An exploration into the attitudes and experiences of Montessori trained practitioners on the implementation of *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in early years classrooms

Thesis

by

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Degree of Masters of Education

(Early Childhood Education)

2nd June 2020
I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of 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. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Maja Haals Brosnan at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all of the participants for the time they gave to provide this research with such valuable data.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Maja Haals Brosnan, for all of her guidance and support throughout the complete process.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my family and devoted friends for their support and encouragement in enabling me to complete this work, I am forever grateful to each and everyone of them.
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Abstract

The introduction of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009 sought to streamline curriculum provision and intended to honour all existing pedagogical practices, especially the Montessori method, a well-established and popular early years curriculum in Ireland. It focused on bringing a child-centred, play-based and emergent pedagogy to the forefront. However, its inconsistent implementation, marked by a lack of required formal training, has potentially created uncertainty amongst practitioners, who may feel ill equipped to integrate the framework into current practices. This study endeavoured to explore this uncertainty by focusing on the experiences of Montessori-trained practitioners, to establish the integrative potential of both Montessori and Aistear and the determining factors between them. A qualitative methods approach was adopted with seven purposefully sampled participants that completed preliminary reflective journals which informed and helped frame semi-structured interviews that followed. Findings revealed polarised attitudes, determined mostly by engagement in recent self-motivated, self-financed CPD. Participants who had recently engaged in CPD perceived more convergent features of both Montessori and Aistear, exemplified by indications of self-reflection and adaptability, in relation to professional identity and competence. Participants who had not recently engaged in CPD somewhat rejected Aistear, marked by a lack of confidence in utilising play and a lack of knowledge in Aistear as a framework, thus inhibiting integrative practice. This indicates an absence of transformational and appropriately funded CPD, which needs to spotlight Montessori practice in line with play pedagogies and encourage reflective practice, in order to inspire curriculum innovation in early years classrooms.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Recent discourse has established that play-based approaches, following a child-led, emergent curriculum are most beneficial for child’s development (Wood, 2014; Yelland, 2011). Ten years on from the introduction of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, and the recent launch of Ireland’s ‘First 5’ strategy, which further promotes the use of Aistear, there is more focus than ever on curriculum provision. Emphasis has also been placed on professionalisation of the sector, a factor that is crucial in discussions about early childhood education due to the consensus about the direct links between highly-qualified and experienced staff and competently implemented curriculum (Hayes and O’Neill, 2019; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari and Peeter, 2012; Moloney, 2010). This study aims to place a spotlight on the connection between early years professionals and curriculum provision by exploring the experiences and attitudes of practitioners which will be contextually based, in the sense that the focus will be placed on curricula specific to Ireland.

Background to the Study

The Montessori method of teaching has a significant history in the Irish education system. Although it is known to be the most established pedagogical approach utilised in early years settings (Bowers, 2017), it does not reflect a national pedagogy, and up until recently, there has not been a streamlined approach to curriculum provision (Neylon, 2012). The introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, introduced in 2010, and the introduction of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009 aimed to achieve this. By suggesting that through four interconnected themes, all existing pedagogies could work, the framework provides a reference point for which practitioners can implement a holistic curriculum that is child centred and values sustained and meaningful interactions (NCCA, 2009).
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However, *Aistear* is neither mandatory or inspected in Ireland and as a result, has become somewhat contentious among practitioners (Gray and Ryan, 2016). This has pedagogical implications for practitioners, especially Montessori trained practitioners like myself, who are conflicted by how to deliver a comprehensive and complete learning experience for children in early years classrooms, while still honouring both Montessori and *Aistear*.

With global regard for Maria Montessori’s philosophy, there are many elements that are ingrained in most early years’ classrooms (Issacs, 2010). However, does the implementation of *Aistear* conflict with these and if so, how? Although there are arguably many similarities and differences between both, it is possible the problem lies more so in our understandings of how learning differs and recognising that “the competence of the adult to implement curriculum is seen as critical to enabling children to become capable and masterful learners from the earliest of age” (Hayes and O’Neill, 2019, p.64). It is therefore the practitioner that holds the key to a better understanding of pedagogy, to find effective ways of communication and collaboration, in order to keep the child, and quality curriculum provision at the forefront of ECE (Stephen, 2010).

A significant proportion of early years professionals in Ireland are qualified in Montessori teaching but have little or no training in *Aistear*. This is a contributing factor towards the problem being raised in this research, because there is an increasing expectation to view *Aistear* as the predominant curriculum framework in early years classrooms, yet there is no formal or statutory training or qualifications provided in it. There are a broad range of factors that influence professional identity, but Moloney (2010) attributes the need for qualifications as the most significant. Practitioners’ ability to be analytic about their practice is crucial when considering professionalisation and professional identity, as it enables new approaches that enhance children’s learning experiences (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering,
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2016; Hayes and O’Neill, 2019). This study attempts to gain insight into practitioners’ experiences in order to further consider quality within ECE and empower practitioners to deliver curriculum confidently.

Research Gap

The specific and contextually based nature of this research topic means that there is little comparative research available. Although Aistear was introduced over ten years ago, research into its value has been sparse. However more recently, discourse relating to play-based approaches and their effectiveness have dominated the forum in ECE and so the integration of Montessori and Aistear is evoking more interest as both are now well established in Ireland. Literature in areas such as adaptation and integration of pedagogies in a more general sense, and the relationship between practitioner and pedagogy, will allow for a more conceptual approach and will aim to help bridge the gap in research.

Researcher Positionality

The motivation for this study contains an element of personal relevance. As a Montessori trained practitioner, currently in an ECCE setting, there is a drive to provide the most appropriate curriculum in order to best serve children’s development. Although I have a particular regard for the Montessori method and recognise that it is well established, cohesive and holistic, I also value the need for play-based learning alongside an emergent curriculum. Placing the child’s interests in the forefront of learning and experience is key, and further understanding for the potential blending of both Montessori and Aistear may help to consolidate this.

However in recent years, with the inspectorate diversifying and expanding (settings are now subject to three visits a year from TUSLA, Pobal and DES), there has been more pressure to implement Aistear, and while it is being promoted, Montessori is being somewhat
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overlooked. During informal feedback from a recent Early-Years Education Inspection (EYEI), my current setting was told to “decrease the amount of Montessori time to 30 minutes, max”. This contradicts the notion of Aistear as a framework, as both Montessori and Aistear should theoretically be efficacious symbiotically.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

As the phenomenon being researched is an exploration into the attitudes and experiences of Montessori trained practitioners on the implementation of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in early years classrooms, the main aim is to establish key issues surrounding the integration of Montessori and Aistear. From this perspective, the research will take an interpretive approach to the data, as it will be rooted in the experiences of the participants with recognition that their realities have been experientially constructed. This assumes a variety of data gained through semi-structured interviews that will have a reflective element.

In order to help frame the study further, the following questions will become a focus, and will include but will not be limited to;

1. How has Aistear impacted on Montessori?

2. Can Montessori and Aistear be integrated into a unified curriculum in early years settings in Ireland?

3. Do practitioners feel that training and courses offered in Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework are sufficient for its implementation in early years classrooms?

In addition to recognition of sub questions within the research, there are other key areas that will be addressed throughout.
Establishing similarities and differences between Montessori and Aistear. In order to assess practitioner views, establishing perceptions of the key aspects of both Montessori and Aistear becomes an important base for this research. Being able to indicate where practitioners place these, pedagogically, will help to further analyse both pedagogical processes and curriculum provision.

To what extent should Montessori and Aistear be integrated. Along with recognising the key pedagogical similarities and differences between both, acknowledging factors that may impede their integration will be important. This will include assessing practitioner views on the adaptability of Montessori and the levels of use of Aistear.

Assessing practitioner levels of Continual Professional Development (CPD) participation. Exploration of the link between professionalisation and quality of curriculum provision, and whether or not this directly or indirectly affects practitioners’ experiences with Aistear.

Existing strategies in relation to unification of Montessori and Aistear. Exploring these in order to help create suggestions for new strategies that may contribute to more positive experiences in the classroom for both practitioners and children.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There are a number of crucial components to consider when critically considering curriculum provision. Ideologies based around child-centred approaches have dominated curricula (Hedges & Cooper, 2018), while play-based learning has risen to the forefront of pedagogical instruction (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Lillard, 2013). In Ireland, fast-paced policy formation has created an arena for mixed curricular practices alongside practitioners who may feel ill equipped to implement them in a holistic and cohesive way (Gray & Ryan, 2016). As Montessori has long been recognised as a major part of the Irish educational system (Bowers, 2017), practitioner views on the introduction of the Aistear curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) are potentially problematic, due to the divergent aspects of both. The following review of literature will focus on four main conceptual points; policy, curriculum, play and professional identity, while also taking a focused look at the Montessori method, the Aistear framework, and a comparative look at both, to ascertain the key problematic elements, if any, towards curriculum provision in Ireland.

The Effect of Policy on Pedagogy

Early childhood education (ECE) is in a state of constant change, due to numerous reasons, most of which revolve around policy change and understandings of best practice in relation to provision of curriculum. In Ireland in particular, the rate of policy development rapidly increased since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992, which placed children’s rights at the centre of policy agendas and caused a review of existing policies in order to facilitate new expectations (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Furthermore, the availability of EU funding, the global recognition of the economic
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and social value of ECE along with an increasing female labour force, were all key factors influencing the need for policy review (Walsh, 2016).

Recent policy development has contributed to issues regarding standards of quality within the early years sector, and conflict regarding curricular approaches has led to increasing scrutiny that has reached the public forum (Murphy, 2015). For example, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Starting Strong III (2012) report has had a major impact on the way in which ECE has developed in Ireland and established five key levers for how it should continue to develop. The levers placed a focus on collaboration between policy, providers and parents by (a) setting out quality goals and regulations, (b) designing and implementing curriculum and standards, (c) improving qualifications, training and working conditions, (d) engaging families and communities, and (e) advancing data collection, research and monitoring. It points out that expansion of services within the early years “will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society” (p. 9) unless quality is placed at the forefront.

Until the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), Ireland did not have an all-encompassing framework and so quality from a pedagogical perspective was difficult, if not impossible to assess. The OECD report has had a major influence on the changing systems within ECE, explicitly guiding policy with specific goals and with the funding instruments attached.

Funding as investment. The introduction of a free pre-school year (FPSY) also known as the ECCE scheme - in January 2010 also placed added pressure on ECE in Ireland. It caused a shift, highlighting that ECE needed to be as much about education as it is about care. There was a sudden increase in places available within early years settings and with that, improving and maintaining quality within services became a focus. The ECCE scheme
radically changed employment in ECE in Ireland. Practitioners had to change work practices in order to accommodate new pedagogical approaches (Neylon, 2012). They were not consistent across the country up until this point, due to the market led approach to childcare that enabled a competitively driven system and prioritised the economy over “equality of access to quality preschool services” (Neylon, 2012, p. 2).

Murphy (2015) acknowledged that investment needed to be about funding but also about improved standards overall, identifying five quality elements, of which the first was increased investment. She recognised that quality needed to be assessed from multiple perspectives, but that in order to ensure “others are to follow and the desired improvements in quality and accessibility are to be achieved” (p. 296) that funding is crucial.

**Rapid change alongside a split system of governance.** In conjunction with the need to fulfil the obligations of the UNCRC and global pressure to coordinate a national policy for early childhood services, Ireland introduced a range of ECE policies. These were developed and implemented in a somewhat fragmented way, due in part to the lack of a specific government body devoted solely to early education (Neylon, 2014). This “absence of effective co-ordination between these departments” (Walsh, 2016, p. 85) may be a contributing factor towards the lack of coherence from a curriculum perspective as well as at policy level. Although three main government bodies shared responsibility for ECE in the early 21st century – the Department of Education and Skills (DES), The Department of Health and Children (DHC) and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) it has been documented that in excess of ten government departments played a role in the development of policy (Walsh, 2016). The lack of an explicit national policy led the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to announce the development of Ireland’s first National Early Years strategy in 2012, which was eventually published in 2018 as the ‘First 5’ strategy. This ten year, whole-of-government plan, is all-encompassing and intends to improve support for
parents, place a focus on child health (especially child poverty), and reform the ELC (Early Learning and Care) system, with an emphasis on funding and professionalisation of the workforce.

**Synchronising policy and practice (education and care divide).** Even with significant national and EU funding in recent years, the ECE landscape has retained its education/care divide with controversy over women’s labour market participation. This split system is deeply rooted in Irish history and culture and has been further accentuated by recent schemes such as the ECCE scheme that further delineates childcare provision for the under and over three-year olds (Walsh, 2016). Numerous attempts at synchronising the system have failed, and up until recently, government policies insisted on continuing to view childcare as a welfare service and early education as an educational service (Hayes, Hynes and Wolfe, 2013). The reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system within the ‘First 5’ strategy acknowledges this divide and promises “a radical reform of the funding model” (DCYA, 2018, para. 26) and “a consistently implemented curriculum framework” (Government of Ireland, 2019, para 11).

Grey and Ryan (2016) acknowledge the impact of social and political forces on the functioning of classrooms in the early years noting that “when multiple systems are in operation, multiple readings are required to understand how systems both directly and indirectly impact classroom practice” (p.199). This is evident through the multiple bodies that take responsibility for inspections within the Early Years. Settings can now expect three separate visits a year, with regard to inspection (Pobal, TUSLA and Early Years Education Inspection from the DES). Although arguably, the involvement of the DES in these inspections has been a progressive development (Moloney, 2015), there is potential conflict over the use of varying curricula and how inspections can be streamlined to account for this.
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The OECD’s Starting Strong III (2012) initiative aims at addressing this with one of its five levers; designing and implementing curriculum and standards.

The implementation of the ECCE scheme also placed a spotlight on the variety of curricular approaches being used in Ireland, which include Montessori, Steiner, Highscope and other play-based learning approaches which have led to a change in practices. Neylon’s (2012) analysis of the ECCE scheme described this change as a focus on uniformity, as it brought about a regular, more streamlined approach to ECE. The scheme therefore highlighted issues with regards to pedagogy and curriculum in order to stay in line with this uniformity. However, uniformity does not equal quality and the introduction of the Aistear curriculum framework as all-encompassing could be considered problematic with regards to this notion of uniformity and differing curricula surrounding it. The following section will conceptualise curriculum and its relevance in ECE in Ireland.

