities. I think it was initial sounds one day with a small group and another teacher and actually took some children out to do a little bit of work with them and the benefits of it for the children, their minds were really working. Instead of it being spoon fed to them they were getting a chance to think about things. They were really engaging with it instead of this teacher up on the board, they are working on it much more themselves, it is much more appropriate for their learning''.

In keeping with studies on SST by Katz (1999), Teacher 6 illustrates a good understanding of how to incorporate socio-culture practices including guided participation and sustained shared thinking. The action of guiding children enough but allowing them space to 'think' and work it out together in a group situation. However, she also acknowledges that this happened for a 'couple of lessons' and stated that the opportunity for sustained shared thinking was limited in her classroom as it was only on occasion that she had a support teacher during literacy, resulting in ''lessons'' being more 'formal'. In contrast to this, another participant spoke of having no extra adult classroom support ''it's all on me this year with the children for Aistear'' (Teacher 5). A clear barrier caused by the Community Plane is observed. One can then only presume that it would be difficult for

a teacher in this context to ensure active participation and engagement was happening for the children in her class as advised by the PLC and the Aistear framework (DES, 2019; NCCA 2009). Overall, this replicates problems found by Hunter & Walsh (2013) when citing issues of play in relation to the role of the adult and provisions of the school. Furthermore, it also implies the apprehension on class sizes what a significant proportion of this small sample expressed, and findings by Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2002) in that socio-culture exchanges resulting in SST are commonly prohibited perhaps due to large class sizes. Teachers are challenged to create opportunities for SST in their classrooms.

Adults role in children's play. Participants cited similar ideas to Walsh (2017) highlighting how important interactions between teachers and children are ones that are skilful and playful in nature, including an effort to create fun yet challenging opportunities, '' Getting games that they enjoy playing can really motivate them to learn'' (Teacher, 7). It is noteworthy however, that only four participants gave a real sense of how teachers need to be involved in play.

''I think getting down and getting stuck in is a massive one, like that I remember when I started teaching infants I had come down from teaching in the senior classes and I said to my colleague it is like teaching a different job. It really is because you have to be have to get down to their level when working with them and engaged in what they are doing''.

Some participants discussed a high level of a playful engagement with children during play, while equally as many participants discussed their role in play as more the 'assessor' or 'observer'. This example of high level engagement is a reinforcement of the

concept of children working in partnership with teachers, where children are supported to speak out and have a voice (Fullan, 2013; Lansdowne, 2011).

Partnership with parents. Resonating with the literature (NCCA, 2009; Shields, 2009) there was a general perception amongst participants that sustaining open communication and cultivating a friendly relationship with parents of Junior Infant children was of great importance. Reflecting on the work of Moyles (2017), six participants perceived that supporting parents who were sending their child to primary school for the first time was an important part of their role, and recognised it could be a worrying time for parents. Positive communication with parents is advocated by participants, particularly in the area of play. Some participants have noted that parents own experiences of school can impact on their children expectations of a more formal education.

‘’Well, I think I'm 10 years teaching now, and I have the confidence to stand behind the curriculum and to say this is what is recommended and the benefits are there and it is important that children play and the curriculum is integrated into the Aistear and into the play. It is a play based curriculum and I can stand behind it so I can explain to parents the need for it and the benefits of it’’ (Teacher, 7).

In sharing knowledge on play based learning with parents, involving parents in the how and why in play-based methods, is regarded as an important activity leading to enhance child development and positive learning outcomes (French, 2007; NCCA, 2009b; OECD, 2017c). Along with this, many participants emphasised the merits of involving parents in collecting resources, as it both strengthens the home school link, and all the while enabling participants to resources a classroom and enabling curricular delivery.

Partnership with preschools. In keeping with Petriwskyj (2005), a significant proportion of the study sample expressed an appreciation in believing that developing relationships between pre-school and primary school would benefit a child during transition. Teacher 12 expressed how connections between preschool and primary school could offer opportunities of the sharing of professional information and how it would be of benefit 'both ways';

''You'd love to sit down with them in the preschool and go through what they have done and covered and not covered. It works both ways. I just find that you know they sometimes are teaching things that they shouldn't be teaching. I find a lot of the children coming from preschool are saying the sounds wrong and it's so hard on teachers to un-teacher or they're forming the letters wrong. Focus more should be on communication skills, social skills,drawing and pre writing skills. I would love to be able to go down to the preschools and just tell them that's because I find it a big problem''.

