

**Evaluating the Benefits of the Aistear Curriculum on the Social Interactions of  
Junior Infant Children**

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to evaluate the benefits of the Aistear Curriculum, a play-based learning curriculum, on the social interactions of Junior Infant children. The study utilised a quasi-experimental, repeated measures design which sought quantitative data using natural observations of children in a school implementing the Aistear Curriculum, in comparison with a control group. The Play Observation Scale (2001) was used to measure children's social behaviours under the headings of solitary play, parallel play, non-play, group play and peer-conversation. It was hypothesised that implementation of the Aistear Curriculum would decrease solitary play, parallel play and non-play behaviours, and increase group play and peer-conversation. Results were significant for a reduction in solitary play, parallel play and non-play behaviours, but not for an increase in group play and peer conversation. Although significant results were found for an increase in group dramatic play in particular. However, tests which compared the results with a control group could not eliminate the possibility of maturation effects.

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 What is Aistear?*

The Aistear Curriculum was developed in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Aistear is the Irish word for ‘journey,’ marking early childhood as the beginning of children’s lifelong journeys of learning. It uses four main themes to outline what children should learn during their early childhood and it began as a curriculum guideline for early childcare and pre-school settings. The themes are: well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking. These themes should be considered when planning activities and learning objectives within early childcare settings.

More recently, many primary school teachers have chosen to use elements of the Aistear Curriculum to support the Infant Curriculum (typically for children aged 4-7 years) in primary schools. The biggest difference between the Aistear Curriculum and the Junior/Senior Infant Curriculum is the emphasis on play (NCCA, 2015). The Aistear Curriculum highlights the importance of play for young children’s early learning and development, and offers many suggestions for different types of play, as well as advice on how to integrate play into classroom learning. Aistear tutors suggest that Junior and Senior Infant children engage in one hour of child-directed, play-based activities each day.

When Aistear takes place in an infant classroom, children are assigned to a particular group for the hour, and rotate around teacher-designed stations daily. The most commonly used stations include: a small world setting, a socio-dramatic/role play area, a sensory area, a creative area and a construction area. For example, taking the strand unit ‘living in the local community,’ from the Infant Geography Curriculum and the Aistear themes of ‘identity and belonging’ and ‘exploring and thinking,’ the following stations might be planned for a 2-3

week term. The small world area might have a road mat with free-standing cardboard cut-outs of village buildings e.g. a grocery store, and several figurines of village people. The role play area might be set up as a post office with envelopes, parcels, a weighing-scales, a cash register, writing materials, stamps and a post box. The sensory area might include a sand tray with images of a local builder's yard and an assortment of toy construction vehicles and materials. In the creative area, the children might be encouraged to design uniforms for people working in the local community and this area might include templates of policemen, firemen, nurses and shopkeepers, a variety of fabric, crepe paper and coloured tissue paper, as well as some glue and scissors. Finally, in the construction area, the children might be encouraged to replicate buildings from the local community using wooden blocks or Lego and would have available to them A4 sized photographs of local buildings. Although the stations are teacher-designed, the children are encouraged to play freely and the direction that their play takes within the hour is completely up to them. At this point, children who are having difficulties integrating into and maintaining play can be easily identified by the class teacher who will then carry out the appropriate modelling and scaffolding teaching strategies for that child.

Each child receives one hour at each station throughout the week and these stations are changed to incorporate new themes after 2-3 weeks. The grouping of children is also changed several times throughout the academic year providing each child with the opportunity to be part of, and to learn from, several different social groups. And so, by implementing the Aistear curriculum in the infant classroom, children not only benefit from the integration of the academic curriculum into the play activities, but also from a rich model of language and social interaction from both the class teacher and from interactions with their peers.

However, because the Aistear Curriculum is not yet compulsory at primary school level and not officially part of the primary school Infant Curriculum, it is not implemented to

the same extent in all schools, and sometimes not at all. There are many ambiguities around the use of the Aistear Curriculum in primary schools, particularly surrounding how much time to allocate to it, as well as how to integrate other curricular areas into the Aistear framework. The inconsistencies amongst schools in their time allocations for Aistear, and even a lack of Aistear in some schools, would suggest that there is a need for empirical evidence to support the replacement of traditional classroom learning with play-based learning as advocated by the Aistear Curriculum. While there is much research to support the importance of play-based learning, there is no Aistear-based empirical evidence (that the researcher is aware of) to support such a change in the infant school day. Nonetheless, despite lacking empirical evidence, the Aistear Curriculum promotes the importance of play in early childhood; the benefits of which have long been recognised in the literature and will be discussed forthwith.

### *1.2 The Importance of Play in Early Childhood*

A recent publication by the Department of Education and Skills (2014) entitled “Well-Being in Primary Schools,” has highlighted the need to consider children’s mental health and socio-emotional well-being in the primary school setting. This publication says that effective schools should put systems in place to promote mental health and well-being, and lists Aistear as one of these systems (DES, 2014). This increased awareness and focus on children’s mental health within the primary school setting comes as a welcome response to the many concerns raised in recent years about the increased focus on academic skills in the education system, and the consequent neglect of the social and emotional well-being of the child.

In 2007, the Canadian psychiatrist, Kenneth R. Ginsburg, wrote of how children are being raised in an ‘increasingly hurried and pressured style,’ disabling them from engaging in child-driven play, and thus limiting the protective benefits associated with this type of play. He expressed concerns about parents’ ‘overscheduling’ of children in after-school enrichment activities, as well as the reduction of free time in schools in an effort to focus on academic skills and adult-directed activities. Margaret Kernan, a researcher and lecturer in Early Childhood Education Care at the Dublin Institute of Technology, also writes about this academic focus and attributes it to the pressures on teachers that emanate from governments’ need for skilled workforces and the expectations of parents (2007, p.10). She also proposes that play can uncomfortably change the nature of the power relationship between adult and child, where the locus of control in child-directed play is with the children (2007, p.10).