The Concept of Curriculum

With the ECE landscape in Ireland having multiple governing bodies responsible for provision of education, it is necessary to define and make clear the concept of curriculum and how it is enforced, as definitions and understandings can vary extensively (Stephen, 2010). Curricula can also become “sites of struggle” (Soler & Miller, 2003, p. 57) as the different visions of politicians, researchers, teachers and parents all need to be considered. Mueller (2012), argues that curriculum studies can be understood as evolving in a binate sense with both curriculum development and curriculum theory needing recognition, because neither is static and in order to move with the shifting nature of society, both elements need to be understood. It is this relationship, between theory and practice that is key when discussing curriculum, as the degree to which practitioners understand child development directly
impacts how they understand and relate to children and so our assumptions about how children develop influences our conception of curriculum (Fleer, 2010).

**Historical perspectives on curricula and progressive reform.** Historically, Piagetian discourse on cognitive development suggested that development and knowledge acquisition are related to particular stages of development within the child, underpinned by biological maturation. Although Piaget also had some of the most influential thoughts on educational thinking and influenced the idea of the child as an active participant in their own development, theorists and educators alike have become more progressive in their outlook on education in recent years. While Piaget’s influence has remained strong, discussion around the sociocultural context of learning has had a transformative effect on curriculum, supported by Vygotsky who believed that it is “through others that we become ourselves” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 18). The work of Vygotsky, and other socio-cultural theorists within this realm of thought, have all been associated with curricular reform. Dewey, whose work suggested that learning was not a static process and the child shapes their own learning through their experiences (Soler & Miller, 2010), is also reflected in this frame of thought. It is also illustrated in Bruner’s theory of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) which has contributed to understandings of learning, where the child is seen as active and engaged in their environment and through collaboration with adults, can complete tasks that may have been beyond the realms of achievement if attempted alone. This concept is reflected also in the notion of ‘sustained shared thinking’ (SST) which emerged from qualitative research in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) longitudinal study. It highlighted the importance of the sharing of ideas within a classroom, and how those interactions are sustained between the child and the educator (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Although there are fundamental differences between Piaget and Vygotsky within their theories of learning, it has been argued that the differences have masked some common
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elements they share within the constructivist theory of learning which can be understood as ‘emergent development’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), a perspective that lends itself to emergent curriculum perspectives.

**The rise of emergent curriculum.** Fleer (2010) argues that “the child’s changing relations to their environment, the development of a new conceptual consciousness, and the dialectical relations between sense and meaning” (p. 564), could make relying too heavily on child development theory dangerous, with changing and transient socio-cultural elements within society. Recent principles of preschool curriculum development challenge the traditional concept of early years settings as ‘cosy’ places where children play freely with little or no guidance, which was widely criticised as being benign and lacking in purpose (Curtis, 2003). Neylon (2014) notes that while Marian Quinn was chairperson of the National Association of Childcare Providers, she argued that quality of care was more about the quality of the relationship between the carer and the child than on the physical environment.

Pioneers of curriculum provision over the years have supported this theory, whilst further contributing to the collective theory that emergent curriculum has become less about fixed content and goals and should stem more from our ever-changing understandings of children and society (Bennett, 2004). Hence, although curricula need to provide a framework at which educators can work from, over-defining objectives may hinder the emergent nature of learning. Hayes and Filipović (2018) also support the idea that too much focus on outcomes may shadow the importance of “providing rich day-to-day learning opportunities” (p. 1) that are most beneficial to children’s development.

The published document ‘Towards a Framework for Early Learning’ (NCCA, 2004) was another significant development in understanding how children learn. French (2007) stated that “in exploring the image of the child as an active and inquisitive young learner, the
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI consultative document used the terms learning and development interchangeably” (p. 51). In a research paper commissioned by the NCCA, French went on to explain that socio-cultural theory forms the basis of the framework developed with regards to Aistear, which highlights the child developing in context to their surroundings and in collaboration with others (2007). In recent years, emergent curriculum has been understood under the premise that child progression occurs through the child’s changing relationship to their environment and their social situation within this (Fleer, 2009). Fleer (2009) also speaks of the emergent curriculum model outlined by Goulart and Roth, which highlights the importance of the collective construction of curriculum, being that of both the educator and the child working symbiotically to develop knowledge and understanding within a setting.

**Challenges implementing curricula in Ireland.** In Ireland, we face a mixed curricular system where a number of pedagogical approaches are well established. With the overarching Aistear framework weaving throughout all of these, there are implications for the development and standardisation of curriculum, as these approaches all need to be recognised (Neylon, 2014). Consensus around what constitutes an all-inclusive curriculum includes not only the notion of emergent curriculum, but also that of a learner-centred and largely play-based one. In order to sustain curriculum within the early years, recognising the importance of play is crucial and promoting pedagogy that does not separate play from learning is also key (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). By integrating different pedagogical approaches, play and its valuable qualities can be harnessed (Wood, 2010).

**The Importance of Play**

**Theoretical underpinnings.** Early years education has been largely dominated by child-centred and play-based pedagogies for some years and our understanding of what quality play pedagogy is changes concurrently with societal change. In Ireland, current policy
and curriculum provisions support the notion that play-based learning is a cornerstone of
effective early childhood education (NCCA, 2004; Edwards, 2017). Literature has long
discussed the numerous benefits of play for child development and its presence as a long
standing social and traditional construct makes it not only difficult to define, but these
definitions can contribute to its over-simplification (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Broström,
2017). Stephen (2010) argues that the multiple interpretations of play that we have, mean that
robust theoretical explanations are needed in order to justify play as child-centred. French
(2007) also adds to the complexity of theorising play by adding that although educators
endorsed the use of play and acknowledged its benefits, they were unsure of how to utilise it,
what their role was in providing for it, and how to assess its outcomes.

Play can be defined in many ways and using a variety of different frameworks for its
implementation can be beneficial to its broader understanding. Broström (2017) depicts play
as being meaningful, intrinsically motivated, involving imagination and creativity but most
notably that play itself does not contribute to development. He argues that play only has a
development potential when the play environment challenges children, through social
interactions. This links to theories such as Vygotsky’s ideas of dynamic learning which note
the importance of planning and supporting the child throughout their play. In an Aistear
background paper exploring the importance of play in children’s early learning, Kernan (2007)
also supports the notion that play is not easily defined as “no one definition of play can
encompass all the views, perceptions, experiences and expectations that are connected with it”
(p. 5). Understanding the theory of play through a socio-cultural lens, we can use the
‘pedagogical play framework’ explored by Edwards (2017). This framework defines play into
three categories; open-ended play, modelled play and purposefully framed play. All of these
value the role of the adult as parallel to the role of the child, which supports the notion of
participation as key in play pedagogy, something that Hedges and Cullen (2012) outline within
their ‘Participatory learning theories’. French (2007) also stresses that the most effective settings utilising play had a balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated activities.

Play can also be understood progressively as opposed to defining the types of play that occur simultaneously. Under the approach of ‘sustained shared thinking’ outlined by Siraj-Blatchford (2009), child development progresses as they are challenged, and this occurs initially through play with adults, then to reciprocal peer play and later in collaborative play. It is almost impossible to discuss any learning theories in ECE without referring to play, as it is central and essential within all classroom environments. Although frameworks are beneficial to educators for application in the classroom, Hedges & Cooper (2018) suggest that through relational pedagogy, ECE educators can unshackle themselves from ideologies of play pedagogy and provide a more contextual engagement with children’s play.

**Play in context.** Although child-centred ideologies about play-based pedagogies have guided most practice in ECE, they may also underestimate the potential that the adult has with regards to providing for play opportunities in culturally and socially connected contexts. Kernan (2007) agrees that the adult’s role is complex and multi-disciplinary naming “play architect, designer…assessor, facilitator, mediator, co-player, scaffold, trainer and advocate” (p. 11) among others, as ways in which the adult can support play. In order for children to benefit from play in the classroom, they must be actively engaged and the surroundings need to have socially and culturally appropriate elements as “contemporary perspectives draw on research undertaken in natural contexts that acknowledge learning as culturally situated and affected by societal values” (Hedges & Cullen, 2011, p.922). In this regard, not only do the social and cultural components need to be acknowledged but the physical environment becomes important too. In order for children to be able to play, there needs to be space to move freely with opportunities for different types of play. Socio-dramatic play; which is hugely beneficial with regards to language development and specific
contextual language, “can be an important context for children to practice the advanced language they hear in the world outside the classroom” (Meachem et al, 2015, p.320).

**Play-based learning in Ireland.** It is important that in the context of ECE settings, that notions of learning and play are interconnected and not separated (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). ECE in Ireland has traditionally been a mix of different pedagogical approaches that have valued play with varying levels of importance. However, the implementation of the ECCE scheme and the *Aistear* Curriculum Framework have highlighted play-based learning and given a sense of continuity and structure to ECE settings (Hayes, Hynes & Wolfe, 2013). The development of *Aistear* brought with it a more comprehensive idea of supporting play as a pedagogical core within early years in Ireland. Kernan (2007) refers to the development of Ireland’s first National Play Policy; *Ready, Steady, Play!* as instrumental in highlighting the need for more play opportunities both within childcare facilities and in public spaces.

The utilisation of play within settings is still varying and potentially conflicting, due to the vast nature of theoretical understandings about what play is, and how it can and should be utilised. Gray and Ryan (2016) conducted a study with primary teachers about the use of Aistear with the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) in Ireland and found that teachers valued play very highly and agreed it is central to children’s learning (99%), even though they are bound by a curriculum focused on formal book work and academic outcomes. The issue arising seemed to be that although teachers agreed that play was important, the lack of understanding of what children were really learning through play, contributed to their apprehension to use it.

Another reason for this conflict maybe the prominent use of the Montessori Method in ECE in Ireland that suggests a three-hour ‘work cycle’ for children, which would absorb all
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hours within the ECCE scheme. Further discussion around the historical and theoretical background of the method may help to clarify these apparent contradictions. The next two sections will give a background into both the Montessori method and the Aistear Curriculum Framework, in order to develop a deeper insight into current ECE practices in Ireland.

Montessori in ECE Today

**Historical context of Montessori.** The Montessori method of teaching is based on two major observations about child development. One follows the notion that there are four planes of development, within which, sensitive periods allow children to fulfil an inevitable biological maturation. And the other is that children possess an ability to absorb the surrounding environment just by being in it, which Maria Montessori herself saw as a power of self-development (Lillard, 1996). Dr. Maria Montessori considered every child to have a unique potential that could be fulfilled as long as the prepared environment provided appropriate activities and exercises that appealed to children’s intrinsic needs for order and independence. Previous research into French predecessors Itard and Seguin gave Montessori the teaching aids needed to fill these classrooms, which became known as the Montessori materials (Isaacs, 2018).

Montessori’s aim was to nurture each child’s individual needs so that they could reach their potential, with the goal of education, rather than the methods involved. By using the prepared environment for this, Montessori claimed that this was possible even if the adult present, or ‘directress’, was not highly qualified or experienced. In this sense the method took precedence over the teacher, something that was culturally relevant at the time as there was a lack of trained early years teachers (Curtis, 2003). Montessori gave children a voice and has been instrumental in highlighting the rights of the child over the traditional perspective of
adult versus child, ensuring that “this new education must foster an understanding of the real values of humanity” (Montessori, 2013, p.73).

**Key aspects of the Montessori method**

**Structure and Freedom with Limits.** In terms of overall structure, there is conflict about Montessori and how it is viewed. Some see it as rigid, with a three-hour work cycle and expectations about children’s behaviour. However, the method developed from close observation of children in relatively free environments, which contributed to the ‘freedom with limits’ aspect of the method that provides a complex and interrelated set of materials where children are free to make choices between the activities, in order to explore their own interests (Lillard et al., 2017). Montessori’s idea of discipline within this freedom was that “the individual is disciplined when he is master of himself” (Montessori, 1994, p. 67). This notion of student autonomy and a sense of responsibility among young children is fundamental to Montessori’s approach and is one of the most effective ways to improve motivation (Demirbaga, 2018).

**Materials.** Maria Montessori believed that the use of materials within a particular sequence of progression, appropriate to their stage of development was key to preparation for life as there is no complete freedom in society (Curtis, 2003). The materials are separated into five subjects; Arithmetic, Language, Sensorial, Practical Life and Culture, with 83 agreed sets of materials for the primary Montessori classroom (three to six year-olds). Montessori teachers are trained to repeatedly use the same materials for specific and extended learning i.e. with one piece of classwork, contextual language may be introduced during extended presentations of the same material to the child. A unique characteristic of the Montessori materials are the ‘control of error’ at which they become self-corrective, which supports the child’s independence and reduces the reliance on adult support during activities, so “they receive adequacy of their decisions from the materials themselves rather than from the
teacher” (Lillard, 2013, p. 164). For example, with the cylinder blocks, if a cylinder does not fit into a hole perfectly, the child will know they have made a mistake and can problem solve independently to correct. This also supports the self-educational aspect of the method.

**Interaction.** In a study that explored the culture and practice of Montessori education, Cossentino (2005) noted that ‘outsiders’ may find the interactions between teacher and child to be “incomprehensible” (p.224), due to the formal nature at which the adult invites the child to work, and the way in which the child’s concentration is protected once the child is engaged. Looking at depth reveals complex and sophisticated cognitive functioning, with regards to the multiple interactions operating. There are the interactions with the materials, which are multi-sensory, and thereby developing sensory discrimination, and there are the interactions with the adult, which maybe sparse from a language perspective, but all language used is intentional, relevant and used to signal cognitive transitions. These interactions between the child and materials, reveal to the adult their readiness to move to more advanced and complex exercises. In this sense, the interactions become crucial in the adult’s ability to support the child’s development (Lillard, 2013).