However, reflecting research reporting low levels of communication between preschool and primary schools (O'Kane & Hayes, 2006), only 3 participants reported to be communicating with preschools. Of the schools who communicated with their preschools, most had positive experiences, however similar to the INTO (2008) some reported tensions when addressing unwanted outcomes of preschools academically preparing children for school;

'' Again, I'm not going to lie, we had a lot of conflict too, so we definitely had disagreements in our school with the preschool system of how they taught. There were pros and cons to it, obviously definitely of course there were more pros but they were too few tough conversations'' (Teacher, 13).

However, echoing Maloney (2011), even though early years' practitioners recognise children's social and emotional development as being most important, it has been found by many participants in this study that getting children ready for school by some preschools put a sizable emphasis on assisting children to into getting used to sitting down and doing worksheets, learning the alphabet, and getting them used to routines and schedules. An academic practice as Graue (2010) argues that has developed without any real purpose or the thought for children's needs and rights. Teacher 3 proposed the following solution to supporting relationships between settings is to acquire an; ''Maybe moving forward, the department might create some kind of policy or a framework for preschool and primary schools to collaborate together that might help, possibly an early year's curriculum connecting the two settings, maybe laying out clearer standards and expectations for settings''. Opposing views to a continuous curriculum argue for recognition of differences associated, and that solving the problem lies with offering suitable support to facilitate children, parents and educators involved (Peters, 2010).

Overall, still, this restriction was voiced by many participants in this study as a concern, and viewed as a barrier to facilitate 'welcomed' and 'helpful' potential to communicate with preschool teachers. This suggestion welcomed by participants echoes a socio-cultural perspective where transition is viewed as a process of co-construction attained through collaboration between all the stakeholders; child, family, preschool, primary school and the wider environment, where communication and participation of all involved are essential for positive outcomes for appropriate learning and development for children transitioning to school (Margetts 2013; O'Kane, 2016).

Personal Plane

Within the Personal Plane of analysis, two themes were analysed; teacher's perspectives and guided participation.

Teachers perspectives. Consistent with the work Abu Taleb, (2013) participants cited similar skills that teachers prioritise for the children to possess, these included; the importance of fine motor, social skills and language skills more so than cognitive abilities such as reading and writing for children in their first year of primary school. Additionally, O'Kane's (2007) findings on independence skills were also identified as specifically important, skills seen to enable the child to negotiate the classroom life without regular support from the teacher, was deemed very important by teachers as illustrated by one teacher;

'' Then independence, I would always have big numbers at the start you know how high 20s. So you would be hopeful that they would be able to put on their coat and take off the coat, and build up to then being able to get their own books off shelves. I would always have things like helpers to give out pencil pots, get the crayon parts, that they would be able to take out a lunch box no problem or go to the toilet when they needed to go.'' (Teacher, 1).

Language and communication skills were highly rated amongst participants as important skills to help support and development in junior infants, and Teacher 5 believes that without language it leads to a lot of frustration and a lot of behavioural problems for children. Some participants prioritised children's ability to sit down, reflective of the results from a study by Maloney (2011), where teachers follow orders and take turns; '' concentration and listening and being able to sit and take instruction are important'' (Teacher, 2), this furthermore highlighting the correlation between skills perceived as

being needed starting primary school, and high adult pupil ratios in Irish primary school classes. In line with findings from a study by O'Kane (2007), many participants showed how the value placed on a skill set can vary depending on the teacher's personal beliefs as well as the educational context the child enters during transition.

''I suppose it's holistic development you're looking at so all the skills, not really one skill is more important than the others. But I suppose communication is really important. First I was thinking about language'' (Teacher, 5).

Correspondingly, Teacher 5 demonstrated a rooted understanding of socio-culture theory, has a master's degree in ECE and teaches in an urban school high numbers of children with EAL, and rates language and communication as priority skills to develop.

