

Aistear in Action



An Evaluation of the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative Programme to promote Quality Improvement in Early Years Settings through the use of the Aistear Framework

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STATEMENT ON ETHICS

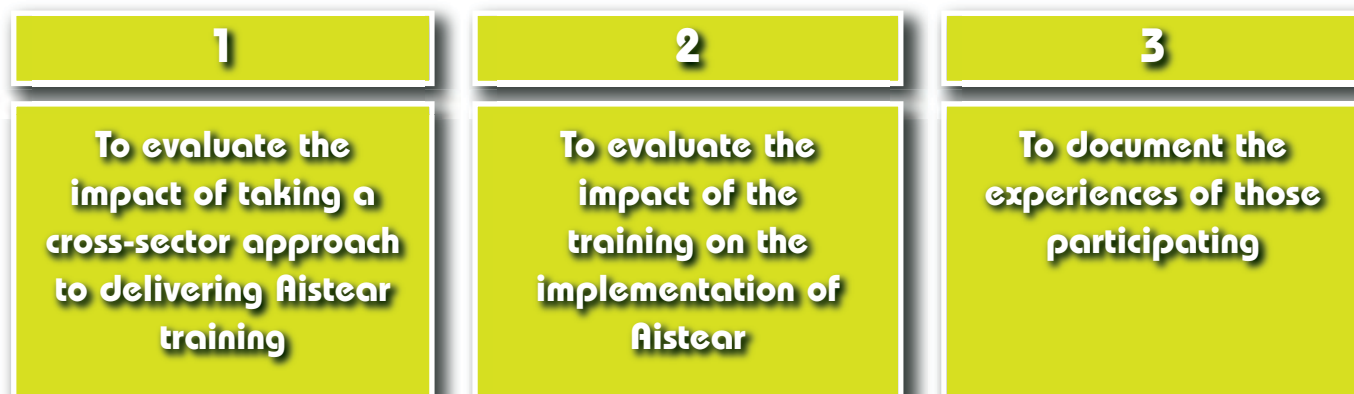
The research was conducted following the British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) and the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009). At each phase of the research ethical approval was granted by the Stranmillis University College Research and Ethics Committee.

Executive Summary

The Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative is part of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) based in the Republic of Ireland. It is a three year project funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, the Mount Street Club Trust, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs and the Early Years Education Policy Unit (Department of Education and Science) through Pobal. One strand of the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative is a professional development course, which supports early years professionals and infant teachers in the implementation of Aistear in their settings.

Aistear is grounded in young children's learning and development. It spans the early years divide, providing a curriculum framework for early years professionals and infant teachers and heralding *"a new beginning in harmonising processes across the preschool and primary school sectors"* (Moloney 2011, p.71).

The research study documented in this report was commissioned by the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative to evaluate the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. The research project, conducted by a team from Stranmillis University College, Belfast, began in December 2012 and spanned a period of six months. The intention was (through capturing the views of the principal stakeholders who are familiar with the origins and delivery of the training, along with the training participants and course facilitators) to gain an insight into the following key objectives:



The evaluation is based on a multi-method and multi-perspective approach.

The diagram below shows the variety of data collection methods explored.



The range of perspectives addressed included those of:

Early Years Professionals

Primary School Teachers

Course facilitators

Project Staff

Advisory Group Members

Using the evidence gleaned from this 'inclusionary' approach, the overarching findings can be summarised as follows:

