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Disrupting the Aistear hour: working towards a play-based curriculum in early childhood classrooms in Irish primary schools

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ABSTRACT

In a climate of pandemic recovery and taking this opportunity to be reflective and reflexive in our practice we set out to examine how we can make a change to the playful experiences of children aged 4–6 years old in Irish infant primary classrooms. As teacher educators in play and play-based learning, in higher education, we are confronted by pedagogical cultures and classroom experiences within early primary settings that turn play on and off for a period during the day. This is a practice commonly referred to as the 'Aistear hour'. The aim of this project was to explore our own current understandings and to improve our professional approaches to teaching student teachers about play-based pedagogy and practices. Participants ($n = 9$) in this small-scale survey research study were tutor colleagues involved in the teaching of elements of Early Childhood and Professional Practice Placement modules. The results indicate a serious need for a professional collective discussion on the adult 'hijacking' of play and the need for a rights-based approach to ensure very young children have control and voice in their play experiences in early primary classrooms.

Introduction

Reviews of country early childhood curriculum framework documents conducted in the last 10 years illustrate the ubiquitous influence of play-based pedagogy as a core consideration in the education of young children (Barblett et al. 2021; Gray and Ryan 2016; OECD 2012). Broström (2017, 6) posits that learning can be perceived in a 'narrow way' and that this creates tensions and challenges to the links between play and learning. Pramling Samuelsson and Björklund (2023) agree that the bonds between play and learning are still not secure across disciplines in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This, they contend, is a result of an absence of a formal and agreed definition of play. We would also

argue that the use of the term 'play-based pedagogy' is fuzzy. Impacting further on the confusion surrounding the term play-based pedagogy when used interchangeably with terms such as 'play-based learning', 'playful approaches' and 'activity learning' do not necessarily mean the same. Furthermore, there are inherent tensions in utilising play to support children's learning and development within frameworks of early childhood curricula, not least because play is child-led and complex and means different things to different people depending on the theory of play being used (van Oers 2014).

Rationale

An issue in initial teacher education (ITE), which impacts quality play experiences and outcomes in the early years' primary education classroom, is the tensions between student teachers' and teachers' beliefs about play and child-initiated playful learning (Walsh and Fallon 2021). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2017) advocates that greater attention be paid to the quality of the school placement (now commonly referred to as Professional Placement PP) experience and the quality of the co-operating teacher (now commonly referred to as the Treoraí in Ireland) in partner schools.

In our roles as educators on an ITE programme in a higher education institute (HEI) committed to high-quality professional education, we agreed with Walsh and Fallon (2021) regarding the confusion amongst student teachers in applying theory to practice during their professional placement with respect to play-based learning in Junior and Senior Infant classrooms (the first two years of primary school in Ireland). At the heart of the confusion seems to be a mismatch between the theory and pedagogical knowledge being taught in the HEI regarding play-based pedagogy and the observed reality of 'peda-gogical cultures' (Arnott and Duncan 2019). Changing national and international priori-ties, curricula and policies influence concepts of play, classroom practices and pedagogical philosophies (McLean et al 2023; van Oers 2014). In Ireland this has resulted in large variation in the way play-based learning is used across schools (Sloan et al. 2021; Woods, Mannion, and Garrity 2021). Furthermore, and noteworthy is Walsh and Fallon's (2021) observation that 'many student teachers fail to see quality examples of play-based learning in their mentor's classrooms from which they can learn' (2021, 399). They suggest that ITE programmes should review how play is valued across their curriculum and content teaching to ensure 'intense support and substantial applied training is pro-vided in a collaborative, collegial manner to bring a comprehensive understanding of quality versions of play as pedagogy in practice' (Walsh and Fallon 2021, 410).

As teacher educators, school placement tutors and lecturers in play and play-based learning, we are often confronted by pedagogical cultures and classroom experiences that turn play on and off for a period during the infant class day. This is a practice that is commonly referred to as the 'Aistear hour' or 'Aistear time' (O'Donoghue 2019). In our view and in agreement with Walsh and Fallon (2021), this turning on and off, of play, jars against the fluidity of play as a process. In a climate of increased accountability in teacher education, there is and should also be space for teacher educator researchers, and indeed all parties involved in the teacher education continuum, includ-ing student teachers, to be agentic. This means being able to interrogate policy and prac-tice to improve practice and contribute to the knowledge base on teacher education

(Kettle, Lunn Brownlee, and Henderson 2022) with the end goal to improve the education experience of all children. It is in that spirit that this research was undertaken.

