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FOSTERING CHILDREN'S EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS THROUGH AISTEAR: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK (2009)

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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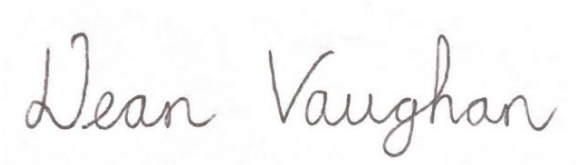
Signed: 

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study sets out to investigate my implementation of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and how I can afford the children in this study with multiple pathways of expression that cultivate and expand on their language skills. Play and play-based learning approaches have been linked synonymously with fostering many aspects of a child's development, yet contemporary issues on Play highlight an uncertainty on its role within formal education. *Aistear* is a play-based framework employed in Irish primary schools that looks to support the holistic development of children and categorises communication as an essential component for life-long learning. Being an effective communicator does not solely rely on the ability to articulate oneself verbally but requires you to draw on other more precise elements of language. Not all children can verbally express their feelings and thoughts, so other forms of expressive language opportunities are needed to ensure that a genuine voice may be unearthed and protected.

The findings from this study suggest that the success of this framework relies heavily on the knowledge and expertise of the teacher implementing it. The intervention employed in this research justifies that *Aistear* can foster expressive language skills but only when provided with the opportunity and autonomy to do so. Drawing provided children with an enjoyable platform to express themselves while simultaneously eliciting key learning outcomes. This worked particularly well as a hidden form of assessment for children who had a limited vocabulary or poor social skills. Role-Play was considered an integral Play Centre that targeted many aspects of a child's academic and social being while affording them with various opportunities to practise and enhance their expressive language skills.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Action Research
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
ECE	Early Childhood Education
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development
DoHC	Department of Health and Children
LL	Learning Log
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

No research without action, no action without research

- Kurt Lewin in Adelman (1993: 8)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter, an outline of the research study and the subject area investigated will be provided. As this is an Action Research (AR) project, the focal point of this study is centred around enhancing and adapting my own professional practice through engaging with the various methods that typify self-study Action Research. I will define my educational values which are derived from a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, in addition to how they fit within my role as an educator. My values of *Communication*, *Voice*, and *Autonomy* intrinsically motivated the type of research conducted, as well as influencing the intervention employed as I completed Cycle One of my data gathering. The aims of this research will be laid out and I will discuss the influence of Froebel as a key contributor to this research study. Political influences that have impacted the study are introduced to the reader and threaded throughout the study. Finally, I will outline the structure of the research giving a brief summation of each Chapter as they appear in the thesis.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

How can I facilitate the *Aistear* Framework, in a Junior Infant class, to maximise expressive language opportunities for children?

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS

This research was designed to explore *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and uncover how I can cultivate an environment that nurtures expressive language skills throughout its implementation. I will critique the literature surrounding Play as a format for language learning potential and examine attitudes towards employing play-based learning approaches. As there are conflicting opinions on what position the adult should assume in the Play experience, I will elaborate on my facilitating role and its outcomes for the research. Assessment on the area of Play will be discussed and the importance of the 'narrative' approach when assessing for Play.

My hope is that this self-study project will not only improve my practice and identify means for enhancing children's expressive language skills but will also begin a dialogue in this research area that informs and influences further study and development.

1.3 PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Selecting this research area extends back to my childhood and the impact that 'Play' had on my own development. Newfound friendships, exploring new ideas, and the immense enjoyment I got from interacting in different forms of Play are distinct memories from my childhood. Having three brothers (two older and one younger) that had charismatic and loud personalities meant it was often a challenge to assert myself in our household. I consider my brothers great friends of mine but vocalising my opinion within our home environment was often a challenge. Play became another form of expression for me and I have carried this code into my professional career today. It was not until my third year at teacher training college that we had School Placement in Junior and Senior Infants, and I instantly became engrossed with the principles and ideology of *Aistear*. Although *Aistear* was developed in 2009, I introduced

the framework into a large urban school on my Junior Infant teaching placement in 2015, six years after its development. During that time, I organised and prepared Play experiences for children that had differing academic, linguistic, and social backgrounds which provided them with an opportunity to express themselves in a way that formal teaching sometimes lacked.

1.4 INFLUENCE OF VALUES

> An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential…
>
> - (DoHC, 2000: 10)

As this is an AR project, the influence of values is in the foreground of its philosophy. As a self-reflective practitioner, values drive my practice and I try to live in the direction of them (McNiff, 2019). I believe that every child must be helped to come to know in ways that are appropriate for them which draws on constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning. Additionally, I wholeheartedly agree with the Department of Health and Children (2000) (DoHC) that young children need to be recognised as capable individuals with their own set of beliefs and values, who influence and shape our society. Subsequently, I determined that *Communication, Voice,* and *Autonomy* were educational values that I try to implement within my practice. These values are also inherent in the *Aistear* framework and embodied within its four core themes of *Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking* (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b).

Communication

When reflecting on my practice and recognising my educational values, communication formed a vital role in how I enabled children to interact with and relate to the world around them. I believe that children need to be able to understand and be understood, as language forms the basis for socialisation and building relationships within society (NCCA, 2009a; Cregan, 2019). Working in a school where many children speak English as a second language, or struggle to verbalise their thoughts and opinions, I believe finding other forms of communication and expression is paramount. This is not confined to children's learning difficulties, but on how they perceive themselves within society and their ability to achieve social ends. Communication is not limited to oral verbalisation as there are multiple ways for children to express themselves which may include: dance, poetry, drawings, photos, writing, sculptures, or stories as observed in the *Aistear* framework (NCCA, 2009a). For this reason, I began to immerse myself within the ideology of play-based learning in fostering viable forms of communication (Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle et al., 2018b).

Voice

I truly believe that all children have the right to a meaningful and impactful voice. I come from a loving family and my brothers and I grew up to become happy and confident adults with my early childhood experiences informing my professional practice and identity today. I looked to establish my role within the family dynamic and beyond, learning to adapt to situations where being afforded opportunities to vocalise my opinions became transformative. This strongly influenced my teaching as I continue to place a huge importance on student's voice in empowering their confidence and innovation (Roche, 2015; Sedova, 2017; Alexander, 2018; Murray, 2019). Furthermore, when children are recognised as citizens in the context of having

their own set of beliefs, values, and attitudes, their sense of belonging is preserved and their voice unearthed (NCCA, 2009a; Murray, 2019).

Autonomy

Self-directed enquiry combined with the belief that all children should have the autonomous freedom to explore the world around them forms the basis of this educational value. I consider choice making important in my practice and essential to how children view their own education, both non-restrictive and open to exploration. When children are granted the opportunity to make individual choices, their sense of belonging and voice are safeguarded (NCCA, 2009a; Nilsson et al., 2015). I relate choice making and autonomy to a distinct form of expression. Children must choose how best to express or communicate themselves, which is suitably affiliated with enabling their own voice (Roche, 2015; Sedova, 2017).

In AR it is not uncommon for your educational values to conflict with your practice (Whitehead, 2018; McNiff, 2019). Identifying models of reflection that resonated with me aided in resolving trials and tribulations encountered during this research project. In a broader sense, it allowed me to reflect on issues I had surrounding educational discourse that I have witnessed within my practice also. My value system informed the type of research undertaken and intervention employed in this study. As I began to unpack my core values, it became apparent that they were not separate concepts transferred from my practice, but rather linked synonymously with the holistic development of the child and developing their citizenship.

1.5 FROEBELIAN PEDAGOGY

Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782-1852) has been a major contributor to this research study. His work not only contributed to the development of the *Aistear* curriculum framework (French, 2007) but Froebel is renowned globally as a pioneer for Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Bruce, 2019). Through his gifts he exemplifies investigative and experiential Play opportunities while maintaining the theme of unity within his philosophy (Werth, 2019). This resonated with me and my practice as Froebel's thinking fits seamlessly within the construct of my educational values. Froebel's rationale endorses the importance of Play as a fundamental steppingstone and pedagogical tool to inform high quality learning opportunities for children as "Play is the highest stage of the child's development at this time" (Froebel, 1885: 30).

He positions adult-child dialogue and partnership as being essential in early childhood development, with these factors influencing the research design of this self-study project. An important aspect of Froebel's teachings that has permeated throughout this study was Play being a "representation of the inner" (Froebel, 1885: 30). This symbolises Play within the context of self-expression and exploring oneself within the parameters of the world (Werth, 2019). This is also apparent in the *Aistear* curriculum framework with holistic learning and development regarded as crucial to forming children's identities within society (NCCA, 2009a).

The choice of intervention that I employed during Cycle Two of data gathering conceptualises ideas explained above while also being placed within the AR model. I will expand on the intervention used in this research project in Chapter Three.

1.6 POLITICAL AGENDA

Political interest in play-based learning is extensive (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014; Lynch, 2015) with the concept of Play being conceived as an important element in children's learning development. However, political pressures are often alluded to in hindering meaningful Play practices, with *Aistear* being a prime example (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Political demands to implement a prescribed curriculum have impeded the ability to plan and structure high-quality Play experiences in early childhood settings, which has left practitioners with mixed emotions. Drawing on Foucault's (1980, 2003) concept on power in institutional education, it suggests power permeates throughout society and restricts teachers of their agency and freedom. This impairs a teacher's ability to recognise their own educational values and live in the direction of them. Primary school infant teachers encounter power related shifts daily through implementing the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), *Aistear* curriculum framework, and the new revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) simultaneously, among other curricular obstacles. I will consider how the consequences of synthesising these together in a modern-day primary school classroom impacted on this AR study. Foucault's ideology on power in education will be addressed further in Chapter Two as a governing body in educational discourse today.

1.7 THESIS STRUCTURE

The key principles of AR influenced the current thesis design and are prominent features interwoven throughout this study. Each Chapter offers a unique insight into this self-study research project and are summarised below:

Chapter One – Introduction

As specified above, the current Chapter acquaints the reader with the research question and rationale behind choosing to investigate this area. My experiences growing up have influenced and shaped my professional practice as a teacher today. Froebel's knowledge in relation to ECE has inspired this research and provided valuable insight when organising the project. Unfortunately, political obstacles suggest Play is not being fully realised in educational settings as curricular pressures take precedence. Finally, I have provided a brief summation of what each Chapter in this thesis will include.

Chapter Two – A Review of the Literature

Literature concerning Play and play-based learning is both plentiful and diverse. Play is often considered as an integral foundation for children's learning development (Hayes, 2009; Macintyre, 2015), yet it is on the periphery of early year's classrooms in Ireland and around the world (Hyvonen, 2011; Hunter & Walsh 2014; Lynch, 2015; Gray & Ryan, 2016). Self-expressive skills and their importance in ECE are discussed and how they are cultivated. Literature from around the world identifies political agendas as influential factors in Play disappearing from educational settings (Nicolopoulou, 2010). The beneficial or detrimental impact an adult can have will be examined in detail as a baseline to inform my role in this research project

Chapter Three – Research Methodology of the Study

The methodology described in Chapter Three defines qualitative research as research centred around viewpoints and experiences in a socio-cultural context. AR forms the basis of this study

and I will position myself with the AR model to elicit how critical thinking can enhance my practice. My overall research design will be laid out with a focus on ethical considerations as my participant group were deemed to be a vulnerable group. Sensitivities implicating 'consent' and 'assent' are deliberated thoroughly. The data gathering tools are inspired by means of expressive language development and the instrumental role my reflective journal played in negotiating through elements of this research will be discussed.

Chapter Four – Findings and Discussion of Data

Chapter Four includes a robust presentation of the findings from this study coupled with a thematic analysis of the main research. I will outline my methods of analysis, drawing on various analytical frameworks that I employed to gather an in-depth review of the data. Relevant literature will be integrated to theorise the main findings obtained and how they fitted within my educational values.

Chapter Five – Conclusions and Recommendations

This is the final Chapter of my thesis. It will tie threads of the research together and provide a scope for further dialogue and recommendation. Reflexivity is characteristic of AR, and I will outline what I would modify if completing the research again. The limitations of the study will be discussed and the how I used AR to negotiate educational discourse. The political issues that affect every day educational practice will be reviewed with a platform for further thought. Recommendations are offered to the reader and some final thoughts on this research and future research will be considered.

1.8 SUMMARY

This Chapter has provided the reader with a prelude to the research topic in question. The research is rooted in enabling children to become competent and confident learners that stems from my own childhood experiences. I have identified *Communication*, *Voice*, and *Autonomy* as educational values embedded within my practice through which I try to live in the direction of. Froebelian pedagogy has been an influencing factor throughout this project with his holistic, adult-guided outlook on child development being central to identifying and exploring expressive language skills. Foucault's (1980, 2003) concept on power governing educational reform was introduced to the reader and will be alluded to further throughout the research. Finally, I provided an overall structure to how the thesis is designed, offering a short account on the content within each Chapter. In Chapter Two I will review recent literature on Play in education and the importance of expressive language skills to children.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter, I will analyse recent theory surrounding the concept of Play and address contemporary issues when implementing a play-based framework such as *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009). There is extensive literature supporting the learning potential rooted within play-based learning yet there are major concerns regarding its implementation and its role within formal education. Adult interactions are seen to be an essential support to children's learning development in play-based learning, and I will examine teacher's views on their ability to navigate through its implementation in terms of planning and assessment. I will also review how the social elements of Play can afford children a chance to express themselves where other areas of the curriculum might fail. Finally, it is necessary to address current problems of practice when employing play-based methodologies in the classroom setting and what has been described as an alarming disappearance of Play in ECE settings (Hyvonen, 2011; Hunter & Walsh 2014; Lynch, 2015; Gray & Ryan, 2016).

2.1 THE FOUNDATION OF AISTEAR

'Aistear', the Irish word for journey not only denotes the developmental experiences that children will embark on throughout the course of this curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009a), but it is equally a culmination of the debates and challenges that ECE has faced in the lead up to its development (O'Connor, 2012). *Aistear* was developed in conjunction with the Early Childhood sector, parents, children, and the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) (Hayes, 2010). It is a play-based curriculum framework set out for children from when they are born until they

are six years of age (NCCA, 2009a) and stresses that experiences in early childhood are crucial to children's developmental skills and learning growth. *Aistear* is centred around twelve principles of learning under the umbrella of four guiding themes of discovery: *Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating,* and *Exploring and Thinking,* (NCCA, 2009a). Interwoven within this framework and its themes, is a significant importance on the child's holistic development, which embraces the ideology of developing the child in the context of their community, school, home, and family (French, 2007).

A Values Based Curriculum Framework

Learning from an early age is shaped by social pedagogy with an emphasis on a holistic culture that places the child at the centre of their learning. This idea is reflected in many ECE settings, particularly in Scandinavian and Central European countries (Mosvold & Alvestad, 2011). Play and play-based learning approaches are merited universally and traceable back to some of the most well-known theorists including Froebel, Freud, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Bergen, 2014). *Aistear* denotes the types of learning taking place such as the "dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding" (NCCA, 2009a: 10) as beneficial towards creating confident and competent learners. Children from a young age are recognised as having their own belief system, ideas and with appropriate interactions, this can be sustained and enhanced (Bruner, 1996; NCCA, 2009b).

The *Aistear* framework was designed in accord with Reggio Emilia's highly appraised practical approach that acknowledges children as skilled and conversant individuals, with incredible learning potential (Edwards et al., 2012; Lindsay 2015). Play is offered as an impactful and pragmatic approach for children to engage with the world around them and create learning communities of shared learning experiences (NCCA, 2009a). Play-based approaches such as

Aistear not only promote and foster the physical, social, cognitive, and mental areas of a child's development but do so in a supportive, and caring manner (Stephen et al., 2010; Wallerstedt & Pramling 2012; Pyle et al., 2017).

Principles and Practice

Aistear acknowledges that being a good communicator is essential to a child's development and skills learned at a young age are transferrable as they get older (NCCA, 2009a). Children "communicate in many different ways including facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds, language and for some children, through assistive technology" (NCCA, 2009a: 34). Children experience language in a variety of ways through playful experiences in *Aistear* which reflect the aims of this research question. Articulating and expressing yourself through language is not just confined to oral verbalisation, but may include dance, poetry, drawings, photos, writing, sculptures, or stories (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b). By interacting with the world around them and exploring new ideas through testing, problem-solving, and questioning, children manifest ideas and theories which refine as they develop (NCCA, 2009a). This is replicated and observed in the Aims and Learning Goals set out for the *Communicating* theme in *Aistear* as outlined in Table 2.1 below. Through playful experiences children begin to emerge as proficient communicators.

Theme: Communicating	
Aim 1	Children will use non-verbal communication skills.
Aim 2	Children will use language.

Aim 3	Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.
Aim 4	Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.