- The key stakeholders were of the opinion that the shared aspect of the training programme was an integral feature of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training and the majority of early years professionals and infant teachers perceived this inclusive experience as principally positive. Participants identified the development of relationships across the Early Years sector and the enhanced mutual respect and recognition for one another as a success of the shared training approach. The newly-formed relationships were described as beneficial not only for adults, but also for children, due to the promotion of continuity across settings and due to the enriched teamwork in moving practice and provision forward.
- There were more mixed views voiced by both the participants and stakeholders about the impact of the training on educators' everyday practice. Most of the participants and some stakeholders reported positively on how the course had changed aspects of daily practice in terms of the room layout and play areas provided (physical environment), the use of more appropriate pedagogical strategies to ensure effective learning through play, greater engagement in reflective practice and the enhanced profile ascribed to play in their setting/classroom context in terms of more time and value. However, others considered the training to have only marginally impacted on practice, either because many of the participants were already familiar with the content addressed within the Ballyfermot Aistear Training or the incorrect issues had been targeted.
- Some stakeholders raised concerns in particular about the Primary School teaching community and the challenges they face in attempting to translate Aistear into practice. However the training seemed to impact greatly on teachers' perceptions of the importance and value of the Aistear framework for young children's learning and development.
- Overall there appeared to be a general consensus amongst the early years educators and the stakeholders that the quality of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training experience had been generally positive.

Recommendations that came to the fore throughout the study included:

- Continue to provide shared training experiences that attract both early years sectors but ensure that there are more direct opportunities for intra-sector and cross-sector mixing.
- Offer adequate challenge within the training to cater for the variety of needs and levels of understanding by providing breakout groups and greater choice on the part of the participants.
- Create opportunities to see Aistear in practice in a typical early years setting/class with typical young children, while the children are present and engaged in play.
- Sustain the interest by providing follow-up support for educators after the training sessions.
- Ensure better consistency of delivery and content between the different training programmes.
- Inject greater innovation into the training content in terms of playful examples.
- Provide opportunities for participants to have some influence on the course content.
- Reconsider the timing of the course and offer prospective participants some degree of choice.
- Ensure that further training is provided to build on some of the issues addressed within the Ballyfermot Aistear Training to target more directly issues such as documentation, observation and assessment.







Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Rationale

The Ballyfermot Language and Learning Initiative is one of the 11 National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) projects throughout the Republic of Ireland, which provide support for young children, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from birth to six years of age. NEYAI is a three year project (2011-2014) funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, the Mount Street Club Trust, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs and the Early Years Education Policy Unit (Department of Education and Science) through Pobal, a not-for-profit organisation with charitable status that manages various funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and European Union.

The particular project which is to be reported on within the content of this report, focuses on one strand of the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative, that is, a professional development course, which supports early years professionals and infant teachers in the implementation of Aistear in their settings. The project is hereafter referred to as the Ballyfermot Aistear Training.

Aistear, the early years curriculum framework in the Republic of Ireland for children aged 0-6 years, developed by NCCA in 2009, *“contains information for parents and practitioners that will help them plan for and provide challenging and enjoyable learning experiences that can enable all children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners in the context of loving relationships with one another”* (Aistear User Guide, NCCA, 2009a:4).

The focus of Aistear, therefore, is firmly grounded in young children’s learning and development and it is divided up into four inter-connected themes (see NCCA, 2009b: 13).



In addition Aistear is based on 12 key principles of early learning and development which firmly position the child at the heart of the learning experience:



In an effort to maintain these guiding principles, Aistear also provides pertinent guidance for parents and practitioners about how the adult can support children's learning across the four inter-connected themes. These guidelines for good practice focus principally on:



(NCCA, 2009c)

Aistear's unique quality in the context of Ireland is that it traverses the early years divide (Moloney 2011), providing a curriculum framework not only for parents and pre-school practitioners but also for junior and senior infant teachers in the primary school context, heralding "a new beginning in harmonising processes across the pre-school and primary school sectors" (Moloney, 2011:71). In this way it could be argued that it provides a shared language and shared understanding about how young children learn and develop, which has relevance for both sectors and in turn helps to ensure that young children experience more profitable learning opportunities and overall smoother transitions in the earliest years of their education.