A lot of Montessori classwork involves individual exercises, presented one on one, that require concentration and focus, skills that are highly regarded in child development. There are also opportunities for small group work, which provides further social and contributory elements (Demirbaga, 2018). Lillard et al. (2017) found that after their longitudinal study, over the course of three years, that higher achievement in Montessori was not “at the expense of social skills or liking school” (p. 12). The opportunity for this is unlikely in early years settings in Ireland, however the extension of the ECCE programme to two years, has opened up the possibility more.
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Montessori in context. With Montessori and Preschool being almost synonymous, most people have come to recognise the method as the most popular curriculum in the early years in Ireland (Bowers, 2017). Although the method educates until age 12, in Ireland, Montessori primary schools are rare. With many early years’ settings wanting to associate with specific pedagogies or curricula as a form of representation, there are numerous settings which may label themselves as Montessori schools, but may not follow the method fully. This is more easily accessible to settings as “Montessori” is not a trademarked term (Lillard, 2013). It may also mean there are early years practitioners that are not specifically Montessori trained working there. This issue is highlighted even more so by the lack of regulation and inspection in relation to Montessori in Ireland.

Although Montessori is considered to be a form of playful learning (Lillard, 2013), it can be suggested that there is a focus on the ‘work’ aspect of Montessori and there is not enough focus on free play; something that is highly valued in a play-based learning approach (Wood, 2014). However Wisneski and Reifel (2012), in their discussion about current play practices within curricula, commented that we need to be reminded that the variety of types of play included in classrooms, within different curricula, reflects a wide range of beliefs about how play functions and that our ability to interpret different curricula allows us to become more open to the different ways in which it can be construed. Demirbaga (2018) also notes how Montessori holds its roots within a Vygotksian socio-cultural approach to learning but that it differs in the way that it is created from an artificial environment, as opposed to the natural environment ideal for a socio-cultural approach. It could be suggested that this artificial environment is at odds with the nature of play and exploration which are supported by emerging interests and authentic experiences.
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Aistear as a Curriculum Framework

**Background and implementation in Ireland.** Current literature suggests that although Montessori is a valued method within the Irish preschool system (Neylon, 2012), it is crucial to develop a curriculum framework that honours all current pedagogical practices without compromising on their values, whilst also placing a focus on play. The introduction of Aistear aimed to focus on a pedagogy of play-based learning, which Kernan (2007) suggests is a vision that both policy and an ideal for best practice have, but that the reality is not as clear. Although it is stated across research and documents that play is valued as central to children’s well-being and development,

a range of structural conditions, such as group sizes, restricted physical space, poor design and lack of resources, coupled with and interacting with pedagogical styles emphasising teacher direction, rather than child-initiative suggest that a coherent pedagogy of play may be currently absent in much ECCE provision in Ireland. (p. 15)

The need for better quality and resources with regards to ECE provision kickstarted the emergence of Aistear. With the introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2009, there were some requirements within early years settings that went with it. Firstly, that staff must meet a minimum qualification standard and secondly, that settings were required to implement the new national framework on curriculum, Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

The Framework itself aimed to standardise a national curriculum that incorporated the numerous pedagogical approaches present within Ireland and included “all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children’s learning and development” (NCCA, 2009, p. 54). The How Aistear Was Developed: Research Papers (NCCA, 2009) also had a major influence on the formation of the framework. With a focus on the education and care divide, how and why children
learn, play and assessment, the four papers give a theoretical background to the pedagogical foundations for the framework. French (2007) outlined that curriculum should be the totality of policies and practices and offer a complete programme that ensures that “the child is at the centre of curriculum planning rather than the child having to fit in with service demands” (p. 22).

Although the government funded the NCCA, it did not initially make any commitments to fund its implementation and so its usage in Early Years settings was initially limited, with a slow increase in the years since its introduction (Hynes, Hayes and Wolfe, 2013). It has also been reported that the framework has been used inconsistently as a result of the lack of funding with respect to its rollout, as there was no comprehensive implementation plan from the start (Roe & O’Neill, 2017). Since then, there have been further initiatives to support its continued use such as the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide in 2015 and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) which was established in 2016.

Recent years have shown more and more practical guides for practitioners to use with regards to observation and assessment and more importantly supporting children’s emerging interests, but these are often only made known through membership of associations and the support of initiatives such as the Better Start quality development initiative, established in 2014 that offers a mentoring service to enhance quality and practice in settings (Pobal, 2019).

**Principles and themes.** Aistear is based on a set of 12 principles grouped into 3 subsections that focus on children and their place in the world as citizens, children’s connection to others around them and how child learn and develop. These then drive a set of four themes; communication, well-being, thinking and exploring and identity and belonging, which are all-encompassing and harbour learning goals within them. Aistear’s themes place the child as a competent and confident learner at the centre of it, which supports a child-
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centred pedagogical approach that is commonly known to dominate ECE globally (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). The themes within the Aistear framework are intended to be used in an adaptable sense, and applicable across not only Early Years curricula but also the Primary School Curriculum.

**Aistear and play-based learning.** The Aistear Curriculum Framework values play as a context for children to collaborate and communicate. It emphasises the importance of time, in that children need time to develop their play, both inside and outside (NCCA, 2009) and literature to support this is in a 20 page document contained within the Framework called ‘Learning and developing through play’. The document focuses on the adult’s role within play, the environment and inclusive practice whilst also giving a practical guide through the use of the four themes. The variety of types of play are vast and Aistear acknowledges the use of all types, in order to enrich the experiences for children. Although Aistear identifies itself as a play-based learning approach, the use of the four interconnected themes also promotes a relational pedagogy approach (Neylon, 2014). Aistear acknowledges the child in relation to their community and the people in it, and therefore views them as an active contributor in society. Kernan (2007) also notes that alongside play relating to the child’s social surroundings and their relationships within this, that the physical aspect is key too and that “the play environment should provide challenge and freedom to move on diverse floor-areas, indoors and outdoors” (p. 4).

The implementation of Aistear has not only increased the awareness and use of play and play-based learning within ECCE settings in recent years but also in the early years of primary school of which the implementation has been visible within classrooms (Neylon, 2014). Teachers have stated that it has helped to increase the time spent on play and increased the importance of play, however there is still a lack of understanding of Aistear in general and although it was good in theory, it is difficult to put into practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016).
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Again, this has been attributed to an overall lack of confidence due to insufficient training in its practical use, with 94% of teachers from the study saying they would welcome further training (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The notion that Aistear’s implementation was stunted due to economic factors, such as austerity measures due to the financial crash led Moloney (2010a) to label it as a ‘soft policy’ initiative. This is further evidence of its under-utilisation at initial stages.

The continuous need for further and deeper knowledge of Aistear with regards to its practical use in preschool settings will be beneficial for enriching curricula in ECE in general across Ireland. Having outlined the main aspects of both the Montessori method and Aistear Curriculum Framework separately, looking at them together with a comparative outlook will be highly beneficial towards understanding how they both work from an integrative perspective, and whether or not their qualities engage with one another successfully.

Comparative Outlook on Montessori and Aistear

The environment and structure. The Montessori approach stresses the importance of the prepared environment as one of its key aspects offering freedom of movement, choice and expression (Isaacs, 2018) while providing an overall structure to the daily schedule, not dissimilar from what is supported in the Aistear framework, although there are varying levels of structure with regards to the activities within this. Children are free to choose their activities in both Montessori and within the Aistear framework, but there is more teacher-led direction in the ‘how’ of the activity with Montessori, as it remains tightly structured rather than the open form of scaffolding that Aistear promotes within its activities.

The overarching principle in Montessori is that the child takes a constructive approach to their own development, for themselves and their community (Lillard, 2013), something that is supported in Aistear, which highlights the sense of identity and belonging as one of its
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themes. Both Montessori and Aistear agree that the social environment is the most effective for learning and development. Some aspects of Montessori can be seen as tightly structured and in other ways, it mirrors a free-flowing classroom. For example, the children are expected to follow a cycle of work, where they choose exercises and place them back in the correct place once finished, move on to another exercise. However looking at the classroom from a macro level, you may see the children moving around independently, choosing their own exercises and needing little instruction from the adult. Whether or not it is seen as similar to Aistear in this sense, depends on which level one focuses on. Overall, from a structural aspect, Aistear and its principles seem to fit well into a Montessori classroom, and this is noted by Lillard (2013), who points out that with the right guidance both Montessori and play-based learning “appears to provide the structure that ensures that learning happens within the contexts of free choice” (p. 166).

**The materials.** The materials in the Montessori classroom are controlled to the point where if too many exercises are available, children will struggle to make choices (Lubienski Wentworth, 1999). Under the Aistear framework, the belief is that all activities should be available to children at all times, with no restrictions, so that the child’s independence is not hinged. The Montessori materials have a definitive purpose and contain a control of error not present within open-ended materials, something that is a key aspect of the exploratory nature of a play-based classroom like Aistear. The use of the pink tower within a Montessori classroom has a specific aim and should be constructed in a particular manner (from largest to smallest). However, under the Aistear pedagogy, the pink tower can be used however the child wants, with the cubes being built with no particular sequence, reflecting the exploratory characteristic outlined within it.

The structured curriculum that Montessori provides is an element not in the Aistear framework. This applies mainly to the way that the materials are used and how they are
defined from one another by subject. However, as Aistear works as a framework and does not insist on a particular set of activities, it is possible to view the four themes integrating into the Montessori subjects from a theoretical perspective. There was a significant time after the introduction of the Aistear framework, where Montessori practitioners struggled to see how the Montessori approach mapped into it, with very little practical tools to support them (Bowers, 2017). But the introduction of the Montessori to Aistear framework mapping tool (MAT) in 2010 from the Montessori Alliance has helped to see how the Montessori materials synergise with Aistear. The MAT is a comprehensive, living document that takes each of the Montessori exercises and matches them to the Aistear themes, aims and learning goals and was born out of the need for a common language amongst early years practitioners (Bowers, 2017). This is however, an online resource that although available to all, does not provide any practical, physical “in-house” training for the practitioner. There are still limited courses available for the practical implementation of Aistear within early years classrooms.

**The child, the adult and relationships.** It is widely agreed that the best learning outcomes for children involve contexts that are interactive (Lillard, 2013). This interactivity can be viewed from multiple perspectives but overall it involves the child and their interactions with their peers, the materials and the adults within the environment. Montessori believes that the sense of social cohesion that develops within children is directed by the unconscious power of communication (Isaacs, 2018) and this is mirrored in the ‘communicating’ themes of Aistear’s framework which recognises communication as a two-way activity that is crucial for language and development (NCCA, 2009). This communication and interactivity is supported by the practitioner within the environment, who observes the child’s interactions to determine readiness to progress. Within the Montessori method, this means that the teacher can closely follow the child’s progression through the materials and then introduce more activities from within the curriculum as the child is ready.
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From an Aistear perspective, within a play-based classroom, the adult observes the child to decipher where their interests lie, in order to extend the learning through these interests and develop short term plans. This is reflected in the ‘Key Person’ approach that Aistear promotes, where the practitioner can focus on particular children in the room in order to reassure the child that they are understood and respected (NCCA, 2009) and ensures one on one time with each child. The one on one approach is a key feature of the Montessori method most visible with the 3 period lesson which requires the adult to present new language with phonetics and numerals to one child at a time, developing their concentration with focused exercises. Both approaches promote the role of the adult in similar ways, recognising the need for one to one interactions. It is in the materials and activities that distinguish the differences rather than in the pedagogical approach.

The language of ‘work’ and ‘play’. From looking comparatively at the similarities and differences between the Montessori pedagogical approach and the Aistear Curriculum Framework, literature shows that there is discord most notably in the language used to describe both. Montessori has long advocated for a classroom environment that supports reality-based activities, and exercises are seen as work (Torrence, 2001; Lubienski Wentworth, 1999; Lillard, 2013). Montessori believed that children are at an age where they are trying to differentiate between fantasy and reality and introducing pretend play objects may cause confusion in their formative minds (Montessori, 1965). Conversely, the Aistear framework sees all activities within the ECE setting as some form of play, which manifests in many different forms. This creates the notion that Montessori and Aistear are distinct from one another on a basic level, but this may be more in relation to the language attributed as opposed to the actual activity occurring. Torrence (2001), makes some comparisons of the integrative functions of both ‘work’ in the Montessori classroom and ‘play’. It is noticed that there are less differences between the theoretical bases of each than it would appear. For
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example, Montessori sees the child’s work as accomplishment that feeds their sense of identity and self-esteem, and similarly through play, children use make-believe to form a concept of self and of others. Although Montessori herself opposed the notion of pretend play as adult amusement, believing that young children should be told the truth, she was not opposed to play in general terms.

The notion of the work/play contradiction raises the question of the child’s learning and development. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) note that although play is not the same as learning, that there are play elements in learning and vice versa. They also highlight that differentiations in ECE pedagogy do not have to result in controversy but suggest an environment where play is integrated into a goal-oriented classroom which will “see the playing learning child and, in doing so, make room for children’s creativity, choices, initiatives, reflections” (p. 638).

Professionalisation and Self-Reflection

There is evidence to suggest that the need for Continual Professional Development (CPD) is more important than ever, as much of the investment in the ECE sector has been targeted towards its physical infrastructure instead of training and qualifications. This excludes the professionals delivering curriculum who are fundamental to the quality of services experienced by the child (Walsh, 2016). The disparate separation between the qualification gap for Montessori and Aistear also deepens their differences further. Formal training in the form of a diploma or BA is necessary to teach Montessori however there is no formal training required at all to deliver the Aistear framework. Although it is necessary to have a FETAC Level 5 diploma to work in early years, these lower level qualifications (compared to, say, Primary School) “reflect not only the unplanned way in which the sector has developed but also the poorer pay levels and less favourable working conditions that
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prevail in childcare generally” (Murphy, 2017, p.295). This may perpetuate the casual use of Aistear from the practitioners’ perspective (Gray and Ryan, 2016).

Furthermore, this lack in training for Aistear may also contribute to practitioners’ inability to be self-reflective about their practice, as they feel a lack of confidence when asked to explain how they acted to support children’s learning (Stephen, 2010). This is supported by Hayes and Filipović (2018) who suggested that “to challenge and counteract the strong outcome discourse early years professionals must have confidence in their pedagogy” (p. 1).