Motivated to improve our own practice with respect to play-based pedagogy within the teacher education continuum, we embarked on a research study which addressed ITE early childhood educator (ECE) tutors' understanding of play-based pedagogy and its effective implementation in professional placement (PP). To address the confusion re play-based learning, and the role of various partners in the teacher education continuum, we first need to better understand it. In so doing, we would be able to enhance the professional learning of teacher educators so that benefits of play-based pedagogy and its enactment could be communicated effectively to student teachers, also prompting discussion with their co-operating teachers in their PP experiences.

The timing of this project was significant given that both Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (referred to as *Aistear* for the remainder of this paper), and the Primary School Curriculum are currently being revised and updated (NCCA 2021). One of the aspirations for the new Primary Curriculum Framework is that teachers provide 'relevant rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches' (NCCA 2020, 11). Whilst this empirical research was conducted in Ireland, many of the issues it addresses, and the ensuing discussion points are relevant in other international jurisdictions.

Conundrum of play in education settings

Play is a complex activity that is framed by personal histories, family and community practices, cultural beliefs and values, and on-going life experiences/contexts. Play is also a natural behaviour of children and a process of cognitive engagement with the environment (Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart 2023). Play naturally draws self-identity and self-expression from the child, where the child's own voice emerges through creative and adaptive thinking and actions (Moyles 2015). Furthermore, in peer-to-peer play, children develop important social competencies and coping skills that endure over time (Bateman 2011).

If, however, we understand play as self-initiated, child-led, and child-directed and unique for all children where their autonomy and independence are central, then as Macdonald (2022) suggests 'we may wonder how play can be planned for children through curriculum structure, pedagogy and provision' (2022, 4). Might a power imbalance between adult and child in an education setting restrain the voice of children's playfulness and decision making? McCabe and Farrell (2021) argue for the 'redistribution of power to children who may lead the interaction in a way that is more productive than the direction intended by the educator' (2021, 367). Pramling Samuelsson and Björklund (2023) suggest that we risk 'hijacking' play (Pyle and Danniels, 2017; Goouch, 2008) when we follow it with terms such as 'pedagogy', 'curriculum' and/or 'education'. These are some of the questions and concerns central to the conundrum of play in education settings, which many international researchers have sought to tackle, and which partly explain the confusion of student teachers preparing 'lessons' for PP in the early years' classrooms of primary school.

One response to the conundrum of play-based pedagogy has been to afford children's voice and agency a central position in playful learning. Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart

(2023) posit that children, through personal planning and self-directed organisation, seek to expand their own cognitive theories through an intrinsic desire to be active, surprised, risky, flexible and to have fun. Hence, children act as agents in their own decisions about learning through playful engagement. Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart (2023, 3) contend that playful learning 'makes space' for children.

'Making space' for agency is one of the educator's adult's roles in playful learning and requires the adult to be an active, play partner, listening to, following, and scaffolding (Broström 2017) the child's voice and choices in play and learning. Viewing play as a mode of human activity with a cultural historical perspective, combining ideas of Vygotskian scholars, van Oers (2014) formulates a play theory with reference to three parameters: high involvement; rules acknowledged by the play actors and degrees of freedom. He notes central to the excitement for children in play is to 'solve the inherent tensions between rules and freedom' (p. 62). Rather than negatively defining freedom as freedom from interference by adults, he argues that adult participation in play is not problematic if the play format for children is not destroyed and children can accept the rules as contributions to their play and don't feel frustrated in their degrees of freedom and involvement.

Such an understanding of adult's participation in play has been operationalised for educators as 'joining in' or 'stepping back' during play. This 'recognises that sometimes the children are the "experts" and sometimes adults are more experienced' (Rekers and McCree 2022, 150). In van Oers's (2014) formulation implicit or tacit rules (*schema*) can be made explicit by adults and more advanced peers. To enact these roles and move fluidly between positions of joining in and stepping back, the educator needs to have a good understanding of children's play, play principles and pedagogies 'to "hold the space" and support children's play responsively' (Rekers and McCree 2022, 155) and be highly sensitive to children's motivation and lived experiences (Fleer 2021; van Oers 2014)

In summary, the conundrum for educators in facilitating play is that for play to remain play, they should not take control of, or direct the play to meet their own agenda, or to meet a specific outcome. They also need to keep in mind that their role in play is crucial and these roles are diverse and recognise and work with the tensions between the educator's identity as a play partner and the professional accountability role associated with learning objectives being achieved (Sproule, Walsh, and McGuinness, 2019).