1.2 Background Context

1.2.1 Play-based Learning

Like many contexts across the globe, there appears to be a renewed emphasis in the Republic of Ireland on prioritising a more play-based approach to teaching and learning across the entire early years sector, where the needs and interests of the child are clearly articulated and where young children are seen to work in partnership with caring and supportive adults (Walsh et al, 2010). Such thinking is grounded on the premise that too formal a pedagogical approach is inappropriate for young children and that young children learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; BERA SIG, 2003; Bennett, 2005; Walsh et al, 2006; Dockett et al, 2007; Wylie et al, 2009; Alexander 2009).

Play has long been valued within early years education, from the eighteenth century and the writings of Rousseau (Emile, 1762) to present day thinking (Wood and Attfield, 2005; Wood, 2007). Not only is play perceived to be a source of innate motivation and challenge for young children, providing a context for exploration and experimentation (Walsh et al. , 2006; Leavers, 2005), but also it allows young children to be themselves, respecting their rights, affording them free-choice, autonomy and discovery (Bruce, 2004; Wood et al, 2010; Pramling-Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008).

It has long been established that within play children are not learning to “fail, to seek right answers with little thought” (Aiken, 1991:33), but rather play can provide opportunities to self-regulate, solve problems, advance children’s concentration, develop their powers of communication (Bodrova and Leong, 2003; Howard, 2011), fostering competent lifelong learners (Wood, 2007).

The benefits of play are summed up in the words of the Canadian Council on Learning – CCL (2006):

Play nourishes every aspect of children’s development – it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life. Play ‘paves the way for learning’ (CCL, 2006:2).

However, against this endorsement of play in theory, is a tradition of play in practice that is highly controversial (Hunter and Walsh, 2013). A raft of research evidence has presented a picture of play in practice as highly challenging and problematic (Moyles, 2010; McInness et al, 2011; Fung and Cheng, 2012; Stephen, 2012; Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Wood, 2013), where early years practitioners appear to lack the skills and understanding of how to translate an effective play-based approach into practice. Walsh et al (2010) have highlighted the early years experience in the Republic of Ireland as no exception. Drawing on the work of Murphy (2004), Hayes (2007), Dunphy (2007) and Kernan (2007), which presents a pitiful picture of play in practice in the Irish context, Walsh et al (2010) emphasise the need for the early years workforce to engage in professional development and purposeful reflection in an effort to make meaning of the pedagogical implications involved. Hunter and Walsh (2013) support such thinking. Drawing on evidence gleaned from a Northern Ireland context, they too call for the need for early years teachers to be up-skilled so they have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the meaning of play as pedagogy in early years classes, in order to ensure that the quality of the learning experience young children receive is rich in possibilities, potential and cognitive challenge (Hunter and Walsh, 2013: 15).

The basic principles of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training are embedded in such an endeavour, providing professional development for all early years educators in the Ballyfermot region to ensure the effective delivery of Aistear- a play-based framework into practice.

1.2.2 CPD and "Shared Training"

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for those who work with young children encompasses a wide range of training approaches and levels from basic competency to postgraduate level since, as Karstadt, Lilley and Miller (2003:41) point out, staff are at **"various points along a continuum of professionalism"** according to age, stage in their career and their previous qualification and training experience. Kennedy (2005) identifies nine possible models of CPD: training, award-bearing, deficit, cascade, standards-based, coaching and mentoring, community of practice, action research and transformational. Joyce and Showers (2002) argue that difficulties in transferring new CPD learning to the workplace setting often arise because collaborative models such as peer coaching and mentoring are neglected both before and after formal CPD events. It is now widely recognised that professional learning is best achieved within a supportive learning community or **'community of practice'** in which the reflective professional can develop and learn (Claxton, 2002; Whalley, 2008; O'Connell and Dymont, 2011). However, Moloney's (2010) study of the perceptions of preschool and infant teachers in Ireland regarding early years professional identity concluded that teachers in the statutory school sector possessed a sense of professional identity, whereas those in preschool 'care' settings tended to lack this sense of belonging to a recognised community of practice. It is clear that the aspiration of the Irish government's Workforce Development Plan (DES 2010) is that a closer relationship might develop between the voluntary and statutory sectors so that all parties in the early childhood care and education sector will work more collaboratively for children:

Engage in interdisciplinary professional work practices designed to support the delivery of consistent quality in the early childhood service provision experiences of young children and their families (DES 2010:2).