Table 2.1 Aims of 'Communicating' theme in Aistear

2.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

> Play is the highest stage of the child's development at this time; for it is a freely active representation of the inner . . . It produces, therefore joy, freedom, satisfaction, repose within and without . . .
>
> - (Froebel, 1885: 30)

Finding a Definition

Froebelian pedagogy links Play closely with children's developmental growth through an engaging and opportunistic approach (Froebel, 1885; Baker, 2012; Colliver & Fleer, 2016). When children are not afforded the opportunity to play, the pattern of their development can become interrupted or disconnected (Tovey, 2017). Play can be classified as the "foundation stone of the early years curriculum" (Macintyre, 2015: 49), yet it is extremely difficult to narrow the philosophy of 'Play' into one succinct definition. Play has been at the heart of children's learning for years and open to interpretation and scrutiny from many theorists' perspectives ever since (French, 2007; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play-based learning has been

described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance, and scaffolded learning objectives (Weisberg et al., 2013). It is moulded in Vygotskian and Froebelian theory where a socialist approach to teaching and learning is encouraged and teachers facilitate for new ideas and knowledge within a modelled and purposeful framework of Play (Vygotsky, 1987; Edwards, 2017). Rather than offering a universal definition, contemporary literature on Play and play-based learning draws on multiple perspectives regarding its complexity (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). This includes but is by no means limited to: Play and whether play-based approaches translate into meaningful learning for children (Brooker et al., 2014), the content within Play and distinguishing between different types (Vorkapic et al., 2015), the importance of Role-Play (Smith, 2005; Loizou et al., 2019), the role of the adult during Play (Hayes, 2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2017) and compatible assessments (Dunphy, 2007; Pyle & DeLuca, 2017).

Although there is no universal definition to Play, the educational value and learning potential rooted within Play is routinely recognised by theorists and scholars around the world. These areas of development include the emotional, social, cognitive, and linguistic sides of a child's being (Hayes, 2010; Stephen et al., 2010; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012; Macintyre, 2015; Pyle et al., 2017). Throughout the course of this research project, I will be focusing on the development of children's expressive language skills through Play. Areas of development including social, cognitive, and other aspects of language will be acknowledged as they are inherently interwoven within the philosophy of play-based learning.

Play and Language Development

Children experience language-related shifts simultaneously to how they develop play-based transitions (Quinn et al., 2018). A study from Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) analysed evidence of

Play in preschool settings and concluded that there were similarities between language development and children's Play experiences. As children engage in play-based learning, they are guided in using the many conventions of language and communication through playful interactions with their peers and adults (Miller & Almon, 2009; Pyle et al., 2018b).

Role-Play

One form of Play that encompasses these playful exchanges and is often regarded as an important format that synthesises Play and language development is Role-Play (Smith, 2005; Hayes, 2010; Macintyre, 2015; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015; Loizou et al., 2019). Role-Play, also commonly referred to as 'Socio-Dramatic Play' (Smith, 2005; NCCA, 2009b), is the enactment of roles within a particular scenario, for a sustained period of time, between a group of children "that refers to personal, social, and domestic themes" (Loizou et al., 2019: 601). It encompasses social dialogue and role taking which allow children to explore many elements of language expression and sociability (Hayes, 2010; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). Furthermore, children can see the world through a relatable lens and negotiate what we see as societal models, entertain, and challenge them (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). Throughout Play, learning to control your own desires and considering the wants and needs of others through empathy are highlighted and innately incorporated (De La Riva & Ryan, 2015; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Through Role-Play children establish vital dispositions such as self-regulatory skills and compassion among other transferable skills (Meyers & Berk, 2014; Loizou et al., 2019). Role-Play provides imaginary scenarios where children assume an alternative role that allows them to practise more advanced language skills (Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Weisberg et al., 2013), also known as 'Symbolic Play'.

Symbolic Play

Symbolic Play happens naturally through various Play forms, especially those which allow for more creative and imaginative tendencies such as Role-Play (Loizou et al., 2019). This form of Play has a direct affiliation with language development (Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Quinn et al., 2018; Romeo et al., 2018) and can be classified as "reflecting the ability to imbue objects with imaginary characteristics and functions" (Campbell et al., 2016: 2305). This can mean using a toy kettle to imitate making a cup of tea or even integrating another inanimate object to replicate the same process through mental representation. Also branded as "abstract thinking" (Mraz, et al, 2016: 16), children generalise their understanding that a single object can be manipulated to have multiple purposes, both intentionally and unintentionally. This is an indispensable tool for higher-order thinking. Moreover, as children's ability to play symbolically increases, they combine various permutations of symbolic relationships into sequences (Orr & Geva, 2015; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). For example, expressing themselves using sound effects and tilting their head back to mimic drinking from a bottle.

Quinn (2016) studied child-targeted speech in infant-caregiver dyads during both Functional Play and Symbolic Play. Functional Play refers to Play where objects are manipulated for its intended purpose (Brown et al., 2001). This includes using a whiteboard to write a word as instructed by the adult. During the Quinn (2016) study, it was determined that Symbolic Play provided more opportunities for conversational language and questioning than Functional Play and the patterns of language used in Symbolic Play were of a direct influence on language development. This conceptualises Symbolic Play's significance within a play-based setting and for the development of this research project, as conversational language and conversational turns are important constructs in fostering expressive language skills (Ribot et al., 2018; Romeo et al., 2018).

Assessment in Play

According to the PSC (1999) assessment should best suit the needs of the child and "construct a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term learning needs of the child and plans future work accordingly" (NCCA, 1999: 17). There has been a shift in accountability when it comes to integrating assessment methods to support learning, while maintaining and implementing developmentally appropriate pedagogies in ECE classrooms (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). Current research on assessment measures in early year's classrooms in the context of play-based learning is difficult to come by (Roach et al., 2010; Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Nevertheless, assessment at this age is suggested to be analytical, comprehensive, and enlightening to compliment and cater for the complexity of needs in early childhood learning (Wood & Attfield, 2005; Dunphy, 2008).

In a recent study, Pyle, and DeLuca (2017) examined teacher's approaches and perceptions of assessment in Kindergarten classes. Across responses, questioning and dialogue were recognised as effective tools in achieving assessment goals. However, it was also noted that teachers in this study struggled to implement contemporary assessment measures along with policy and practice, which previous research has backed (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; DeLuca & Klinger, 2010; Martlew et al., 2011; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Observational data from the study saw a "blended orientation towards assessment" (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017: 464) proving impactful. This system is echoed in *Aistear* where assessment should be employed as a "narrative approach" (Dunphy, 2008: 5) whereby a rich picture of the child should develop over time using stories, drawings, samples of work and photos.

2.3 SELF-EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

> We use language for a purpose. Language is a tool used for many reasons, e.g. to greet, inform, explain, describe, report, question, express and justify an opinion, or to narrate. When we use language, we use it in a wide variety of contexts. Depending on the context, we need to alter our style of language.
>
> - (Cregan, 2019: 5)

Pragmatics

Children begin to use language at their babbling stage of development (Orr & Geneva, 2015). This transforms into single-word utterances, repetitive word statements and this cycle continues as they grow. Cregan (2019) states that a knowledge of linguistics allows us to channel and exchange information, moods, and ideas in a communicative process. For a child to develop their expressive language skills whereby they convey feelings and emotions in a social context, their pragmatic knowledge of linguistics needs to be developed first (Owens, 2012; Lockton et al., 2016; Cregan, 2019). “Pragmatics concentrates on language as a communication tool that is used to achieve social ends” (Owens, 2012: 24). Greeting someone by saying “hello” as well as knowing to say it at the start of a conversation is an example of pragmatics. The conversational use of pragmatics is “likely influenced by factors associated with expressive language ability” (Lockton et al., 2016: 513) and providing opportunities for more conversational turns with a focus on pragmatics, stimulates parts of the brain connected to language (Romeo et al., 2018).

Children's Voice and Conversational Language

Placing importance on children's voice in the classroom is not only essential to my own value system but also in allowing children to voluntarily communicate themselves (Roche, 2015; Sedova, 2017; Alexander, 2018; Murray, 2019). Recognising multiplicity in children's viewpoints puts an importance on their ability to have their own beliefs and values (Murray, 2019). This is reaffirmed in the *Aistear* framework, where there is an emphasis on children's autonomy and confidence in making their own choices (NNCA, 2009a). Being able to voice your own opinions and views within a supportive construct plays a key role in forming their identities at this young age (NCCA, 2009a; Nilsson et al., 2015). This belief empowers "children so that no child fears rejection or ridicule when expressing a thought, feeling or idea, or asking a question" (Cregan, 2019: 31). Open-ended questions that allow for a variant of responses encourage children to apply their knowledge of language to express themselves (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014; Katz et al., 2018; Cregan, 2019). A question such as "Tell me about this picture" not only requires an elaborate answer using nouns and complex syntax but involves composite ideas where children must articulate and justify thoughts (Cregan, 2019). The importance of conversational turns and children's voice within the classroom supports expressive language development particularly through adult interactions.

A study by Ribot et al. (2018) led research on how the use of language, directed children to develop better expressive skills. The focus of this group were bilingual Spanish-English children where expressive skills (language output) and receptive skills (language input) were assessed at various stages of development. The implications of this research were encouraging and endorse the idea of parents encouraging "children's talk" (Romeo et al., 2018: 937). Similar logic can be translated into a classroom context where the teacher provides the same opportunities for children to converse.

2.4 ADULT INTERACTIONS IN PLAY

> Play at this age must be guided, and the boy developed for it; that is, his individual life (his school life, and his life of outward experience) must be made so rich that it must necessarily break forth in joy from within.
>
> - (Froebel, 1885: 229)

Perspectives on the Role of the Adult

There are diverse viewpoints implicating adult involvement in play-based learning and its contribution to enhancing the Play experience (Hargreaves et al., 2014). One point of view is that children's Free Play is conducive towards their social and emotional development and should be safeguarded and untouched (Pramling et al., 2006; Goouch, 2008; Weisberg et al., 2016). This is echoed in a comparative study in Germany where German practitioners implemented learning through Play as a solely child-initiated and child-led practice with no adult intrusion. The outcomes of this child-directed format illustrated that this form of Play catered for the psychological needs of the child (Wu, 2014; Wu et al., 2018). In contrast to this is a more adult guided approach to Play that puts the practitioner in a facilitator role. As Froebel (1885) depicts above, there is an importance on implementing an adult guided approach to play-based learning in comparison to Play where children are solely left to their own devices. Recent research builds on Froebel's ideas and signifies the importance of adult interactions in Play contributing to linguistic and cognitive developments (McAfee et al., 2015). Hayes (2007, 2010) agrees with this theory and believes in the "nurturing pedagogy" (2010: 9), which positions the adult as having a vital, yet respective role in the child's Play experience.

Another recent study in Kindergarten classes in the United States found teacher-directed learning activities and explicit instruction contributed to the use of higher-order thinking skills (Ansari & Purtell, 2017). Furthermore, in the same study student-selected learning activities resulted in higher decision-making functions and self-regulation (Ansari & Purtell, 2017), which reflects the outcomes of the Wu study (2014), as previously mentioned. Both perspectives highlight contemporary arguments surrounding adult interactions in Play and support the literature of a supportive, inclusive environment that allows for both explicit instruction while permitting children to develop through appropriately playful learning experiences such as Free Play (Hope-Southcott, 2013; Sundberg et al., 2016; Pyle et al., 2018a; Pyle et al., 2018b). *Aistear*'s development was based on similar research that positioned the adult as having an integral role in facilitating for Play while also incorporating children's free Play and providing them with the autonomy to make their own choices (French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; Dunphy, 2008).

Scaffolding Multiple Voices – The Zone of Proximal Development

Aistear recognises adults at the fore of children's learning and its aims and learning goals are to be rooted "in partnership with the adult" (NCCA, 2009a: 44). Co-creating and guided learning, is a key concept moulded and influenced by psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), otherwise known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It is a sociocultural theory of learning (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011) which mirrors current research on the topic. Through open-ended Play experiences in the ZPD, teachers support new ideas and knowledge to guide the development of children's learning (Vygotsky, 1997; Edwards, 2017). Vygotsky (1997) associated his ZPD to language acquisition. It acts as a catalyst for children to become proficient in language for communication initially, but as they get older it forms a much more

complex system. Within this theory, there is usually a more competent other in the ZPD, and one child can assume this role for another child to further dialogical interactions (Eun, 2019).

Children perform skills and concepts socially that extend beyond their individual capabilities but must be specific to each learner (Vygotsky, 1997; Kauser, 2010). The ZPD is the difference between actual development, measured by what the children can do independently, and potential development, measured by what the children can do under guided instruction from an adult or more capable peer (Vygotsky, 1997; Kravtsova, 2009; Kausar, 2010; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011). Scaffolding is of high priority within the ZPD (Kauser, 2010). Eun (2019: 25) describes communicative scaffolding as "each utterance is connected to previous utterances and is formed in anticipation of future utterances". Children will get bored if the scaffolding is too close to what the learner can do independently. Conversely, the learner will become frustrated if the scaffolding is above what they can do independently (Vygotsky, 1997). The *Aistear* theme *Exploring and Thinking* (Aim 2, Learning Goal 1) is evident here: "Recognise patterns and make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know" (NCCA, 2009a: 44). Continuing to model and revisit strengthens continuous development within the ZPD (Kauser, 2010; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011). However, knowing when to intervene in Play and provide this scaffolded approach requires understanding and training to implement a balanced child-led and adult orientated approach to Play (Hunter & Walsh, 2014).

Supportive or Intrusive? - Chocolate-Covered Broccoli

Debates on 'Play' being linked synonymously with 'learning' or whether they are two separate entities (Brooker et al., 2014; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) contribute to the desertion of authentic Play experiences in ECE settings (Nicolopoulou, 2010). There is an aura of confusion and uncertainty on how the two can coexist along with other curricular pressures (Pyle &

Danniels, 2017). Froebel (1885) and Brooker (2011) state that is most effective for children in ECE settings to have supported Play instruction based on their own interests and hobbies to infuse learning opportunities. However, current mandated curricula have hindered its enactment (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). A study by Pyle and Alaca (2018) investigated children's perspectives on the role of Play in Kindergarten classes which found that children associated Play with learning when the teacher was an active participant in the Play experience. Conversely, when children's Free Play was used in classrooms without interactions from the teacher, the idea of learning through Play became a distinct construct (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). It was also noted in the same study that when children viewed Play as being developmentally inclusive of learning, their appreciation of it was heightened and this made for a more conducive Play experience overall. In theory, a collaborative classroom environment is advised, yet a domineering adult approach to Play can leave you with what can be described as "chocolate-covered broccoli" (Bruckman, 1999: 75).

Coined by Bruckman (1999), this describes work as camouflaged Play. When adults take an assertive stance to operating a Play environment, there can be an overbearing element of infusing alternative learning expectations on the children. This neglects the children's autonomy to participate in Play freely and explore their own avenues and paths of creation (Weisberg et al., 2013; Sundberg et al., 2016). Regrettably, this has become more apparent in contemporary education as practitioners of Play are influenced by mandated curricula and find it increasingly difficult to marry play-based learning and more traditional teaching aspects together (Lynch, 2015; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

2.5 PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE IN PLAY-BASED LEARNING

The "political endorsement" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 201) that surrounds Play and play-based learning approaches in the Early Childhood sector is forthright worldwide, with an overwhelming amount of literature supporting this statement, as discussed above. Hayes (2007) positions well-educated practitioners as major stakeholders in implementing an effective learning environment for *Aistear*. The competence of the adult is critical in enabling children to become more masterful and accomplished learners from an early age (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Hayes & O'Neill, 2017). Yet, Play is on the periphery of early years classrooms both in Ireland, and around the world (Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Martlew et al., 2011; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

'Implementation' and 'Practice' Divide

Gray and Ryan (2016) conducted a multi-method study in Ireland concerning teachers' experiences with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and how primary school teachers perceive *Aistear* in relation to its more established counterpart, the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). Despite many teachers (99% of the study sample) believing Play is central to children's learning and agree that play-based learning should be embedded within our classroom practice daily, it was being used as a settling in period at the start of the school day in order to "complete administrative tasks before completing the 'real work' of the day" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 201). Scaffolding is central to Vygotsky's ZPD, however, the process becomes difficult when children associate Play with the absence of adult involvement as discussed in the Pyle and Alaca (2018) study. Many teachers in the Gray and Ryan study (2016) believed the pressures of the PSC outweighed the demands of the *Aistear*

curriculum framework as the former is mandated, inspected, and is in line with the political pressures to reach educational goals for schools.

Integrated Play Hour – The Antithesis to a Play-Based Framework

The role of the adult as described in *Aistear*'s User Guide "involves many dimensions such as when to intervene and when to stand back" (NCCA, 2009b: 56), paired with being confident in organising, implementing, and assessing for Play. However, 64% of teachers in the study by Gray and Ryan (2016) agreed that they did not feel confident organising an environment which encouraged play-based learning, and a further 43% of teachers were unfamiliar and lacked the necessary training to marry the two together. Even with the inherent pressures from the PSC apparent, some schools have taken to providing a certain element of *Aistear* within their classroom practice, more commonly known as the '*Aistear* Hour' or 'Integrated Play Hour' (Concannon-Gibney, 2018). Although good intentions are evident here, this format is contradictory to the principles and themes of the *Aistear* curriculum framework which does not seek to compartmentalise itself as a standalone subject (Ring et al., 2016; Concannon-Gibney, 2018). This not only supports the fact that teachers do not feel confident in organising for Play (Gray & Ryan, 2016) but suggests that *Aistear* is acting as another subject within that PSC that already contains eleven other detailed subjects (NCCA, 1999). Nevertheless, it is does propose a willingness from teachers in trying to implement play-based approaches in their daily practice.