Play-based pedagogy in primary school curriculum in Ireland

Significantly, *Aistear* was developed for all children from birth to six across the range of early childhood settings including the infant classes in primary schools (NCCA 2009). Play, exploration and hands-on experience was/is one of its 12 underpinning principles.

The role of the adult *vis-à -vis* play as articulated in the *Aistear* Guidelines is multifaceted. It includes enhancing and extending play based on teacher knowledge of individual children. (NCCA 2009). Within the infant classroom, it was envisaged that the development of attitudes, skills and learning dispositions through play advocated in Aistear would be implemented alongside the subject-based curriculum of the Primary

School Curriculum (NCCA 2009). In practice however, primary school teachers struggled with implementing Aistear's integrated approach while also meeting the requirements of the existing Primary School Curriculum (including the time allocations per week for each subject) and other emerging national education strategies (Concannon Gibney 2018; Gray and Ryan 2016).

Nevertheless, larger-scale research suggested strong support amongst infant class primary teachers for play-based learning as a pedagogical approach, but uncertainty regarding its implementation (O'Keeffe and McNally 2021; Sloan et al. 2021).

There is evidence in the research of on the one hand of infant teachers' appreciation of the contribution of play to children's learning and development particularly regarding language and communication, and on the other hand a preponderance of structured, time-bound play and adult-led play themes within the context of the so-called Aistear hour, potentially limiting children's high involvement and degrees of freedom and the maintenance of the play format (van Oers 2014).

Method

The overall research question posed in this study was: 'How do ITE ECE tutors understand play-based pedagogy and its effective implementation in infant classes in primary schools?' The nature of the research question required a mode of inquiry that would make use of qualitative research approaches (Gray and Ryan 2016) to garner the best possible and most useful information. A survey approach was employed via an online questionnaire with some standard demographic questions and open-ended questions addressed to teacher educators/tutors in one HEI, who were contracted on a professional masters in primary education programme.

Research Participants

A non-probability, purposive sampling approach was employed. It was important that tutors were active in the teacher education continuum. Given the focus of the research, it was also important that they were actively engaged in the ECE module on the ITE programme, and/or had visited student teachers on school placement in infant classes. The on-line questionnaires were created on Microsoft Forms and distributed to a purposively selected cohort of 22 adjunct faculty who met the inclusion criteria. A total of 9 adjunct faculty responded (40.9% response rate).

The initial questions on the questionnaire were about professional experience in early childhood education and garnered the following information. The average number of years teaching in infant classroom amongst the nine participants was 8.9 years. This ranged from 2 years to 23 years. One of the participants has been tutoring on the ECE Module more than 10 years; one between 5 and 9 years and two between one and four years. The remaining five participants had less than 1 years' experience tutoring on the ECE Module. Four of the nine participants had held, or continue to hold, leadership positions with respect to implementation of Aistear in their own school and/or as CPD facilitators on training about Aistear and play-based learning in primary schools. In summary, the professional experience of the participants reflected the breadth of the teacher-education continuum in Ireland.

Initial data collection took place in early 2022. Face-to-face interviews and focus groups were avoided in respect to the ongoing post-covid issues affecting schools and HEIs. Furthermore, an online interview involved less of a time commitment for participants.

On-line questionnaire construction

Several sub-questions were generated from the overall research question, which formed the basis of the questionnaire, and which were piloted in advance of data collection. Most of the questions were open-ended requiring text responses. They addressed the following topics: participants' understanding of play-based pedagogy; their views about benefits of play-based pedagogy in infant classes; the role of Aistear in infant education in primary schools and the factors in infant classes that promote play-based pedagogy. Participants were also asked about challenges in explaining play-based pedagogy and Aistear to student teachers as well as their views about challenges student teachers experience in understanding and implementing play-based pedagogy.

Ethical considerations

The research was informed by the guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018). Participation in the research was based on voluntary, informed consent. The researchers were mindful of relevant ethical issues throughout the process, from planning to first contacts with participants inviting their involvement, to analysis, debriefing and reporting and dissemination.