Resonating in thinking by both Walsh (2017) and the Aistear Curriculum Framework, that children will flourish once their dispositions and skills are nurtured, participants all perceived the development of dispositions as an elemental and crucial part of junior infants. (Aistear really emphasises this self-learning also)

'' I think self-esteem is definitely important. The more a child believes in their own ability, the more likely they are to be motivated to do a task and to continue with the task. I think it's important as teachers for us to develop the self-esteem in children by encouraging them and motivating them and praising them when they do something and encourage letting them know that they can do things and therefore they're more willing to try things down along the line as they get older, they're more willing to engage with topics and to stick with the topic, even if they're finding it difficult'' (Teacher, 7),

Many participants in their discussion of dispositions, illustrated the importance of cultivating a positive culture towards dispositions to learning, one example is seen in how creating a culture where motivation to persist and to keep trying is promoted in their

setting and impact future success; ‘’Resilience is a massive one, and if a child can be resilient and intrinsically motivated to learn then you are setting them up for a good academic life after that’’. On the contrary, some participants declared a great barrier to developing this type of culture because of large class sizes.

‘’So the biggest challenge for me as the teacher is to develop a really special relationship with each child, to understand their strengths and needs during that time, during that Aistear time. And to gives them the time that they need to develop their confidence, develop their communication. If I had more time for them it would be beneficial for their self-esteem, their self-worth, their belonging to the group’’ (Teacher, 9)

Illustrating findings by researchers, participant’s cited; how well each child works, both independently and with others, their motivation and persistence when faced with challenges, and their ability to get on well with others have been identified as traits fundamental to school success by teachers in this study (McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2000). However, despite academic hopes and desires for independence skills, by the end of the year most participants seemed to mostly want the children to be ‘’happy in school’’, ‘’have friends’’, and that they ‘’have a really positive attitude going into senior infants’’. This highlights the nurturing and caring element by teachers for their students, and indicative of Walsh (2017) who’s research indicates a strong support for caring, nurturing relationships is essential in early years’ education.

Guided participation. Resonating with Voygosky’s concept of ZPD describing the zone in which children learn and practice new skills, and Rogoff’s (1990) references to the transition from novice to mastery as developing out of practices of guided participation by adults and more experienced peers over time, the majority of participants viewed this as

a central processes involved in order to bring on learning and development in young children.

Participants regularly cited ‘guiding’ and ‘scaffolding’ children in their learning, and allowing children time to ‘think’, while participating in daily school tasks and activities.

‘’ I think it's important for the teacher to be the facilitator. I mean the teacher has to take on lots of rolls as the days go on in the years go on but definitely to facilitate them and guide them at that age. Give space for questions and that too, but also it's important to let them take the reins. You learn a lot by watching them as well’’ (Teacher, 13).

In guided participation processes like this, Teacher 13 indicates notable understandings of socio-cultural theory; guiding, observing and giving space to practice skills and develop dispositions by themselves. Through guidance, the teacher here has shared expertise with students to become more participative, and as suggested by many theorists, this can result in an ability to take on more complex roles with competence, and proficiency to apply skills and dispositions within different contexts. This echoes Rogoff’s (1990) perspective on children’s individual development occurring within and through their everyday experiences. However, the research on children’s lived experience is limited (Rogoff, Dahl, Callanan, 2018) and contemporary researchers are calling on more studies to take consideration of how development happens through everyday participation in cultural practices, a view that is valued by all participants in this study. Along with this, the growth of children’s learning and development during these school experiences seems to be what teachers in this study and the parent’s too value the most by the end of junior infants. This is reflected by Teacher 1’s end of year aspirations for children;