The Influence of Power

Studies have emerged from around the world including Finland (Hyvonen, 2011), Northern Ireland (Hunter & Walsh, 2014) and America (Lynch, 2015) where the same pressures to focus on a prescribed curriculum undermine the significance of play-based learning. In Ontario, play-based learning is mandated into full-day kindergarten classes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011) but teachers face problems with balancing the role of Play in the classroom and the academically focused curriculum (Pyle & Bigelow, 2014; Lynch, 2015). This draws on Foucault's (1980, 2003) theories surrounding institutionalised power that is prevalent in modern education and adopted worldwide, where teachers have absorbed a set of disciplinary norms and power is vertically governed onto them(Foucault, 2003; Leask, 2012). This "model of exclusion" (Foucault, 2003: 41) obstructs teachers of their agency and freedom to operate justifiably. They are unable to position themselves within their practice and become disconnected as a result (Oers, 2015). Although the mechanisms of power are fixed, Foucault advises constant critique and the possibility of rethinking as a transformative intervention (Foucault, 2003; Leask, 2012).

Since the study by Gray and Ryan (2016) was conducted, the new revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) (2019) has been introduced and could be construed as recent combatant and informative outlook to implementing *Aistear* successfully (Concannon-Gibney, 2018). It "builds upon the principles of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. These principles highlight the importance of adult-child relationships and playful and meaningful experiences for children's learning and development" (NCCA, 2019: 15). The PLC recognises Play as a vital methodology to children's early development with its outcomes reflecting approaches supported by *Aistear* (NCCA, 2019).

2.6 SUMMARY

In this Chapter, I have provided an outline of current theories and perspectives surrounding Play and play-based learning within an Irish context (*Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*), and around the world. Recent literature supports Play fostering the cognitive and social development of children's learning with language use being considered as instrumental within Play. Language forms the basis for effective communication and children experience language through interactions involving both children and adults. Self-expressive language skills come in many forms such as oral expression, drawing, writing, drama, and singing, and can, in theory, be nurtured through meaningful interactions. From a pedagogical perspective, the success of the *Aistear* framework lies solely with the adult. However, teachers feel undertrained and unsupported when trying to implement this play-based framework. As a result, some schools have opted to include the 'Integrated Play Hour' in a bid to incorporate *Aistear* within their practice. Finally, it is important to position yourself within the Play experience and provide children with plentiful opportunities for conversational language and open-ended questioning techniques. The methodology used for this research project will be discussed in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

> How dissonant the *I* of the ego sounds … But how beautiful and legitimate the vivid and emphatic *I* of Socrates sounds. It is the *I* of infinite conversation
>
> - (Buber, 1970: 117)

3.0 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two, I provided the context of my research question and used relevant literature to support why I chose to investigate this area. In this Chapter, I will describe how I positioned myself in the research and the importance of choosing an AR methodology as opposed to other research paradigms. Central to this self-study project was my own value system that influenced the choice of research method and question. I will depict the overall design of this project together with the data collection instruments utilised. As the research participants were considered a vulnerable group, sensitivities around ethical 'consent' and 'assent' will be addressed through the lens of qualitative research.

3.1 WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Different paradigms of research offer unique assumptions on how research should be undertaken and its role within society (Bassey, 1990). Selecting a research paradigm must be steeped in what you want to gain from the research (Cohen et al., 2018). The virtues involved in research, termed paradigms, are "the basis on which we build our verifiable truth" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994: 4). In correlation with what I want to achieve from this study, I have

chosen AR as my preferred methodology. Kurt Lewin (1946) was a Jewish refugee who first introduced the term 'Action Research'. He was devoted to "raising the self-esteem of minority groups…" (Adelman, 1993: 7) and believed that a democratic sharing of ideas influenced change which achieved a deeper understanding towards action. AR can be described as invitational and not coercive. McNiff (2019) defines AR on her website as:

> a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be. Because action research is done by you, the practitioner, it is often referred to as practitioner-based research; and because it involves you thinking about and reflecting on your work, it can also be called a form of self-reflective practice

3.2 THE NATURE OF ACTION RESEARCH

AR is a way for researchers to analyse elements of their practice, whether encouraging or adverse, and act in response (McNiff, 2014; Glen et al., 2017). Only through identifying a problem, can we begin to rectify it (O'Brien, 1998). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) devised a simple model that typified AR as being cyclical in nature with each Cycle having four steps: *Plan*, *Act*, *Observe*, and *Reflect*:

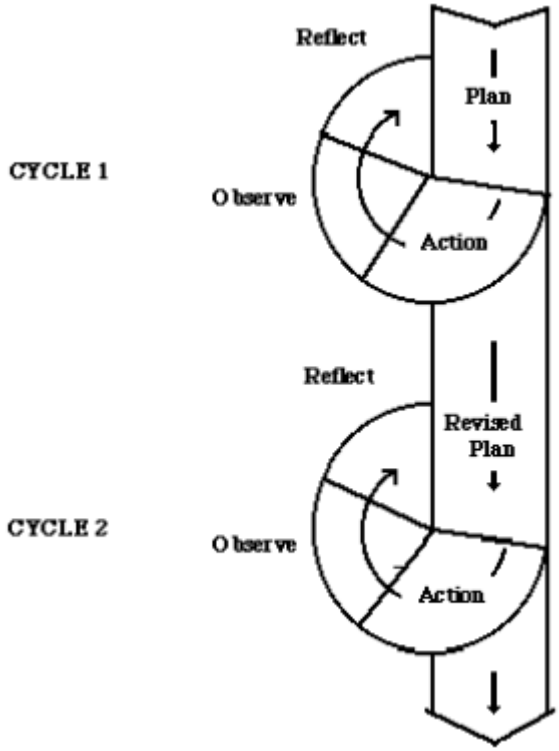

Figure 3.1 Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) cyclical model for Action Research

Each Cycle in any AR model is refined through "understanding developed in previous cycles" (Koshy, 2010: 8). This idea fits effortlessly with self-study research as it requires the researcher to engage with and reflect on their practice as "knowledge is created by knowers for themselves, through building on prior knowledge" (Roche, 2017: 109), incorporating the importance of the scaffolding approach referenced in Vygotsky's ZPD. However, AR is not as straightforward and linear as some models would suggest. McNiff (2014, 2019) illustrates that the processes involved such as planning, reflection, action and observing could be happening simultaneously and not "sequential or necessarily rational" (McNiff, 2014: 67). Teachers can be described as powerful agents of change in our classrooms and through meaningful reflection with an underlying belief to change, can transform educational practice (Ghaye, 2010; McDonagh et al., 2012; Niemi et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2016). As I am an 'insider researcher', both observing and participating in the research within an advisory group, this

encouraged a reflexive approach. Reflexivity is portrayed as a "conscious experiencing of the self within the process of researching it-self" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000: 183). It would have been naïve of me to assume that over the course of this AR project I would not have had to alter my focus in some aspect. As Walsh and Ryan (2015: 31) highlight, we must "recognise the complexity of the web of life and experience" and adjust to this evidence. Ongoing, consistent evaluation and analysis are key components that underpin AR and self-study research (McDonagh et al., 2012; Glen et al., 2017; Mc Niff, 2019).

3.3 POSITIONING MYSELF WITHIN ACTION RESEARCH

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, this research project stems from constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning that positions shared learning experiences as a gateway towards knowledge creation. I wanted to improve and enhance my teaching practice while living closer to the direction of my values (Whitehead, 2018). I included a quote in the opening line of this Chapter from Buber (1970) where the outcome of the research is not an egotistical 'I', but rather a platform for further dialogue and debate. What becomes of your research does not just concern self-learning but benefits the learning of others (Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Glen et al., 2017; Mcniff, 2019). This fits seamlessly into my own practice, and my core educational values of *Communication*, *Voice*, and *Autonomy*. AR lends itself as a "deeply values-based methodology" (Sullivan, 2016: 28) as accepted by Glenn et al. (2017) that our values, whether ontological or epistemological, are rooted in what we do. The data collected from this research project is not refined conceptual objectives, but rather goals that are in line with my values. I cited the trials and tribulations that we as teachers and ECE practitioners encounter in the previous Chapter and it cannot be denied that these pose problems when living in the direction of my own educational values (Schön, 1995), and becoming a "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 2018: 131). It is through negotiating and identifying these issues that I can begin

to enact change (Mc Niff, 2014). My personal agenda from this research project is that the knowledge gained would enable me to improve my practice and live consciously in the direction of my educational values.

3.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH – AN EVERCHANGING WORLD

The key to understanding qualitative research is rooted in the belief that "qualitative researchers are interested in knowing how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019: 4). Social constructivism sits tangibly within the constructs of qualitative research as it deals with real world problems and the belief that knowledge is socially conceived (Roche, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In contrast to this, quantitative research tends to have a smaller focus in its implementation. Observational data in quantitative research is often disseminated into smaller pieces accumulated into a variable of measurability (Cohen et al., 2018). The choice between qualitative and quantitative research methods lies directly with the research question and the researcher (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Walsh & Ryan, 2015).

My research question draws on multiple perspectives and experiences stemming from my own educational values, so the choice of research reflects that position. Qualitative research is an attractive option for researchers who want to explore minority groups or whose experiences and voices may have been ignored or suppressed (Silverman, 2006). This ideology resonated with me and my value system which added to the importance of this research. Qualitative research is rarely linear, and the researcher often experiences obstacles that may influence the outcomes (Silverman, 2006). Nevertheless, a well prepared and organised project that considers potential barriers can prevent this from happening (Sakata et al., 2019).

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

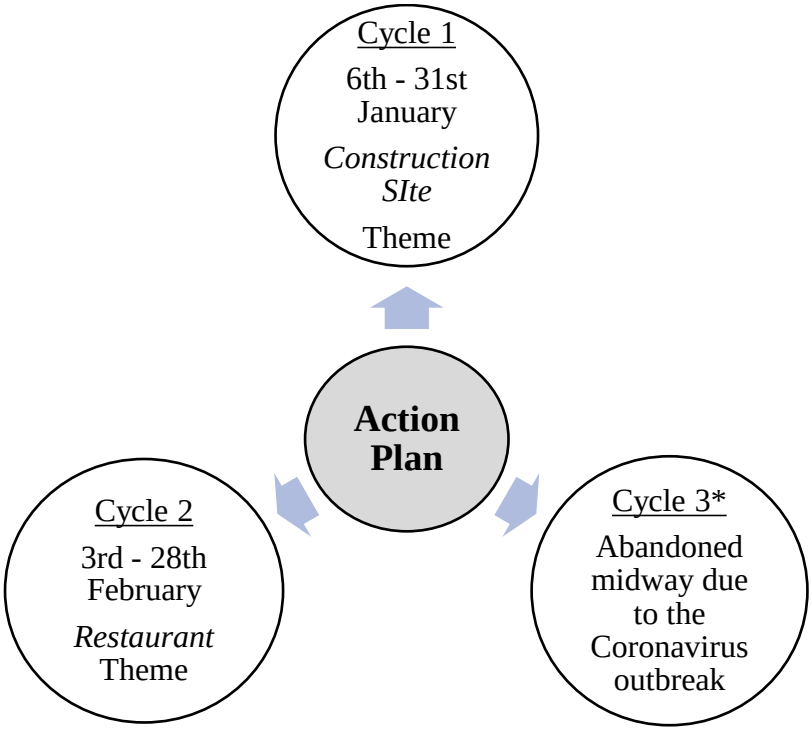

Figure 3.2: Action plan for Cycles

This project was conducted in a Junior Infant classroom (first year of formal education at primary level), located in the school where I worked as the mainstream class teacher. Children from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds attend the school with additional teaching posts being granted because of the high number of children who require additional learning support in English. The research took place over three months and consisted of three Cycles respectively, as laid out above in Figure 3.2. in Cycle Two, I applied my intervention where I implemented focus questions and scenario based problem-solving to ascertain whether this improved expressive language elements in children's learning, as outlined below. It is also

important to note that Cycle Three was interrupted due to the Coronavirus pandemic which resulted in the closure of schools nationally.

Research Site and Implementation of Aistear

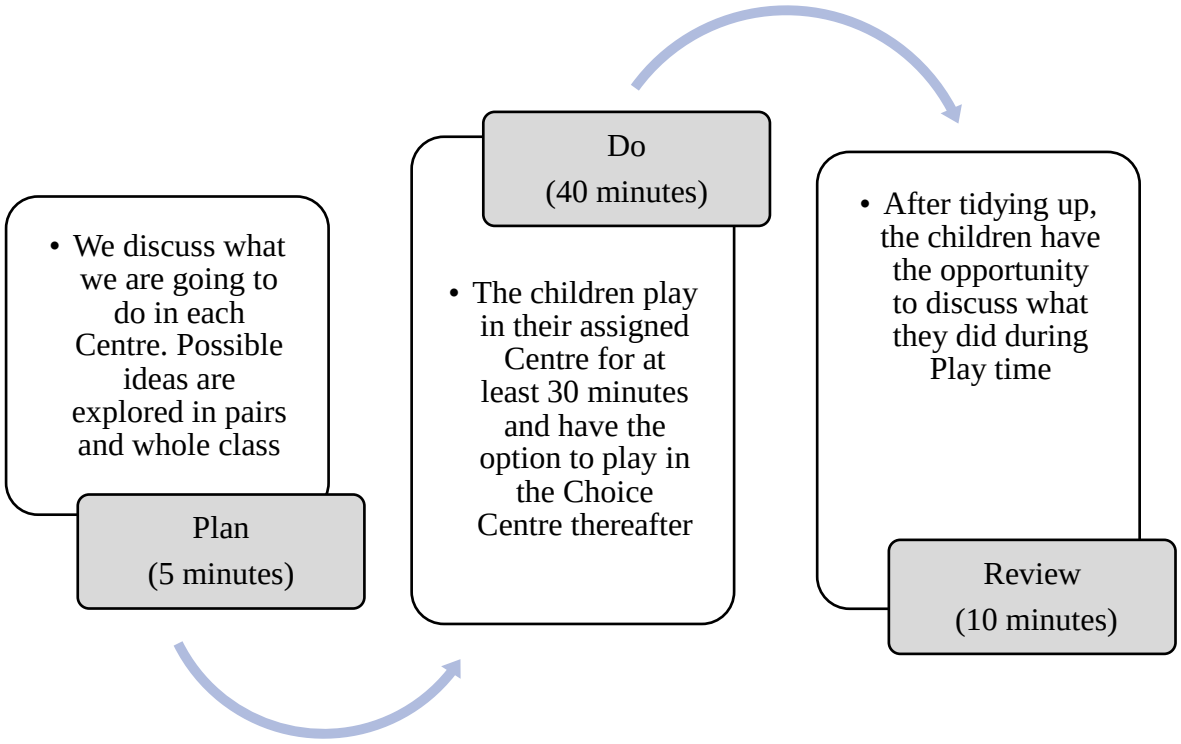

Figure 3.3: Layout of Aistear Session

Figure 3.3 above illustrates the layout and timings of a typical 55-minute *Aistear* session that was implemented daily from Monday to Friday during the three Cycles of the research. The 'Choice Centre' as depicted above, was made available after children spent 30-minutes in their assigned Centre and included a combination of topic related table-top games, books, and activities. A Centre is a place within the classroom where children can play and pursue learning activities. As there were four Centres to be explored each week, on a Friday, children had the choice to play in any of the Centres. Play Centres were based on various forms of Play such as Role-Play, Malleable Play, Junk Art, Constructive Play, and Table-Top Play where a rota

system was used to inform the children as to what Centre they were to play at on any particular day.

Research Participants

There were several participants involved in this study. Firstly, the main contributors who enhanced the research and provided me with an abundance of rich data, were the children themselves. Consent forms were sent to the children's parents and thirteen children agreed to participate. A consent form was also signed and returned from my critical friend. The Principal and Board of Management acted as the main gatekeepers. I received permission from the Board of Management to conduct this research in my classroom and simultaneously, permission from my Principal was granted. All letters pf permission and consent can be found in the Appendices. Finally, my supervisor was an active participant in providing excellent feedback and guidance throughout the research project.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

> Will the child really be given the right not to take part, or is the action research seen less like research and more like the carrying out of a professional duty to ensure that the best possible education is being promoted, i.e. part of the normal practice of improving curricula, teaching and learning, and hence not requiring the consent of the child or the parents?
>
> - (Cohen et al., 2018: 125)

Throughout the course of this research project, I continually adhered to and was compliant with Maynooth University, School and Safeguarding Children Policies, in addition to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) (See Appendix A). Having to obtain informed consent prior to conducting research was a challenge coupled with the "predicament that informed consent - divulging one's identity and research purpose to all and sundry will kill many a project stone dead" (Punch, 1998: 171). Although I was the participant's class teacher, it was imperative that the children knew of the research and understood that they could opt out at every stage without any pressure or ramifications. As the participant group were of a young age, Barley and Bath (2013) insist that familiarisation between child and researcher is of upmost importance in not only achieving the best outcomes for the research but also helping the children feel comfortable around the researcher. Considering I was the main class teacher of the participant group, they were more likely to feel relaxed and secure while I conducted my research (Cohen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, ethical restrictions were strictly adhered to.