Recent inspection reports (DES, 2018) have established a systemic need for CPD in early years education, particularly in relation to training in Aistear and Síolta. Further training in both Aistear and Montessori will only support and facilitate more opportunities for practitioners to be self-reflective, which as noted, is an important factor in delivering curriculum and will help to sustain the philosophies and practice (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering, 2016; Hayes and O’Neill, 2019; Moloney, 2010b). A recent study on ‘the perspectives of BA ECEC graduates about accessing employment and working in the early years sector in Ireland’ emphasises the strain that ECE professionals feel with regards to confidence in their practice and found a “pervasive tension between the potential of ECEC to be a rewarding and satisfying career, and the reality of employment conditions within the sector” (Moloney, 2015, p.334). There is increasing awareness of the link between confidence and professional identity in the sector. Moloney (2010b) discovered in research regarding practitioners perspectives that a sense of value was linked with the lack of mandatory training requirements in the sector.

The report on ‘competence requirements in early childhood education and care’ (CoRe) suggests recommendations that also make a connection between professional
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competence and the ability to develop and deliver curriculum, finding that quality of service is dependent on the competence of people working with children (Urban et al., 2012).

Conclusion and Relational Pedagogy

Hedges and Cooper (2018) place approaches to ECE across a continuum and suggest a more integrative pedagogy. They explain that at one end you might place free-play, which is hugely child-led with little adult input and at the other there is didactic teaching, which is majorly adult-led, academic and formal. Although these seem far from one another in style and pedagogical approach, the relationship between play, learning, curriculum and pedagogy is inseparable and interconnected and we find that the modern approach to ECE finds the continuum to be less defined and more complex. This is due, in part, to our historical reliance on developmental theory for creating ideologies and curriculum within ECE, centred around child-initiated play, but sociocultural theories have challenged this in recent years.

The recognition that interest is stimulated by not only the environment but the people in it, suggests that participation is key for learning and that learning becomes more effective when supported by these interactions (Broström, 2017). Although pedagogy attached to Montessori places the practitioner in the position of observer, the challenge for practitioners in the context of Aistear, is to encourage emergent and agentic play while encouraging a supportive practitioner role, as play becomes more meaningful when this is done. In an Aistear background paper, French (2007) states that socio-cultural theory underpins the pedagogy noting that “the child develops not in isolation but through relationships within the family, neighbourhood, community, and society” (p. 9).

It may be said that the Montessori method takes a developmental theory stance and Aistear takes a sociocultural stance, which leads to the notion that when seen together they may form a relational pedagogical approach (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). Both the Montessori
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method and Aistear framework honour the child’s interests as fundamental to their learning and experiences. Although there are distinct differences in their approaches which does create disparity between them, both the child’s interests and relationships, especially with the practitioner, are honoured. However, the practitioner’s ability to provide for this, incorporating play and acknowledging the child’s interests, while maintaining a connection to the Montessori method is the most important factor here.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter includes the rationale and aims for this study, the reasoning for the methodology adopted, and limitations and ethical considerations that were considered ahead of the design. A review of the literature has informed the researchers plan and ideas in relation to designing the study. The study explored practitioners’ experiences of their current and past practice in relation to pedagogical practices and their implementation. The study focuses on how the Aistear curriculum framework has engendered potential disparity within the Montessori classroom.

Rationale and Aims of Study

The Rationale for this study has arisen from personal professional experience as an early years’ educator, with qualification and experience of the Montessori method within numerous settings over the course of a decade. Having experienced an increasing amount of discord within curriculum provision i.e. what to implement and how to implement it, there are potentially conflicting approaches between the Montessori method and the Aistear curriculum framework. This piece of research took an exploratory approach towards the attitudes and perspectives of other Montessori trained professionals to ascertain if their experiences have been similar and how they perceive the potential divergence between Montessori and Aistear. This study aimed to determine views about the key aspects of both Montessori and Aistear and what curricula are currently being implemented in different classrooms.

Upon reviewing the relevant literature, commonalities and differences were established that helped to focus the study and inform the research questions at greater depth. Similarities were established between Montessori and Aistear identifying a convergence within theoretical interpretations and practical application of both. Differences highlighted an
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apparent divergence between understandings relating to play and learning, a lack of synchronicity in relation to policy and practice and uncertainty in relation to the implementation of Aistear as a curriculum framework.

Research Design

As with interpretive approaches to data collection and analysis, there is no single view of the data and so the participant and their experience is central to the research. As phenomenology is concerned with the construction of social life in order to make sense of the world, this research follows an interpretive constructionist paradigm, one that recognises multiple realities and merits perception as the key to creating these realities (Denscombe, 2014). The recognition of multiple realities implies that there is more than one explanation for how things are. In terms of this research, the use of semi-structured interviews enabled the elicitation of rich narratives for an emergent conceptualisation. This inductive process of data collection allows the data to build themes that connect and compare personal experiences and existing literature on the topic (Creswell, 2009). Participants in this study have defined their realities in relation to Montessori and Aistear based on their professional knowledge and skills, which is subjective. Hence choosing a qualitative method of data collection and analysis over a quantitative method supports the constructivist lens, allowing multiple realities to co-exist and contribute to data immersed in experiences.

Phenomenology. The phenomenological approach to research studies do not rely on measurement of statistics or take objective stances to data, rather it seeks to interpret the human experience and how it appears through our senses (Denscombe, 2014). As this research study focuses on individual’s subjective experiences within the classroom and with curricula, the phenomenological approach frames this exploration, intending to “understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participant” (Mertens, 2015, p. 247). This
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study is concerned with the experiences of early years practitioners and their feelings and attitudes towards the introduction and implementation of Aistear alongside the well-established prevalence of Montessori, in Ireland. Phenomenological research allows for analysis of a range of interpretations and according to Patton (2014), these methods are used to achieve analytical depth and can be used to emphasise saturation and transferability. So although it is a small-scale study, these multiple understandings give the research validity (Roberts-Holmes, 2014).

Further reasoning for this approach lies in previous research that follows similar lines of inquiry and defends a qualitative approach. Shuker (2004) investigated Montessori from a historical and cultural context in New Zealand. The use of qualitative methods is highlighted by the researcher’s role within the study, because the researcher needs to be “responsive to the context, sensitive to non-verbal aspects, and had the ability to consider the total context, process data immediately, clarify and summarise as the study evolved” (p. 7). Similarly, a thesis which analysed the effects of policy changes and a strategic plan for a new approach to early years was carried out in New Zealand. Freeman (2008) interviewed Montessori trained practitioners in order to capture how they were making sense of the changes and also to ascertain commonalities within this.

**Positionality.** As with phenomenological research, the researcher needs to be aware of their position in relation to the content and context of the data being analysed. The inherent focus of all research is representative of the standpoint of the researcher (Mertens, 2015) and bias cannot be ignored with regards to personal investment in the research. Denscombe (2014) notes that this is an integral part of the research, especially with regards to the data collection, but it also raises issues of reliability. As all text and data that emerges from this research is steeped in context and personal experience, there cannot be any claim to universal truth due to its collaborative construction.
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It is therefore important that I suspend my own beliefs about the topic in order to get pure and thick descriptions from the perspectives of the participants. As I am also a Montessori trained practitioner, currently implementing the Montessori method under the Aistear framework, I have a personal line of inquiry in this research. I have been practising the Montessori method for 10 years, and although the Aistear Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2009, there was no onus on practitioners to implement it immediately. Increasingly, over the years, Aistear has been promoted and Montessori appears to lack support, with regards to CPD and Inspection. It appears that practitioners, like myself, are found to be in a struggle as to how to confidently and cohesively blend both approaches, while remaining true to both curricula. While I believe in the holistic curriculum that Montessori provides, I also believe a play-based approach is essential to a child’s development, alongside child-led and emergent activity. Although I have a personal and professional interest in this research, I endeavour to remain objective while adhering to the literature and data, as is reflective in a phenomenological approach, that respects the variety of interpretations to data.

Qualitative Research

There are philosophical and methodological implications related to the use of qualitative methods in research. This study strived to gain a greater insight into the pedagogical processes within the early years sector in Ireland. Using qualitative methods allow for authentic accounts of experiences that strive to be detailed and complex in order to gain deeper insight. In addition, qualitative research is more suited to small-scale research, which in this case is particularly suitable as the interviews were intended to be personal, in-depth and rooted in text-rich data, open for the multiple interpretations that phenomenology brings.
Phased qualitative data. When considering the qualitative method of data collection, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was the most suitable and appropriate fit. However, to enrich the interview process, and hopefully gain a more in-depth view of participants’ real position in relation to the research questions, reflective journals were presented to participants, prior to the interview process. These would be a form of observational reflection during class time for a period of two weeks.

The use of participant reflective journals prior to interviews may help to acknowledge any researcher influence as the questions within the interview schedule were formed upon preliminary analysis of the reflective journals. By inviting participants to collaborate on the formulation of the research questions it allows for further reflexivity and interactivity (Agee, 2009). Participants make meaning through their actions, the use of journal documents marries this action and intention. Using reflective journals as a source of primary data contains a value beyond its literal contents, in this case, with informing the interview questions (Denscombe, 2014).

Reflective practice. A reflexive element to the research design is aimed at creating critical self-reflection for the researcher and participants (Ortlipp, 2008), and underpins the interconnectedness between both. By inviting the participants to be reflective on their practice within the classroom, it may help to clarify purpose, focus personal stance and help to shape the study overall (Agee, 2009).

Data Collection Procedures

Preliminary document analysis (reflective journals). The data collection procedure for this research followed a phased approach with preliminary documentary analysis followed by interviews. Reflective journals were used as a form of documentary data and although significant in formation of the interview schedule, were not the main form for data collection.
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The majority of data collected was through interviews. Reflective journals were used as a participatory data collection strategy to gain background knowledge of the participants’ situations and gain insights into the everyday practice within the classroom. These documents were intended to track any interesting observations practitioners made during class time that may be relevant to the synergy or divergence of Montessori and Aistear practice. They also gave the researcher a retrospective account of behaviours and thoughts and were analysed by coding and themed appropriately (see Appendix E). These are elicited documents that the researcher asked the participants to create which Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) as cited by Saldaña (2016) explain “must be examined critically because they reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors” (p. 61). This also gives the researcher an insight into the specific language used by participants, prior to the interview process, which may also represent a limitation to their use, as not all participants use language equally.

Interviews. The decision to use interviews as the appropriate method of data collection is based firstly on the qualitative nature of the study and secondly on the explorative aspect to the research questions. Using a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions allowed for the participants to convey attitudes and experiences more freely, “providing a broader lens for the researcher’s gaze” (Mertens, 2015, p. 384). Keeping a certain degree of structure to the interviews ensured that specific topics were addressed but allowed the participants to express their opinions without pressure and develop ideas with flexibility (Denscombe, 2014).

Gaining access to participants with relative ease also supported the decision, with one on one interviews lasting between 25 and 45 minutes. Questions followed a loosely themed structure based on insight gained from the literature review and data from reflective journals. Each interview included one or more questions specifically tailored towards that participant,
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based upon recurring themes within the reflective journals, that sparked relevance and interest for the broader research questions (see Appendix C for full interview schedule).

- Participants were asked for a certain amount of **background** information relating to their previous experience and practice for participant comparison.
- Participants were asked to give a general perspective on **curriculum aspects** of both Montessori and *Aistear* to establish personal understandings.
- Questions around **theoretical underpinnings** relating to Montessori and *Aistear* that emerged from the review of the literature and the reflective journals.
- Participants were asked about their **current practice** to establish attitudes and how they relate to policy and curriculum provision.
- Participants were invited to express views around reflective journals and be **reflective** about general practice.

The interviews were planned to follow a structure of eight interviews, with two planned per week for four weeks within the office of the workplace of each participant (consent was gained for this prior to use). However, there were major social and health factors (COVID-19 pandemic) that inhibited the continuation of face to face interviews. Four interviews were conducted previous to this, following a code of conduct whereby all participants were re-confirmed the day before, given a re-cap of the interview protocol and given another opportunity to remove consent if they so wish. The remaining three interviews were then conducted by phone call, with one participant withdrawing from the research at this point.

The move from face-to-face interview to phone interview has methodological implications. Although the use of telephone interviews is an increasingly utilised method of
collecting data (Glogowska, Young and Lockyer, 2011), it still has some limitations that need to be recognised as it “challenges conventional notions of the function and purpose of qualitative interviews and the extent to which qualitative research can be conducted at a distance” (Lechuga, 2011, p. 251). Extra planning needed to be put in place with regards to technical considerations, timing and consent. Consent forms were posted to participants and returned prior to the interview taking place. Although the assumption that creating rapport may be more difficult with the lack of face to face communication, the fact that I knew the participants prior to the process made this less of a consideration. In addition, there is an assumption that “the time for a telephone interview may be less than that for its face-to-face counterpart” (Glogowska, Young and Lockyer, 2011, p.24), however I found this not to be the case. Interviews were timed, on average, at more than the face to face counterparts. This does not dismiss the notion that the element of remoteness potentially affected the interview, had it been face to face. The lack of visual contact has physical and psychological implications (Denscombe, 2014). All interviews were transcribed within 2 days of interview by the researcher for optimum absorption of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

**Sample.** There were certain key criteria necessary in relation to conducting this research. Participants were purposefully selected in order to best understand the problem and explore the research questions. In this case, the participants needed to be qualified for 5 years or more, be Montessori trained and currently practising while implementing the *Aistear* curriculum framework, to varying degrees (see Table 1). These attributes support the use of purposeful sampling and is used as it intends to get the most valuable and optimal data (Denscombe, 2014). With data being collected through two methods; Documentary and Interviews, it was decided that 8 participants would be sufficient. Denscombe (2014) notes that in this case, the size of the sample is not governed by accuracy but rather by how informative it is.
Participants were contacted via phone call (for contacts already known) and for anyone not known to me but known through a mutual contact, contact details were presented to a mutual contact which allowed them to contact me if and when they wanted to, in order to stay in line with data protection and issues concerning consent. For participants not known at all, ECCE settings within the community were contacted via email, using my college email address. Once participants were confirmed, an information letter regarding data collection procedures and consent form were sent out via email to all participants detailing protocol (see Appendix A and B). Consent forms were re-presented at time of interviews for signing. This process proved to be complex due to complications regarding phone interviews. In the case of phone interviews, consent forms were posted out to be signed and posted back prior to the interview taking place.