‘’ That they would have good self-esteem and resilience, that they keep trying. Because a lot of the things they're doing are quite new to them and they don't become overwhelmed by it. Just to keep trying, not to give up and to keep trying. And that they are motivated they want to complete their work and that they would persevere and take risks with their play. And socially that they would move beyond who they already knew you with other classmates’’.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the data gathered from interviews and presented an in-depth analysis using the themes within Rogoff’s Three Planes of Analysis model. Through this framework, Chapter 4 illustrated the multiple community, intrapersonal, and personal components participants perceived in relation to curriculum and Junior Infant children starting primary school in Ireland. Overall, the interconnectedness of the Three Planes were apparent, and how together they influence human development. Participants want Community Plane changes to happen to better support Interpersonal Plane experiences for children, reinforcing Personal plane child development. The following concluding chapter will summarise the major findings emerging from this study, outline the limitations associated with it and make recommendations for further research opportunities.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

This dissertation sets out to examine curriculum as an instrument to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland. A review of the international and national literature on curriculum and the transition from preschool to primary school was undertaken with an emphasis on Rogoff's Three Planes of Analysis. Drawing on a theoretical framework influenced by the socio-cultural paradigm, this research facilitated a holistic and in-depth examination of the multiple, interrelated community, intrapersonal, and personal components that influence Junior Infant children's experience with curriculum starting primary school in Ireland. The research questions which guided the study were; What are our aspirations for young children's learning and development in Juniors Infants and what type of experiences are needed to facilitate this? What kind of interrelated curricular, pedagogical and structural environment do we need to enable this? This research presented the relevant national and international literature and subsequently adopted a qualitative research approach acquiring data in the form of semi-structured interviews to compare the relevant literature to the experiences of 14 Junior Infant teachers.

This study acknowledges the relatively small sample size used and identifies that its findings are not conclusive. This chapter puts forth the major findings from this study, and proposes suggestions for future research opportunities and recommendations based on these findings.

Major Findings

In keeping with Rogoff (2003), development is an ongoing, mutually constituted practice. When one lens becomes the focus of analysis, the others remain present in the background, all parts making up a full picture (Rogoff, 1990).

In viewing the first research aim through Rogoff's Personal Plane lens, teacher's aspirations for young children's learning and development in Junior Infants, participants fundamentally wanted to see Junior Infant children make holistic progress, developing what were deemed by teachers as the essential skills and dispositions setting them up for future school and life success. A lesser focus was placed on academic achievement by participants, however, they did unanimously note that they hoped children would make academic progress with the PSC by the end of the year, particularly in literacy and math. A clear sense was observed that teachers valued the importance of supporting whole child development but were also equally cognisant of a tension to prepare children with the academic skills needed for Senior Infants and First Class.

In keeping with this aim, and drawing on Rogoff's (1990) interpersonal perspective, participants had a good sense of how children learn, recognising the value of meaningful, relevant, integrated hands on learning experiences, and overall believed in the value of learning through play. Still, it was insisted across the board that skills and strategies are not just developed in play, nor in teacher guided activities, but rather multiple facets of curriculum and interactions that are working systematically to support child development. The call for an appropriately supported balanced integrated curriculum was felt.

Through Rogoff's (1990) community lens including external (policy-makers and government funding) and internal (school context) stakeholders, the second guiding question was addressed; What kind of interrelated curricular, pedagogical and structural environment do we need to enable this? Clear 'community' barriers to implementing a balanced curriculum were found, and the first barrier broadly criticised by participants was curriculum. The literature review aired the existence of different and opposing curricula, and this was reflected in the findings presented by the participants who asserted frustration at the obligation to teach high numbers of children a prescribed curriculum alongside a

contrasting play-based framework with no mandatory training, additional funding or support available. Barriers to implementing curricula effectivly, gave strong indications of how this must influence the quality of experiences for children, and therefore impacting their overall learning and development and ultimately their transition experience.

Participants expressed difficulties in working from three different documents, and a compelling number of participants suggested a need for an integrated curriculum, including guidance on best practice on how to integrate the PSC, PLG and Aistear collectively. There was a great sense of teachers feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and unsupported in the delivery of these three curricula frameworks. Participants described the expectations placed upon them from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) as unachievable and unrealistic within a short school day. Participants also seemed to want more guidance on how to plan an integrated PSC with a play based curriculum, and also more guidance on how they as educators might participate effectively with child-led learning. The curricular expectations from the role and duties of a Junior Infant teacher seems to be caught in the abyss between ECEC educator and primary school teacher.