Vulnerability

In accordance with the course handbook from the University, all potential participants were informed in full of the research I conducted, what their role in the research was, what it will be used for, and how their right to privacy and anonymity was of precedence. Individual and situational factors are essential in identifying vulnerability in your research (Bracken-Roche et. al., 2017). Junior Infants can be regarded as a potential vulnerable group because of their age, so in order to minimise discomfort among pupils, if one child did not want to be included in the research on a specific day, their decision was respected in full even if their parents gave consent. This was a defining element for this research project and for my value system. Children had the *Autonomy* to opt out and simultaneously, their right to a *Voice* was being

respected. This was achieved through a ‘thumbs up and thumbs down’ system where if they wanted to participate, the ‘thumbs up’ was selected and vice versa. I checked in with the children daily to make sure they were happy to participate in the research as failing to do this would have meant I was not upholding my values in practice. Pseudonyms were given to all participants so that their anonymity was respected. If a participant wrote or drew anything that broke their anonymity, then I rendered that piece of data invalid**.**

Power Dynamics

The school I conducted the research project in was welcoming of research. There have been other self-study AR projects within the school over the past year and stakeholders have been supportive throughout. Transparency was a key factor during this project. Being open and having conversations with participants helped them feel at ease as well as affirming them that they can opt out at any stage during the research, whether it was the participant group or my critical friend. Being the class teacher, there was an obvious power dynamic prevalent. I was very much cognizant of this dynamic and wanted the children to understand that power relations are changeable (Foucault, 2003), and they had the power to opt out. The foundation of this research was investigating my own practice. All participants were thoroughly informed that they were not under any critique or observation, but the entirety of this study was a reflection on my practice.

Informed Consent and Assent

A letter of consent was sent to the Board of Management first and foremost, so that research could be undertaken in the school. Researchers must provide a credible and meaningful

explanation of their research intentions (Cohen et al., 2018) so it was important that simple, plain language was used in all letters of consent so that participants knew exactly what was being requested of them and their role within the project. As aforementioned, Junior Infants are regarded as a vulnerable group. I explained to them that what we were going to do was to make me a better teacher and not a reflection on them as learners. I re-iterated this focal point at various intervals throughout the research and I was satisfied the children understood this.

Sensitivity

As outlined before, I adhered to and was compliant with Maynooth University, the School and Safeguarding Children Policies, in addition to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). If a child was to make a sensitive disclosure to me during the research, then I followed the school's Child Protection Policy and followed the necessary steps. This data would not be part of the research project and rendered invalid as a piece of data. Again, as the participant group were of a young age, I was mindful of unpredictable responses from children that may compromise the rights of other children involved in the process.

Data Storage

In accordance with the Maynooth Master of Education Student Handbook, all data which is privatised and anonymous will be retained for a minimum of ten years following its publication. All data is password protected, encrypted, with the necessary firewalls, and safeguarded with an anti-virus. Hard copies of data are locked in a secure cabinet in a room only made accessible by me and evidence of personal data will not be showcased to any unauthorised person. Moreover, I was also a recipient of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) Masters

Level Bursary 2019 for this research project and a copy of my thesis will be held in the INTO research library. This may be accessed and or referenced for educational publications in the future. Because of this, I included this information in all letters of consent (See Appendix C).

3.7 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The purpose of collecting data is to generate evidence in accordance with your claim to knowledge (Glen et al., 2017). I am investigating whether my implementation of *Aistear* can lead to children fostering essential expressive language skills. Triangulation between methods, observers, and approaches contribute to the validity and reliability of the claim (Jewitt, 2012; Lee et al., 2015). My methods of collecting data were influenced by my research question, *Aistear*'s Aims and Learning Goals for the 'Communicating' theme (NCCA, 2009a), and finally my value system. Children's voice is an important construct within my practice, so it was important for me to adopt instruments that allowed for various forms of expression in a holistic and developmentally appropriate manner. The accumulating of data only began when I had all ethical permissions in place. For this purpose, I used the following data collection instruments:

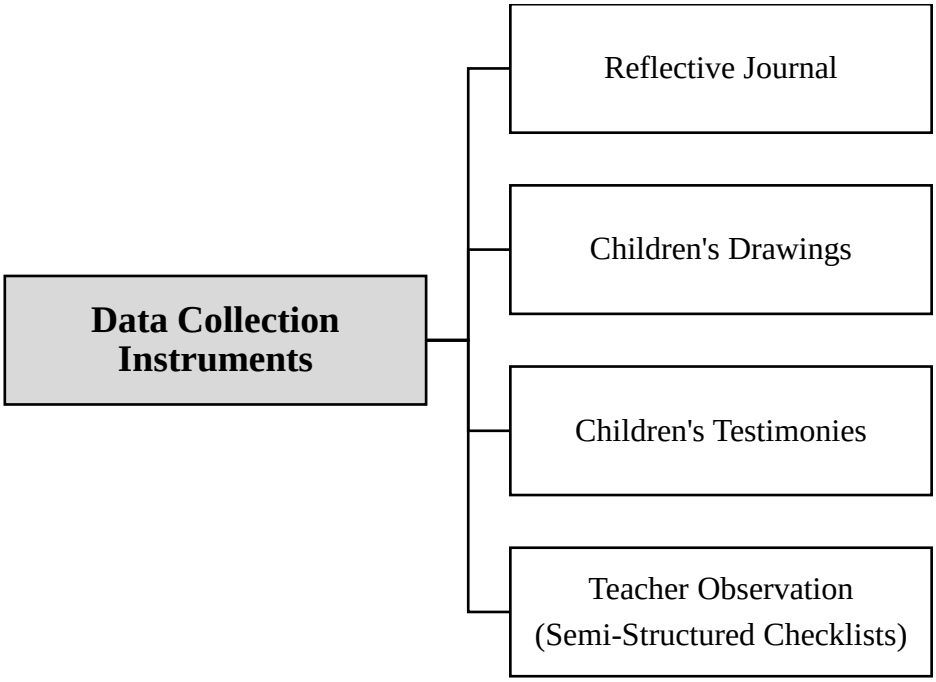

Figure 3.4 Data collection instruments

Reflective Journal

> A process of re-organising knowledge and emotional orientations in order to achieve further insights…. reflective practice emphasises the use of reflection in professional or other complex activities as a means of coping with situations that are ill-structured and/or unpredictable
>
> - (Moon, 2004: 82)

My reflective journal was instrumental during this project. As Moon (2004) depicts above, reflection is a necessary tool that researchers use to provide explanations and solutions to problems faced. Reflection and reflexivity are principles that underpin AR (Ghaye, 2010; McDonagh et al., 2012; Niemi et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2016) and the reflections in this study included tracking my participant group and conversations with my supervisor and critical

friend. Reflection informed by theory can provide us with insights which in turn can improve our practice and the practice of others (Brookfield, 1995). This assisted in constructing a broad sense of the issue for my reflections as I considered not only my own 'personal lens' but the lenses of students' and colleagues. I drew on multiple reflective theories and models depending on the nature of the reflection. One such version that I identified with and used regularly was Gibbs' (1988) *Reflective Cycle*. This model encourages the researcher to think systematically about the phases of an experience or activity through the subheadings provided in Figure 3.5 below. Samples of my reflections can be evidenced in Chapter Four.

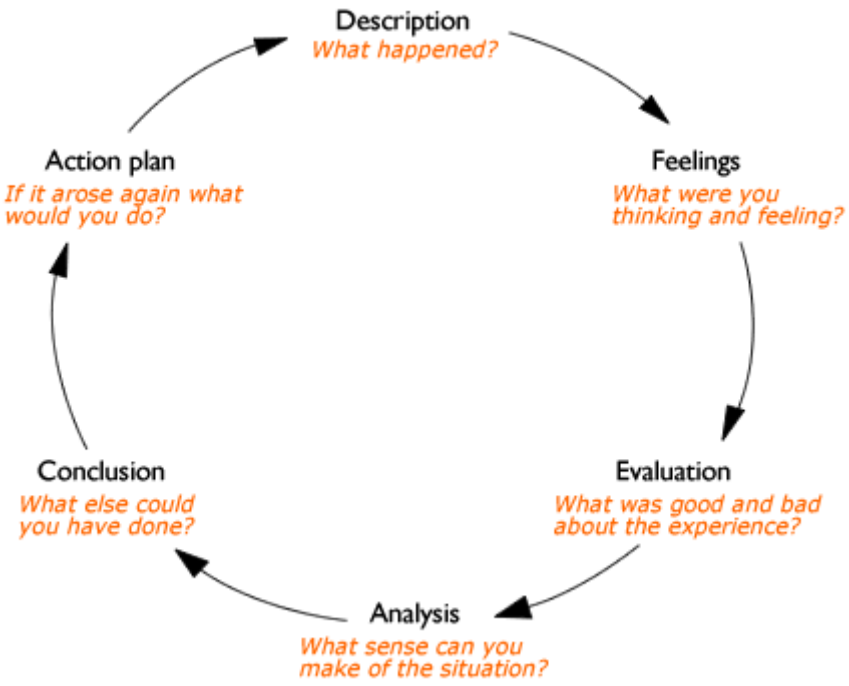

Figure 3.5 Gibbs' (1988) *Reflective Cycle*

Children's Drawings

Drawing can be considered as being in the same field of expression as Play and speech (Farokhi & Hasemi, 2011; Bland, 2012). Through drawing, children learn to communicate with each other, develop fundamental skills for learning and build a sense of trust (Anning & Ring, 2004). Negi (2015) highlights the importance of drawing as an effective communication tool for children with limited or poor language skills. The element of drawing was integrated into our *Aistear* Learning Logs (LL) to depict our favourite Play Centre that the children participated in during that week. We completed these drawings every Friday in our 'Planning' session and the children were encouraged to tell their peers about what they drew. Sedgewick and Sedgewick (1998), Anning and Ring (2004), and Hope (2008) illustrate the emotional side of children's drawings and the mental growth that can be achieved from this exercise. It serves as a channel for emotion, which may not be articulated where thoughts, opinions and ideas are made available. This concept was vital in ensuring I was living in the direction of my values as well as making certain that the children received a sense of achievement from their drawings and identified themselves within the Play experience. This process was invitational, and children opted in or out using our 'thumbs up or thumbs down' system.

Children's Testimonies

Accompanying the children's drawing was a 'testimony'. Thomas and Jolley (1998), Jolley and Vulic-Prtoric (2001), and Walker (2008) argue that children's drawings on their own are too complexly created and characteristically abstruse to be a reliable source of the events illustrated by them. A child's stage of drawing is varied. In the beginning, children are primarily interested in drawing dynamic properties such as moving objects, as they are attracted towards those qualities (Quaglia et al., 2015). Following the children's drawing and discussing their

pictures with their peers, they engaged in their Choice Play which occurred on Fridays. While this was in motion, I called up the children who brought back consent forms (and those who did not) and invited them to tell me about the picture that they drew in their LL. For children who did not participate in the research study, the LLs from these participants were stored in a separate folder to avoid mixing data with the other participant group. The type of question offered by the researcher is of huge importance in determining the outcome of the child's testimony (Saywitz & Camparo, 2014; Katz et al., 2018). Presenting the child with open-ended questions produces both a richer and more reliable testimony from children. This is also mirrored in the literature that supports children's expressive language skills (Cregan, 2019). Drawing helps children to structure their narratives about an event by reminding them what they have or have not said, and what they have yet to describe (Patterson & Hayne, 2011; Katz & Hamama, 2013). This again was influenced by literature on the topic and is also concurrent with *Aistear*'s *Exploring and Thinking* theme where children are encouraged to understand, negotiate, and question their own working theories (NCCA, 2009a). The *Aistear* LLs were a combination of the child's drawing, and their accompanied testimony (See Appendix G). Testimonies were handwritten accounts of exactly what the child had said to ensure accuracy and validity.

Teacher Observation – Semi-Structured Checklists

A distinctive feature of observations is the ability to obtain 'live' data from a naturally occurring situation (such as Play), as opposed to sieving through reported data after the fact (Creswell, 2012; Wellington, 2015; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). It was crucial for me to facilitate for and enhance the Play environment parallel to not disturbing the experience when carrying out my research. Conventionally, observation has been categorised as being "non-

interventionalist" (Adler & Adler, 1994: 378). I used semi-structured checklists from Monday to Thursday that focused on an element of expressive language stemming from relevant literature. The criteria for each Cycle was fixed: *Speaking, Artistic Endeavour, Non-Verbal Behaviour* and *Choice Making*, but the objectives within each criterion varied due to the reflexive nature of AR (See Appendix F). This idea is concurrent with the reasoning behind using semi-structured checklists. Categories were planned out prior to its implementation in Cycle One, and through reflecting on the data, this influenced and informed what I wanted to achieve in Cycle Two. Observations can be both qualitative and quantitative in nature. However, "the qualitative researcher aims to catch the dynamic nature of events, to see intentionality and maybe to seek trends and patterns over time" (Cohen et al., 2018: 544), which reflected my position in this research study. The thought processes behind the criteria chosen are explained below in Table 3.1 and were informed by the literature that supported expressive language development.

Criteria	**Reference to Literature**

Speaking	• Conversational Language and Social Turns
	  ○ (Lockton et al., 2016; Romeo et al., 2018; Cregan, 2019)
	• Pragmatics
	  ○ (Owens, 2012; Cregan, 2019)

Non-Verbal Behaviour	• Symbolic Play
	  ○ (Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Quinn et al., 2018; Romeo et al., 2018)
	• Abstract Thinking
	  ○ (Mraz, et al., 2016)

Artistic Endeavour	• Reggio Emilia's 100 Languages
	  ○ (Lindsay, 2015)
	• Drawing
	  ○ (Farokhi & Hasemi, 2011; Bland, 2012)

Choice Making	• Enabling Student Voice ○ (Roche, 2015; Sedova, 2017; Alexander, 2018; Cregan, 2019)

Table 3.1. Criteria chosen for checklists as informed by literature

3.8 CHOICE OF INTERVENTION

I mentioned the reflective nature of AR and the need to critically reflect on your own practice to enhance it (Glen et al., 2017). The cyclical model of AR that I referred to in Figure 3.1 by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) requires you to *Observe* and *Reflect*, followed by a revised plan. The evidence from your observations and reflections influence the action or actions that make up your intervention. It was important for me to liaise with my critical friend when coming up with my *Revised Plan* after Cycle One. As McNiff (2019) describes it, a critical friend is someone trustworthy who can offer aid and critique constructively with a view on assessing and enhancing the quality of the research. My critical friend was chosen at the outset of this research project.

Cycle One was exclusively child led and incorporated child's Free Play. Having reviewed the data from the semi-structured checklists in Cycle One, I began to implement an intervention in Cycle Two. My intervention consisted of a more adult-driven approach and problem-based scenarios that encouraged expressive language skills within the Role-Play Centre in *Aistear*. Role-Play was chosen over other Play Centres as it encompasses a wide variety of language learning potential (Smith, 2005; Hayes, 2010; Macintyre, 2015; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015; Loizou et al., 2019). These scenarios were consistent with the research question and the outcomes for Cycle Two. Although observational data for the criteria in the first Cycle was relatively high, I wanted to expand on the learning taking place through reflecting on what I could employ to

improve my practice. This also conceptualised *Aistear*'s theme of *Exploring and Thinking* where Aim three states that "children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers" (NCCA, 2009a: 44). One such scenario would involve me acting as a customer during 'The Restaurant' theme and giving a child my order with an exact amount of toppings for a pizza or else sending a pizza back as I only wanted three peppers instead of two (See Appendix H). I was informed by the quality of feedback obtained from the LLs in Cycle One, and as a result I created a list of open-ended-questions for use in the Role-Play Centre. These questions reflected recent research and the benefits of utilising open-ended questions that require more precise elements of language (Romeo et al., 2018; Cregan, 2019). It was important to implement a *Revised Plan* that was in line with my educational values and did not interrupt or halt the Play experience. An example of the intervention employed in Cycle Two during 'The Restaurant' theme can be viewed below in Table 3.2 The outcomes of my intervention will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Scenario	**Focus Questions**
The customer has been waiting too long for a table	• How will we make the customer happy again? • What should we say to the customer? • How can we get the customer into the Restaurant?
The customer received the wrong order	• Who should we tell? • What can we do to get the right order to the customer? • Should we say something to the customer?

Table 3.2 Sample intervention employed in Cycle Two

3.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative research lends itself to analysis during, and after the data collection stage (Sarantakos, 2013). The data from this study was examined thematically with a focus on identifying codes, patterns, and reoccurring themes within data sets (Braun & Clark, 2006). Flexibility and a researcher's judgement were essential in providing a rich thematic description of the data to establish outcomes for the research. The following Chapter will provide an in-depth evaluation and nuanced account of the themes that became evident, in addition to the processes that led me to arrive at them.