Participants were fully informed about being recorded (by digital audio recorder) and how the interviews would be transcribed subsequent to the end of the interview. Participants were also informed about confidentiality and anonymity with relation to their data. Preparation of the data included backing up the transcriptions on to an encrypted USB storage device that will be kept in a locked cabinet, along with reflective journals, to ensure the data is protected. Interviews overall flowed well. There was flexibility within order of the questions, allowing participants to explore perspectives. If subject matter was being changed, participants were briefed about moving to another topic to keep structure and clarity. In cases where answers were short and not explanatory, additional questions were asked to extend data received.
## Table 1

**Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Qualification (All Relevant)</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Curriculum being Implemented</th>
<th>Current Role (Self Evaluated)</th>
<th>Affiliation with Organisations</th>
<th>CPD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Level 6 VECE Childcare and Mont. Dip.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Play-based following Aistear. Montessori Shelf in room</td>
<td>Play-school Teacher</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B.Soc.Sc H.Dip. in Montessori Teaching (Level 8)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Play-based Room (Aistear)</td>
<td>Observe and Support</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Mont. Dip Early Childhood Education (Level 8)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Montessori blended with Aistear</td>
<td>Dual Role: Service Provider and Montessori Teacher</td>
<td>• Association of Early Childhood Professionals • Montessori Alliance • London School of Montessori</td>
<td>Recently Completed Level 8 (&lt; 2 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Mont. Dip Early Years Education (Level 8)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Montessori blended with Emergent Curriculum (Aistear)</td>
<td>Service Provider and Room Leader</td>
<td>• St. Nicholas Montessori Society • Montessori Alliance • Federation of Early Childhood Professionals</td>
<td>Recently Completed Level 8 (&lt; 2 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>National Diploma in Humanities and Montessori Education (Level 7)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Montessori and Aistear mixed (Bigger focus on Aistear)</td>
<td>Owner and Teacher</td>
<td>• Early Childhood Ireland • Federation of Early Childhood Professionals</td>
<td>LINC Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mont H.Dip Early Years Education (Level 6)</td>
<td>SNA (Level 6)</td>
<td>Play-based, Emergent Curriculum</td>
<td>Observer and Support</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Currently studying Level 7 Early Years Ed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>BA Hons Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>H. Dip Montessori (AMI)</td>
<td>Montessori blended with Play-based (Aistear)</td>
<td>Room Leader</td>
<td>Association of Early Childhood Professionals</td>
<td>Aistear Implementation Course (1 Day)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis Procedures

Once the interviews were completed, they were systematically transcribed – a process which required listening to the recordings and typing conversations, word for word. This took approximately four hours per interview and required careful attention. By transcribing the interviews myself I was able to become immersed in it, something that is key to the familiarity of the data (Saldaña, 2016).

Meaning was gathered from the data through coding that involved “assigning a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute to a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Coding itself was a reflexive process as it contains numerous phases in order to incorporate all data. Mertens (2015) cites Charmaz (2006) for advice on the initial coding phase which was followed. This included staying close to the data, ensuring codes were short and precise and that data was compared to data. Focused coding was then applied which helped “lead to identifying relations among the coding categories and organizing them into a theoretical framework” (Mertens, 2015, p. 442). The coding process was completed using a computer software program MAXQDA, which allowed for data sets to be organised virtually. Reliability procedures included checking transcripts for mistakes and ensuring coding remained stable in its definitions by comparing data across codes.

Following from this, thematic analysis was applied, which allowed coding to move towards categorisation and moved the data from descriptive in nature into a more analytical context. Themes were created by looking for similarities, differences and also relationships between categories, while still acknowledging the interpretive nature of the data at which the codes were created. As with the phenomenological approach, particular attention was paid to
the subjective nature of the data when creating codes. Analysis from reflective journals was referenced, with regards to recurring themes, for strength of validity and triangulation (see Appendix E).

**Validity**

Issues surrounding validity have been addressed throughout, to a certain extent. Transparency is crucial for clarity within the research trail and highlights issues of validity (Robert-Holmes, 2014) and the use of validity strategies help to confirm the consistency of researcher procedures (Creswell, 2009).

Using a semi-structured approach means that consistency is hard to achieve. Individuals use varying amounts of contextual language and how that language is perceived by the researcher is relevant, but also how the researcher is perceived by the participants. ‘The Interviewer Effect’ recognises that participants will respond differently to the researcher based on certain characteristics. Specifically, in this study, a number of the participants are known to me personally. However, as the research relates to personal practice within their own classrooms, it should not affect the established relationships or what information is exchanged. In order to minimise any additional intervening variable, as researcher, I remained friendly, open and casual in nature throughout the duration of interviews.

**Clarifying the bias.** Acknowledging personal interest in the research topic adds an additional element of self-reflection to the study. By using self-reflection tools throughout it will allow me to challenge my assumptions about curriculum provision and pedagogical processes (Robert-Holmes, 2014). Additional potential bias lies in the participant sample and what Mertens (2015) refers to as the “researcher as friend” (p. 259) characterisation. As I have relationships with the participants, clarification on how this may affect the data needs to be acknowledged. On one hand participants may feel safer divulging personal perspectives to
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A stranger but on the other hand, a pre-existing relationship can bring about a rapport that allows participants to feel more at ease and willing to share.

**Credibility – member checking.** Validity is seen as an interactive process, especially in qualitative research and assessing credibility is seen as a form of internal validity for the research (Mertens, 2015). Using member checking allowed for the accuracy of the data, both raw and within findings, to be somewhat validated by the participants. Transcripts were emailed to participants within 48 hours of the interview to cross check for my interpretation of the data to be accurate. This allows for interpretation beyond the researcher and strengthens the raw data before analysis began.

**Triangulation** – The process of data triangulation was used across data sets in order to improve the validity of the data (Denscombe, 2014). This was done by taking analysis from the reflective journals (see Appendix E) and comparing it to data gained from interviews in order to assess common themes and validity within those themes. The reflective journal data acted as complementary data as it was in a different format, but still related to the production of further data (interviews). The triangulation across these data sets provided the research with further insight and information.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues have been addressed to the extent that consent, confidentiality (use of pseudonyms) and personal and protected information have been considered. All participants are informed about their anonymity and the protection of their data through the use of an information letter (see Appendix A) and consent form (see Appendix B). As a researcher I was as clear as possible about the purpose and intent with the research so that participants felt informed and valued (Creswell, 2009). Member checking also adds an element to this as ethically, interviewees could confirm that their data was interpreted correctly. This particular
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research area does not highlight any particular sensitivities or triggers but understanding and tact will be used at all times in relation to participants.

Limitations

The use of qualitative methods within a phenomenological study means that there is an emphasis on interpretation and subjectivity which means that there are limitations that come with it (Denscombe, 2014). As this is a small-scale study about a very specific phenomenon there are a number of limitations within the study to be acknowledged.

• Firstly, the sample size, although sufficient, was small. The occurrence of COVID-19 circumstances also meant that one participant pulled out and there was not sufficient time or resources to find another. It must also be mentioned that although the participants are all currently practising ECE professionals, that the study did not involve participants from other areas of the sector, such as parents or inspectors. Due to the scale of the research it was a conscious decision to take the data specifically from the practitioners’ perspective.

• There is a current lack of research in this particular topic. Previous studies of similar breadth have been mentioned to a certain extent, however, due to the specific nature of the topic, and the cultural relevance (Ireland specific), international research was used to a large degree for comparative reasons.

• Policy and management constraints also need to be mentioned as a possible limitation to the data received from participants. In most cases participants are practising in classrooms where there is a high degree of autonomy. However, management and service providers also influence curriculum provision and pedagogical practices which may have an effect on practice within the classroom.
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Conclusion

This topic for study lends itself towards qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews due to the need for open dialogue based on experiences and opinions. Purposeful sampling was used in order to access participants in a specific group of people that are Montessori trained, currently practising with a minimum amount of experience. Reflexivity has been acknowledged throughout, with a focus on self-reflection as both researcher and practitioner. Participants were also invited to be self-reflective to attain a sense of consistency throughout.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Overview of the Chapter

The data extracted from the seven semi-structured interviews that were held with currently practising Montessori trained practitioners, provided this research with rich and varied analysis. The following chapter will discuss findings that has emerged from the data through the process of coding and thematic analysis described in the methodology. The following themes and subthemes emerged as the most relevant in relation to research questions and literature:

Theme 1: Policy and pedagogical change
- Attitudes towards ECCE policy
- *Aistear* – curriculum vs curriculum framework
- A sense of forced change

Theme 2: Curriculum Conflict
- The devaluation of Montessori
- Work and play
- Benefits of Montessori: individual activity and concentration
- Benefits of *Aistear*: collective thinking and interactions

Theme 3: CPD and adaptation
- Lack of support
- CPD and changing perspectives
- Reflective practice

A number of the following findings relate closely to previously discussed literature and research. For example, findings that relate to ECCE policy formation and participants’ attitudes towards this were recurring, along with certain conflicting aspects of curricula that
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are present between both the Montessori method and Aistear framework (see Appendix D). However, participants also introduced some original data, which will be discussed through a theoretical lens, in order to provide insight and further understanding of attitudes in relation to the topic. The variety in findings reflects a range of interpretations of the data, something which Patton (2014) believes gives depth to the study, something that is key in phenomenological approaches to research.

Although no formal sub-groups have been distinguished within the participant profiles, for the purpose of analysis there is a distinction within certain themes between participants who have engaged in recent CPD and those who have not. This is relevant to some of the unique findings within the chapter and will be clarified further as it relates to discussion.

**Theme 1: Policy and Pedagogical Change**

**Attitudes towards ECCE policy.** Participants made distinct connections between the recent changes in early years policies and how this has affected some substantial elements within their classrooms. This was most notably in relation to curriculum provision, as according to one participant “it has diluted what we do” (Participant C). This challenges Neylon’s (2012) analysis with regards to a sense of ‘uniformity’ that the ECCE scheme intended to provide, with a more streamlined approach to preschool provision, that aimed to harmonise curricula as “pedagogical approaches were not uniform” (p.2). It highlights the ongoing issues of quality and the education and care divide that continues to dominate childcare provision in Ireland, something noted by Murphy (2015).

At a macro level, overall participants agreed that the ECCE scheme had been beneficial for children, with participant B stating that there were children “who wouldn’t have been able to access preschool facility before”, which is reflected in elements of the First
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5 Strategy, which “seeks to further improve affordability, accessibility and quality” (DCYA, 2018, para. 11) and in the fact that the ECCE scheme opened up a significant amount of places in services for children to access; participation rates were at 90% for all eligible children within a year of operation (Hayes, Hynes and Wolfe, 2013). Furthermore, participants commented that the scheme has brought early years to the forefront as “the scheme is a great introduction into the early years setting” (Participant E).

However when exploring attitudes towards the ECCE scheme at micro level, and in regards to personal practice within services, participants seemed to feel less confidently about changes that the ECCE scheme has brought about. For example, Participant C stated “for the children who only operate or come here for the 3 hours, has put massive stress on all pedagogical practices, I believe, but in particular Montessori”. Neylon (2012) also noted that these changes came “as a surprise” (p.5) to practitioners with regards to changing work practices. Similarly, Murphy (2015) highlighted that although there was improved co-ordination at government level, this did not imply improved standards with regards to quality.

The attitude that the ECCE scheme falls short in ensuring quality ECE for children with was because it cost “too much money and too much time, yep” (Participant D). This supports Murphy’s (2015) previously discussed idea that quality is about more than financial investment but that economic funding with regards to the ECCE scheme is crucial in order for improvements in both quality and accessibility.

Noting that participant C and D are both service providers/owners, and have been for over 10 years, there is an element of reflection upon how the ECCE scheme has had pedagogical implications for them.

And the thing that it has done for curriculum is, parents aren’t choosing where they come. So initially, back in the day before ECCE was available. When a parent came
to me, I had to give them the sell, and they then had a choice to go off to other schools and decide whether they wanted to go Steiner, Montessori… (Participant C).

Although the ECCE scheme has provided more available places for children, practitioners feel like it has taken the identity away from their curriculum and that potentially some parents are more concerned with getting a place rather than what it is that their children will be learning. This once again highlights the education and care divide being experienced in Ireland. Hayes, Hynes and Wolfe (2013) note the large focus on affordability for parents and viewing childcare as a welfare service, that potentially undermines the importance of quality curriculum provision.

Because the ECCE scheme, it is free for parents, therefore they are not that inclined to send their children, they don’t have that same educational investment (Participant E)

This potential decrease in educational investment from parents may be related to the three free hours of ECE a day. Although it is a positive step for parents financially, practitioners may feel that interest in curriculum choice becomes less relevant. However, - with the introduction of Aistear, practitioners have a framework to adhere to and promote that can be applied to any early years setting. Although the OECD Starting Strong III Report (2012) recognised the added value in having a curriculum framework in place that values individual approaches, this is potentially not being honoured at practitioner level. The following sections will explain this further.

**Aistear – curriculum vs curriculum framework.** Overall, participants displayed mixed opinions towards Aistear that exhibit its inconsistent implementation. There appears to
be a distinct group with regards to this, with participant A, B and E expressing a more negative, if possibly misinformed view of it.

Participant B clearly stated “I 100% prefer the Montessori method to the Aistear method”. When asked further to explain why, reference was made to the work cycle, and how practical life exercises promoted independence with everyday tasks. During development of Aistear, Kernan (2007) makes reference to the value of play and child-centred approaches, and how it was currently missing in pedagogical practices across ECE in Ireland.

One participant displayed the attitude that Aistear was perhaps imposing on well-established pedagogical practices:

actually hold on it’s our school and we studied for this long and we love Montessori and the method so we’re trying to, we are pulling back a little bit more (Participant E).