Furthermore, the Development Plan adopts the four strategic objectives of the European Council Conclusions ('ET 2020'), including the aim to make lifelong learning a reality by **"the establishment of more flexible learning pathways – including better transitions between the various education and training sectors..."** (DES 2010:4). The underlying philosophy of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training has been to deliver **'shared training'** in order to nurture relationships and to deepen empathy between participants from different sectors of the workforce. Shared training within the Early Years sector is quite a novel concept, the long-term aim being to **"contribute to the emergence of a strong early years community of practice in the Republic of Ireland in the future"** (McMillan et al 2012).



1.3 Aistear Training Programme

The Aistear training comprised of a six week shared training programme (2 hours per session) for early years professionals and infant teachers. The training course was co-facilitated by two pairs of tutors, each pair comprising a primary teacher who has pioneered Aistear in the classroom, and the other an Early Years training specialist, primarily from Early Childhood Ireland. The training was delivered locally in Ballyfermot, in a school or setting of one of the participants. The topics covered over the six sessions included the following:



See Appendix 1 for further information on the Aistear training sessions.

1.4 Focus of the Research Study

The Ballyfermot/Chapelizod Partnership, the lead agency of the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative, commissioned a small scale research study which began in December 2012 and spanned a period of six months. The overarching purpose of this evaluation, undertaken by Stranmillis University College, Belfast, as identified in the invitation to tender, was:

“To evaluate the Aistear training programme, provided by the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative”

In an effort to meet this aim the following key objectives were addressed:

- To evaluate the impact of taking a cross-sector approach to delivering Aistear training to early years and primary educators, both from a stakeholder perspective and in relation to the impact of the cross-sector approach on implementation in the settings;
- To evaluate the impact of the training on the implementation of Aistear in the education settings; and
- To document the experiences of those participating.

These key issues formed the principal research objectives for the study in question.

1.5 Methodology

Based on the premise that *“purpose is the driving force behind decision-making about research methodology”* (Nastai, 2010: 307), an eclectic approach was undertaken, whereby a range of different methods were employed in an effort to shed some light on each of the established areas of scrutiny. The overarching aim and objectives for the study demanded not only qualitatively rich and illuminative data in the form of focus group discussions, telephone interviews and reflective diaries but also a degree of quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire survey. In this way the study gathered an inclusive set of *‘meta inferences’*, drawn from the separate analyses of the multiple research methods, all unravelled through the researchers’ interpretive lens.

1.5.1 Data Collection Methods

To address the above issues four key methods of research enquiry were conducted:

Focus Group Discussions

a) *With teachers and Early Years (EY) professionals who have completed the training*

To begin this inclusionary approach and in an effort to gather rich and valid data about the impact of taking a cross-sector approach to delivering Aistear training and its impact on the implementation of Aistear in education settings, a series of focus group discussions were undertaken with a sample of teachers from infant and senior infant classes and early years professionals who had already completed the training programme. It was decided that each sector would be interviewed separately to ensure that all voices were appropriately heard and the groups comprised no more than 6-8 participants on each occasion. The structure of the focus group interviews was as follows:

- Four focus group discussions with infant and senior infant practising teachers and early years professionals (representative of Early Starts, pre-schools and early years settings) who had already received the training. The focus group discussions were divided by sector i.e. two focus groups were conducted with infant teachers and two with early years professionals.