While Ginsburg (2007) says that most ‘highly-scheduled’ children thrive, some are reacting to these pressures with signs of anxiety and increased stress. Peter Gray (2011) even believes that there is a correlation between the decline of children’s free play and increased levels of psychopathological problems, such as childhood and adolescent anxiety and depression, feelings of helplessness and narcissism.

For the others however, the majority for whom the lack of play does not so negatively affect, there are some important socio-emotional benefits for increasing play opportunities at school. In fact, a study carried out in Victoria, Australia, compared a play-based curriculum school with a traditionally structured classroom curriculum school, and found that the children in the former school had significantly higher scores in play, language and social interaction skills, as well as lower scores in social disconnection (Reynolds, Stagnitti & Kidd, 2011). Some concerns might be raised as to whether this is at the expense of academic achievement and cognitive development. However, a significant amount of research suggests that play facilitates improved performance in cognitive-linguistic domains (Fisher, 1992),

better understanding and use of number (Emfinger, 2009), and an increase in appropriate behavioural and attentive classroom behaviours, thus improving children's capacity to learn (Allen & Barber, 2015).

Besides looking at the academic benefits of play however, if the social and emotional well-being of children is to be taken as seriously as academic progress and success, a significant amount of time and effort should be allocated to the development of socio-emotional skills, of which there are many. At infant level in primary school, play is the most effective way to teach and develop these skills. Gray (2011) writes that, through play, children learn to develop intrinsic interests and competencies; how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules. They also learn to regulate their emotions, make friends and experience joy, all of which promote mental health (p.454).

### *1.3 Social Interaction during Early Childhood*

Of particular importance in considering the socio-emotional well-being of children is their daily interactions with others, particularly their peers. Kupersmidt and Dodge (2004) wrote that "since the time of Aristotle, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists have elucidated the contributions of friendship to healthy adaptation across the life span," (p.37). The importance of friendship begins in early childhood. Kernan (2007) writes of the centrality of peer relationships for young children, and particularly refers to a study which interviewed four and five year old children on their experiences in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings and found the need for affiliation with their peers to be of huge importance to them (Kernan, 2006, as cited in Kernan, 2007). In order for children to be accepted by their peers, they need the appropriate social skills.

For some, these skills come more easily, and there may be many contributing factors including child temperament, parenting styles and a variety of other environmental factors (Gagnon, Huelsman, Reichard, Kidder-Ashley, Griggs et al., 2013). However, many children at this age are still learning how to solve problems, regulate their emotions, form friendships and manage their social environment (Gray, 2011), as well as alternating between playing and fighting with peers (Flood, 2010, p.128). There are also those children who struggle with these social interactions, spending more time engaged in arguments than play, and consequently being rejected by their peers.

Unfortunately, research supports the influential role of chronic peer problems and peer rejection for many negative outcomes including suicide, drug abuse, educational underachievement, delinquent behaviour and depression (Kupersmidt & Dodge, 2004, p.119). In fact, a 12 year follow-up investigation by Bagwell, Newcomb and Bukowski (1998) found that peer rejection and the absence of friendship during childhood were both associated with psychopathological symptoms in adulthood, although neither was specifically predictive of symptomatology. It is difficult to intervene in such a descent, as rejected children are likely to become even more isolated due to continuous rejection experiences, thus preventing themselves access to the very peer groups that might help them to develop the social competencies needed for social interaction (Erwin, 1998, p.58).

However, the very nature of the Aistear Curriculum allows children with poorer social skills the opportunity to integrate with and to learn from their more socially-able peers, while also receiving guidance and encouragement from the class teacher, at an early intervention stage. With such rich social opportunities, it would be expected that children's social interactions would improve greatly throughout the year in comparison with a school that does not implement the Aistear Curriculum. While the importance of play for children's social connectivity and their abilities to make and maintain friendships cannot be underestimated

(Kernan, 2007, p.31), play also serves as an excellent indicator of social competence, as it is the primary activity through which children interact socially (Gagnon et al., 2013). It particularly lends itself to the observation of children's interactions with others in a natural environment.

In 1932, Mildred Parten significantly categorised play in terms of progressive levels of social participation, emphasising the important role of social interaction in play. These levels were solitary play, spectator play, parallel play, associative play and co-operative play. While her categories are no longer thought of as a hierarchy of progression, they are still very relevant as descriptions of the different kinds of social play which emerge from infancy through to early childhood (Sheridan, Harding, Meldon-Smith and Sheridan, 1999, p.10). In this research, the observation scale designed and tested by Kenneth H. Rubin (2001), is based on Parten's social categories of play and records play behaviours under the headings of solitary play, parallel play, non-play behaviours, group play and peer conversation.

#### *1.4 Solitary Play in Early Childhood*

Parten's categorisation of play has been criticised for implying that playing alone is a less advanced form of play (Kernan, 2007, p.17). In fact, Ó Donnchadha (2000) says that fantasy is a characteristic especially associated with solitary play, and that it is important that children are allowed to have opportunities to play by themselves (p.129). Children should not be put under pressure to always be with their friends. During Aistear, children are often observed drifting in and out of solitary play, particularly in the construction, creative and sensory stations. While solitary play holds its own importance, and should not be discouraged, it would be worrying to observe a child engaged in only solitary play during Aistear, and particularly in the socio-dramatic and role play stations. In fact, Nelson, Hart and

Evans (2008) observed how children who frequently engaged in solitary activities appeared to be actively excluded by the peer group.