The fact that participant E was ‘pulling back’ could represent that Aistear brought with it a radical change that was too different to current Montessori based practices. Participant E describes policy surrounding Aistear as intending to impose on Montessori, misunderstanding that as a framework, it intended to support and honour all current pedagogical practices without compromising on their values (Neylon, 2012). Participant B also shared this misunderstanding, stating “So, I felt I had to throw out Montessori and introduce this brand new curriculum.” This lack of knowledge surrounding the voluntary implementation of Aistear may be linked to the absence of a coherent roll-out plan that Roe and O’Neill (2017) state is a result, once again, of a lack of funding. Moloney (2010) places the financial crash of 2008 as partly to blame for this lack of funding. Perhaps this ‘soft policy’ initiative is another contributing factor towards the misinterpretation of Aistear.
One thing I feel about Aistear, also it’s something that has been forced upon us. It’s a government implemented curriculum. Whereas with Montessori I chose to study Montessori, I wanted this to be part of my teaching philosophy. Whereas Aistear is very much a case of the ECCE scheme was implemented and we have to implement Aistear along with that (Participant E).

Here, Participant E clearly views the ECCE scheme and Aistear concurrently, suggesting that one had to be implemented with the other, the result of a poorly implemented initiative perhaps. It could also be related to feedback from inspections that implied that Montessori was less important as a result of the further establishment of Aistear – “I’ve had inspectors tell us ‘its lovely that you have all of these Montessori materials’ but that it doesn’t matter that much” (Participant E).

Participant A added “My issue is taking a Montessori classroom and making it into an Aistear classroom. I don’t believe that Aistear brings anything to the table that Montessori didn’t already”. These attitudes further illustrate how practitioners felt powerless with regards to Aistear, and remained unaware how Montessori did not need to be disregarded with its implementation. Up until recently, there has been very little practical or visual guide for how the Aistear framework was meant to integrate with the Montessori method. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide in 2015 and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) in 2016 provided accessible information on how to utilise the framework but this is 6 and 7 years respectively after its initial introduction, which is a significant amount of time. There are additional but minimal resources available illustrating the integrative possibilities, but only available mainly to practitioners that are connected to associations and groups.

Considering the Montessori method is the most popular curriculum in early years in Ireland (Bowers, 2017), it is surprising that there are not more widely available resources.
A sense of forced change. The view on *Aistear* as a curriculum, rather than a framework is reinforced by attitudes that it is prescriptive and involuntary. Participant B felt that “with everything that has gone on with ECCE and the DES inspections we have been forced to change and maybe more so than I would have liked to”. Again, the impression practitioners gained from the Inspectorate was that of promoting *Aistear*, perhaps to the detriment of Montessori.

With there being such fast-paced change within ECE policy in recent years, there was a general sense that this change has been forced upon practitioners and service providers, having financial implications for business owners of early years settings –

When the ECCE became involved, they [services] didn’t want to change but they couldn’t sustain it as a business because people are not going to pay for preschool when they don’t have to. (Participant A).

The feeling of forced change became more apparent in relation to the implementation of the *Aistear* Curriculum Framework and how it compromised their Montessori practice - “I think Montessori schools as Montessori schools were, there wasn’t any need to change it” (Participant A). Participant B also shared this opinion: “I suppose my preference is Montessori but I feel within the workplace you are under pressure to come from an *Aistear* perspective”. Participant C also echoed this sense of resistance to *Aistear*

because it was forced upon us, and was something we absolutely had to engage in, as part of our contractual commitment to the government, with regard to the ECCE scheme, I had to implement it.
This sense of forced change expressed by participants may have caused a kind of resistance to using the *Aistear* framework but also potentially represents a sense of professional disillusionment that many of the participants discussed, which may also have fed the negative backlash towards *Aistear* in general. Gray and Ryan (2016) argue that without appropriate training with regards to play-based approaches, primary school teachers often fall back on more familiar “teachy” (p. 191) ways. This could also be applied to early years practitioners. The sense of professional disillusionment may stem from a lack of confidence that comes from “a lack of familiarity with the play-based approach to learning and the availability of training” (p.191). This in turn, may cause practitioners to revert to Montessori as a more familiar base for instruction.

**Theme 2: Curriculum Conflict**

The perceived conflict between some of the participants (A, B and E most notably) not being able to view Montessori as integrative with *Aistear* could be down to a number of issues. Using an example within the classroom, one participant explains the contentious nature of the use of Montessori materials under the *Aistear* framework:

> with *Aistear* I think, it encourages the child to mix materials, whereas again with Montessori, you are not allowed to mix the brown stairs with the pink tower until you have them both mastered. (Participant G)

With the sensorial materials in the Montessori philosophy, there is an inbuilt sense of purpose that means that the child can control error and complete an activity, if carried out in the way it is intended. Exploration is encouraged but usually once the activity has been ‘mastered’.
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This struggle to link both may be because “I suppose you deviate from your set curriculum” (Participant B) with Montessori, something that is usually not practised, as Montessori herself devised a full curriculum that intended to cover all aspects of development. When viewing Montessori and Aistear comparatively it was suggested that the notion of the child’s choice seemed to be relevant. The child’s ability to make choices and follow their interests is a common characteristic of both Montessori and *Aistear*. It is possible that the fear of deviating from the Montessori curriculum is rooted in unfamiliarity with *Aistear* and play in a wider sense. Wood (2014) suggests that free choice and free play always have a degree of control due to teachers’ beliefs and values they attribute to play, but that acknowledging “the complexity of children’s experiences” (p. 16) allows for more critical engagement. This might result in interpreting curricula with flexibility and consequently make them more accessible.. As Bowers (2017) stated, there are few practical tools available for uniting both Montessori and *Aistear* to empower practitioners to embrace this flexibility. Making resources similar to the MAT (Montessori and Aistear mapping tool) more widely accessible would be beneficial as it comprehensively and visually shows how the Montessori materials blend into the *Aistear* themes.

The apparent separation between *Aistear* and Montessori expressed by the participants may have a link to an ideological view of the Montessori method that practitioners may have. Multiple participants expressed views about Montessori that reflect a “strict Montessori” approach (using the words of Participant E), potentially disabling an ability to see the method in a reflexive and integrative manner. Participant B expressed that “I’m not saying that you can’t deviate, but if you were to deviate all the time then I would feel that yea, they would be missing out on important aspects”. This worry about deviating from the Montessori method is further illustrated by views that “the materials are nearly seen with a reverence” (Participant E) and that they are “really genuine Montessori materials. It was just lovely” (Participant C).
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This “high respect level of the Montessori materials” (Participant E) reflects the approach that Montessori does not easily adapt to other practices. When asked about how an emergent curriculum may affect their Montessori practice, Participant G felt:

> If I was being a true Montessori teacher to the letter of the law, then if a child is interested in the pink tower and wants to expand it by bringing in people or other blocks or that kind of thing, I’m supposed to say no. So that’s not supporting their emerging interests.

The recognition that practising Montessori in the traditional sense does not line up with an emergent curriculum suggests an element of ideal practice that practitioners may feel attached to, especially in relation to the Montessori method. Participant A refers to past practice and how “when I started with the service that we’re with it was one classroom and it was a Montessori classroom, purely Montessori classroom”. The reference to a ‘purely Montessori’ classroom suggests that any integration with another pedagogy or framework, such as Aistear, may negatively affect this.

**The devaluation of Montessori.** Issues surrounding implementing both Montessori and Aistear highlight the concept of choice within practice, and potential issues surrounding a sense of devaluation of the Montessori method that participants also expressed. This was most evident in relation to Aistear and how its implementation may have overshadowed the Montessori method. A number of participants expressed how their practice has been affected by their perception that the Montessori materials had lost their pedagogical purpose, because the children were not using them in the way that they were originally intended.
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It was completely turned upside down in my opinion. You know, just went in one day and you know the pink tower and broad stairs that I learnt how to teach, now is a princess castle that has been knocked to the ground and the respect for the materials is not there (Participant A).

Allowing exploration with the Montessori materials holds contention. Under the Aistear framework, explorative play allows for the child to express themselves creatively and gain knowledge of himself (NCCA, 2009) but by doing so, is the Montessori exercise fulfilling its intended purpose, and is this important? Torrence (2011) refers to this as “unsanctioned play occurring during designated work time” (p.10) and also noted that in a study asking 128 Montessori trained practitioners whether they would intervene in this unsanctioned play, only 19% were very likely to (while using sensorial materials). Therefore, respondents knew not to intervene but are still potentially viewing it as negative practice. Respondents also agreed they wanted to incorporate more play elements in their classroom, establishing that play is valued. Perhaps the unfamiliarity with free play is causing this perceived ‘devaluation’ of the Montessori method. Conversely, Lillard (2013) recognises that the use of specific materials in Montessori makes it more restrictive than play-based approaches to learning, perhaps validating the sense of devaluation.

Participant B also felt that “I didn’t really like the implementation of it because it kind of pushed the Montessori curriculum out of the way”. This was even more apparent when asked how the introduction of Aistear had impacted Montessori practice as “I think a couple of years ago it would have been all Montessori material on all the shelves whereas now it’s just one shelf of Montessori” (Participant G). Participant A also felt that the Montessori method had been negatively impacted by Aistear saying “I think it was decimated. Completely. Decimated it completely and devalued it.”
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Perhaps the time taken to study the Montessori method was a factor in the perspectives around being valued. In this research, 5 of the 7 participants have reached FETAC level 7 or above (with specific Montessori qualifications) and expressed, “I do feel a little bit like the respect of what I studied was taken away because they don’t value it anymore” and “well I didn’t study 3 years of Montessori to not use it” (Participant E). The attitude towards study and time taken to become qualified is shared by Participant D who thought:

There was plenty of people working in early years education that had no training and this is something that really bothered me. Because there were rooms calling themselves Montessori rooms that had absolutely no training and then you had other rooms where you had 3 teachers that were fully trained in the rooms. And they were considered the same.

With their being no formal training in Aistear, it compares immensely to the training required to practice the Montessori method. Although practitioners are aware of the value of play, they have limited knowledge in how to implement it (Gray and Ryan, 2016). Montessori training can involve modules on play pedagogies and child development, but doesn’t always. This is especially relevant for practitioners that have not qualified recently and not engaged in any CPD (this accounts for 3 of the 5 participants that hold FETAC Level 7 or above), and may contribute to their confidence and ability to provide curriculum content, especially with a seemingly contradictory framework alongside it.

Work and play. There is an ongoing debate surrounding the possible dichotomy of the child’s work and the child’s play (Lillard, 2013; Torrence, 2011). Traditionally, Montessori children partake in a three hour ‘cycle of work’, however in practice, the term
‘playful learning’ may be more appropriate (Lillard, 2013) in order to disperse the idea that they are two different things. Participant D recognised this issue and places it in an historical context;

I think where we have fallen down in recent years is, when I was growing up your mother said “go out and play, go and play with your friends, play with your toys”. It was something that you were sent to do, not that the adult really engaged all that much with.

This view on play in general reflects the ideas of Torrence (2001) who believed that the apparent dichotomy surrounding work and play was less about the integrative functions of both and more about the language engrained in people. When asked about play within a Montessori environment, Participant D went on to say “You see I have an issue with the difference between the word ‘play’ and the word ‘work’. I think it’s all down to language. And to me, play and work are actually the same thing”. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) recognise that play and learning are often separated, and that this approach pervades rhetoric in relation to early years education. Recognising that play and learning are inseparable, and using the terms ‘work’ and ‘play’ interchangeably, as they suggest, may help to dispel the perceived dichotomy. The multiple definitions and understandings of play that exist also contribute to this. Lillard (2013) refers to Montessori as ‘playful learning’, as distinct from ‘play’ in a broader sense, which would not traditionally involve the instructive materials and with adult direction, in the way that Montessori does. However, Wood (2010) suggests that by integrating different pedagogical approaches, “practitioners can harness the qualities of play” (p.20) so that play in all of its different structures, can be utilised.

Participant C also expressed that “people don’t view real materials as play materials. I mean if you go to a really well stocked practical life shelf, to me that is massively playful”.

Participant C then added;
I suppose, in my mind I can’t separate play and Montessori. Because if the child is engaged in a material, Maria Montessori would say the child is working with that material. Therefore in my mind, play is the work of the child.

Viewing play in this way resonates with play-based pedagogical approaches that argue that play and its developmental benefits can be misunderstood and oversimplified. Broström (2017) theorises play through relational pedagogy, which refers to this ‘engagement’ between the child and the material, but also the adult. If the child becomes the “active social constructor” (p. 12), then the child’s activity regardless of whether it is referred to as ‘work’ or ‘play’ becomes the fuel for development.

The idea that there should be less emphasis on how we label the child’s activity and more focus on the activity itself is mirrored by Participant D – “It is to me, just a word, you can call it play you can call it work”. Participant F echoes this by adding “I think Aistear and Siolta look at the child as working through play”. Interestingly, Participant C,D and F have recently embarked on CPD, achieving FETAC level 7 and 8 in Early Childhood Education within the last year. This may contribute to the tendency to view this ongoing dichotomy in a more inclusive and abstract way.

**Benefits of Montessori: individual activity and concentration.** A number of distinctions were made between how the Montessori classroom traditionally provides the child with more opportunities for individual activity, whereas Aistear places an emphasis on the benefits of group activity. In some cases, participants described these differences in a contentious way, perhaps contributing to feelings surrounding the segregation of Montessori and Aistear. When asked about any key differences perceived between both, 3 out of 7
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participants noted a similar sentiment to Participant D’s statement that “Well the main difference I would see between Montessori and Aistear is personal space”.

Participants expressed a somewhat defensive attitude towards individual work and how there are some children “that like that alone time and like that focus and need that concentration where they take a piece of work and they do it by themselves” (Participant F). Participant D explains the potential discordance in a blended Montessori and Aistear class:

when a child goes to take a piece of work, as they call it, off the Montessori shelf, the mat is there, the work is there, and our children are trained to leave that child alone and let them do it themselves. Where with Aistear, I feel that’s not something they touch on. They seem to think if a child is playing with something there’s no problem with another child going and joining. (Participant D).

It is possible the implication here is that if the child does complete this solo activity fully, that they’re learning may be hindered. Although it is recognised that individual activity is beneficial for the child to fulfil intrinsic needs, does this focus on developing concentration exceed the child’s need for interaction? There are potentially constraints to it as it opens the possibility that the child enters into overly repetitive activity (Isaacs, 2018). In addition to this, Broström (2017) notes the potential risks of ‘short-sighted play orientation’ which assumes that if the child is playing, that this automatically contributes to their development, but this is not necessarily the case. There needs to be challenge present, in the form of social interaction, either with other children or an adult.