Topics for discussion included:

- Reasons for involvement in the training programme;
- The process of a cross-sector training approach in terms of its advantages and disadvantages;
- The usefulness and relevance of the content of the training programme for participants' everyday practice;
- Participants' knowledge and understanding of the impact on practice associated with this training programme e.g. children, parents, pedagogy, physical environment;
- A personal reflection on what, if anything, they gained from participating in the training programme and whether their attitudes towards cross-sector training and aspects of Aistear have changed in any way;
- Any recommendations for future practice in terms of content, process, outcome and relevance for schools, daycares/sessional preschools/playgroups in general.

b) *With teachers and EY professionals pre and post training*

- Separate sector focus group discussions with infant and senior infant teachers and early years professionals were also conducted before the training (n=4) and after the training (n=4) (with a focus on March/April 2013 cohorts) in an attempt to capture whether educators' views, knowledge and understanding had changed over the course of the training programme. Topics for discussion resembled those for focus groups 'a' as detailed in the focus group schedule provided in Appendix 2.

Structured Telephone Interviews

Eight individual telephone interviews were conducted with the course facilitators and representatives from the Ballyfermot Language and Learning Initiative Consortium (Advisory Group Members and Project Staff) to provide detail on the origins and philosophy of this Early Years initiative.

Topics for discussion for the telephone interviews explored the views of the participants on the nature and effectiveness of the training programme. The interview questions focused on:

- The cross-sector approach as a training process i.e. its origins and their views and perceptions about its benefits and the challenges it presents for the early years workforce
- The origins and purpose of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training in general;
- The content of the training programme and its relevance and usefulness for early years practice;
- Their knowledge and understanding of whether the Ballyfermot Aistear Training has impacted on the implementation of Aistear in practice and if so how and why;
- Any recommendations for future practice in terms of content, process, outcome and relevance for

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in general. (See Appendix 3 for interview schedule).

For the purpose of analyses, all focus group/interview sessions were recorded via note taking and digital recording, appropriately transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach.

Reflective Practice Diaries

In an effort to shed further light on the key objectives of the study (i.e. the cross-sector approach of the training and the impact of the training programme on practice) and in addition to documenting the experiences of those participating, a sample of teachers and early years professionals completed reflective practice diary entries after each training input. The purpose of these diaries was to encourage the teachers and early years professionals to reflect upon each input of the training programme and to comment upon the following:

- How useful/relevant each session has been;
- Specific areas of knowledge gained from each session;
- Any challenges presented during each session and how they might attempt to overcome these;
- The impact of each session on their own pedagogy and practice.
(See Appendix 4 for an exemplar of the RPD).

The Reflective Practice Diaries were also subjected to thematic analyses.

Questionnaire Survey

To complete the research study a questionnaire survey was sent to all participants of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. The questionnaire was drawn up by members of the research team, and sent by post to over 200 trainees following their training period. Fifty-two responses were received. A copy of the blank questionnaire can be found in Appendix 5. The findings gleaned from the questionnaire were inputted into Excel and subjected to descriptive and inferential analysis.

1.6 Structure of the Report

The report containing the findings of the study in question is structured in five key chapters. Following the outline of the study in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 details the findings stemming from the telephone interviews conducted with the key stakeholders, namely members from the Advisory Board and Project Staff. Chapter 3 reports on the early years professionals' and teachers' views and perceptions on the Ballyfermot Aistear Training and its impact on their practice, whilst Chapter 4 presents the findings gleaned from the focus groups conducted with a sample of educators from both sectors before and after the Ballyfermot Aistear Training to extrapolate further their views and perceptions of the quality of the shared training programme on Aistear and its impact on practice. The report concludes in Chapter 5 with the identification of principal conclusions and key recommendations for the Ballyfermot Aistear Training, based on the overall findings of the research project.





Chapter 2

Structured Telephone Interviews

2.0 Structured Telephone Interviews

This chapter reports the findings from a series of structured telephone interviews conducted with key stakeholders involved in the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. The sample was selected in consultation with the project co-ordinator and represented the key stakeholder groups involved in the project: course facilitators, Learning Initiative Consortium members, members of the advisory group and project partners. A member of the research team contacted the selected stakeholders by email with details of the project evaluation process and a copy of the interview question schedule (see Appendix 3). Following this, suitable dates and times were agreed for the interviews. All eight key stakeholders agreed to participate and each interview lasted for approximately 30 - 40 minutes. The researcher took notes during the telephone conversations and each interview was later transcribed for analysis. Examples from the transcripts are included throughout this chapter in order to illustrate the key themes that emerged. Stakeholder interviewee roles in the Ballyfermot Aistear Training are indicated in the table below and throughout this section of the report each interviewee is referred to by the alias provided in the table.