Emerging from the data was an overwhelming sense from participants wanting a balanced integrated curriculum framework, one that paid attention to the important development of children's skills and disposition, but also a curriculum that will develop academic abilities so they can have a skill base required to move comfortably ahead in primary school through the PSC as it is at the moment. A sense of caution from participants was felt around the proposal of *Aistear* as the overarching curriculum framework in an integrated curriculum. Broadly top-down academic pressures worried teachers, concerns surrounding a play based curriculum were positioned on children potentially not having enough opportunity to practice sitting, listening and quietly concentrating on tasks, and there would ultimately be a shortfall in academic skills required for the following year.

Furthermore, *Aistear* does not allude to how learning might be built upon year on year, how to have high expectations on children and how to encourage more advanced subject specific knowledge, while continuing to engage in playful pedagogies. Some teachers were open to the idea of curriculum moving towards a play based curriculum with possible less academic focus, while others voiced apprehension that it would not be received well by primary teachers considering the history and culture of primary school teacher training of more formal education. From another perspective however, the findings also demonstrated that many teachers were already practicing socio-cultural methodology throughout the day, but naming guided learning sessions as something else. Examples of adult-led, child-led, peer-to-peer scaffolding and SST practice was happening during 'curriculum time' as children explored math and literacy in small group settings. This may indicate that the label of *Aistear* carries ambiguity and perhaps more resistance to teachers, then the actual implementation of the socio-cultural methodologies imbedded within Aistear.

While participants admitted they felt sufficiently prepared to teach the curriculum following initial teacher training, they considered themselves lacking the skills required to implement play based learning, and so as to remedy their perceived shortfall, participants prepared themselves for the infant classes in different ways. Some turned to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses while others depended on the guidance of more experienced colleagues and following teacher blogs on social media. Participants believed continuous experience was the only path through which to become a well-informed and expert Junior Infant teacher. This acknowledgement further highlights the need for education and training on how to teach curriculum content using playful pedagogies in primary school, and how to engage with children during play in a meaningful and purposeful way, building on funds of knowledge and working towards essential holistic child development goals.

Participants believed the implementation of the Junior Infant programme, in reality, was not a standardised homogenous practice. Influence of authority figures including Board of Managements and school principals, along with difference in the levels of government funding, school size, the number of support teachers in a school, school location, and school culture and understanding of ECE were named as key in determining how the Junior Infant programme was conducted in schools. This research gives rise to questions regarding the fairness of how the Junior Infant programme comes to pass within Irish primary schools. In particular opportunity to engage with socio-cultural practices like SST and guided learning varied greatly from school to school, and were simply school dependent. This is strikingly inequitable on young children, and their right to develop appropriately and have a voice and chance to be heard in their leaning environments. Large class sizes and high adult to pupil ratios are not supportive of the agentic child, a cornerstone of sociocultural theory, reflecting school structures to be a major barrier in the practice of recommended methods in current curricula. Furthermore, participants stressed feeling a sense of injustice concerning the vast differences between preschool settings and Junior Infant classes, considering they teach a similar age and utilise the same *Aistear* framework. This is a clear direct setback for young children in developing essential skills and dispositions required to explore and grow at that age, and as research suggests, could potentially impact upon their future wellbeing and school success.

In reflecting a socio-cultural perspective, the study highlighted the value of developing a relationship between preschool and primary school, especially to assist children during times of transition, but also to support continuity across settings. It was promising to find some participants communicating to feeder preschools, however increased national policy on transition and further guidance for primary schools is needed and would help foster greater ‘community’ lens relationships between preschool and primary schools across all

settings. Additional transition initiatives to supplement Mo Scéal is necessary. Aside from academic 'pre-teaching' objections, participants spoke positively about their views of pre-school and teachers believed that children were starting school with skills they valued such as; independence, social and language skills. This is possibly reflective of preschools engagement with the *Aistear* framework, potentially bridging curricular continuity between preschool and primary school. The literature review highlights the importance of aligning the curriculum and pedagogy approach, in practice however, *Aistear* in primary schools appears to be implemented at a segmented part of the school day and sometimes recognised as another curricular subject. This furthermore highlights current difficulties in practice as Aistear is implemented in tandem to the PSC and PLC, the concept of *Aistear* as a curriculum framework is in danger of being lost in favour of *Aistear* as a curricular subject.