Ethics approval for the study was sought from the institution's *Research Ethics Committee* and was approved before a pilot study took place. Potential participants received a plain language information letter about the research and essential information about what the research would involve, how long it would take to complete the questionnaire, and how they will be informed about the findings, as well as their right to confidentiality and anonymity.

Analysis

An analysis of the literature about play-based pedagogy in education settings has led to the identification of the following themes and issues:

- Exploiting inherent characteristics of play in play-based learning in early childhood education.
- Giving space to children's voice through play in school.
- Strong positive association between Aistear, and play-based pedagogy amongst educators in Ireland, but uncertainty about its implementation.
- Need for greater attention to play-based pedagogy in all phases of the teacher-education continuum.

Through repeated and close reading of the survey raw data, patterns were ascertained with respect to these themes and that related to the research question and

unexpected findings were identified (Braun and Clarke 2012). This stage led to the generation of additional sub-themes and categories and issues that will require further exploration.

Findings and analysis

The results are organised according to the following four themes: (1) Diversity in understandings of play-based pedagogy and its benefits; (2) Structure and agency when implementing Aistear in infant classes; (3) Enabling factors for play-based pedagogy; (4) Teaching and Learning about play-based pedagogy across the teacher-education continuum.

These themes provide answers to the research question 'how do ITE ECE tutors understand play-based pedagogy and its effective implementation in infant classes in primary school?' Theme 1 responds to the exploration of tutors' understanding/ conceptualisation of play-based pedagogy, while theme 2 and 3 draw attention to effective implementation of a framework play-based curriculum including the factors that enabled play-based learning to take place physically in infant classes. Theme four relates back to theme 1 and expands tutors' professional experiences of teaching and learning, further elucidating on the confusion surrounding play-based pedagogy and identifying exact barriers to student-teacher understanding and quality practice.

Diversity in understandings of play-based pedagogy and its benefits

Previous research as outlined in the literature review has pointed to difficulty in defining play in education settings. It was, therefore, not surprising that the question 'what do you understand by play-based pedagogy' yielded very broad and wide-ranging responses from participants. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify dominant (frequently occurring) concepts across the participants, which were confirmed in responses about the benefits of play-based pedagogy in infant classes.

The predominant concept referred to by seven of the nine participants was the notion of children being actively involved and engaged with materials, games, toys and their environment, which in turn facilitates learning through discovery. Two participants noted that play-based pedagogy used children's natural 'impulse to play', that 'children learn without realizing it'.

A second dominant concept associated with play-based pedagogy was that children learned and developed holistically, with some participants specifying domains of development: 'gross motor and fine motor skills'; 'social growth and interaction'; 'big language development'; 'learning and developing socially, emotionally, cognitively communicate, develop language and communication skills'.

Three of the participants included reference to the adult's role in their definition of play-based learning: as 'scaffolding the learning … embed learning and foster and develop the various competencies and abilities of the children'; 'provide structured opportunities for this kind of learning to take place'; 'guided informally by professional'. One respondent emphasised life-long learning, executive function and the facilitation of the 4C's of twenty-first Century Learning when describing play-based pedagogy. This correlates with Zosh et al. (2018) position on guided play

as the optimal on the continuum for learning through play. They contend that the proposed 'Continuum of Playful Learning' also demonstrates how play is related to both traditional academic outcomes, and the skills needed for twenty-first century success.

All nine participants wrote about the benefits of play-based pedagogy in infant classes. Benefits relating to social and emotional learning and to active and discovery learning were identified most frequently, followed by creativity and imagination, communication and language acquisition and numeracy and mathematical skill development. Just two participants included reference to how play provided the teacher with insight into individual children's attributes and informing planning.

This is in line with Woods, Mannion, and Garrity (2021) finding that infant teachers in their study did not consider their daily Aistear play time as an opportunity for assessing children's learning and development. Rather, the Primary School Document was the leading document for planning and assessment.