Table 1: Telephone Interviewees by role

Interviewee Alias	Role in Ballyfermot Aistear Training
1	Advisory group member
2	Course facilitator
3	Course facilitator
4	Course facilitator
5	Course co-ordinator
6	Advisory group member
7	Project co-ordinator
8	Project partner

Each theme will be considered below:

Findings are grouped under four key themes

The origins and aims of the project

The appropriateness of the training content

The impact of the training on practice

Implications for future training

2.1 Origins and Aims of the Project

Some stakeholders were familiar with the origins of the initiative, whereas others had joined the Ballyfermot Aistear Training during its implementation and were largely unaware of its history and development. One interviewee explained the process by which “the pressing needs for children aged 0-6 years” (5) in the Ballyfermot area had been identified and prioritised, resulting in the funding and delivery of two projects, one of which related to the implementation of Aistear in local early years settings.

The aims of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training, as described by the interviewees, were multiple and these can be categorised into three main areas:

- 1 Transition:** improvement in this process from preschool to school;
- 2 Collaboration:** increase in mutual respect, dialogue and understanding of the local early years workforce; and
- 3 Curriculum:** awareness raising and implementation support for Aistear.

It would appear from the interviewees’ descriptions of the development of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training that the three categories stated above may also be in priority order. One interviewee, who was involved from the project’s inception, provided a list of aims and concluded:

“At the heart of all this is the child: transitions needed to be better supported.” (1)

There was a high level of consensus around the second aim of the project in regard to bringing together early years practitioners from the two sectors:

“I was keen for Aistear to be rolled out inclusively in our area.” (1)

“Better understanding between the two different sectors with the overarching aim to improve relationships between them...” (6)

“The collaborative aspect of the training is one of the main reasons to be there.” (7)

The transcripts reveal a general perception of an existing lack of collaboration between the two sectors involved in early years provision in the Ballyfermot area:

“I found the EY services and primary schools did not communicate at all.” (5)

“Previous perceptions were ‘You do nothing but play’ and ‘You do nothing but sit at desks’.” (1)

“It is challenging to bring together two groups of people not normally working together.” (4)

Those interviewed unanimously regarded this issue as a high priority of the project and clearly saw the collaboration process as the means of achieving the primary aim – to improve transitions for children. Raising awareness of Aistear and supporting practitioners in its implementation was seen by some as the tertiary aim of the project:

“The aim was the collaborative process with Aistear as the vehicle.” (8)

“Through Aistear to increase respect and understanding between preschool and primary school teachers.” (3)

Key words used by interviewees in relation to Ballyfermot Aistear Training aims

improve Aistear understanding
awareness appreciate quality
relationships disseminate respect
communicate dialogue channels
collaborate commonality transitions
open perceptions

2.2 Appropriateness of the Training Content

Interviewees were mainly positive about the content of the training course, though some acknowledged their lack of detailed knowledge of this aspect of the project. Responses included:

"We brought together the best to design the content." (5)

"The content is very comprehensive." (6)

Another interviewee explained the appropriateness of the content in terms of current government policy:

"The rolling out of Aistear makes it very timely... infant teachers are interested in play and Aistear at this stage." (3)

However, some stakeholders expressed concern that the content was not equally relevant to practitioners from both sectors:

"A lot of early years practitioners say 'We do this anyway'... It is brand new for primary school teachers." (2)

"Sometimes the early years practitioners already know it and are not as new to it as teachers." (7)

"My concern is that primary school teachers are not getting enough from this course to implement Aistear in the classroom." (3)