At Junior Infant level, children are very aware of the presence of their peers, and should be demonstrating an interest in interacting with them (Kernan, 2007, p.31). Therefore children primarily or often engaged in solitary play may in fact be lacking the skills necessary to gain access and relate to their peers, and may be in need of help and support. Bandura's Social Learning Theory proposes that people learn through observing others' behaviour and attitudes and the outcomes of those behaviours and attitudes (Flood, 2010, p.131). This is why it is vital that children are exposed to good role models, and why behaviours and attitudes learned in childhood through social modelling are so difficult to change. Also, the important role of adults and peers in the development and learning of children is further supported by Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (French, 2007, p.31).

The implementation of the Aistear Curriculum allows the class teacher the opportunity to identify children displaying social difficulties and overly engaging in solitary play. The class teacher can then intervene by modelling the appropriate language and behaviours necessary to enter into and engage in play. Of course, further role models are also available in socially competent peers. It is hoped that the skills learned through teacher and peer modelling would then be applied on the school yard where the observations for this research take place, and result in an overall increase in positive social interactions during free play.

### *1.5 Parallel Play in Early Childhood*

This type of play is similar to solitary play except that while the child plays independently, they are also very attentive to others (Rubin, 2001). The child is often playing with the same

toys as the children around them, and may even engage in ‘parallel speech,’ or the verbalising of his/her thoughts for the benefit of the other children. However, while the child demonstrates an interest in the children around them, they are not playing, conversing or engaging with those children (Rubin, 2001). Similar to solitary play, children may be observed entering in and out of parallel play during Aistear and some would say that parallel play is a necessary ‘bridge’ towards entry into group play (Bakeman and Brownlee, 1980). Again, while parallel play has its benefits and should not be viewed entirely negatively, the child who is primarily or often engaged in this type of play may be lacking the social skills necessary to cross the bridge into more social play. French (2010) quotes Froebel when she writes that “play is too important to be left to chance” (p.19), and so it is vital that the classroom teacher is aware of the children who are having difficulties in their play, and can make the appropriate interventions i.e. through scaffolding and modelling. Also, the placement of children into groups of mixed social ability allows these children to be exposed to peer-modelling of positive social skills and interactions.

Because children participating in solitary and parallel behaviours are not socially interacting with their peers, these are treated as non-social behaviours for the purpose of this research.

### *1.6 Non-Play Behaviours on the School Yard*

There are many non-play behaviours that might occur during an observation of children’s play on the school yard. The most significant of these behaviours, for the purpose of this research, are unoccupied behaviours, onlooker behaviour, anxious/hovering behaviour, aggression, and rough-and-tumble play.

Unoccupied behaviour involves the child staring blankly into space, or wandering with no specific purpose or interest in the activities of others (Rubin, 2001, p.5). This is a very typical solitary behaviour on the school yard, as most Irish schools do not allow the children to bring toys onto the yard at lunch time. The child who typically engages in solitary play behaviours during classroom playtime then has a choice between playing with their peers in the school yard setting, or opting out of play completely.

Onlooker behaviour involves the child watching and showing an interest in the activities of others, but not entering into the activity (Rubin, 2001, p.5). This is similar to parallel play, although the child is on the school yard and does not have toys or manipulatives at hand.

Hovering is similar to onlooker behaviour, only the child appears to want to join in play but is wary of doing so (Rubin, 2001, p.6). Anxious behaviours include: crying, whining, nail biting, hair twisting and foot wiggling. Children may be involved in another activity, but still engage in anxious behaviours, at which point their actions would be double-coded as anxious behaviours (Rubin, 2001, p.6). These are both treated as non-social behaviours.

“Aggression refers to non-playful, agonistic interaction with another child” (Rubin, 2001, p.5). Aggression has been divided into two categories for this research: verbal and physical. Both of which are treated as non-social behaviours. Aggression must not be confused with ‘rough-and-tumble’ however, which according to Tannock (2011) is distinguishable from aggressive behaviours by the presence of the ‘play face.’ Rough-and-tumble includes running, climbing, chasing, play-fighting, fleeing, wrestling, falling and open-handed slaps (Tannock, 2011). Not all of these behaviours are acceptable on the school yard as they are deemed to be too rough, however running, chasing, fleeing and non-contact play-fighting are often observed.

Rough-and-tumble is perhaps the most controversial social behaviour. There are some who believe rough-and-tumble to be a form of play (Tannock, 2011), although this is not universally accepted. While it is listed under non-play behaviours on Rubin's (2001) observation scale, it is also double-coded as group functional play. Functional play is defined by Rubin as "an activity that is done simply for the enjoyment of the physical sensation it creates" (2001, p.3). Whether or not these behaviours can be classified as play or not, they involve very little social interaction apart from laughing and smiling, and so they are treated as non-social behaviours for the purpose of this research.

It is hoped that through sufficient in-class modelling of appropriate social interactions, and integration of children into groups of mixed social abilities, that the number of solitary, parallel and non-play behaviours would decrease in favour of more group play and peer conversation.

### *1.7 Group Play in Early Childhood*

Ó Donnchadha (2000) says that "in group play, the child learns the value of personal effectiveness in gaining access to the group, remaining a part of the group and dealing with exclusion (p.127). Children then who are seen to be involved in a peer group during Aistear and during free-play on yard can be said to be learning and practicing many important social skills. Children engaging in play with other children, where there is a common goal or purpose to the activity, is a very social behaviour (Rubin, 2001, p.3).