So you know, if we’re looking at old photographs of Montessori schools. We’re looking at the individual table and the child taking work. And I suppose where Aistear
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is concerned, they’re looking at more collective thinking… I do feel that Montessori has got a lot of bad press in regards to the individual work. It’s not all about that, I think it can be very blended and play can be included in everything (Participant C)

Participant C highlights the idea that it may be true that Montessori supports solo activity and Aistear promotes group activity, but that all forms of play used concurrently is most beneficial. Edwards (2017) argues that all types of play are of equal pedagogical value, and promotes “combinatorial activity” (p.9) as the most effective for play-based pedagogies, which place the adult at the centre, integrated into all activity.

Benefits of Aistear: collective thinking and interactions. When further asked to describe ways in which Aistear has impacted the classroom and ways in which Aistear differs from Montessori, participants identified some positive aspects. Participant G stated that “I really like the idea of children coming together in small groups”. Participant F, who was outspoken on the need for individual activity, also observed benefits of interaction within the classroom and responded to the question about whether Aistear has been a positive step for ECE;

the children’s interactions and their social and emotional development has definitely improved. I see the children just play more together, their imaginative play is really good. Their vocabulary has come on, you know they’re speaking to each other a lot more, they’re more inquisitive and have more questions about things.

Here, participant F recognises some of the many dimensions of children’s learning, all of which relate to group interactions. Although Montessori promotes interactivity (Lillard,
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2013), this is typically in relation to the observation of the adult in the child’s readiness to move on to more complex work, as opposed to between children. Participant D made the interesting comparison that “whereas with Aistear, I feel that they’re saying relationships are so important, they are making us be aware of it more, where Montessori would have felt that you should have naturally been aware of it.” The recognition that Aistear has heightened the importance of children’s interactions (more so than in Montessori) is reflective of socio-cultural theory, which dominates the forum on play pedagogy today. Hedges and Cooper (2018) theorise this as relational pedagogy, an all-encompassing approach that focuses on adults’ engagement with children in order to add “complexity to their thinking” (p.371) and promotes reciprocal relationships. This focus on relationships polarises Montessori and Aistear in this regard. Although Aistear values adult input and support, it equally values the co-construction of knowledge that peer relationships bring (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). Whereas the Montessori method relies heavily on scaffolding from the adult (Isaacs, 2018), placing less importance on peer to peer interactions, which is more reminiscent of old-fashioned didactic forms of teaching.

Participant C also feels that the relational approach to pedagogy has meant “they [the children] definitely approach the teachers more.” This is something that may have been lacking in a traditional Montessori classroom, as participant G makes a comparison that with Aistear “the children can see kind of different ways of doing things by watching others whereas with Montessori, it’s very much individual presentations and the children don’t get to learn how to help each other out”. Although all types of play need to be recognised, utilised and valued simultaneously, participants have placed a spotlight on relationships and interactions as a major aspect of Aistear that is crucial in discourse on ECE pedagogy.
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Theme 3: CPD and adaptation

Lack of support. The sense of resistance towards Aistear that some participants expressed may be attributed to the forced changed already discussed, or conflicting aspects within curricula. However, there is also a lack of confidence with Aistear and ambiguity in relation to the role of the adult within its use (Gray and Ryan, 2016) that is potentially contributing to its scant use. The potential ‘over-simplification’ of Aistear could be attributed to the lack of support and advice practitioners have experienced since its introduction. In relation to feedback from a DES inspection in 2019, participant B felt “Oh there was definitely a pressure to follow Aistear but with very little support”. Perspectives on the Better Start Initiative were similar –

And more support, our Better Start Officer was fantastic but again she hasn’t come back to us in a long time. So I mean she was here in September, for a little while but since then there hasn’t really been anything from her. She was here physically but then after that…. So personally I think to have more interaction with her could help as well. (Participant F).

Although the Better Start Mentoring Service reflects are more targeted approach within a meaningful context with regards to CPD (Hayes and O’Neill, 2019), this shows there is still doubt about its effectiveness. Although there has been a strong emphasis placed on up-skilling early years educators in recent years, there is still no funded time within the ECCE scheme for professional development. Participant G also reflected on a one day Aistear implementation course that she attended feeling that “And in terms of the Aistear curriculum, they were talking about the website, and I went on and I just didn’t find it useful really”.

As there remains to be no formal training for *Aistear*, most notably for practitioners who qualified before its introduction, this research suggests that it is a major factor in its negative perception. Participant C explained –

The training was very scant, there was no real onus on early years educators and Montessori teachers to attend these courses. However, we were meant to be implementing this curriculum framework without any real training and I think everybody felt very scared and all pedagogical practices began to run and scurry into their own corners and try and get their heads around it.

Perhaps a natural reaction to the unfamiliarity with *Aistear* was for practitioners to find comfort in the reliability and structure that the Montessori method provides, which resulted in *Aistear* being utilised even less. When asked if participants believed there was sufficient training in *Aistear*, the answer was unanimously no. Participant D stated “There is nothing, apart from a book” and “it doesn’t give you enough ways of how to use it in your setting” (Participant E). In one case, although the feeling was positive towards *Aistear*, participant G felt “I think we are not able to fully implement Aistear, as much as I would like to” due to the lack of available training. Gray and Ryan’s (2016) study on infant teachers’ perceptions of play reinforces this by noting that 73% of teachers received no additional training when the *Aistear* framework was introduced, yet there was an expectation to adhere to the principles.

Although there have been initiatives (such as the Aistear in Action (AiA)) implemented in Ireland to support the practical use of *Aistear*, it has been limited, and there remains to be no established or routine provision for all settings across the sector. With the lack of ‘hands on’ *Aistear* training, it may well hinder the ability for practitioners to be
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reflective about their practice and evaluate the impact that their pedagogical practices have on children’s learning (Hayes and O’Neill, 2019).

**Recent CPD and changing perspectives.** Along with negative perceptions of Aistear, linked in part to the lack of available training and support, there have also been positive experiences. Participant C exemplified a practitioner who admitted her lack of knowledge but also felt empowered to change this –

I was massively out of my depth with regards to it because there wasn’t any training given in Aistear and in order to really get a feel for how this was going to impact basically as a Montessori teacher, I felt I needed to go on a further journey of education. So I continued my professional development by doing a level 8.

(Participant C).

With the general consensus that quality ECE provision is hugely dependent on “well educated, experienced and ‘competent’ staff” (Urban et al, 2012, p.508), the need for confident and capable practitioners is more important than ever. Recent policy has established that professionalisation within the sector is a major focus, illustrated in The First Five Strategy (Govt. of Ireland, 2019). The awareness that further training was necessary to conceptualise the synergy of Montessori and Aistear was shared by Participant D and F, who both had recently decided to recommence CPD, with the main aim of reconnecting with pedagogy and practice. Participant F explained;

I mean it [Aistear] is pushing teachers to gain more qualifications to try and get the higher capitation. So personally I had my level 6 when I started my current job and a
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lot of the other staff members were moving on to do their level 7 and level 8 so that made me want to pursue that as well.

In relation to this research, participants’ experiences with recent upskilling was self-motivated and self-financed. With the sector currently experiencing issues with low pay, non-essential financial investment puts further strain on practitioners. However, with increasing accountability expectations from external agencies, practitioners are feeling the pressure to keep professional practice to a high quality in line with issues around compliance (Moloney, 2010b).

Participants that had recently taken part in upskilling and CPD were positive in their approaches towards blending Aistear into the Montessori curriculum, displaying better knowledge and confidence –

from what I have learnt 30 years ago and what I have learnt in the last 2 years erm, yea I have found a way of bringing the two together. It’s probably because of my recent training and updating (Participant D).

In addition to this, participant C made the realisation that “I’ve realised how that framework sits perfectly into Montessori, following my professional development. So I’ve actually come full circle”. Participants who had engaged in recent CPD showed a much stronger ability to evaluate their own practice. Hayes and O’Neill (2019) point out that this is an essential element in professionalisation, in order to identify what works effectively and what needs further assessment and reflection. These particular participants (C, D and F) illustrated that they view the Montessori method with deep regard but also as adaptable and flexible -
You know I could sit on my high Montessori throne and just pontificate day in and day out about how amazing it is. However, if those foundations have been rocked in some way by having to examine and question things, I think that’s a good thing. (Participant C).

The traditional view of Montessori has perhaps restricted practitioners from being able to use it reflexively, as according to Participant D: “I think even an awful lot of educators understanding of Montessori was very limited and they thought it was as rigid system that couldn’t blend and couldn’t bend”. The idea that Montessori can ‘blend and bend’ is examined in relation to ECE policy change in New Zealand. Freeman, Dalli and Pickering (2016) recognise two key elements that have dominated policy discourse in relation to Montessori. Firstly, improving quality with teacher qualifications and secondly, reflective practice as an underlying principle in early childhood pedagogy. They note that Montessori as a method was intended to inspire inquiry and that once practitioners had grasped the fundamentals, were encouraged to experiment. They refer to Montessori’s notion of “critically engaged pedagogy” (p.73) as a reminder to practitioners to critically develop their practice.

**Adaptation and reflection.** The link between a positive attitude towards engaging with Aistear and recent CPD is apparent, along with the ability to be reflective about current practice. Confidence is a big factor here. Participants that had upskilled and gained higher qualifications were empowered to adapt their practice, especially with regards to integrating Montessori and Aistear. Urban et al. (2012) noted that coherent support and CPD contribute to competence of staff and increase levels of professionalism, even with lower-qualified practitioners.
This was exemplified more so when participants were asked about their experience with the reflective journals, and how these have created a space for further contemplation. For participants who had engaged in recent CPD, the reflective journals seemed to be a pleasant experience. For example, Participant D felt

I thoroughly enjoyed my reflective journal. I thought it was a very positive thing because it was drummed into me from a very young about observations, observations, observations, it was something that I had done a lot in college.

Correspondingly, Participant F felt she “gained a lot more insight into my classroom and into the individual children that I had. And gave me the time to look at my classroom a little bit differently, and how I teach and maybe how I implement certain activities”. Participant F illustrates that the ability to question practices in the classroom requires time to reflect. With ECCE ratios at 1:11, and non-contact time at a minimal, practitioners are busy and may struggle to engrain reflection into their practice. Nevertheless, reflective practice is a key characteristic of practitioner’s skillsets and CPD programmes are aimed at developing this, along with nurturing a positive professional identity. However, this cannot be nurtured if any additional or required training is not available or accessible to practitioners (Gray and Ryan, 2016).

Participants who had not recently engaged in CPD also mused about the positive outcomes of completing the reflective journals, with Participant E stating “I’ve always thought that Montessori and Aistear were quite similar but I had never sat down and thought, how are they similar, why are they similar.” Participant G also commented on how reflection allowed opening up of Montessori towards the Aistear framework – “by actually stopping
and thinking and writing it down, it makes you think, well you know, am I implementing Aistear, am I implementing Montessori and the emergent curriculum”.

Participant A, who expressed a strong resistance towards Aistear throughout the interview, commented that the reflective journal experience showed her “what I did learn, is that it made me think more about what the children were actually doing, and could I link them [Montessori and Aistear] up”. Similarly, Participant B who had expressed a somewhat negative view towards Aistear stating that it had “ruined it [Montessori] by introducing Aistear” but when asked about whether or not her pedagogical practices were well established or in a state of change answered;

I think in the last few years it is always changing. If you think I have gone from a Montessori classroom to an Aistear and Montessori classroom to an Aistear classroom and I suppose the question then always is; Can I work through and maybe try a little bit harder to get the Montessori back in.

Although clearly still unable to view both as symbiotic, both Participant A and B were able to consider how further professional reflection may benefit their curriculum provision with regards to Montessori and Aistear. Freeman, Dalli and Pickering (2016) suggest that practitioners’ reluctance to question the Montessori philosophy was due to a feeling of protection for it but also that they might be viewed as ‘disloyal’ if practices were questioned. However, the research also showed that 73% of survey respondents were willing to engage in self-reflection, a process that would surely provoke questioning.

This suggests that although participants have had mixed experiences with Aistear, that generally, practitioners are responsive to developing their professional identity. A lack of resources and funding may be contributing factors as to why some participants persist in
somewhat rejecting *Aistear*, as they have not had the opportunity to engage in self-reflection.

It is the responsibility of government agencies to form supports in order for practitioners to develop their practice, something that the following chapter will explore in greater depth.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The main purpose with the introduction of Aistear was to address quality within the early years sector and establish a streamlined and coherent approach to curriculum in ECE, because “contemporary analysis of ECE practice in Irish settings points to an absence of a clear consensus on what constitutes a curricular approach” (Hayes and O’Neill, 2019. P.65). Its initial introduction did not intend to disregard established pedagogies and aimed to highlight the need for play-based learning with particular attention to interaction within the classroom, supporting current discourse on what constitutes quality curriculum provision (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). However, its gradual implementation over the course of a decade has not come without problems. This research suggests that the framework within itself is not problematic, but more so factors surrounding its implementation. This chapter intends to acknowledge the research questions and make suggestions based on the findings discussed in the previous chapter.

Research Question 1: How has Aistear impacted Montessori?

Analysis of the data suggests that findings were most appropriately discussed in relation to participants that had engaged in recent training and CPD and those who had not, especially in relation to the impact that Aistear has had on Montessori practices. The consensus was that the impact had been great, but polarising. In some cases, it was perceived as positive and in others it was perceived as negative.

Analysis of the findings have shown that recent CPD participants (C, D and F) viewed the impact positively, exemplified in understandings about how both approaches can blend and how conceptual understandings about ‘work’ and ‘play’ did not cause major obstacles when providing for learning opportunities. Participants in this case were able to conceptualise ‘playful learning’ through the use of Montessori materials, something that Lillard (2013)
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refers to. Although some Montessorians refer to practising ‘the method’ as somewhat of “a ritual” (Cossentino, 2005. P.213), the element of “critically engaged pedagogy” that Freeman, Dalli and Pickering (2016, p.73) present, suggests experimentation and exploration with the Montessori materials will allow for longevity and contextual flexibility.