Structure and agency when implementing Aistear in infant classes

We observed in the analysis of our findings that participants were positive about the contribution of *Aistear* as a curriculum framework in primary education. The two most frequently mentioned contributions were that it provided teachers with a framework to follow, and it gave structure. However, the analysis of responses illustrated that *framework* and *structure* within infant education could be understood quite differently. Some participants understood *Aistear* as something to be 'done' (subject/practice) during a distinct part of the day, whilst others viewed *Aistear* as play-based pedagogy (philosophy) which should permeate throughout the whole day. This finding supports research from Fleer (2021), suggesting the confusion lies between a philosophical perspective as espoused in *Aistear* (NCCA 2009) and a pedagogical practice (play-based approach).

Referring to the many subjects within the Primary School Curriculum, one respondent noted that *Aistear* was especially useful as an integrating mechanism, giving teachers 'an opportunity to cover a lot of topics and subjects at the same time'. Another respondent viewed *Aistear's* role as providing a safe space to explore emotions and experiences, where teachers could assess the 'child's soft skill development rather than academic attainment'. In this respect, 'doing' *Aistear* gave children freedom and space 'to be', which was not possible at other times of the day. It also provided new insights to teachers about children's learning and holistic development. This description by one respondent is illustrative of such an opportunity:

> There is a lot that goes on during Aistear that [you] wouldn't necessarily pick up on in other areas of your teaching – language gaps, thought process, conflict and resolution. You get to see how children interact with one another without being prompted.

Aistear as *structure* was considered by some participants as important for teachers, especially newly qualified teachers, uncertain about how to implement play in their timetable in the infant classroom, 'who may not know where to start when it comes to implementing a solid based learning slot throughout their school day'. Indeed, structure and planning emerged as key when participants were asked about the factors that promote play-based pedagogy in infant classes.

Enabling factors for play-based pedagogy

To deepen understanding about play-based pedagogy in primary schools, we sought tutor's perspective about the factors that promote or contribute to play-based pedagogy in infant classes. Participants in the research were asked to list the three most relevant factors in this regard. The question was sufficiently open for participants to include either structural or organisation factors or more processual, interactional factors. By far the most frequently mentioned factor (by seven of the eight participants who answered this question) was: (access to) resources and materials. The second most frequent factors listed were planning and giving children space.

Participants also referred to teacher attributes and pedagogical practices as promoting play-based pedagogy. Mentioned specifically were: 'teacher's own views', 'well-trained teachers'; 'knowledge, experience and enthusiasm of teacher'; 'teacher scaffolding and modelling', questioning (teacher-led enquiry). A related factor mentioned by one respondent was 'school views', perhaps referring to school leadership or a general school climate of support for play-based learning. Other factors listed by respondents were: 'freedom'; 'talking'; 'structured environment'; 'play activities throughout the day' (both indoor and outdoor where possible); 'active hands-on experiences with real and concrete materials'; 'collaborative learning'; 'child-centred learning'.

Teaching and learning about play-based pedagogy across the teacher-education continuum

As this research was designed to inform the continuum of teacher education in relation to play-based pedagogy, it was important to investigate tutors' experiences when supporting student teachers preparing for PP in infant classes. We first asked tutors what had influenced their own understandings about play-based pedagogy. Most participants mentioned their own practice experience of teaching young children and various forms of CPD (either as leader or participant). Two participants highlighted that play and play-based learning had been emphasised in the pre-service (undergraduate) programmes they had followed. Two others highlighted their postgraduate research as being very important – one specifying their research in twenty-first century skills. Collegial learning and exchange in the college was highlighted as an influence by two participants. Finally, one participant noted that her teaching was also influenced by (her observations of) home-based play of her own children.

We asked tutors about the challenges they had *explaining* both *Aistear* and play-based pedagogy to student teachers. We also asked them what they perceived student teachers had most difficulty with, in respect to understanding, both Aistear and play-based pedagogy and in their implementation. Separate questions were asked about *Aistear* and play-based pedagogy. However, given the interchangeability of the use of the term 'Aistear' and 'play-based learning' and 'play-based pedagogy' in primary education discourse in Ireland, it was not surprising that in many cases similar issues arose regarding the responses in relation to *Aistear* and play-based pedagogy.

Aistear is not a lesson!

The findings elicited that the most challenging aspect for tutors was teaching the key message to student teachers that *Aistear* is a framework and an approach to play-based learning. It is an approach to play-based learning that complements the primary

curriculum and not a lesson like other subject-based lessons in the school day. As expressed by one tutor, it's the challenge of explaining 'Play-based pedagogy is a way of being, and not just a specific time of the day'.