Group play, as well as solitary and parallel play, can be further categorised into various types of play. Smilansky (1968; as cited in Rubin, 2001), elaborated upon Piaget's stages of cognitive development to define five different types of play: functional, exploratory,

constructive, dramatic and games with rules (p.2). More of these types of play are observable in group play than the other two social categories of play as dramatic play and games with rules usually require more than one person. Vygotsky argued that play was a leading factor in child development, and particularly focused on the cognitive functioning and social rules involved in maintaining peer interaction in socio-dramatic play (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). He particularly viewed this form of play as the most important for social-cognitive development. This particular type of play can only take place in a group play situation as it requires the interaction of others. Although Smilansky's types of play are no longer viewed as successive or hierarchical, according to Vygotsky, children involved in socio-dramatic play are arguably involved in the most beneficial and socially interactive type of play (Bodrova & Leong, 2005).

### *1.8 Peer Conversation on the School Yard*

While peer conversation falls under non-play behaviours in the Play Observation Scale, it will be observed separately from the other non-play behaviours for the purpose of this research as it is a highly social interaction. It is defined by Rubin (2001) as the "verbal transfer of information to another person." Parallel and private speech, do not fall under this category as neither are attempts at communication. Conversation is also coded when a child is being spoken to by another child and is actively listening in order to respond or follow directions. However, a child who is listening to someone else's conversation but is not specifically being spoken to is coded as engaging in onlooker behaviour.

### *1.9 Rationale*

While there is a collection of research emphasising the importance of play and promoting the use of Aistear (Kernan, 2007; French, 2007; Hayes, 2007; Dunphy, 2008), there is no empirical evidence (that the researcher is aware of) to encourage the replacement of one hour of traditional infant learning with one hour of play-based learning. A review of early childhood education in Ireland in 2004 (OECD, 2004), found that didactic, whole-class teaching was the primary teaching style in Junior Infant classes, where play was only used as a means of delivering a curricular goal. It would be interesting to see how much has changed since then. While infant teachers may be more aware of the importance of play, there are many challenges to the implementation of play, such as large class sizes, teacher-training, classroom design, organisation, resources and high adult-child ratios (Kernan, 2007, p.13). In order for teachers to overcome these challenges, and to warrant dedicating one hour of an already curriculum-overloaded infant day, to fully implement the Aistear Curriculum, more empirical research is needed on the benefits of doing so. While play has been correlated with many positive gains including social, cognitive and physical (Belknap and Hazler, 2014), this research project focuses only on the social and emotional benefits. However, it could be argued that any improvements in the socio-emotional well-being of the child may in fact also lend itself to the cognitive and physical benefits of the child.

### *1.10 Aims and Hypotheses*

The aim of the current study is to evaluate the benefits of the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum for the social interactions of Junior Infant children.

*Hypothesis 1:* It is hypothesised the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum will increase social play and peer conversation during free-play on the schoolyard.

*Hypothesis 2:* It is also hypothesised that the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum will decrease the number of solitary, parallel and non-play behaviours on the schoolyard.

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1 Participants*

Two groups of children participated in this study. The first group was comprised of 26 children, 12 female and 14 male, and all of these children were from the one school (School A) which was implementing the Aistear Curriculum. The second group was comprised of 8 children, 3 female and 5 male, and all of these children were from the second school (School B) which was not implementing the Aistear Curriculum.

Permission to carry out the research was granted by the principals of both schools. As the participants were Junior Infant children with an approximate age of 4½ - 5½ years, parental consent was requested on their behalf. Parents received an information sheet outlining the purpose and design of the study and the observations. They were also informed that the inclusion of their child was voluntary. Thirty consent forms were issued in School A, and 10 consent forms were issued in School B. Four consent forms were not returned in School A and 2 were not returned in School B so these children were not observed.

The sample was a convenience sample as the researcher is a teacher in School A. The researcher was one of two teachers implementing the Aistear Curriculum in the school and 21 of the 26 students in the Aistear group were being taught by the researcher. School B is located less than 20km from School A and the observer for this group of children is a teacher in the school but is not involved in the teaching of the Junior Infant children.

## *2.2 Design*

The study utilised a quasi-experimental, repeated measures design which sought quantitative data using natural observations. The predictor variable (PV) was the implementation or non-implementation of the Aistear curriculum and the criterion variables (CVs) were: solitary play, parallel play, non-play behaviours, group play and peer conversation.

## *2.3 Materials*

Kenneth H. Rubin's Play Observation Scale (2001) was used to record the children's play behaviours. The scale includes all 5 criterion variables as based on Parten's social categories of play. These are solitary play, parallel play, group play, non-play and peer conversation. Nested within the solitary, parallel and group play categories are Smilansky's cognitive stages of play (1968; as cited in Rubin, 2001, p.2). These include: occupied play, constructive play, exploratory play, functional play, dramatic play and games with rules.

Inter-rater reliability was calculated prior to these observations using 5 children separate to those involved in the study. Both coders observed and independently rated the same children. Coders had equal scores 80% of the time and scores differed by 0.4 for the remaining 20%. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that scores between the two observers across the 5 variables were not significantly different.

## *2.4 Procedure*

Once permission was granted by the principals of both schools and all consent forms were returned by parents who allowed for the participation of their children in the study, the initial

observations took place (Time 1). These observations were carried out in both schools within the same school week and during lunchbreaks from Monday through to Friday. Each child was observed once for a total of 4 minutes. These observations took place at 10 second intervals, where the child's behaviour was observed for 10 seconds and the coder then took 5 seconds to mark the observed behaviour on the coding sheet so that a total of approximately 6 minutes was spent on the observation and coding of any one child. One to 2 minutes was also spent locating each child on the schoolyard and observing them before formal observation and coding of that child took place. Each child was assigned a number so that he/she would remain anonymous within the study.