3.10 SUMMARY

In this Chapter I discussed the reflective nature of AR as a catalyst towards knowledge creation and transformative change. I located myself within the philosophy of AR and identified my educational values of *Communication, Voice,* and *Autonomy*. I outlined the overall design of my research project and how it was implemented within my classroom. Ethical considerations were of upmost importance in protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants. I was cognizant of the children's needs and any potential breach of ethics when overseeing my research. Considerations around 'consent' and 'assent' were deliberated thoroughly as the children participating in this project were considered a vulnerable group. The qualitative data collection methods utilised reflected recent literature on self-expressive skills paired with my educational values. Chapter Four will present the findings from the research and interpret them using a thematic analysis approach.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

> All of Aistear. I made a torpedo house with Junk Art because it helps not to get mouldy. I made a marshmallow house with sticks to keep the Big Bad Wolf away and me and my friend made the tallest apartment in the world with Mega Blocks. It was very fun because I made lots of houses
>
> - (Holly, 24/01/20)

4.0 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter, I will clarify the reasoning behind engaging with a qualitive, thematic approach to analysing data. This system included colour coding, detecting repeated patterns and locating words or phrases to identify reoccurring themes that became apparent in my data. The children's *Aistear* Learning Logs (LL) formed an essential role in surveying the data along with the semi-structured checklists and my reflective journal. My journal entries became a crucial analytical tool when navigating through elements of this research project. The first part of this Chapter will present the data with a focus on introducing material to the reader. The second part of this Chapter will use literature to theorise the data presented to establish the main findings and outcomes of the research. Finally, it is important to remind the reader that pseudonyms have been employed throughout to ensure the anonymity of the children.

4.1 THEMATIC (QUALITATIVE) ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis "turns data into findings, however, there is no simple formula or recipe for this" (Patton, 2002: 432). As a qualitative data analyst, I identified raw data and linked it to both my research question and the findings obtained from the study (Thomas, 2006; Gläser & Laudel, 2013). My research question was dedicated to enhancing my practice of *Aistear* to cultivate and enrich children's expressive language skills. For this AR study I chose a thematic analysis approach due to its flexibility, ease of organisation, and the detailed and comprehensive accounts it can provide researchers (Braun & Clark, 2006; Sarantakos, 2013).

Identifying Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

As previously mentioned, thematic analysis requires you to familiarise yourself with the data, generate codes and plot them on a thematic map (Braun & Clark, 2006). Using direct quotes from the children's *Aistear* LLs, I collated the data and began to identify emerging patterns and themes. Table 4.1 below provides an adapted account of codes generated from analysing the data from the LLs. In this example the children's testimonies are examined. This was compiled after Cycle Two and all names mentioned are pseudonyms. A more polished example of the colour coding system used in this research project can be found in the Appendices.

Codes	**Data Cycle Two: The Restaurant**
Partner as a Supportive Scaffold	• Ryan helped me put the pizza toppings on the pizza, so the customer wasn't waiting. • Playing the pizza game with Seamus was really fun. We kept getting the same slice of pepperoni and cheese. We got five! • We made an automatic door in the restaurant so it's easier to get in. Some families are bigger, so we made big tables

Self-Assessment	• I loved being the chef and I worked really hard making lots of food. • Next time, I'll help Seamus take the orders because there were lots of customers. • I wasn't patient waiting for my food but I said sorry to Nancy who was the waitress.
Use of Content-Related Vocabulary	• The chef makes food and wears an apron. He made a pepperoni pizza for me. • I am the chef cooking real vegetables in a pot like broccoli and carrots. • Me and Jason were the customers sitting here. I had the pink bowl. We ordered food. Pizza and salad and chips.
Inclusion of Irish	• Rólimirt (Roleplay) was my favourite because I liked being the freastalaí (waiter). • I put cáis (cheese) on my pizza. • I ordered sicín (chicken) agus (and) sceallóga (chips) from the freastalaí (waiter).

Table 4.1 Post Cycle Two codes generated from analysing children's testimonies

These codes were then divided into themes and sub-themes, some of which were irrelevant to the research question, but were important to the overall cohesion and validation of the research study (Braun & Clark, 2006). This process was completed after every Cycle and tabulated using the LLs that the children completed.

Analysing Children's Drawings

In image-based research, content analysis over interpretive analysis, and paying attention to first impressions can provide a more elaborate evaluation of children's drawings rather than inspecting minute details (Stiles & Gibbons, 2000; Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). Darbyshire et

al. (2005) warns that an adult interpretation of a child's drawing might result in a misunderstanding of what the child was trying to convey. This highlights the need incorporate children's testimonies as a means of securing authenticity. I have included tables and diagrams in presenting the findings to provide context to the reader and gain an insight into the data obtained.

4.2 PRESENTING THE DATA

The data presented below is a culmination of two complete Cycles of data gathering and the beginning of Cycle Three before schools closed due to the Coronavirus outbreak. Triangulation is incorporated using various data collection instruments to support points made and in validating the research (Cohen et al., 2018). The drawings included are taken directly from the children's LLs and incorporated to provide a clear and rich depiction of the data set. The same logic has been applied to journal entries included, which were extracted directly from my reflective journal. Most notations on the children's drawings are my own but in some cases children attempted to do their own labelling. It is important to reiterate, that pseudonyms were used to anonymise the children and protect their identity.

Language Scribble

There are many iterations on how children's drawings can, and should be interpreted (Quaglia et al., 2015). As the research question refers to children expressing themselves through different mediums and for ease of offering the reader perspective on the stages of drawing development, the following table (Table 4.2) has been adapted from Lowenfeld's (1947) S*tages of Artistic Expression*, that apply to the participant age group. This details what is commonly

included in children's drawings at specific ages. The children in this study should be in the 'Pre-Schematic Stage' of drawing development if adhering to Lowenfeld's criteria:

Scribbling Stage	**Pre-Schematic Stage**	**Schematic Stage**
(2-4 years) • Introduced to mark-making • Marks symbolise people and objects • Exploring of controlled motions • Longitudinal and circular lines	(4-7 years) • Circular images with lines which seem to suggest a human or animal figure • Drawings show what children perceive as most important • Lack in detail, colour, and organisation	(7-9 years) • Colours reflected as they appear in nature • Less ego-centric • Organised • Skyline and baseline

Table 4.2 Drawing stage of development adapted from Lowenfeld's *Stages of Artistic Expression*

From examining the *Aistear* LLs, it was apparent that 90% of the participants were at their intended stage of drawing development (Pre-Schematic Stage). There was a small cohort, 10% who were at the 'Scribbling Stage' of development and another group who exceeded their stage of drawing development, which is inclusive of the 90%. Eimear's drawing below in Figure 4.1 is an example of a drawing in the 'Scribbling Stage' of drawing development if we refer to Lowenfeld's criteria. Additionally, Sarah's drawing in Figure 4.2 is an example of a drawing in the 'Schematic Stage' of drawing development according to the same criteria.

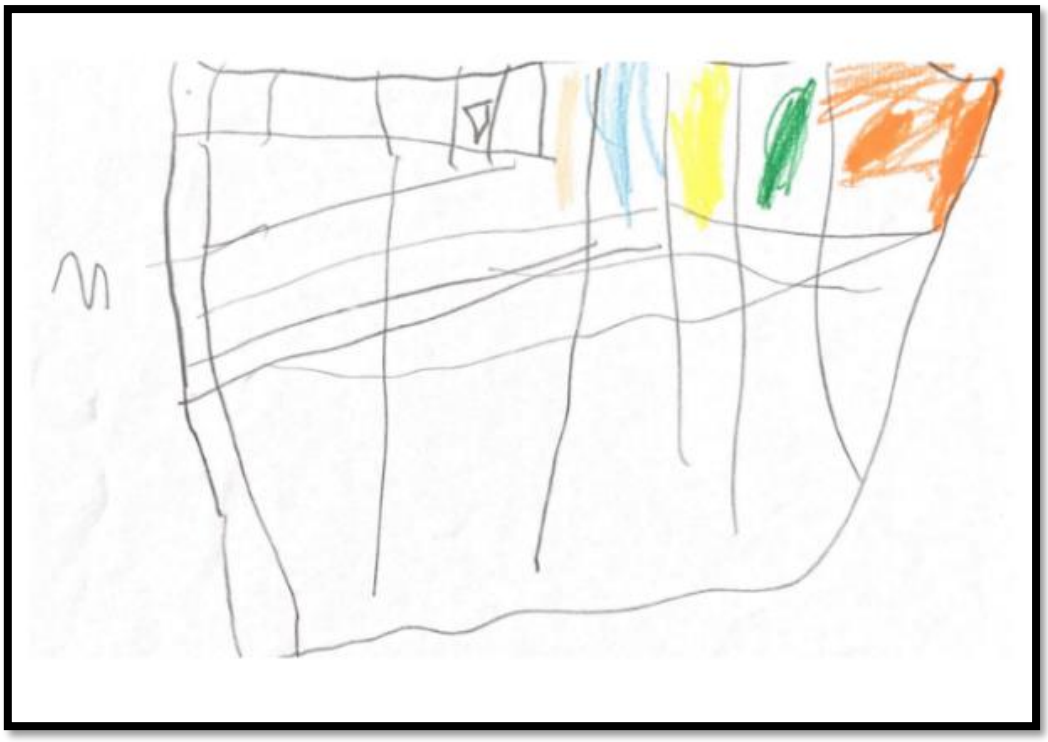

Figure 4.1 Eimear's drawing in the *Scribbling Stage* of drawing development

Figure 4.2 Sarah's drawing in the *Schematic Stage* of drawing development

As previously stated, it was essential to accompany the child's drawing with a description of what they drew. Not only for verification of what they illustrated (Jolley & Vulic-Prtoric, 2001), but also to help the child better understand their rationale for choosing to draw what they did (Wright, 2007). Furthermore, it was important to apply a consistent method of critiquing the children's testimonies without bias, that also provided a means of identifying expressive language elements and provided context for the reader. As a result, I adapted the relevant 'Learning Outcomes' from the new revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) (2019) that related to my research question. As discussed in Chapter Two, the PLC seeks to improve language capabilities in junior classes, through playful experiences and is in alignment with the principles and themes of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2019). The adapted framework from the PLC can be found in the Appendices (See Appendix I) and I will reference it periodically when presenting evidence on the children's testimonies. It focuses on five areas of expressive language skills and ranges from 'poor' to 'excellent'.

Albeit Eimear's drawing (Figure 4.1) being below her stage of drawing development, her testimony highlighted her engagement with the Play experience:

> *I was doing the Mega-Blocks. I was on Charlie's team. I used the hammer and nailed the roof with the hammer for our castle with a two-storey house on top of it! Charlie will make the automatic door*
>
> - (Eimear, 31/01/20)

There is little correlation between the drawing and accompanied testimony yet, the level of language expressed exceeded the stage of drawing development that the child was at. Referencing my adapted framework of expressive language skills, the description of the drawing was coherent and showed a very good use of theme related vocabulary coupled with

a detailed elaboration when retold. This drawing fell into the 10% of children who were not at their intended stage of drawing development. Nevertheless, the testimonies that accompanied these drawings provided a valuable insight into their Play experience. Additionally, Ryan's drawing below (Figure 4.3) was not considered to be at his intended stage of drawing development however his testimony, like Eimear's, surpassed his drawing ability.

> *There's the kitchen. I'm the chef cooking vegetables to go on the pizza. The waiter has a plate in his hand and serving the customer. I'm going as fast as I can… at superspeed*
>
> - (Ryan, 21/02/20)

Figure 4.3 Ryan's drawing of himself cooking as a chef in Cycle Two

Although, 90% of children were at their intended stage of drawing development, it became apparent that children's linguistic ability superseded that of their drawing stage of development, having analysed the LLs. This is also supported in the semi-structured checklists

(See Figure 4.13) where the *Speaking* element of the observational data was the most noted aspect throughout the three Cycles. This could have been a result of the drawings themselves acting as a roadmap for the children to better understand their own narratives as suggested by Wright (2007). Alternatively, or indeed collaboratively, the intervention employed could have acted as a scaffold for the children to practise more precise language in their testimonies.

Children as Active Participants in Play

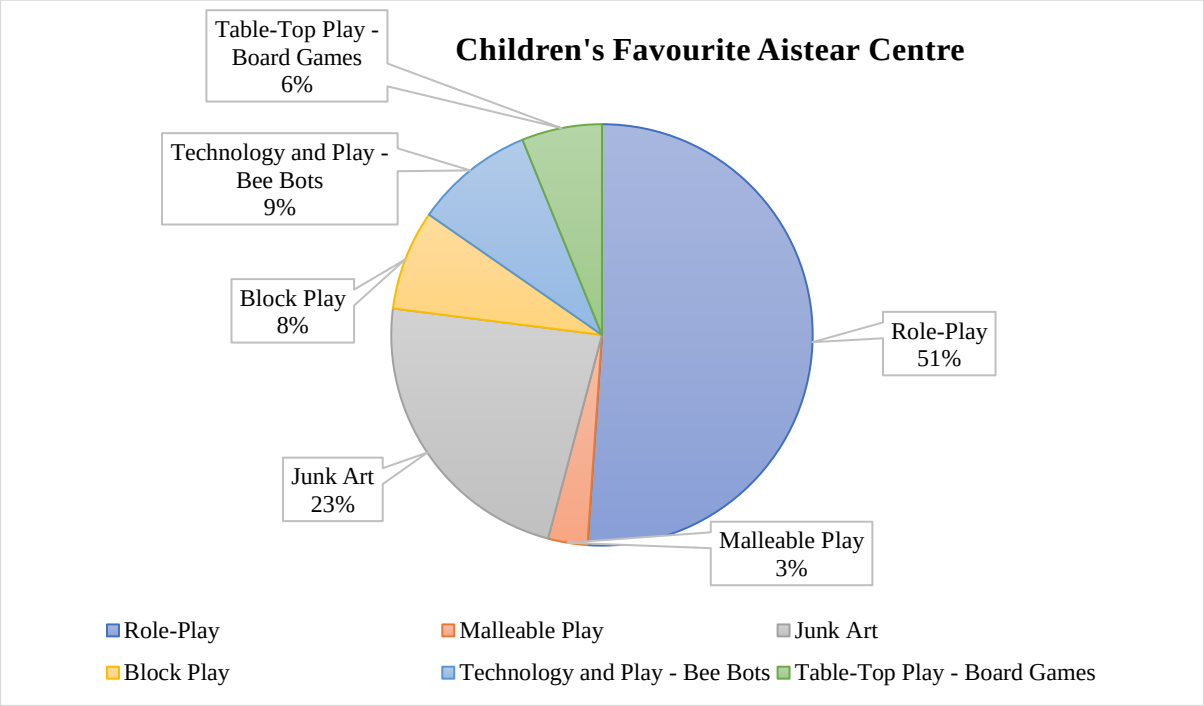

Figure 4.4 Children's favourite *Aistear* Centre

The children engaged in many Play Centres throughout the course of the research, all offering various types of Play and Play experiences. Figure 4.4 above, provides a list of the Play Centres that the children participated in, and tallied using the *Aistear* LLs. After each Cycle, the Play Centre's that were apparent in the children's drawings were then collated. Role-plays in the

form of builders on a construction site (Figure 4.5) and impersonating various roles within a restaurant setting (Figure 4.6) were favoured over other Play Centres, with 51% of children choosing this Centre as their preferred form of Play over the course of the three Cycles.

Figure 4.5 Edel's drawing from the Roleplay Centre in Cycle One

I am building a two-story house. I used mega blocks and the tools to build the house. Tools help you build stuff. The attic is where I keep my suitcases.

- (Edel, 24/01/20)

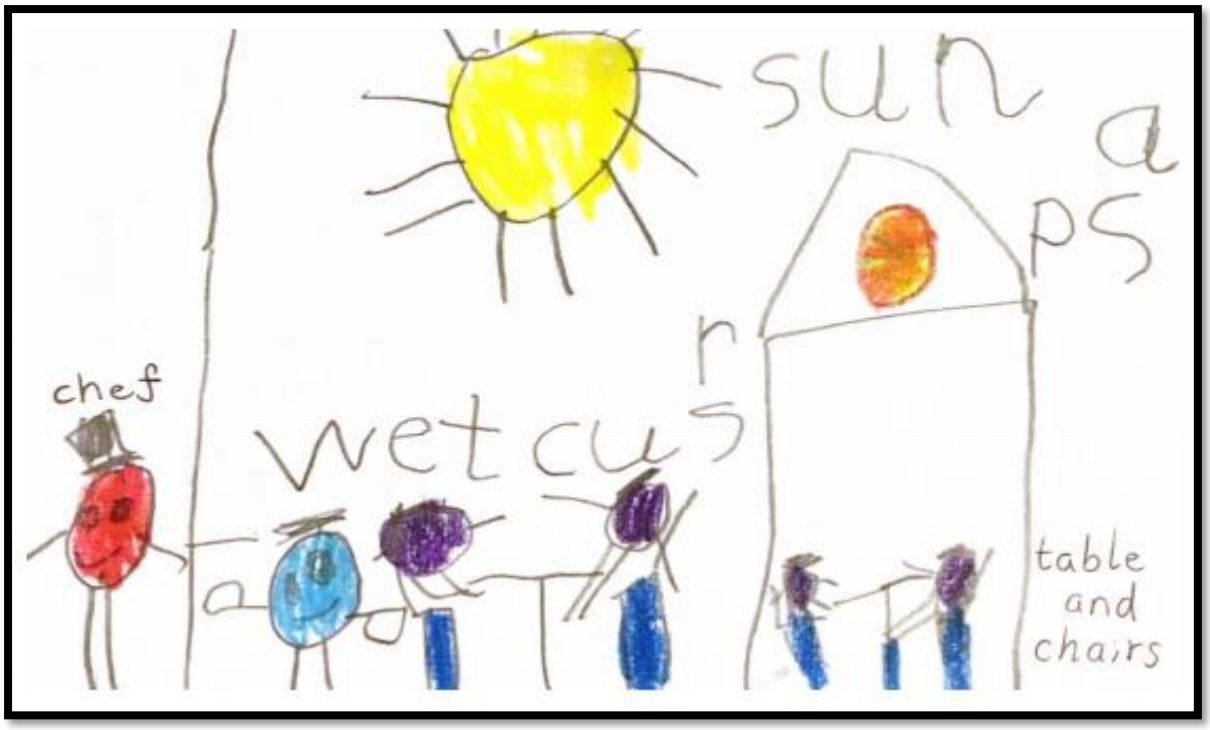

Figure 4.6 Jason's drawing from the Roleplay Centre in Cycle Two

I put green peppers on the pizza. There are customers at the restaurant. They are waiting for their food. The waiter took the orders. I was hoping they ordered vegetable soup and they did. I tried to get their order right, but it was tricky.