One stakeholder articulated the dilemma of how to respond to participant evaluations when these reflect opposing views:

"Participants do not always see the big picture: one says 'I loved the play dough'; another says 'Why are we doing play dough? I did it before!'" (1)

Another specific content example relates to the area of planning, where an interviewee explained the problematic nature of seeking to meet all participants' needs in a 'shared training' context:

"Some participants want more emphasis on paperwork and planning. Groups would need to be separated for this as the requirements from inspectors are different." (2)

The view was expressed that the content of the original training had been improved after the initial phase and that this resulted in an "experiential, adult-focused approach" (8) in which "reflection in action is important all the time". (4) The same participant added:

"Changes were made during the programme – it was incremental as we consulted the group and each other." (4)

From a less positive perspective, two interviewees reflected that the six-week training course was too short to include a significant amount of content. Others expressed problems in relation to issues such as: the timing of sessions in order to try to suit practitioners from both sectors; inclusion of teachers who teach senior classes and are not implementing Aistear in their classroom practice; difficulty in encouraging participants to complete evaluation diaries after sessions; widely varying literacy levels and different levels of interest within the group.

Key words used by interviewees in relation to appropriateness of the training content

learning process children new
needs creativity relevant experiential
appropriate play balancing
interactive active innovative
problem interesting teething

2.3 Impact of the Training on Practice

When asked to comment on their perceptions of the impact of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training on practitioner practice, several respondents cited changes made by course graduates to their setting's physical environment:

"They had made a sand box, home corner, shop/doctor's surgery." (7)

"The layout of settings was changed; more resources were available at child level." (4)

The latter interviewee also spoke of the training having an impact in terms of changes to teaching methods:

"The school is in a disadvantaged area and children... are often reluctant to write: the teacher was inspired by the training to get children to write about their play experiences ..." (4)

Some stakeholders commented on the impact in terms of practitioners being equipped to reflect on theory and use it to evaluate their own practice:

"Some say they thought they were already doing it but find they were not and make changes." (3)

"Play is now seen as a context for learning (a new idea for many primary school teachers)." (4)

However, some respondents were concerned about the challenges faced by course graduates who were *"struggling to make changes, especially teachers."* (8) This interviewee spoke of how much teachers have to *"give up in terms of their traditional practice"* and expressed the view that *Aistear is still widely regarded as "an add-on – it is not yet seen as integral but presented gingerly as a play hour."* Another stakeholder described the question of impact on practice as 'tricky', describing teachers' worries about the health and safety issues associated with freedom of play and experiential learning. This interviewee, whilst recognising that the training was not designed for teachers of senior classes, remained positive about the potential impact on aspects of their practice:

"Senior class teachers are seeing the benefits for special educational needs (SEN) children e.g. junk art and play dough. Teachers give children more leeway, more freedom of choice." (2)

Besides having an impact on the practice and ideology of individual early years practitioners, the Ballyfermot Aistear Training aimed to affect relationships and perceptions between the two sectors. Interview data indicate that this aim was achieved to some degree:

"There is now more dialogue between practitioners in preschool and primary school." (1)

"We are all more aware of each other's job... Transition is a little less formal because of it." (2)

"One principal said both sides now look at each other with respect." (3)

Key words used by interviewees in relation to the impact of Ballyfermot Aistear Training on practice

layouts play choice methods
context changes inspiring
struggling principles traditional
learning beneficial implemented
fantastic freedom insights practice
independence resources room

2.4 Implications for Future Training

All telephone conversations with the key stakeholders included an element of reflection on the lessons learned from the Ballyfermot Aistear Training and all participants expressed positive aspirations for the future, whilst at times tempering these with less positive realities such as economic constraints or uncertainty relating to the future of Aistear. Several interviewees expressed their vision for future training, linked to what has been implemented through the current project:

"There could be more work done on consolidation – site visits and ongoing support in implementing learning from the programme." (5)

"Maybe some transition workshops – building on what has been set in motion." (7)