In both schools the observer was seated at the side of the schoolyard in view of, but away from the attention of the children. Another teacher was on yard-duty at the time and the children had been told prior to the observations that this was the teacher to whom they should address any issues. It was also decided and discussed with the teaching staff of both schools that the observers would only abandon observations for cases of serious physical harm to a student, and that any other cases such as minor injuries and possible bullying behaviours unseen by the teacher on yard-duty would be communicated to that teacher by the observer and subsequently dealt with by the teacher on yard-duty.

Once all of the children were observed, the Aistear Curriculum was implemented in School A the following week and continued for 8 weeks before observations were carried out again in both schools under the same conditions (Time 2). During the 8 weeks, the themes were changed 3 times and the social grouping of children was changed twice. The themes covered were 'Houses and Homes,' 'Winter,' and 'Clothes.' All four themes from the Aistear Curriculum: well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking, were also incorporated into the planning and implementation of these themes.

Finally, all data collected from the observations was entered into the SPSS programme for statistical analysis. SPSS version 22 was used for all statistical procedures. All data was interpreted in terms of the collective groups (Aistear and non-Aistear) and not on an individual child basis

### 3. Results

This section will provide demographic information as well as a statistical summary and analysis of the data collected from the observations. Following this the findings for the group comparisons will be reported. Tests for normality revealed that the data was not normally distributed and so a series of non-parametric tests, including Mann Whitney-U tests and a Wilcoxon test, were conducted in order to interpret the data gathered for the two groups.

#### 3.1 Demographics

Junior Infant children are typically aged 4-5 years old at the beginning of the school year. The mean age and standard deviations for both groups of children were calculated at Time 1, and are displayed in years and months in *Table 1*.

Table 1

*Mean age and standard deviations of both samples before the intervention in School A.*

	School A	School B
Mean	4 years 11 months	4 years 10 months
Standard Deviation	4.02 months	4.0 months

#### 3.2 Descriptive Statistics

*Table 2* below displays the descriptive summaries for the data collected from both groups across the five variables at Time 1 and Time 2. As expected there is a greater decrease in solitary play for School A with a difference of 3.04 between the means for Time 1 and Time 2 compared to a difference in means of 1.25 between Time 1 and Time 2 for School B.

However, the same was predicted for parallel play, but there was in fact a greater decrease in parallel play for School B with a difference in means of 2.37 between Time 1 and Time 2, compared to a difference in means of 1.73 for School A. Non-play data demonstrated, as expected, a decrease of 7.69 between the means at Time 1 and Time 2 for School A compared to an actual increase of .50 between the means at Time 1 and Time 2 for School B. Also, as expected, there was a greater increase between the means for group play at Time 1 and Time 2 for School A of 3.35, compared to an increase of 2.75 for School B. Finally, as expected, there was also a greater increase in peer conversation of 3.04 between the means at Time 1 and Time 2 for School A compared to an increase of 1.38 for School B. Further analysis was conducted in order to examine if these differences were statistically significant.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for each variable at Time 1 and Time 2.*

	School A		School A		School B		School B	
	Time 1		Time 2		Time 1		Time 2	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Solitary Play	3.54	5.30	.50	2.35	2.75	4.40	1.50	1.77
Parallel Play	2.31	3.07	.58	1.58	3.25	6.61	.88	1.36
Non-Play	8.31	7.17	.62	1.17	10.00	6.39	10.50	2.88
Group Play	10.42	8.01	13.77	5.67	8.25	6.90	11.00	1.93
Peer Conversation	4.38	4.77	7.42	5.63	4.25	1.67	5.63	1.60

Particularly high scores in group play are evident for both groups at Time 1. This can perhaps be explained by the double coding of rough and tumble play as both a non-play behaviour and as group functional play. In order to control for this, descriptive statistics were

also obtained for the various cognitive sub-categories of group play at Time 1 and Time 2. These are displayed in *Table 3* below. It is apparent from *Table 3* that while there is a slight increase in group functional play for School B in the second observations, group functional play decreases in School A. This parallels the results obtained for the non-play variable which also contains the observations of rough-and-tumble occurrences. Furthermore, *Table 3* illustrates a much higher score for group dramatic play in School A at Time 2 compared to School B. It appears that the children in School A have moved from predominant engagement in group functional play to an increased engagement in the more socially advanced group dramatic form of play.

Table 3

*Descriptive statistics for the cognitive sub-categories of group play.*

	School A		School A		School B		School B	
	Time 1		Time 2		Time 1		Time 2	
	M	SD	M	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
Group Occupied	.12	.59	.00	.00	.00	.00	.38	1.06
Group Constructive	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Group Exploratory	.23	.71	.88	2.29	.00	.00	.63	1.77
Group Functional	5.04	7.32	.12	.33	5.38	6.32	8.50	2.14
Group Dramatic	3.38	5.73	9.73	6.85	.50	1.41	1.25	2.82
Group Games	1.65	4.73	3.04	6.21	2.38	3.62	.25	.71

### 3.3 Inferential Statistics

A Mann-Whitney U test was carried out in order to compare both groups at Time 1 and found that there were no significant differences between the two groups across all five variables. This indicates that both groups were at a similar baseline to begin with.

A Wilcoxon test was then carried out in order to test for both hypotheses. This would indicate whether the increases/decreases in behaviour between Time 1 and Time 2 for School A were statistically significant. The test revealed statistically significant differences for solitary behaviours ( $z = -2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ ), for parallel behaviours ( $z = -2.74$ ,  $p = .006$ ), and for non-play behaviours ( $z = -4.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and so, the null for Hypothesis 2 can be rejected. Differences for group play and peer-conversation were not statistically significant, and so, the null for Hypothesis 1 could not be rejected. However, as a result of post-hoc analysis, further exploration of the group play variable and particularly the group-functional and group-dramatic sub-categories using a Wilcoxon test revealed that the differences for group-functional play between Time 1 and Time 2 were significant ( $z = -2.98$ ,  $p = .003$ ), as were the differences for group-dramatic play ( $z = -2.94$ ,  $p = .003$ ), thus offering partial support for Hypothesis 1. These results are displayed in *Table 4*.