- (Jason, 21/02/20)

The Role-Play Centre clearly offered the children something that the other Centres did not. Impersonating the role of someone else is characteristic of Role-Play (Loizou et al., 2019) and evident in many of the LLs. The testimonies provided support that the children engaged in Symbolic Play as referenced in Chapter Two (Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Quinn et al.,, 2018; Romeo et al., 2018). Edel used smaller building blocks that acted as tools and the 'restaurant' mentioned in Jason's testimony was an area partitioned off by a bookcase.

Junk Art was the next most popular Centre which required children to manipulate common household items such as cardboard, paper, empty containers, and scraps of material to create a piece that reflected the theme we were learning about. Figure 4.7 is an example of Oscar's drawing of the Junk Art Centre in Cycle One. It can be noted that he is below his drawing stage of drawing development, but his testimony has provided a unique insight into his drawing.

> *I was doing the Junk Art again. I did a robot that was a tent and shoots out volcano lava. It was lava that keeps robbers from getting my sleeping bag and food*
>
> - (Oscar, 24/01/20)

Figure 4.7 Oscar's drawing from the Junk Art Centre in Cycle One

Malleable Play was the least favoured Play Centre with only 3% of children including this Centre into their LLs. I do not believe this was a reflection on the malleable Play activities

available at that Centre, but rather a result of the children using Playdough and resistive exercises regularly throughout the day outside of this research project. The remaining Play Centres and their popularity can be observed in Figure 4.4. Finally, dialogue and conversations between myself and my critical friend noticed Role-Play's rise in popularity over other Centres which was captured in my reflective journal on numerous occasions. Here is an example one such reflection:

> The children are really enjoying the Role-Play Centre and show a huge amount of engagement with it. The enthusiasm the children demonstrate when it is revealed they will be at that Centre for the day along with the in-depth discussions they have in their planning sessions is vibrant. I have had numerous professional conversations with my critical friend Sarah, and she agreed. I felt the social and active nature of this Centre coupled with having an array of resources to manipulate encouraged the high level of enjoyment and participation. The roles children assume within this Centre allow them to experiment while feeling safe as everyone is acting in an imaginary situation. The intervention is working well (so far!) and adding to the excitement as the scenarios fit within the fictional setting. However, I think I will put images of the scenarios on the wall so the children can experiment with them when I am with another Centre. The focus questions mean I am not put on the spot thinking of new questions and the ones I prepared evoke the use of content related vocabulary, so I am happy to continue with this type of open ended questioning. As we near the end of Cycle Two, this will be something to consider for the final Cycle.
>
> - (Vaughan, Journal Notes, 20/02/20)

Language Barrier

Children who do did not have English as their primary language provided elaborate and informed testimonies having analysed their LLs using my adapted framework. There may have been an absence of grammar and pragmatics in areas (Owens, 2012; Cregan, 2019) but overall, these children showcased a detailed awareness and understanding of their knowledge on the current topic that we were learning about. Figure 4.8 below is Megan's drawing and accompanied testimony. Typically, a shy and timid girl who would be reluctant to answer questions generally, she provided a thorough account of her Play Centre:

> *I play with ___ building a bungalow with cement and we making chimney with window and a door. The Big Bad Wolf climbs out chimney! We need a saw in making door*
>
> - (Megan, 24/01/20)

Figure 4.8 Megan's drawing of herself and her friends building a bungalow

This was evident in other LLs from children who may have lacked self-confidence or like Megan, English was not their main language. These children in the participant group would normally contribute little to formal teaching lessons and avoid answering questions where possible. This is supported in Diarmuid's drawing below in Figure 4.9. Diarmuid, like Megan did not speak English at home, yet he has provided an elaborate and detailed testimony which is developed effectively, has an informed sequential order, and uses plentiful theme-related vocabulary when referencing my adapted framework:

> *You put cocktail sticks in marshmallows and be careful not to be pointy and dangerous. The sticks hold bungalow together. I blow on it and it do not fall. Big Bad Wolf can't eat Three Little Pigs. Here is my mask I make.*
>
> - (Diarmuid, 31/01/20)

Figure 4.9 Diarmuid's drawing of himself making a marshmallow house and a mask

I was cognizant of the quality of language output observed by these children. This was also noted in my reflections. Ethical considerations were forensically planned out due to this participant group being deemed a vulnerable group. However, the children never opted out of either the drawing or explaining elements of their LLs:

> I feel that I have completely underestimated the power of drawing as a tool to enhance and assess children's language skills. There are some children in my class who would do anything not to contribute to classroom discussion due to confidence issues or a lack of language skills. However, the testimonies I received today from our *Aistear* session have captivated me. Ethics has been a huge part of this self -study and reminding the children they can opt out at any time is paramount to the success of me living in the direction of my own educational values. Nevertheless, when it comes to either playing in their Centre or completing their Learning Logs, no one has opted out using the thumbs down system. Perhaps it is the open-ended questions that allows the narrative of their drawing to flow or else the excitement of telling their friends and teacher what they drew. In any case, the grammar may not be perfect but the testimonies themselves are illustrative and full of insight so far. I will try and build on this for Cycle Two.
>
> - (Vaughan, Journal Notes, 31/01/20)

Social Scaffold

When analysing the *Aistear* LLs, one of the most prominent and reoccurring themes of note was the inclusion of another child in their Play experience. This theme was not only evident in the children's drawings but explained in detail in their testimonies. Figure 4.10 is Nancy's drawing of her Play experience in the Role-Play Centre. The level of theme-related vocabulary Nancy has used here is of an excellent standard, coupled with effectively retelling what she did

during her turn in the Role-Play Centre, according to my adapted framework. It is important to note that not only has Nancy elaborated efficiently on what her Play experience was, but she has also demonstrated a very good understanding of concepts within this theme. Nancy suggests that the chef needs his hat and apron to keep his clothes clean, coupled with the rationale behind a child needing their own menu, which may again hint that the child needs pictures as they unable to read.

The chef has his hat and apron because he's in the kitchen. He is starting work. The customer has a walking stick and needs a table for two. The kid needs a kid's menu so he can see the photos to order sausages and chips.

- (Nancy, 14/02/20)

Figure 4.10 Nancy's drawing of herself and her friends playing in the restaurant

Like Nancy, many of the children incorporated another person within their LLs, most of the time it being one of the participant's peers. The addition of another person did not act as an idle entity, but rather as an active participant within the Play experience. The children acted as a supportive scaffold towards one another as they explained their role in the drawing while also elaborating on the role of their peers, which is reflective of Vygotsky's (1997) ZPD, described in Chapter Two. This led to more complex and in-depth testimonies, requiring the children to use more language skills. Figures 4.11 and 4.12 respectively, depict Lauren and Charlies LLs. When including another child in their Play, it is in the context of the imaginary setting. Lauren is building a tall apartment using imaginary tools and Ryan explained his testimony as if the classroom setting was a real restaurant. As previously mentioned, Symbolic Play (Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Quinn et al.,, 2018; Romeo et al., 2018) was infused throughout our *Aistear* sessions and enhanced the Play experience:

> *I was playing with the mega blocks with Holly. I am wearing a high vis jacket and using the saw to cut out windows for the kids to see out. We are making a tall apartment.*
>
> - (Lauren, 24/01/20)

Figure 4.11 Lauren's drawing of herself and her friend building a tall apartment

Figure 4.12 Ryan's drawing of himself acting as a customer in the restaurant

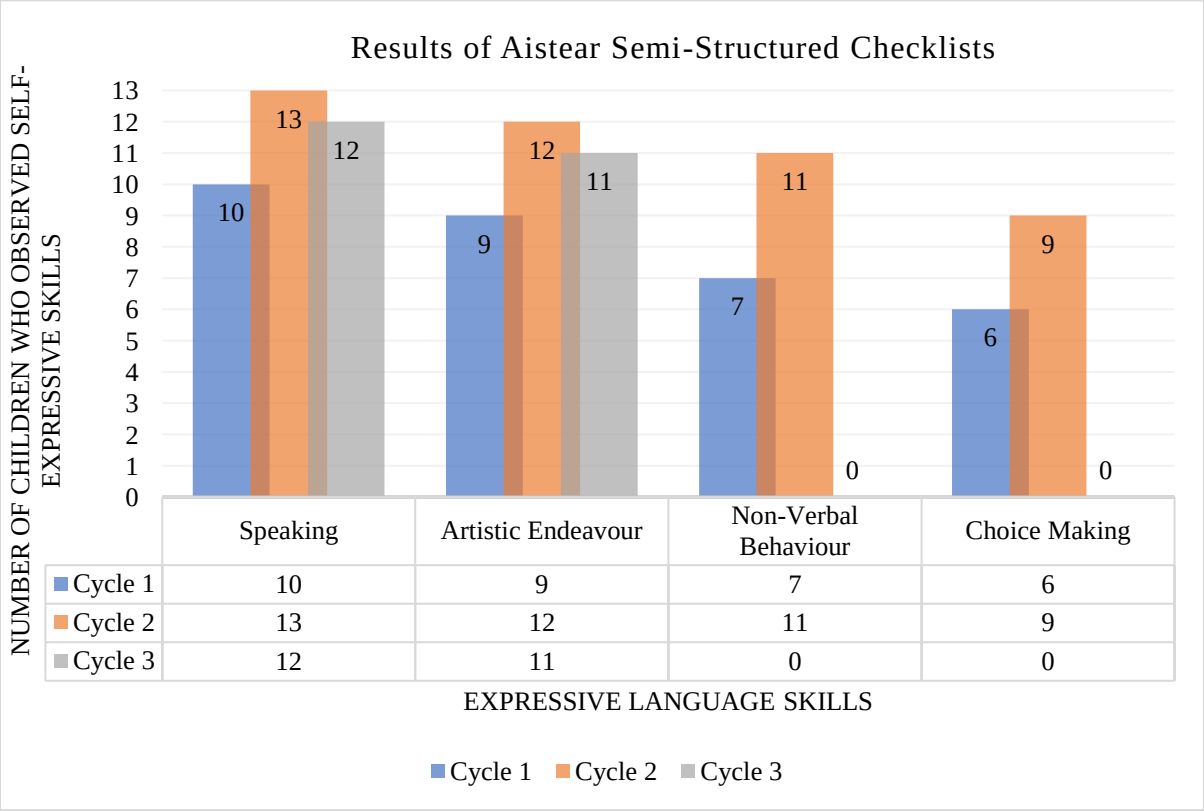

Figure 4.13 Results of semi-structured checklists

Figure 4.13 above is the results of the observational data and semi-structured checklists used in Cycles One and Two. It is important to note that the *Non-Verbal Behaviour* and *Choice Making* criteria in Cycle Three is at zero due to schools being closed because of the Coronavirus outbreak. Cycle One (Blue Bar) showcased high numbers of pupil observation in most areas of the criteria for that Cycle, with *Choice Making* being the lowest in participant observation. In response to this, there were several absences from some participants in Cycle One that could have rendered the results askew. Nevertheless, in Cycle Two (Orange Bar), when the intervention was applied (See Appendix H), there was a significant increase in all aspects of the expressive language skills targeted. Additionally, everyone in the participant group was

observed completing the *Speaking* element of the checklists. Cycle One concentrated on children's Free Play whereas Cycle Two incorporated the use of a more-adult driven approach. When implemented within the Role-Play Centre there was an all-round increase in expressive language targets in both Cycle Two and Cycle Three (Grey Bar) as shown above. *Non-Verbal Behaviour* observed the highest increase in participant observation from Cycle One to Cycle Two. This required children to identify with Symbolic Play and perform imaginary gestures within their Play experience. This occurred most naturally in the Role-Play Centre as our theme was 'The Restaurant' and the children impersonated various role within that theme. Figure 4.14 is Charlie's drawing where he describes his role in this Centre with a focus on Symbolic Play

> *Me in the restaurant as a waiter. I'm asking Daniel and Aaron what they would like to eat and at the end asked would you like the bill and they started laughing because they were still eating dessert with the fork*
>
> - (Charlie, 14/02/20)

Figure 4.14 Charlie's drawing of himself pretending to be the waiter in the restaurant

Charlie showed an excellent demonstration and understanding of the concepts drawn in his LL, such as knowing that the bill comes at the end of the meal as well as the conventional actions a waiter would take when you enter a restaurant as a customer. His drawing and accompanied testimony suggest that Charlie engaged with this theme and the Role-Play Centre with great enthusiasm. This LL was completed in Cycle Two, having introduced my intervention. The intervention was exclusive to the Role-Play area and required the children to practise more precise language skills through problem-solving and focused questioning. Having introduced the intervention, elements identified in the semi-structured checklists observed an all-round increase in Cycle Two as shown in Figure 4.13.

4.3 DISCUSSING THE FINDINGS

Through triangulating the data collection tools and methods, this aided in validating the research (Cohen et al., 2018) and provided different angles by which to analyse the data. Role-Play was labelled as the favoured Centre among participants with the majority of *Aistear* LLs containing this Centre. Central to the children's drawings and testimonies was the inclusion of their peers and how they contributed to their Play experience. Children who lacked confidence or the necessary skills to convey emotions or opinions appeared to find a voice through their Play. Utilising my adapted framework from the PLC, coupled with Lowenfeld's (1947) S*tages of Artistic Expression*, it was determined that the children's language output surpassed their stage of drawing development. Finally, by critically reflecting on my practice in Cycle One, I shifted from child's Free Play to a more adult-driven response in Cycle Two. The results observed from the semi-structured checklists imply that this was a more encouraging approach when developing children's self-expressive language skills. I will now use theory and the relevant literature to further support and analyse the data and findings presented above.

4.4 INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

The aim of this research was to identify means to improve my practice of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) in the context of developing children's expressive language skills. This was to be done in a way that I was comfortable with in accordance with my educational values of *Communication*, *Voice*, and *Autonomy*. Due to the reflexive nature of AR, it is typical that there may be more than one explanation for the observed outcomes (McNiff, 2014). Having applied the intervention in Cycle Two, the learning outcomes for the semi-structured checklists increased in all areas of expressive language skills. There were several absences towards the end of Cycle One that could have altered the results for that Cycle.

Another possibility for increased results in Cycle Two could be the choice of theme. It may be argued that Cycle Two's theme of 'The Restaurant' was a more relatable and familiar theme for the children than 'The Construction Site' theme or 'The Farm' theme. Children may frequent restaurants more often and already possess some of the more universal concepts associated with this theme. Nevertheless, I will begin to theorise the findings presented above and offer rationale through literature that stems from my educational value system.

Drawing – Enabling Student Voice through Non-Coercive Assessment

There were many motivating and positive factors that arose from completing the *Aistear* LLs with the children. Not only did the participants have an excellent engagement with the both the drawing and explaining elements of the Logs, but I gained valuable insight into their knowledge of the topic, stage of drawing, ability to retell their narrative, all while giving them complete ownership of their work. Image-based research has been combined successfully with enabling student voice (Bland, 2012) as we get an insight into children's perspectives about school and classroom practice. The children claimed ownership of what they recognised as their favourite Centre and explained why, without feeling interrogated by the teacher. This was invaluable for children who lacked confidence, language skills or those who had a poor level of English like Megan (Figure 4.8) or Diarmuid (Figure 4.9) (Negi, 2015). To these children drawing became an alternative outlet for emotion and communication that could not be accurately verbalised in other mediums (Sedwick & Sedwick, 1998; Anning & Ring, 2004; Hope, 2008; Negi, 2015).

Ethics were of fundamental importance in this study. The children had the option to withdraw at any stage but not once did any participant opt out of explaining their LL. The children voluntarily explained their drawing to me and appeared confident in expressing themselves. They elaborated on their picture with informed and coherent testimonies. This placed value on

respecting the children's voice as there was no fear of rejection (Roche, 2015; Sedova, 2017; Alexander, 2018; Cregan, 2019). Open-ended questions in both the intervention and the testimonies motivated the children to articulate and justify ideas and thoughts they had on their drawing giving them a sincere voice (Roche, 2015; Cregan, 2019). The *Aistear* LLs enabled children to propagate their ideas and opinions in ways that perhaps other forms of assessment would not allow (Merriman & Guerin, 2006).