Limitations

As with any research study, there are limitations. The limitations of this study can be contextualised in terms of its strengths considering curriculum from the perspective of *Aistear* and transition influenced by the socio-cultural theoretical perspective is unique and has brought unique insights to the fore. As recognised earlier, the first limitation of this research is its small scale. This study involved semi-structured interviews with 14 Junior Infant teachers in primary schools in Ireland. A second limitation is that it lacked the voice of the Junior Infant child. It would be valuable to have the input of children in a child centred study like this. Along with this, a third limitation was the broad level of literature to cover, and the greatest focus and length however was given to curriculum as it was central to the study.

In mirroring Grey and Ryan (2016), action-research research is recommended into teacher's involvement in integrated curriculum requires further in-depth research to

promoting playful pedagogies in early childhood education in primary school. The findings of this study should be of interest to those researching curriculum and child development.

Further Recommendations

The following are the recommendations to improve curriculum and transition to primary school practices in Junior Infants:

- The continued review and development of the Primary School Curriculum by the NCCA focusing on a more integrated curriculum for the early years of primary school, providing greater flexibility in timetabling and promoting learning through inquiry and play-based pedagogies.
- Lower pupil to teacher ratios and providing a classroom assistant would support Junior Infant children's school experiences.
- More adult teaching support is necessary for guided learning opportunities. Extended space and resources to facilitate outdoor learning experiences should also be considered.
- Opportunities to look at practice in different preschool sectors maybe a valuable experience for teachers, and may enhance relationships and understandings between sectors.
- Additional in-service support from the P.D.S.T. and/or the NCCA for those using Aistear in tandem with the Primary School Curriculum. This training could focus on helping teachers to integrate play-based pedagogies with curriculum objectives.
- Colleges of education should include ECEC approaches, play pedagogy and child development theory to primary school teachers.
- Review initial training opportunities relating to playful pedagogies

- Frequent professional development opportunities should be offered to Junior Infant teachers concerning new methodologies to assist best practice, along with extra support or mentorship to newly-appointed Junior Infant teachers.
- Communities of learners should be established within local areas whereby Junior Infant teachers and preschool educators could gather together to discuss best practice, seek advice and share expertise.

In conclusions

This research sought to explore curriculum as an instrument to support appropriate child learning and development for children starting primary school in Ireland. Rogoff's three planes of analysis (Rogoff, 1990) provided an ideal lens through which to examine the complexities involved in implementing curriculum in the Junior Infant classroom, however, this data suggests a system that is simply not meeting the needs of young children in a meaningful way. Identifying that acquiring core content and facts is essential for school and life, but likewise children require a solid, conceptual mastery that permits them to link concepts and skills, exercise their knowledge to changing activities, and create unique ideas (Winthrop & McGivney, 2016; Frey, Fisher, & Hattie, 2016). In an age of accelerated change, such as this during a global pandemic, children will need to know how to cultivate solutions to complex problems and navigate uncertainty, it has become critical to cultivate a skill set that goes beyond math and literacy. As empirical evidence reporting from *Learning through play at School* (2019) states; ''If we fail to support learning through play, we will be stuck with old ways of learning that are not only impractical, but also not effective in moving forward our communities and societies to solve the challenges we have in front of us'' (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Still, echoing the OECD (Shuey, E., et al., 2019), a roll-out of an integrated curriculum alone is not enough. Ultimately, to respond to 'Personal', 'Interpersonal' and 'Community Plane' best practice obligations, a culture of critical

refection and analysis needs to be fostered within early childhood education in primary schools, reinforcing that human development and learning is a social, cultural process, prioritising children's dispositions, knowledge, experience, skills and interactions with aspects of the environment. Listening to the views of Junior Infant teachers, having their knowledge and experience considered may assist in promoting evidence-based pedagogical practices that can be put in place within Irish primary schools.