Table 4

*Wilcoxon tests comparing the means between Time 1 and Time 2 for School A.*

	Time 1		Time 2		Z	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Solitary Play	3.54	5.29	.50	2.35	-2.77	.006
Parallel Play	2.31	3.07	.58	1.58	-2.74	.006
Non-Play Behaviours	8.31	7.17	.62	1.17	-4.02	.000
Group Play	10.42	8.01	13.77	5.67	-1.69	.091
Peer Conversation	4.38	4.77	7.42	5.63	-1.84	.066
Group-Functional	5.04	7.32	.12	.33	-2.98	.003
Group-Dramatic	3.38	5.73	9.73	6.85	-2.94	.003

Finally, a series of Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted in order to examine if there were any significant differences between the two groups at Time 2 as illustrated in *Table 5*. This was to control for any maturation effects i.e. that the changes in behaviour were due to the natural maturation of the children rather than the intervention. Analysis revealed that the decrease in non-play behaviours for School A (mean rank = 13.50) in comparison with a slight increase in non-play behaviours for School B (mean rank = 30.50) was a significant difference ( $U = .000$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Yet, analysis which compared the other four variables revealed that the results were not statistically significant.

However, post-hoc analysis uncovered masking effects due to the previously mentioned double coding of rough-and-tumble play as group-functional play. Consequently, further analysis was conducted on the group-functional and group-dramatic sub-variables in

particular, also illustrated in *Table 4*. The comparison of group-functional scores at Time 2 between School A (mean rank = 13.50) and School B (mean rank = 30.50) revealed a statistically significant lower score in group functional play for School A ( $U = .000$ ,  $p = < .001$ ). Also, analysis comparing group-dramatic scores between School A (mean rank = 20.50) and School B (mean rank = 7.75) at Time 2 revealed further statistically significant results ( $U = 26.00$ ,  $p = .001$ ) confirming that School A were engaging in significantly more group dramatic play than School B and that this was not simply due to maturation effects.

Table 5

*Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the means at Time 2 between School A and School B.*

	School	Mean Rank	U	p
Solitary Play	A	15.81	60.00	.077
	B	23.00		
Parallel Play	A	16.69	83.00	.413
	B	20.13		
Non-play Behaviours	A	13.50	.000	.000
	B	30.50		
Group Play	A	18.50	78.00	.307
	B	14.25		
Peer Conversation	A	17.96	92.00	.647
	B	16.00		
Group-Functional Play	A	13.50	.000	.000
	B	30.50		
Group-Dramatic Play	A	20.50	26.00	.001
	B	7.75		

## 4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to fill a gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence to warrant the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum in primary schools, and particularly looked at the social benefits of the programme for the children. At an international level, the Republic of Ireland is quite late in its acceptance of the importance of play-based learning, with many countries having already made play-based changes to their curricular frameworks at primary-school level (Hunter and Walsh, 2013). In Northern Ireland, a play-based framework was introduced into the 'Foundation Stage Curriculum' in 2007, following a pilot study which promoted a child-centred and play-based approach. As far as the researcher is aware, no such pilot study has been carried out in the Republic of Ireland and so, the Aistear Curriculum is mainly based on research movements within the UK and other European countries. Although, a research article published by the NCCA in 2007, entitled "Listening for Children's Stories" also provided some support for the development of the Aistear Curriculum, and particularly the Aistear themes. This was a portraiture study which involved the observing and questioning of a small sample of children from a variety of early childhood settings on their daily experiences and interests.

Hunter and Walsh (2013) conducted a research study which explored the relationship between policy and practice of the new play-based curriculum in Northern Ireland by means of teacher questionnaires and observations within the Foundation Stage classrooms. They found that teacher's attitudes towards a play-based curriculum were mainly positive, particularly in comparison with teacher's scepticism around the learning benefits of play in studies undertaken prior to the formal introduction of play into the Foundation Stage Curriculum. However, the study then zoned in on the practice of the new curriculum, and particularly the ambiguous role of teachers in the direction of play, as well as a lack of higher

levels of challenge and extension of children's academic learning through play. The conclusion to this article completely disregards views such as those of Ginsburg (2007) who wrote about the importance of child-directed play and the concerns around 'over-scheduling' children. The article fails to recognise the socio-emotional needs of young children, and threatens to pressure teachers with the need to validate play in terms of academic gains. It was hoped that the findings of the current study would provide evidence for benefits other than those of a cognitive and academic nature, so that implementers of the Aistear Curriculum would not be tempted to follow recommendations similar to those made by Hunter and Walsh.

#### *4.1 Findings*

Statistically significant results were found for the decline in solitary, parallel and non-play behaviours (all considered to be non-social behaviours for the purpose of this study) in School A between Time 1 and Time 2. Strangely, despite a significant decrease in non-social behaviours, the increases in group play and peer conversation were not deemed to be statistically significant. On further investigation, it was found that decreases in rough-and-tumble, due to its double coding as group-functional play, cancelled out any increases in the more socially advanced forms of group play, particularly group-dramatic play. Post-hoc analysis revealed that there was in fact a statistically significant decrease in the less socially advanced group-functional form of play and a significant increase in group-dramatic play between Time 1 and Time 2 for School A, but also in comparison with School B.