Role-Play – Enhancing Communication Skills through Playful Social Interactions

Various forms of Play offer children a variety of skills and experiences that contribute to their language development (Quinn et al., 2018). It cannot be denied that over the course of the research, Role-Play was favoured as it offered children something different that other Centres could not. Role-Play is language driven and requires the child to interact with their peers and practise communicative language skills both verbally and non-verbally (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015; Loizou et al., 2019) which is reflected in the findings of this research and in the Aims and Learning Goals of the *Communicating* theme in *Aistear* (See Table 2.1).

Children frequently included one or more of their peers in their drawings who acted as a social scaffold in the Play experience. This is mirrored in Vygotsky's (1997) ZPD where children create knowledge by interacting with others around them and learn through these social connections. The children in this study acted as a social scaffold in enhancing the Role-Play Centre for each other (Eun, 2019).

Exhibited in the current study is the emphasis on conversational language and conversational turns being linked strongly to improving self-expressive skills (Lockton et al., 2016; Romeo et al., 2018; Cregan, 2019). Once the intervention was implemented, it encouraged children to interact with one another and converse in a problem-based situation. Although this Centre is

naturally affiliated with verbal language output (Macintyre, 2015; Stetsenko & Ho, 2015; Eun, 2019; Loizou et al., 2019), it urged children to apply various forms of expressive language skills to solve a problem which is illustrative of the outcomes from the results of the checklists in Cycle Two.

It was stated in Chapter Two that imaginary scenarios or situations provide children with fruitful opportunities to practise more precise language (Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Weisberg et al., 2013) and that Symbolic Play is closely associated with language development (Lillard & Witherington, 2004; Quinn et al., 2018; Romeo et al., 2018). The imaginary scenarios within our Role-Play ranged from 'The Construction Site' to 'The Restaurant' and 'The Farm' where the richness in language that transpired was plentiful. The results of the *Aistear* semi-structured checklists from Cycle Two confirm that children engaged with this Centre through Symbolic Play, whether it was pretending to eat from a plate or adding sound effects to a drill. Furthermore, the high participant level of playful conversation coupled with the use of topic specific vocabulary that was observed from analysing the children's LLs contributes to the social nature of Role-Play and the importance of conversational language (Lockton et al., 2016; Romeo et al., 2018; Cregan, 2019).

Role of the Adult – Facilitating for Autonomous Play Experiences

The ongoing debate on the role of the adult continues to cause tension among theorists associated with contemporary research on Play and play-based learning (Hargreaves et al., 2014). In Cycle One of this study there was a focus on Children's Free Play as the literature suggested that it aids in developing children's social and emotional skills (Pramling et al., 2006; Goouch, 2008; Weisberg et al., 2016). I was acutely aware of the relatively high observation count within the semi-structured checklists throughout Cycle One. However, by reflecting on

the outcomes of that Cycle and formulating my *Revised Plan*, I felt it possible to enhance the outcomes even further. I took inspiration from Hayes' "nurturing pedagogy" (2010: 9) and Froebel's facilitator approach that places importance on providing strategies that support language development but do not direct the Play experience. The open-ended questions pre-prepared in Cycle Two presented children with an opportunity to elaborate and broaden their answers without restricting them (Cregan, 2019). Moreover, the problem-solving scenarios acted as a prompt for the children to provide more information and use extended language with their peers. The full participant group were observed carrying out the *Speaking* criterion for Cycle Two which could have been a result of the language focused approach taken during that Cycle. The Play experiences planned were not directive in nature and gave children the autonomy to discover through Play. Through *Aistear*, children explore, negotiate, understand, and theorise (NCCA, 2009a) under the guidance of the adult in a facilitating role.

4.5 SUMMARY

It was evident in clarifying and theorising the findings from this study that when implemented successfully, *Aistear* can provide fruitful opportunities for children to demonstrate a wide variety of expressive language skills. The data collection instruments and methods adopted were grounded in the literature surrounding the framework's application and my educational values. The data collection tools gave insight to various aspects of the research and through triangulating the data, it provided for a more robust and in-depth analysis of that data obtained (Cohen et al., 2018).

The *Aistear* LLs motivated children to voice their opinions and thoughts on topics without fear of being contested. The evidence obtained from the Logs showcased the richness in language

along with elaborate and well-informed testimonies. No child opted out of the research demonstrating the participative nature of *Aistear* when planned for and supported.

The Role-Play Centre was the most popular Play Centre among the participants while exemplifying the social and cognitive aspects that are indicative of this Centre and Symbolic Play. Conversational language was significant in children displaying a variety of expressive language skills through verbal and non-verbal communication as informed by the observational data. The social aspect of this Centre was highlighted in the children's LLs with the literature supporting playful experiences with peers as prescribed by Vygotsky's (1997) ZPD.

A planned and prepared Play environment contributed to the success of the Play experience. By avoiding a directive approach to play-based learning, this allowed for the Play to flow naturally. The use of open-ended questions required children to elaborate and extend on answers that required more specific language while the use of problem-based scenarios cultivated divergent thinking and enquiry skills. In the final Chapter of this thesis, I will tie together elements of this research and offer recommendations and concluding assertions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 FINISHING MY THESIS

This study set out to explore how children's expressive language skills could be enhanced through my practice of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009). The Playful experiences encountered coupled with the superb enthusiasm from the children in the participant group contributed to the wealth of data obtained. Chapter Five, the final Chapter of my thesis will tie together thoughts and concepts surrounding the research and depict a path that I will embark on as this part of my research journey ends. I will discuss the limitations and barriers of this research and while I summarise the main findings, there were unanticipated outcomes that would influence the self-study if completed again. The ideology of 'power' and 'teacher agency' are woven throughout this project and they will be negotiated as influential factors on a teacher's practice of *Aistear*. I will consider my own learning from the research and the complexities within AR that both challenged and improved my practice. Finally, recommendations will be offered to open a dialogue on this research area.

5.1 LIMITATIONS

I have noted throughout the research that ethical procedures were mutually of huge importance, and an unavoidable obstacle. Formulating a research project with a vulnerable group such as Junior Infants was a sizeable barrier. Familiarisation was key in helping the children feel comfortable in the class and aided in the richness of the research (Barley & Bath, 2013). Informed 'consent' and 'assent' were a considerable undertaking that required time and attention. If this was denied, then children's voices would also have been concealed, and I

would not be living in the direction of my values. I was happy with the thumbs up and thumbs down system I had in place and believed it worked adequately.

Qualitative research rarely follows a smooth trajectory and this research project was no exception (Sakata et al., 2019). Although two full Cycles of research was conducted, Cycle Three was halted due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Nevertheless, I believe the data obtained in Cycles One and Two were more than satisfactory in supporting the findings from this research.

Time constraints within school and pressures to 'focus' on the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) meant having to adapt and restructure the research. Taking the current curriculum as well as the revised *Primary Language Curriculum* (2019) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) became tedious and contradictory at times. Marrying the three together requires thought, preparation, and experience (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The curriculum is planned for at a local level yet implementing all three together became challenging to combine when structuring a coherent research project alongside them.

Another significant limitation of this research was my own ideology towards AR at the outset of this self-study. Ironically, I was focused on implementing as many data collection tools as possible to achieve the results that I wanted. I soon realised that AR is not always a victory narrative, but rather the learning and knowledge gained from the research is of much more value to my practice (McNiff, 2019). Through critically reflecting on my own practice, engaging with reflective models, and trying to live in the direction of my values, I began to witness constructive results.

5.2 UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

It was evident from the outcomes of the checklists in Cycle Two that I was not providing enough opportunities for children to make their own choices. The *Choice Making* criterion was fixed, with the actual choice making objective changing after each Cycle. The outcome for Cycle Two focused on children's engagement with the Choice Centre that became available after they spent thirty minutes playing at their prescribed Centre. There could be different interpretations of this outcome. Firstly, the content within the Choice Centre was not enticing enough to warrant leaving their Centre. Secondly, the children were content with the Play experience at the Centre they engaged with.

Finally, the impact drawing had on the research project was enlightening. Drawing was chosen at the outset, primarily as an alternative way for children to convey themselves as they could not write down their thoughts and feelings. Drawing achieved this and much more. It became a vital tool for children to express themselves where verbalisation was not possible. The participant group never opted out of drawing their favourite Centre or describing it as they did not feel threatened by the format, as identified in the findings from this study. I gained valuable insight into many aspects of the child's development: social interactions, knowledge on theme related learning outcomes, and drawing ability all within the safe construct of simple, planned, open-ended questions.

Next Steps – Doing it all Again

Personal reflections and professional dialogue between colleagues have helped inform this research and take it to new levels. Having completed this self-study project, I started to deliberate on my *Revised Plan* going forward. Although there is latitude for children to make personal choices in the classroom and throughout my practice, I will be cognizant of providing

an environment for children to make multiple significant choices (NCCA, 2009a). It was naïve of me to have the children's participation at the Choice Centre as an outcome for the semi-structured checklists. Having reflected on this issue, it could be interpreted as being contradicting to the value of 'choice' within *Aistear*. It is up to the children to decide whether they want to participate in this Centre, and it should not be included a measurable outcome.

Children's drawings and testimonies have been an essential component of this research project. Having implemented the *Aistear* LLs and observing the positive results, I would look to magnify this system within my practice of the curriculum framework. Junk Art was the second most popular Centre in this study and although we had a 'review' at the end of each *Aistear* session, it was not in the same context as the testimonies. The one-to-one eliciting and negotiating format that formed the basis of the LLs was a success and I gained significant data on children's expressive language skills as discussed in Chapter Four. Children could choose elements from their Junk Art Centre to include with their testimony instead of a drawing. Additionally, if all GDPR and ethical considerations were in place, I would make use of photography to capture the learning taking place within the Play Centres and again, children could give a testimony on the photo selected. Altering between these forms of capturing the children's work fits seamlessly within current literature on play-based assessment (Pyle & De Luca, 2017), as well as *Aistear*'s "narrative" approach to assessment (NCCA, 2009a: 26).

5.3 ISSUES OF CONTENTION

These unexpected findings challenged my educational values of *Communication*, *Voice*, and *Autonomy* and will need further reflection and thought to remedy. While each of the findings should act as a foundation for further discussion and dialogue, the contextual factors that affect these in terms of questions posed by teachers are prevalent. There is an extraordinary amount

of literature recommending the use of play-based methodologies within the classroom and ECE settings, not for its validity in a child's developmental learning, but rather on how to implement Play effectively in the classroom. This section will further analyse the data and discuss possible reasons for "the alarming disappearance of play" (Nicolopoulou, 2010: 1).

Power

Having reviewed the literature and engaged in this research project, there is a clear divide between the teacher's role in education and what they believe their role should be. As Biesta (2008: 43) describes it, "the danger here is that we end up valuing what is measured, rather than that we engage in measurement of what we value". Mentioned previously, Gray and Ryan (2016) conducted a study regarding teachers' perspectives on *Aistear* in their classroom practice. Many teachers in the study believed the pressures from the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) outweighed the demands of *Aistear* as the former is mandated, inspected and is in line with the political pressures to reach educational goals for schools. Moreover, 64% of teachers interviewed, agreed that they did not feel confident organising an environment which encouraged play-based learning and a further 43% of teachers were unfamiliar and lacked the necessary training to marry the two together. This epitomizes the subjectification and conservative modernisation that is apparent in educational discourse today (Foucault, 2003; Apple, 2015). I referred to this concept in the limitations of the current Chapter and multiple times within my reflections, that there is a pressure to implement a prescribed curriculum that was introduced some twenty years ago where formative assessment is at its core (Gray & Ryan, 2016).

Pressures to implement the PSC have resulted in teachers implementing the '*Aistear* Hour' or 'Integrated Play Hour' which is at odds with the principles that clearly underpin *Aistear* (Ring

et al., 2016; Concannon-Gibney, 2018). *Aistear* is grounded in nurturing the holistic development of the child (NCCA, 2009a) yet it can be said that we are purely educating "on the measurement and comparison of educational outcomes" (Biesta, 2008: 33) without any intent on the child's holistic development (Greene, 2000).

Teacher Agency

> Teachers' agency in a play-based curriculum can be fostered by offering them appropriate auxiliary mean (both material and conceptual) that they can employ wilfully and according to the personal system of pedagogical beliefs. This helps them to find solutions for their teaching problems within the cultural-political constraints of the play-based curriculum.
>
> - (Oers, 2015: 19)

Biesta (2008) describes teacher agency as the ability to actively contribute to the influencing of a positive and well-suited work environment. Teacher agency is fundamental in educational discourse in realising the current academic climate. Teachers who are implementing *Aistear* evidently do not feel confident or indeed qualified enough to do it justice within their practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016). This is where I believe the transformative impact that AR can have. Biesta et al. (2017) illustrates the importance of teacher's talk in achieving agency within teachers. Talking about your beliefs, values, and attitudes stimulates conversation and potential action. Conversely, limiting teacher's talk to already existing policy discourses restricts critical reflection and alternative courses of action (Oers, 2015; Biesta et al., 2017).

It was through reflecting in my journal and professional conversations with my critical friend and supervisor that I began negotiating educational discourse and provided an informed revised plan for my next Cycle. However, a significant challenge for teachers in the Gray and Ryan (2016) study was the volume of content that needed to be covered in the PSC which left little time for critical reflection on improving practice. Nevertheless, the need for authentic dialogue is necessary in achieving teacher agency with educational reform relevant now more than ever (Oers, 2015).

5.4 PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The new learning opportunities and insight I have gained from this study is incomparable with anything I have done this far in my professional career. Reflexivity and being a critically reflective practitioner have influenced my thoughts and ideas surrounding educational discourse, and my practice. The incremental learning processes that became apparent as I built on previous learning in a bid to develop my practice was transformative. I have a newfound appreciation for the educational commitments and values realised from participating in AR. When problems arose, my value system was in conflict. However, overcoming the contradiction that threatened these values led to new knowledge being created instantaneously. Liaising with various groups within the circle of this self-study has led to an increased awareness and appreciation for my professional identity coupled with an autonomy for positive change.

Realising that AR is not always a victory narrative but rooted in the learning that materialises because of the research, was instrumental in gaining the most from the study. As Biesta (2019) iterates, educational research that poses more problems as opposed to solving them can often

be more influential in questioning and challenging assumptions. As a result of this research project, the following recommendations are suggested:

1) ***Encourage children to draw and employ this medium as a 'hidden' form of assessment***

Aistear uses a narrative approach to assessment in its framework (NCCA, 2009a) with the PSC stating that assessment should be tailored for each individual child (NCCA, 2007). Globally, the literature on assessment in play-based learning is limited (Roach et al., 2010; Gullo & Hughes, 2011), but most studies suggest a blended approach that involves diverse methods of assessing, questioning and some form of dialogue (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017). The outcomes of this research project exemplify the *Aistear* Learning Logs as an informative and diverse method of assessment for children of varying academic and social capabilities. Drawing their favourite Centre acted as a scaffold towards their testimonies which were informed and coherent. Children who could not accurately verbalise thoughts and opinions on their own provided elaborate descriptions of their drawings that reflected their knowledge of a topic. The Learning Logs were invitational during the research yet none of the participants opted out of completing them. This further personifies the enjoyment and motivation from this type of assessment.

Below in Figure 5.1 is the *Continuum of Assessment* in circulation that discusses eight types of assessment methods in the PSC (NCCA, 2007). Approaches positioned towards the left are those in which the child plays a leading role in assessing his or her own work; towards the right of the continuum the teacher plays a greater role in leading the assessment (NCCA, 2007). As you can see, the LLs fit effortlessly within the mould of many assessment methods, notably where the child leads the assessment. This requires the child to reflect on their own learning

while creating a positive classroom climate as children gain confidence by understanding that it is ok to make mistakes (NCCA, 2007).