It was suggested that planning for *Aistear* is very different to planning for other subject areas and therefore extra challenging for student teachers. Another participant noted that *Aistear* 'allows for a more balanced, advanced and enriching approach to play-based pedagogy' than the 'free play' which she felt was the main play in infant classes in decades previously and maybe what student teachers remembered from their own time at school. Working with a play-based pedagogy, therefore, demands a *deep* understanding of play and assessment from student teachers.

Aistear's flexibility, adaptability and integrated nature was a difficulty for both tutors to get across and for student teachers to understand. One participant referred to the challenges of marrying notions of 'accountability'; 'appropriate and expected behaviours'; 'the teacher "contract" with play, and children are doing more than play' … when playing they developed, 'self-agency in being respectful', 'being independent when tidying away their toys'. Another tutor expressed the view that it wasn't a question of student teachers having a difficulty in understanding *Aistear*, rather that they had not engaged with, read, or studied the *Aistear* documents: principles, themes, guidelines.

Play is both planned and free

Planning for play in the infant classroom was identified by 8 of the 9 participants as a challenge for student teachers. Many different aspects of planning were mentioned. As noted above, one difficulty for student teachers was understanding how to plan for play in a way that 'fits into the curriculum'. Referring to the allocated time for each subject in the primary school curriculum (DES 1999) one participant noted that student teachers question where the curricular time for *Aistear* comes from. Another participant described that her greatest challenge in explaining play-based pedagogy was supporting student teachers to 'recognise that planning is key to creating effective learning opportunities through play'. This is how another tutor articulated the planning required:

> Planning play activities in a way that gave children freedom to engage in an activity, that was child led and where they the teacher may join in as a player.

It was described as a challenge for tutors to explain that play-based pedagogy acknowledges that 'young learners are capable of taking ownership of their own learning and can direct and make decisions for themselves during play'. The tendency or default approach for student teachers according to a few participants was turning the play into a lesson (with worksheets) or giving too many instructions. Reflecting the continuum of play proposed by Zosh et al. (2018) this respondent noted that an aspect of play-based pedagogy that was challenging to explain to student teachers was, 'that it can take many forms and that there is an important place for structured and unstructured play in the infant classroom'.

Communicating to student teachers the various roles the teacher needs to take on at different times in play-based pedagogy was also a challenge. Roles mentioned by three different participants were: 'modelling; questioning'; 'knowing when to step back and let the play unfold without interrupting with a suggestion'; 'allowing the play to speak for itself is what they find most difficult'.

5 Play stations in one hour

A few of the responses reflected a frustration amongst tutors about the reality that student teachers meet on PP in infant classes, 'Play is not just about handing out toys during Aistear hour'. 'Aistear is a framework that is used all day and not 5 stations for 1 h a day'. This is also reflective of Walsh and Fallon's (2021) concern about the lack of quality examples in schools of play-based learning integrated throughout the day. It also points to van Oer's assertion that a play-based curriculum should not be conceived as a curriculum that allows children to play now and then. Rather 'playfully formatted cultural activities' are the contexts for learning (van Oers 2013, 24).

One participant referred to student teachers

> becoming consumed by the difficulty in varying themes and providing ideas and materials/ toys for stations based on said theme. Referring to the *Aistear* themes and learning goals, this tutor noted 'I think at times they overthink the amount of resources they will need'.

Even, when interpreted as 'the Aistear Hour', this is not always about play-based hands-on manipulation of materials. One participant mentioned that student teachers have difficulty understanding that 'Aistear is not stations of worksheets' … I find it a constant battle to keep student teachers away from constantly filling in worksheets as an 'activity' on school placement.

Providing some nuance on worksheets vis-à-vis the difficulties student teachers have in understanding play-based pedagogy, another tutor noted:

> I sometimes feel that there are still student teachers who believe that if the children are not producing something concrete be it a colouring or matching or phonics worksheets etc. that they have not taught a successful lesson or that the children have not learned anything.

If classrooms can integrate both play and play-based learning, teachers are afforded the opportunity to provide the guidance required to expand and extend children's learning in a beneficial and engaging, play-based manner.