However, when comparing School A with School B in order to control for natural maturation effects, statistically significant results could only be found for non-play behaviours. Despite being able to see expected higher increases in group play and peer-

conversation and expected decreases for solitary play when initially comparing the means for both schools at Time 2, these differences were not deemed to be statistically significant. Therefore, any statistical support for the hypotheses cannot be confidently attributed to the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum, and may in fact be due to the maturation of the children throughout the school year. However, due to the fact that some amount of expected differences could be seen between the two schools for 4 out of the 5 main variables, perhaps a larger, more equal-sized control group would have revealed more significant results.

#### *4.2 Limitations, weaknesses and implications for future research*

There were several limitations and weaknesses in the present study. Firstly, due to accessibility, the control group was quite small in number, with only 8 children in comparison with 26 children in the school where the Aistear Curriculum was being implemented. Therefore, it may have been difficult to pick up on several behavioural trends within the control group and this may have contributed to insignificant findings. It also meant that there were slightly different demographics between the two schools in terms of class size and consistency, as the control group, who were all Junior Infant children, were part of a mixed class of Junior and Senior Infants. Therefore, the control group may have been in a more socially intimate position, or alternatively, lacking in social interaction opportunities to begin with. Ideally, the control group should be of a similar size and demographic nature to the research group in any future research. Furthermore, both samples are only representative of two primary schools of similar socio-economic backgrounds. In order for the results of such a study to be generalizable to Irish primary school children, a variety of Irish primary schools around the country should be included in any future research.

Secondly, the fact that the researcher who was also the observer in the school implementing the Aistear Curriculum was the teacher of most of those Junior Infants is a further limitation of the study. Again, this was due to accessibility and convenience sampling, but the possibility of observer bias must be considered. However, attempts to control for this included the use of a very particular observation coding sheet, as well as a pilot observation which tested for inter-rater reliability. Furthermore, the observer for the control group was not the teacher of those Junior Infant children. In future research, it would be preferable if the observer was unattached to the children being observed. Also, the use of a second observer in each school for the duration of the study would be advisable in order to ensure inter-rater reliability throughout.

Thirdly, it was very difficult to find an observation scale for the observation of children at play. It was even more difficult to find one which explored and measured children's social interactions and peer relationships. Rubin's (2001) observation scale was designed for the purpose of observing play in general, although it has been used by Rubin to explore peer relationships (e.g. Rubin, Daniels-Beirness and Hayvren, 1982) and social withdrawal (e.g. Rubin, 1982). There were some drawbacks with the use of this observation study, particularly with the aforementioned double-coded behaviours. Furthermore, there were many behaviours listed on the observation coding sheet which were not necessarily applicable to the school yard setting. For example the occupied and constructive play behaviours simply received a score of 0 for all children as there were no toys or manipulatives present on the school yard to enable these behaviours. It would also have been beneficial to have included more subtle social behaviours such as inviting a peer to play, or complimenting a peer, as well as more subtle non-social behaviours such as the exclusion of a peer, or sulking and tell-tale behaviours. Consequently, this research calls for the design of an observation coding sheet which is suitable for the observation and assessment of the Aistear Curriculum in particular.

Finally, it must always be considered that the researcher's opinions, experiences and observations have led them to their chosen research topic. While this researcher believes in the importance of play for the social and emotional development of children, there are those who see play as more beneficial to the academic and cognitive development of children, and who believe that play within the learning environment should be defined to encourage the effective development of these skills and attributes.

#### *4.3 Strengths of the study*

Despite the limitations and weaknesses associated with this study, there are also many strengths. This study highlights the lack of empirical research to support the implementation of a play-based learning curriculum in an Irish context. It has also compiled a collection of respected research which supports the importance of play for the social and emotional benefit of young children, and particularly at an early intervention stage (Rubin, Coplan and Bowker, 2009). It also considers the social and emotional well-being of children, in line with the current national initiative to promote positive mental health in children (DES, 2014).

The researcher hopes that this study will encourage the researchers involved with the NCCA to format a coding sheet for the assessment of play. Assessment is a particularly important element in the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum, and in fact, an entire research paper is available to teachers on the importance of supporting early learning and development through formative assessment (Dunphy, 2008). While provisions are certainly in place to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills surrounding assessment and observation of children's play, the current study highlights the lack of specific standardised observational assessment tools available to teachers and researchers alike.

This study also recognises international research which supports the impact of play-based learning on cognitive-linguistic development, better use of number and more attentive classroom behaviours to name but a few. The researcher encourages others to provide empirical evidence for these developments as well as socio-emotional developments, in an Irish setting, and particularly in relation to the implementation of the Aistear Curriculum. However, the researcher also advises caution around attempts to validate play through academic gains. Fung and Cheng (2012) refer to problems surrounding the implementation of play-based learning in Hong Kong, where teachers are still directing, instructing, and controlling children's play and learning in the classroom environment. An over-emphasis on the need to structure children's play and to challenge and extend their academic skills through play could in fact heighten children's anxiety levels and reverse the protective benefits associated with a more child-initiated play as described by Ginsburg (2007).

#### *4.4 Conclusion*

There is currently an increasing focus on the mental health of young children and adolescents in Ireland (DES, 2014). The DES has called on schools to be a driving force in fostering and promoting a positive sense of health and well-being amongst children. The DES has mentioned Aistear as a curricular area which particularly addresses positive mental health (p.16). The Aistear Curriculum is particularly suited to the development of social interaction skills at an early intervention stage. The current study has observed some increases in more socially advanced play and decreases in non-social play behaviours as a result of the Aistear Curriculum, although these differences were not statistically significant. It is hoped that this study would be replicated using a larger sample size and an equal-sized control group in order to support these observations. This research study also highlights some important

ambiguities surrounding the integration of a play-based curriculum into the Irish primary school. It is clear that teachers need to be provided with a more defined version of a play-based curriculum and particularly with the tools necessary for effective assessment of and for learning. In order to do this, much more empirical research on play and the effective implementation of play needs to be carried out within the Irish context, and particularly in relation to the Aistear Curriculum.