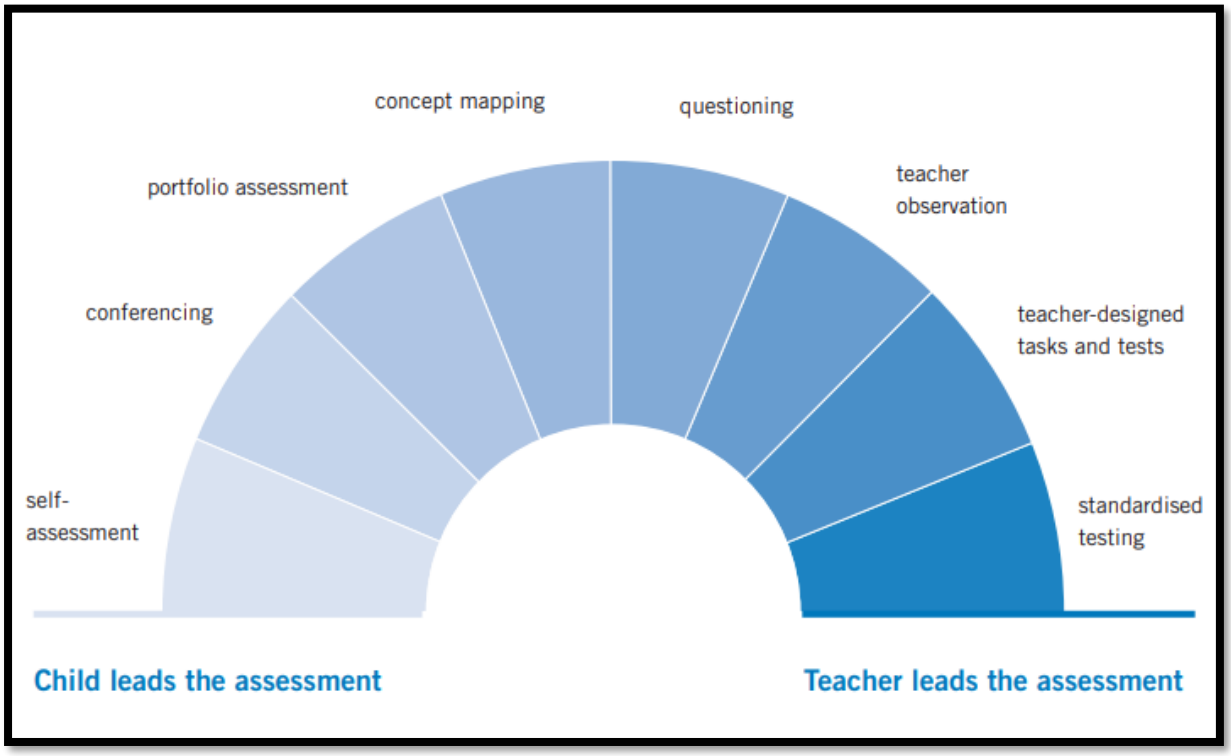

Figure 5.1 NCCA 'Continuum of Assessment' for primary schools

2) Professional development and support model for teachers offering practical solutions when implementing Aistear

Many studies conducted in international educational settings illustrate that curriculum pressures and demands overshadow a fruitful and opportunistic Play environment (Hyvonen, 2011; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Lynch, 2015; Gray & Ryan, 2016). As this study concentrates on *Aistear* and expressive language skills it is important to focus on this play-based framework. The study conducted by Gray and Ryan (2016) embodies the need for reflection and reform in

this sector. 64% of teachers did not feel confident in organising for Play and 43% stated they lacked the necessary training. I continue to recycle these numbers from the study as they are both concerning and thought-provoking. Seeing that play-based learning is being solely used a passive exercise while administrative tasks are being completed goes against all my educational beliefs and values. I determine Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as fundamental in achieving the most from play-based learning in schools. However, this requires a support model for teachers on practical steps and solutions to marry the PSC and *Aistear* together. The current research project has found that learning through Play has enhanced children's expressive language skills and this same logic and methodology could be translated over to other developmental areas. I mentioned the revised PLC as being a recent combatant in allowing the PSC and the *Aistear* framework to coexist simultaneously as it incorporates the themes of *Aistear* and positions Play as being a major contributor to a child's development (NCCA, 2019). It was for this reason I adapted the Learning Outcomes from this framework as a way of analysing the children's testimonies. However, I believe more is needed in optimising play-based learning in Irish primary schools in the form of a trained and practical workforce.

3) Cross-curricular integration of expressive language skills

The *Aistear* curriculum framework prescribes communication as instrumental in fostering and enhancing children's developmental growth (NCCA, 2009b). Communication happens naturally in several ways, with multiple forms of communication happening simultaneously. Children who are not proficient in the verbal output of communication rely on expressing themselves in other ways. This study has placed Role-Play as an effective Play Centre in augmenting children's expressive language skills. Not only was it the most favoured of the

Play Centres but it allowed children to explore and experiment with language in an interactive and opportunistic manner. The verbal aspect of conversational language paired with non-verbal interactions such as Symbolic Play provided children in this study with multiple mediums through which to express themselves. This can be adapted and translated into other curricular areas in conjunction with the *Aistear* framework. Incorporating Role-Plays into formal literacy lessons for example, where children act out nursery rhymes will develop the same dispositions and skills (NCCA, 2009a) as integrating them within *Aistear*.

4) Extension of Aistear throughout the day

My final recommendation is the increased use of *Aistear* throughout the teaching day. It has been noted in previous Chapters that schools have adopted the '*Aistear* Hour' or 'Integrated Play Hour' when trying to fit in opportunities for play-based learning. This is contradictory to *Aistear*'s principles, but a step in the right direction. With the inclusion of the revised PLC, it is possible to integrate more chances for play into the prescribed PSC, but I suggest further thought is required in supporting and allowing teachers to increase the amount of play-based learning in their practice.

5.5 THE END OF MY THESIS JOURNEY

This research set out to investigate:

> How can I facilitate the *Aistear* Framework, in a Junior Infant class, to maximise expressive language opportunities for children?

This self-study project examined a variety of ways that children can express themselves, both verbally and non-verbally, and how I could enrich these experiences through my practice of *Aistear*. AR was not as straightforward as I expected it to be. In fact, it was often unpredictable and caused many moments of frustration. However, this enriched my research as I navigated past these factors through critical reflection and liaising with my supervisor and critical friend. Being a critically reflective practitioner has become embedded within my practice and I will continue to look for outlets by which to expand on this knowledge. My future practice will not just reflect the outcomes of this research, but I will continue to embed my values of *Communication, Voice,* and *Autonomy* in my daily practice.

I have started to see reform in the way we approach *Aistear* in my school having completed this self-study project. There has been a noticeable improvement on informed Play experiences taking precedence over dismissive alternatives. I have also been instructed to conduct CPD in implementing *Aistear* to all staff members where I hope to inspire play-based learning as an important construct in our daily practice. As previously mentioned, I was recipient of the INTO Masters Level Bursary and a copy of my thesis will be held in the INTO research library as well as the Maynooth library. I am very grateful for the bursary and welcome my research being available publicly as to listen to other viewpoints on this research area.

Finally, I have talked industriously about the importance of 'conversations' and 'talking' throughout this project and this is exactly what is intended from the outcomes of this research. Not to simply solve problems but open a dialogue that can be discussed and traversed. If we are to see the true value of Play in our classrooms, then we need to invest in this research area and this sector of formal education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Declaration by Researcher

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath-Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Declaration by Researcher

This declaration must be signed by the applicant(s)

I acknowledge(s) and agree that:

a) It is my sole responsibility and obligation to comply with all Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.

b) I will comply with Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.

c) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy.

d) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy.

e) That the research will not commence until ethical approval has been granted by the Research and Ethics committee in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Signature of Student: Dean Vaughan

Date: 06/12/19

Appendix B: Letter to the Board of Management

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Dear Board of Management,

As you are aware, I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing an Action Research project. The focus of this research is the betterment of my own practice in which I will look at *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)* in the junior infant classroom to assist children with their self-expressive skills (speaking, writing, body language etc.).

The data will be collected using structured observations at different stages during the week including: a teacher journal, a teacher checklist and an *Aistear* learning log worksheet that we do in class. The research plan will commence in the second term from January and conclude in March.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Children will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage using a happy or sad face, and their anonymity is of precedence. Pseudonyms will be given to all children who agree to participate in the research. Children will be given a plain language statement that will inform them of what is asked of them in the research.

All information will be stored confidentially and will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. All data which is privatised and anonymous will be retained for a minimum of ten years following its publication. All data will be password protected, encrypted, with the necessary firewalls, and safeguarded with an anti-virus. Hard copies of data will be locked in a secure cabinet at home, in a room only made accessible by me. Any evidence of personal data will not be showcased to any unauthorised person. The research will not commence until after ethical approval has been granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I am also a recipient of an INTO Masters Level Bursary 2019 for this research project and as a result, once completed, a copy of my thesis will be held in the INTO Research Library. This may be accessed and or referenced for Educational Publications in the future.

I am asking for permission to carry out this self-study action research project in the school. In doing so, I hope to provide sufficient evidence that supports my research question, better myself as a teacher, and provide the school with a strong basis for future development in *Aistear*.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at

Yours faithfully,

Appendix C: Information Letter to Parents

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing an action research project. The focus of my research is based on the framework *Aistear* (See information sheet attached and ask your child!) and whether this assists children with their self-expressive skills (Speaking, writing, body language etc.)

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in our classroom. The data will be collected using observations, a teacher journal, checklists, and an *Aistear* learning log worksheet we do in class. The children will be asked their opinions discussing how they have interacted with the different *Aistear* themes, what they know before we start a theme, during, and after the theme.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. I will give the children pseudonyms so there will be no way to identify your child in the research, and nothing will be shared outside of my supervisor and the MU Ethics Committee. Your child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage using a happy face to participate and sad face if they wouldn't like to participate that day.

All information will be confidential and anonymous, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project. This is a study on developing MY own teaching and not a study on your child. They will just be helpers in it.

I am also a recipient of an INTO Masters Level Bursary 2019 for this research project and as a result, once completed, a copy of my thesis will be held in the INTO Research Library. This may be accessed and or referenced for Educational Publications in the future.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at

Yours faithfully,

Information Sheet for Parents and Guardians

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood, Maynooth University are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What is the research question?

- An investigation to see whether the *Aistear* framework can assist children with their self-expressive skills (Speaking, writing, body language etc.)

What is the *Aistear* Framework?

- *Aistear* is the curriculum framework made in 2009 is for all children in Ireland from birth to six years. It describes the types of learning that are important for children at this stage in their lives. *Aistear* is a guide for planning exciting, engaging and fun learning experiences and activities for young children. For more information on the framework check the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website.
- Ask your child about some of the themes we have done so far: Birthdays, Halloween, Clothes and Santa's Workshop.

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Teacher observation, reflective journal, transcripts of testimonies, worksheets, checklists.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do? (Child's Assent to Participate Form)

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

Appendix D: Critical Friend Information Letter

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

Dear Sarah,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing an action research project. The focus of my research is based on the framework *Aistear* and whether this assists children with their self-expressive skills (Speaking, writing, body language etc.).

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in my classroom. The data will be collected using observations, a teacher journal, checklists and an *Aistear* learning log worksheet we do in class. The children will be asked their opinions discussing how they have interacted with the different *Aistear* themes, what the know before we start a theme, during, and after the theme.

As you provide in-class support with me in my classroom every day, I would like to invite you to act as my critical friend. Your role as a critical friend will be to validate and critique my practice and provide honest and candid feedback in a supportive role. I will liaise with you frequently to discuss data and how I can further develop my practice.

All information will be confidential and anonymous, and data will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I am also a recipient of an INTO Masters Level Bursary 2019 for this research project and as a result, once completed, a copy of my thesis will be held in the INTO Research Library. This may be accessed and or referenced for Educational Publications in the future.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at

Yours faithfully,

Appendix E: Child's Assent to Participate Letter

Child's Assent to Participate

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and I agree to take part in this research.

I understand that I will be helping my teacher during *Aistear* time when I am playing. My teacher might ask me questions about what I am doing in *Aistear*. This might be with just me or with other children during play. I give permission for my teacher to use my *Aistear Log* for his project.

I know that if I do not want to take part in the research at any stage I can opt out. If I want to take part, I will pick the happy face and if I do not want to take part, I will pick the sad face. I will use a pretend name when talking to my teacher, so my real name is kept private.

Name of child (in block capitals):

_____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Aistear Semi-Structured Checklists

Self-Expressive Language Skills

Checklist – Cycle One

Name	**Week 1** **Speaking** *Does the child participate in playful conversation during their Play?*	**Week 2** **Artistic Endeavour** *Does the child show creativity in their Play?* (Junk Art)	**Week 3** **Non-Verbal Behaviour** *Does the child maintain eye-contact between speaker and listener during their Play?*	**Week 4** **Choice Making** *Does the child make their own choices during their Play?*	Comments

Checklist – Cycle Two

Name	**Week 1** **Speaking** *Does the child use content related vocabulary during their Play?*	**Week 2** **Artistic Endeavour** *Does the child use writing to convey messages during their Play?* (Writing/ Drawing/ Menus)	**Week 3** **Non-Verbal Behaviour** *Does the child use imaginary gestures during their Play? (e.g. drinking water from a cup)*	**Week 4** **Choice Making** *Does the child choose to go to the Choice Centre when it opens during Play?*	Comments

Checklist – Cycle Three

Name	**Week 1** **Speaking** *Can the child retell effectively what they did during their Play?*	**Week 2** **Artistic Endeavour** *Can the child turn their Learning Log from Play into a story?*	**Week 3** **Non-Verbal Behaviour** *Does the child allow for pauses between phrases, separating ideas, and holding attention*	**Week 4** **Choice Making** *Does the group decide together what should go in their own farm?* (Lego)	Comments

Appendix G: Aistear Learning Log Template

Aistear Learning Log

Name: _____

Date: _____

This was my favourite Centre this week:

What I told my teacher / friends:

_____

_____

_____

Appendix H: Example of Intervention Scenarios and Focus Questions

Intervention for Cycle Two

Role-Play Centre (*The Restaurant*)

Scenario	Focus Questions
The customer has been waiting too long for a table	• How will we make the customer happy again? • What should we say to the customer? • How can we get the customer into the Restaurant?
The customer received the wrong order	• Who should we tell? • What can we do to get the right order to the customer? • Should we say something to the customer?
There is a fire in the kitchen	• How do we put out the fire? • Should we ring someone? • What about the customers?
The customer is a cat/ wizard/ princess/ giant etc.	• What would a ___ eat? • How will we serve it to them? • What would they have for dessert?
The chef has run out of ingredients for the Pizzas	• What ingredients do we need? • Is there anything else we can get the customers? • Where could we get the ingredients for the pizzas?

Appendix I: Adapted Framework for Analysing Children's Drawings

Analysing Children's Drawings

Criterion	1	2	3	4
Engagement *Does the child attend to, take part in and enjoy drawing, listening to reading and talking about the meaning and interpretation of written words and illustrations with others?*	Does the child display a poor level of engagement when completing and talking about their drawing?	Does the child display a good level of engagement when completing and talking about their drawing?	Does the child display a very good level of engagement when completing and talking about their drawing?	Does the child display an excellent level of engagement when completing and talking about their drawing?
Artistic Perspective *Do the child's drawings contain elements that were included as part of their testimony?*	Does the child's Learning Log show no correlation between drawing and testimony?	Does the child's drawing show a good correlation with the child's testimony?	Does the child's drawing show very good correlation with the child's testimony?	Does the child's drawing show and excellent correlation with the child's testimony?
Vocabulary *Can the child use content related vocabulary in the context of explaining their drawing?*	Does the child use no topic-specific language when describing their drawing? **0 words & phrases**	Does the child use good topic-specific language when describing their drawing? **2 words & phrases**	Does the child use very good topic-specific language when describing their drawing? **4+ words & phrases**	Does the child use an excellent range of topic-specific language when describing their drawing? **5+ words & phrases**
Demonstration on Understanding *Can the child comprehend elements that they have drawn and clearly state a case? A child may draw a food menu, but can they explain its purpose?*	Does the child show no understanding of concepts drawn from playful activities?	Does the child show a good understanding of concepts drawn from playful activities?	Does the child show a very good understanding of concepts drawn from playful activities?	Does the child show an excellent understanding of concepts drawn from playful activities?
Retelling and Elaboration *Can the child use their drawings as a platform to expertly bring across ideas and narratives within the drawing?*	Does the child tell or retell their drawing through explanation using no sequencing, tense, oral vocabulary and confidence?	Does the child tell or retell their drawing through explanation using good sequencing, tense, oral vocabulary and confidence?	Does the child tell or retell their drawing through explanation using very good sequencing, tense, oral vocabulary and confidence?	Does the child tell or retell their drawing through explanation using excellent sequencing, tense, oral vocabulary and confidence?

Appendix J: Colour Coding Process for Cycle Two Data Analysis

Data 24/02/20	Codes
(Q) Researcher: Tell me about your drawing. There's the kitchen. I'm the chef cooking vegetables to go on the pizza. The waiter has a plate in his hand and serving the customer. I'm going as fast as I can… at superspeed. My friend was the chef and cooking a pizza. Seamus and Ryan is the custaiméir. We ordered food. I put green peppers on the pizza. There are customers at the restaurant. They are waiting for their food. The waiter took the orders. I was hoping they ordered vegetable soup and they did. I tried to get their order right but it was tricky. My favourite was the Restaurant. I got dinner. The chef makes food. He made pepperoni pizza. *Child writes "I am waiter". I made a restaurant out of bricks with Sarah in the restaurant. We made enough tables for all the customers. There's a cistin (kitchen). A big table for 10 people and a waiter. There are customers at the table. They are ordering pizzas. Pepperoni. Me and Edel made perfect pizzas with pepperoni and cheese and ham and oráiste (orange). I done a car stopping at the restaurant. I loved the rólimirt (Role-Play) because I liked being the freastalaí (waiter) with Charlie. I play with the building blocks. We make chairs, tables, and another automatic door. We cook in the kitchen. I loved the pizza game. Me and Nancy collected lots of different types of pizza. I spin the board and won loads of pizzas with pepperoni and cheese. I needed super concentration to win tomorrow again and again.	**Partner as a supportive scaffold** **Integrated use of spoken Irish** **Self-Assessment** **Content-related Vocabulary**