Most notably, the element of self-reflection these practitioners displayed may be a major contributor to the ability to be confident and competent. Quality of interactions (between adults and children) are hugely dependent on these elements, stated in the CoRe report as one of five dimensions that needs to be “proactively developed” (Urban et. al, 2012, p.510). There has been a struggle in Ireland, with professionalisation in the sector. Moloney (2010b) suggests that the care and education divide has contributed to persistent views of childcare practitioners as maternal and caring and to sustain professional practice, there needs to be appropriate training. Understandings about mixed pedagogical practices can only be developed with a strong theoretical base. This research strongly supports ongoing theories that CPD participation contributes to reflective practice (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering, 2016; Hayes and O’Neill, 2019; Moloney, 2010b). The knowledge gained from partaking in training enabled these particular practitioners to see that Aistear is a framework and not a prescriptive curriculum, one of the most distinctive findings from this study, because that basic understanding seems to determine the success of its use and implementation.

For participants that have not engaged in any form of recent training or CPD, the impact felt on Montessori was expressed as somewhat diluting and devaluing. Misunderstandings about Aistear as a framework has not only affected quality in its use but also the quality in pedagogical practice within Montessori. For these participants, a rejection of Aistear perhaps comes from fear (lack of knowledge) and familiarity (towards Montessori). This relates again to the construction of a strong professional identity that creates confidence but is based very much on CPD and good wages (Hayes and O’Neill,
In this sense, desired ‘uniformity’ (Neylon, 2012) within curriculum provision, that Aistear intended to bring has not been achieved, not least with practitioners without recent CPD, because it has caused digression towards a purist view of Montessori that was not necessarily ever intended (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering, 2016).

Interestingly, Participant G, who has also not engaged in any recent CPD but who did view Aistear positively, exhibits another argument for the necessity for mandatory and funded CPD. Although participant G was implementing Aistear confidently, it seems Montessori practise had been abandoned, perpetuating a ‘one or the other’ view, instead of an integrated perspective, which is the intended vision for Aistear (Bowers, 2017).

Research Question 2: Can Montessori and Aistear be integrated into a unified curriculum in early years settings in Ireland?

Whether or not Montessori and Aistear can be viewed as unified and integrative depends on a number of factors. The adaptability of Montessori and views around interaction (in the classroom) were the most contentious. Freeman, Dalli and Pickering (2016) make the connection that is evident in this research, that being able to adapt Montessori, in this case towards including the Aistear framework, depended on their ‘quality-through-qualifications’ model. The more CPD that had been taken, the more likely practitioners would to be able to integrate both. There will always be differing views on how any pedagogy should be practised, based on interpretation and beliefs (Freeman, Dalli and Pickering, 2016).
Acceptance that there is not one true and correct way to implement a curriculum supports the notion that all practitioners should continue to observe and inquire and thus enable reflective practice.

Recent discourse on effective pedagogical practices in ECE present a participatory model that values all forms of interaction. Findings suggest Montessori values individual
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activity and Aistear values group activity. All forms of play and activity should be valued equally (Edwards, 2017) but relational pedagogy suggests the child is the “active social constructor” (Broström, 2017, p.12) of their learning and that through interactions, children can make meaning from their experiences. Aistear is somewhat rooted in a relational pedagogical approach. Hedges and Cooper (2018), suggest that practitioners should “unshackle themselves from long-standing ideologies” (p.370) about pedagogy and conceptualise a participatory model for children’s play and learning. In the case of this study, letting go of the prescribed direction of Montessori and its materials, to incorporate play and allow for the benefits of participation, suggests to be the most beneficial for children’s learning and development. Again, this is dependent on effective training, as French (2007) stated, educators are still unsure of how to utilise play and assess its outcomes.

Research Question 3: Do practitioners feel that training and courses offered in Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework are sufficient for its implementation in early years classrooms?

Participants unanimously agreed that courses and training did not meet basic standards for the implementation of Aistear in classrooms. Analysis of the findings suggests that participants who had engaged in some form of CPD were more equipped to provide an integrated pedagogical approach to Montessori and Aistear. However, these participants also agreed that the training and courses offered were not sufficient. Any recent training that had been undertaken was self-motivated and self-financed, which represents negatively on policy supports, that have failed to provide in-house and funded, practically based training for practitioners who are already unvalued and underpaid within the sector as a whole (Moloney, 2010b). The minimal implementation of Aistear is also a major factor in this. Although the recent ‘First 5’ strategy has addressed the lack of policy focus with regards to professional development (Hayes, Hynes and Wolfe, 2013), there are still no commitments to how...
practitioners will be supported, which further widens the gap between policy and practice. Participants also noted that the ECCE scheme itself illustrated issues with regards to implementing *Aistear* alongside Montessori. The lack of funded time for CPD has accentuated the idea that quality needs to be considered as a continuous process (Urban et. al, 2012), as CPD needs to reflect the active nature of professional development.

**Conclusion**

The Montessori method remains to be a holistic and child-centred approach to early years education. The ability to view it as flexible and adaptable is crucial in an Irish context because *Aistear*, although slow in its initial implementation, is becoming more and more utilised. This research has found that recognising *Aistear* as a framework that blends with Montessori is dependent on experienced and appropriately trained staff, that are confident enough to utilise self-reflection as a tool for curriculum provision. However, the onus on continual staff training should not be placed on practitioners. A lack of recognition regarding the complexity of working in early years is having a devastating effect on the workforce in the sector (Moloney, 2010b). There needs to be sufficient support and funding from government level to ensure that practitioners remain valued and professional identity remains strong enough to continuing providing children with quality education and care.

**Recommendations**

The research suggests that experiences of Montessori trained practitioners with *Aistear* have been mixed, due mostly to participation in CPD and how that has empowered participants to adapt and reflect. Findings suggest using a model of relational pedagogy to integrate both Montessori and *Aistear* may result in a more inclusive and modern approach to ECE that promotes play-based learning. However, Hayes and O’Neill (2019) agree that the emphasis on up-skilling practitioners has never been stronger, and early years educators
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cannot improve the quality of their practice if they are not trained and supported. The
Strengthening Foundations of Learning (SFL) programme established in 2014 (Hayes and
O’Neill, 2019) provides a good framework for a cohesive in-house CPD programme, that
gives practitioners much need practical help on the use of Aistear in classrooms, but it was
small in scale and was not rolled out nationally. An extension of this, or similar initiatives
would begin to address the issues raised here.

Training also needs to be addressed in relation to the integration of Aistear and
Montessori. As Montessori is a well-established curriculum within Ireland, this needs to be
reflected in both training and inspection. With a current lack of regulation and inspection in
in relation to Montessori, standards are hard assess. However as Gray and Ryan (2016)
suggest, training alone is not sufficient to change mindsets, and so there needs to be reform
and a depth of knowledge within the workforce. CPD therefore needs to be embedded within
the correct contexts, providing CPD that specifically targets Montessori trained practitioners
in integrating play pedagogy will support positive change. Although the Better Start
Mentoring programme provides one on one time with practitioners, having specifically
Montessori trained mentors available might strengthen this programme, helping to bridge the
gap between Montessori and Aistear. This way, settings can be targeted based on the
curriculum they represent, while also encapsulating the Aistear vision. This also supports the
notion that with multiple systems operating, there needs to be multiple readings available
(Gray and Ryan, 2016).

However a focus on individual practitioners alone is not sufficient in order to increase
quality of ECE provision in a wider context (Urban et. al, 2012). Resources and support need
to reflect the continually changing nature of the early years sector. The ECCE scheme needs
to provide funded time for practitioners to plan, assess and most importantly, reflect. The
inspectorate also needs to be reassessed. At the moment, settings are liable to three separate
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI inspection visits, yet none of these specifically support the integrated use of Montessori and Aistear. Contextual support will not only produce better situated knowledge for practitioners but contribute to a better quality and more cohesive pedagogical vision for early childhood education in Ireland.
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Dear Practitioner,

I am writing to ask for your help with a qualitative research study that explores Montessori practitioner experiences and attitudes in the classroom in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. The research project involves learning more about the effect that *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework has had within classrooms where Montessori trained staff are working. I hope that the findings of the study will inform other practitioners about best practice and integrated curriculums in a mixed pedagogical system in light of recent concerns regarding quality of education and care within the sector. Topics of interest will be in relation to how you structure your ECCE hours, what curriculum you implement and how you implement it.

The research will take the form of reflective journals and interviews. The reflective journals will involve you casually noting daily reflections on your practice and observations within your classroom for a duration of two weeks in relation to the implementation of *Aistear* and how it may or may not integrate alongside the Montessori method. These journals will be confidential and only viewed by me, for purposes of data collection and in order to add an element of self-reflection to the research.

The interviews will be one on one, will last for a maximum of 45 minutes, will take place in the office of your setting and with your permission, will be recorded on digital audiotape. No one else will hear your audio recordings of the interviews except for me. The data collected will be later transcribed for analysis and when this is done, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to clarify anything you may wish to change. The questions will be open ended and conversational in style and will be referring to your personal practice in your classroom. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you wish to do so.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide.

The risks of participation in the study are very low and of a social or reputational nature. Once the study is completed, the audio will be destroyed on the basis of the schedule outlined in the Institute’s data retention schedule and your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. If you would like...
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI

more information on how long the data will be retained for, please don’t hesitate to contact me directly. There are no risks or direct benefits in participating in the interview.

You will be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in the different parts of the study.

If you agree to participate please contact me in one of the following ways:

1. My phone number - **********
2. My college email address – **********

I hope you will be willing to participate because your responses are important and a valued part of the study. Your participation will remain strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate, it would help me greatly to know this as soon as possible so that your participation can begin as soon as possible.

Your participation in this project is sincerely appreciated. I understand that your time is valuable. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact me or my advisor Dr. Maja Haals Brosnan. This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact MERC@mie.ie

Yours faithfully,

________________________

Ruth Leopold

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Appendix B
Statement of Consent

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you would be willing to participate in the study as described.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Ruth Leopold. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions in relation to the study and have been provided with any additional details I wanted.

I have been informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

Do you consent to data from your reflective journals being used to inform the interview process and as analysis for the study?

Do you consent to be interviewed based on your reflective journal data and to have the interview audiotaped?

Do you consent to excerpts from your interview being included in the dissertation, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous?

Participant Name (please print): ____________________________________________

Participant Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________

Researcher Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI

Appendix C

Interview Protocol List

Participant’s Name:

Date:

Time:

Location:

Background

How long have you been a Montessori Practitioner?

Where did you train?

What is/are your qualification(s)?

How many settings have you worked in?

How would you describe your role in your classroom setting?

Are you affiliated with any Montessori or Early Years groups or associations?

Montessori and Aistear Curriculum Aspects

1. What would you describe as the key aspects of the Montessori method?

2. What do you think are the key features of Aistear?

3. Do you see any similarities between Montessori and Aistear, and if so, what are they?

4. Do you see any key differences between Montessori and Aistear, and if so, how would you describe them?

5. Do you think there are more similarities or more differences between Montessori and Aistear?
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI

Theoretical Underpinnings of Montessori and Aistear

6. (a) What are your thoughts on implementing play within a Montessori environment?

   (b) Do pretend play and socio-dramatic play have a place within Montessori?

7. (a) What are your thoughts on an emergent curriculum?

   (b) How does an emergent curriculum affect Montessori?

8. Do you think interactions (peer to peer and practitioner and child) differ with both Montessori and Aistear?

   Current Practice – Curriculum and Policy

9. (a) Would you say you implement Aistear to its full extent? Why?

   (b) Would you say you implement Montessori and Aistear in equal amounts or one more than the other?

10. (a) How has the introduction of Aistear impacted on Montessori in your classroom?

     (b) What aspects of Aistear do you incorporate into Montessori? How?

11. (a) Have you attended any CPD courses in relation to either Aistear or Montessori?

     (b) Do you feel there is sufficient training and support available in relation to Aistear and its implementation?

12. What effects, if any, do you think that the ECCE scheme has had on curriculum provision in recent years?

   Reflective Practice

13. What was your experience of completing the reflective journal and what did you gain, if anything, from it?
AISTEAR AND MONTESSORI

14. (Individualised question in relation to themes arising from reflective journal entries)

15. Do you feel like your professional practice is in a state of change or have you established your pedagogical beliefs and curriculum provision in relation to Aistear and Montessori?

16. Do you think the introduction of Aistear has been positive for early childhood education?

17. And finally, are there any points that you would like to raise and cover that have not been discussed so far in this interview?
Appendix D

Key Pedagogical Aspects of Montessori and *Aistear* Following Data Analysis

(Aspects documented were stated by 2 or more participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Montessori Method</th>
<th><em>Aistear</em> Curriculum Framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independence and Confidence (gained through challenge)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of choice and movement</td>
<td>Choice and the Freedom to choose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order and Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Education (through exploration)</td>
<td>Child-led / Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prepared Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect (through grace and courtesy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle of Work</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Tables (Limited numbers to an activity)</td>
<td>Collective Thinking (group work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Real’ Materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication / Interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Reflective Journal Analysis

Reflective journal analysis was conducted using coding and subsequent thematic analysis, the same as with data gained from interviews. As noted by Denscombe (2014), the validity of journal data needs to be established using some basic criteria. Authenticity was confirmed as the journals were handwritten and received by hand. Credibility was acknowledged by taking into account the ‘reflective’ aspect of the data, there is an awareness of the subjective nature of the data. As the reflective journals were text based on observations and practice, it helped to gain access to individual experiences within the classroom, ahead of interviews. The following themes emerged from the data, which informed interview protocol for further questioning. Themes stated below appeared in more than one journal, to improve credibility of the data. However, as the journals were experiential in nature, the findings relate mostly to current practice, and less in relation to the wider issues surrounding ECE, such as policy for example.

- Language of ‘Work’ and ‘Play’
- Developing Creativity
- Interactions and communication in relation to Group work and individual work
- The Physical Environment
- Routine and Structure
  - Free Play
  - Freedom to explore
- Curriculum Conflict – Emergent and ‘Set’ Curricula
  - Deviation from Montessori work in its set purpose / merging activities