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## Appendix 1

### *Parental Consent Form- School 1*

09/11/2015

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am currently completing a part-time Higher Diploma in Psychology in Dublin Business School. For my Final Year Project I am interested in looking at the effectiveness of the Aistear Curriculum for the social interactions of the children in the class by observing their play behaviours on yard. Below you will find information and a consent form for these observations. Please read this carefully and return consent forms before this Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November.

### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS**

**Research Topic:** “Evaluating the Benefits of the Aistear Curriculum on the Social Interactions of Junior Infant Children.”

**Researcher:** Louise Murphy, Student researcher. Contact: 10168293@mydbs.ie  
Dr. Patricia Orr, Supervisor. Contact: patricia.orr@dbs.ie

**Background and Purpose:** In my research I am interested in finding out about the effectiveness of the Aistear curriculum and the importance of play-based learning for the social and emotional well-being of young children.

**What happens if my child is part of observations?** I will be observing the children during lunch-breaks and coding their play behaviours as they occur. Observations will take place on two occasions. Each child will be observed twice and for four minutes each time. As the children are used to my presence on yard for yard duty, they will not be aware that I am observing them. The children will be kept anonymous throughout the observations and the entire research project.

**What will happen to the results of the study?** The information gathered will help to determine the effectiveness of the Aistear programme and will be used to highlight the importance of play-based learning for the social interactions of young children. The study's results will be published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences. However at no point will any child be identifiable.

**How will my child's information be protected?** The children will be allocated a number. This number will be used for any information relating to the study. The information which links names and numbers will be stored separately in a secure location until the research is completed. All data will be destroyed 2 years after the study.

**Voluntary Participation:** It is up to you to decide whether your child is going to take part or not. Participation is completely voluntary.

**Important: The consent form!** *There is a consent form attached to this information sheet. Every child to be included in the research must have a consent form which you have signed. Please note that research practice guidelines do not allow me to make any exceptions, and verbal permission cannot replace the signed consent form.*

**Thank you very much for supporting this research study. Please keep this information for your records**

### PARENT'S CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Evaluating the Benefits of the Aistear Curriculum on the Social Interactions of Junior Infant Children.

**Researcher:** Louise Murphy, Student researcher.  
Dr. Patricia Orr, Supervisor.

**Parents Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Child's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for Parents for the above research study and have received an explanation of the nature, purpose and duration of the study. I understand what my child's involvement will be.

I have had time to consider whether I want my child to take part in this study. Any questions have been answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my child's participation is voluntary (that I have a choice as to whether she/he participates).

I understand that the information collected may be presented and/or published in academic journals and at conferences, but that no child will be identifiable from the information.

I agree for my child to take part in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian  
(in block letters)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix 2

### *Parental Consent Form- School 2*

09/11/2015

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am a teacher and Psychology student in Dublin Business School. For my Final Year Project I am interested in looking at the social interactions of Junior Infant children by observing their play behaviours on yard. Below you will find information and a consent form for these observations. Please read this carefully and return consent forms to the class teacher before this Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November.

### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS**

**Research Topic:** “Evaluating the Benefits of the Aistear Curriculum on the Social Interactions of Junior Infant Children.”

**Researcher:** Louise Murphy, Student researcher, xxxx@xxxx  
Dr. Patricia Orr, Supervisor, xxxxx@xxxxx

**Background and Purpose:** In my research I am interested in finding out about the effectiveness of the Aistear curriculum and the importance of play-based learning for the social and emotional well-being of young children.

**What happens if my child is part of observations?** Ms. [REDACTED], a teacher in your school, will be observing the children during lunch-breaks and coding their play behaviours as they occur. Observations will take place on two occasions. Each child will be observed twice and for four minutes each time. As the children are used to [REDACTED]'s presence on yard for yard duty, they will not be aware that she is observing them. The children will be kept anonymous throughout the observations and the entire research project.

**What will happen to the results of the study?** The information gathered will help to determine the effectiveness of the Aistear programme and will be used to highlight the importance of play-based learning for the social interactions of young children. The study's results will be published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences. However at no point will any child be identifiable.

**How will my child's information be protected?** The children will be allocated a number. This number will be used for any information relating to the study. The information which links names and numbers will be stored separately in a secure location until the research is completed. All data will be destroyed 2 years after the study.

**Voluntary Participation:** It is up to you to decide whether your child is going to take part or not. Participation is completely voluntary.

**Important: The consent form!** *There is a consent form attached to this information sheet. Every child to be included in the research must have a consent form which you have signed. Please note that research practice guidelines do not allow me to make any exceptions, and verbal permission cannot replace the signed consent form.*

**Thank you very much for supporting this research study. Please keep this information for your records**

### **PARENT'S CONSENT FORM**

Title of Study: Evaluating the Benefits of the Aistear Curriculum on the Social Interactions of Junior Infant Children.

**Researcher:** Louise Murphy, Student researcher.  
Dr. Patricia Orr, Supervisor.

**Parents Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Child's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for Parents for the above research study and have received an explanation of the nature, purpose and duration of the study. I understand what my child's involvement will be.

I have had time to consider whether I want my child to take part in this study. Any questions have been answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my child's participation is voluntary (that I have a choice as to whether she/he participates).

I understand that the information collected may be presented and/or published in academic journals and at conferences, but that no child will be identifiable from the information.

I agree for my child to take part in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian  
(in block letters)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature