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Appendix A

Participant Letter of Info & Consent Form

Letter of Information and Consent Form

Name: *Claire Dooley*

Phone Number: *0879333661*

Email: *cdooleymece17@momail.mie.ie*

Thesis supervisor: *Rhona McGinn*

Phone Number: *01-8535146*

Email: *rhonamcginn@MIE.ie*

Dear Participant,

I am seeking your consent to be involved in a study ethically approved by Marino Institute of Eduction related to transitions from preschool to primary school and the junior infant curriculum. The study title is: Can curriculum itself be a tool for change in transitions practices from preschool to primary school? It focuses on understanding about curriculum connection between preschool and primary school on improving the transition experiences for children. It will involve participating in an audio recorded interview, with questions based of your professional experience The interview will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner, and you can cease the interview at any time and without the need to provide a reason. If you decide to withdraw from the project, then audio recording will not be used. To ensure confidentiality and protection I promise that:

- Names will be removed from the study.

Tapes will only be used for research or educational purpose

- You may ask to listen the recordings
- You may request the audio not be used in the study

Thank you for considering this. If you wish to speak to me further about this study, please contact me at the above number. Would you please complete the attached form and return.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Claire Dooley

- I……..… voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

- I understand that participation involves answering questions and conversation about the above topic.

- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation, conference presentation, or published papers.

- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in my home until August.

- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained until August 2022

- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information - names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of researchers (and academic supervisors when relevant).

--- ---

Signature of research participant Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

--- ---

Signature of researcher Dat

Appendix B

Principal & Teacher Consent Form

Research Participation Consent

Name: *Claire Dooley*

Phone Number: *0879333661*

Email: *cdooleymece17@momail.mie.ie*

Thesis supervisor: *Rhona McGinn*

Phone Number: *01-8535146*

Email: *rhonamcginn@MIE.ie*

To be completed by School Principal:

I am aware a teacher from our school is participating in this research and will be exploring issues related to the transition into primary school.

Signed_____

Date_____

To be completed by the Teacher:

- I have been fully informed of the nature of this study |Yes |No
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study |Yes |No
- I agree to take part in this study. |Yes |No
- I agree to the interview being recorded |Yes |No

This consent form will be kept confidential by the researcher. All audio recordings will be stored securely and confidentially.

Signed_____

Name is Block Capitals_____

Date_____

Signature of researcher_____

Date_____

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Introduction to research:

Discuss:

- Confidentiality
- Right to withdraw
- Permission to record
- Information relating to teacher's professional background

Teachers views and thoughts:

- Thinking about 4 and 5-year-old children, which skills (social, language, independence, communication, concentration etc.) do you feel are most important for children to develop?
- Which dispositions (self-esteem, resilience, ability and motivation to complete a task etc.) do you feel are most important for children to develop?
- What are your aspirations/expectations for junior infant children by the end of the year? What expectations do parents have for their children in junior infants? What impact has this on teaching and learning?
- How do you think young children of this age learn? What do you believe your role is in developing learning?
- In practice is this always the case? Why/why not?
- What practices do you feel work best to develop and extend learning?
- Considering wellbeing, and the important skills you have discussed, do you feel junior infants prepares children well for long term success? Why?

Curriculum:

- How do you feel about the primary school curriculum (PSC) and frameworks in use currently in junior infants? What do you feel is working well? Is there anything you feel that needs to be supported better/changed?
- What are your thoughts on the PSC and academic formal assessment in the infant classroom?
- What do you feel in the purpose of Aistear? Benefits and difficulties you find with Aistear? In practice does it connect well with the PSC & PLC?
- Which types of play do you feel are most effective for learning and development?
- Opportunities for active learning with engaged participation and choice is encouraged in both the PLC and Aistear. In practice is this working well? Is there anything that needs to be supported or changed for this to happen better?
- As proposed by the NCCA, could/should an integrated play based curriculum be introduced into the first year of primary school? Establishing Aistear as the principal framework used in Junior Infants to be used throughout the day (weaving the PSC throughout)?

- What are the possible issues stopping it from being used more? How do we support this? What do we need to know and do to support this? (training/resources/class sizes etc.?)