Play and assessment

In addition to understanding how they discharge curricular obligations when implementing Aistear, student teachers, according to the participating tutors, are preoccupied with questions about child-management; how they assess children at play and how will they be assessed as student teachers within the professional assessment framework of the HEI. Student concerns about classroom management were articulated by one respondent in terms of: 'how will they manage the class if all the pupils are active and "*playing around*"' [italics added by authors]. Four participants mentioned the challenges student teachers have in knowing what and how to assess children in the context of play-based pedagogy i.e. how will they know if anything has been learnt by children while playing? Just one tutor mentioned how planning for differentiation is also challenging to student teachers.

Conclusion

The responses confirmed previous research findings that teachers and student teachers of young children are convinced of the importance of supporting play as part of curriculum

but have difficulties articulating how it should be implemented (Pramling Samuelsson and Björklund 2023). The responses also revealed the diversity in defining play and its benefits to child outcomes. Play-based pedagogy is fundamentally described by the participants as recognising the concept of childhood as a time for play and learning. Tutors defined play-based pedagogy as a way of professional 'being' across the school day and not an activity that is attended to in an hour. This was re-iterated by some tutors when they expressed their frustration at the practice of 5 stations and the use of worksheets based on adult-selected themes reducing the potential of the play experience. Here lies the conundrum of the Aistear Hour and the reinforcement of 'the opposing cultures of play' (Walsh and Fallon 2021) in schools, which disrupts the theory-to-practice cycle with respect to play-based learning. This research presents a thesis for the need to disrupt the 'Aistear Hour', to uphold a stance on taking the child's perspective and motivation to play (Fleer 2021) and to promote play-based learning across the infant school day whereby children's lived experiences in playfully formatted cultural activities, as suggested by van Oers (2013), are the contexts for learning.

Encouragingly, participant responses confirm that they as tutors, uphold the principles espoused in Aistear and recognise, as Brennan and Forster (2022, 115) suggest 'children as competent, curious and active, and present learning as essentially social, interactional and involving meaning making'. Tutors explicitly detail the positive benefits of a play-based approach to quality child outcomes and the importance of these approaches to assessment practices in infant classrooms. Also evidenced by the tutors in their observations on PP is the diversity of situations (schools) and cultural practices (teachers and classrooms) in conceptualising play and learning in infant classrooms thus highlighting the continuing challenges for HEI's in supporting student teachers to integrate theory and best play-based practice on PP.

This research supports the need for policy and training stakeholders such as the NCCA, HEIs and providers of CPD to address the on-going challenge in interpreting Aistear as 'doing' or something to be done during the infant day. This continues to undermine the concept and theories of a play-based curriculum framework and pedagogy and re-enforces the 'hijacking' of play (Pramling Samuelsson and Björklund 2023). In fact, it could be argued from our findings that the intent of a framework curriculum that delineates the possibilities of how, what and when of content and outcomes is curtailing professional agency, creativity and innovation. This may be because the concept of a 'framework' is not well understood by practicing teachers. It would be advantageous at this point of updating Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum that the principles of a framework curriculum be better explained. Schools and teachers are continuing to structure Aistear as a timed, adult-organised subject and our student teachers are continuing to see this practice on their PP experience. A framework curriculum (such as Aistear and the proposed Primary Curriculum Framework) requires that classroom assessment practices support and accommodate 'making space' for children's agency in teaching and learning (Baker, Le Courtois, and Eberhart 2023). Evidence from our findings clearly indicates infant teachers need as Walsh and Fallon (2021, 410) suggest 'intense support and substantial applied training' to embrace playful pedagogical practice such as Zosh et al.'s (2018) continuum of playful learning, where power is redistributed, and adult roles become more diverse and responsive to children's voice and playful learning intentions (McCabe and Farrell 2021).

There is also convincing evidence of the need for HEIs to collectively attend to the complexity for student teachers in learning how to interpret, design and implement *Aistear* as a framework curriculum alongside the Primary Curriculum in a meaningful and integrated way, which also attends to the continuity between early childhood education and primary education. Agentic teachers understand the value of affording their learners opportunities to construct knowledge and build on their prior knowledge.

This we argue relates to the importance of the foundations of education and a realistic approach to curriculum studies that clearly articulates the concepts and organic nature of curriculum development as a classroom practice in enabling children's voice and agency. This has implications for all ITE provider memoranda of understandings as to expectations and practices, and their commitment to the developing role of the co-operating teacher and the co-operating school during PP.

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Disclosure statement

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