Context

- Do you feel the structure of the infant classroom (eg. pupil adult ratio, resources, space, outdoor learning facilities) is suitable for implementing a play-based curriculum for 4/5 years old?
- What kind of environment do we need to provide to enable this? (physical, pedagogical, social, philosophical).

Continuity of learning and transition:

- What transition practices does your school undertake? How does your school prepare for new junior infants starting school? (letters to parents, school visits, parent and teacher meeting, transfer documentation?).
- How is this information used?
- What are your thoughts on school readiness? What makes children ready for school? (ages, ability, language, skills?).
- Do you communicate with pre-schools? How would you feel about communicating more with pre-schools? Would this be worthwhile? Are you familiar with how Aistear is implemented in pre-schools?
- What skills do you think a child develops at pre-school? What practices would you like pre-school to do in preparing children for school? What skills are most important for a child to develop before starting school?

Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of curriculum and transition in junior infants?

Appendix D

Extract from Interview Transcript

CD. Perfect. Thanks a million. Just thinking about four and five-year-old children, what skills do you feel are most important to develop and why?

O. I think the most important skills that I would see for 4 and 5 year olds. I feel would be their social skills that they develop their independence and understanding of the words and their communication skills, because communication is integral to being able to communicate with others, communicate with adults and make friends and find their way in the world. So I think they would be the most important.

CD. So within the area of learning dispositions like self-esteem and motivation. How do you regard those dispositions? How important they are in Junior Infants, what ones are most important and why again?

O. think children generally of that age group of four and five, are willing to give every task a try which is encouraging because discovering and learning for themselves is really important. But if you see a child that does have self-esteem issues, you can see it. It kind of it inhibits they're learning is if they're not willing to try something for whatever reason, maybe they don't understand the task or maybe they're not confident enough to. You can see that their learning is impacted and they don't make the progress, especially when their peers that were willing to give it a go and willing to try it. And so at. Yes, self-esteem and confidence. And to give everything a go at that age is so important.

CD. And how do you develop those skills and dispositions, and how well do you think that fits in with the curriculum and frameworks we have in junior infants, are there enough opportunities for it and how can it be supported better?

O. The curriculum and the play based theories and Aistear have an emphasis on oral language, they are all great changes that have been made. But the biggest challenge I find as a junior and teacher is class sizes. I have 28 children, where twenty six come from non-English speaking backgrounds, so only two of them. And so they you could say they're already at a disadvantage even though we're not a DEIS school. So the biggest challenge for me as the teacher is to develop a really special relationship with each child, to understand their strengths and needs during that

time, during that Aistear time. And to gives them the time that they need to develop their confidence, develop their communication. If I had more time for them, it would be beneficial for their self-esteem, their self-worth, their belonging to the group. I just need time to implement an Aistear lesson in a class of 28, where you're trying to get junk art in one corner and you're trying to get a role play in another corner if conflict occurs in the role-play area. They're fighting over who wants to be the doctor in the doctor's surgery and who's the patient. You're also trying to help somebody else cut out a shape on cardboard and it's just. That's the biggest challenge. And if it does impact the atmosphere in the room and the children and generally they're very good at understanding just one minute just hold on, boss. It would be better if there were smaller class sizes.

CD. What kind of environment would support appropriate learning in an infant classroom? What would that look like?

O. I think the most thing that we would look like would be there would be further engagement from an adult with the child. So if I always had a learning support teacher in a classroom with smaller numbers and there would always be a guide there for the children to learn from. Not necessarily always guiding them, but overseeing them or scaffolding them or ensuring that they are using their skills in the best way that they can. So I know there are obvious leaders in a group and sometimes you can see a leader in a group of play or organizing who has what role. But then different dynamics in groups there may not be a leader and there may be conflict and. I just feel it would benefit kind of the atmosphere and the skills that the children can develop to their models. So, yeah, smaller group numbers. If there was a class of ideally say 20, and a learning's support teacher there on hand at all times. And then I think it would benefit in those kind of interactions.

CD. Ok Thanks. So as a teacher, what are your expectations for your children by the end of junior infants?