"A refresher course would be great – to talk about the problems they have met and how they have fixed them." (2)

"The model is very good. It should be developed – 12 weeks at least with time to build on the learning." (8)

One participant reminded the researcher of the meaning of 'Aistear' – 'journey' – and spoke of the need to continue that journey in terms of providing more training specific to primary school teachers. Others supported this view that separate training might better meet the needs of practitioners from the two sectors, particularly in practical areas such as written planning, where documentary requirements currently differ between the sectors. Conversely, other stakeholders were strongly opposed to separate training and maintained that 'shared training' should be continued:

"I believe very strongly in the process – breaking down barriers." (8)

"It is imperative that there are closer configurations between early years practitioners and teachers. Concern is not with the content of the training but to build established relationships." (6)

"We would all like to do more for teachers but we have to do this as a whole group." (4)

Other implications for future training suggested by the interviewees related to practicalities such as finding methods of reducing attrition rates after training has been put in place and the possibility of producing a Ballyfermot universal information leaflet to *"keep the doors open between preschool and school settings."*(2)

Key words used by interviewees in relation to implications for future training

obstacles problem clips solving
play Aistear build video
course relationships consolidation
autonomy modular refresher journals
relevant journey established



Chapter 3

Participants Questionnaires and Reflective Practice Diaries

3.0 Participant Questionnaires and Reflective Practice Diaries

This chapter reports the findings from a questionnaire that was sent to all participants of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. The questionnaire was drawn up by members of the research team, and sent by post to over 200 trainees following their training period. Fifty-two responses were received. A copy of the blank questionnaire can be found in Appendix 5. In conjunction with the final questionnaire, two sets of participants were selected to complete weekly reflective practice diaries (RPD) throughout their training period. Trainee Group 1 had their training programme held on Mondays and Group 2 on Tuesdays. Both groups comprised teachers and early years professionals. The research assistant attended both the first and the final training sessions to give each participant six copies of the RPD, and to collect the completed versions. Participants were asked to keep RPDs in their possession throughout the training programme so as to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in their responses. Forty-four completed RPDs were collected from Group 1, and forty-five from Group 2. These weekly diaries allowed participants to reflect on individual training sessions and evaluate how they could translate the training into their professional practice. A copy of the RPD template can be found in Appendix 4.

The research assistant collated the returned questionnaires, and RPDs, and processed the data. The data are presented in line with the structure of the questionnaire, with quotations from the RPDs to illustrate more fully the questionnaire responses.

The questions are divided into the following three sections:

**General
Demographic
Information**

**The Training
Programme**

**New Practice and
Knowledge**

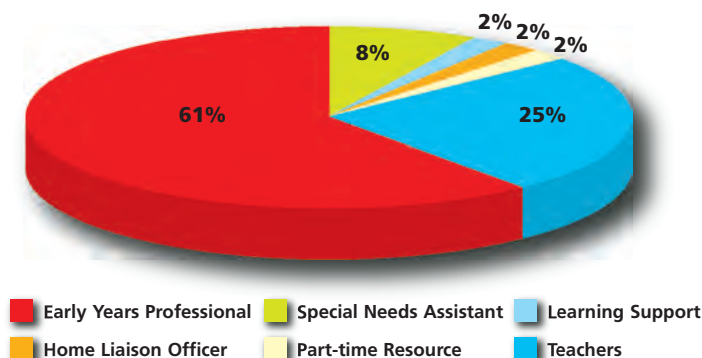


3.1 General Demographic Information

Fifty-two responses to the final questionnaire were received. All respondents were female.

Figure 1 visually represents the respondents in terms of their job description:

Figure 1: Respondents' Job Titles



As can be seen in Figure 1, 61% of respondents were early years professionals, working in preschool settings. The remaining 39% worked in primary schools as teachers, special needs assistants, learning and part-time support, and home school liaison teachers. In relation to their number of years' experience, Figure 2 indicates the percentages of participants within each range.

Figure 2: Years of Experience

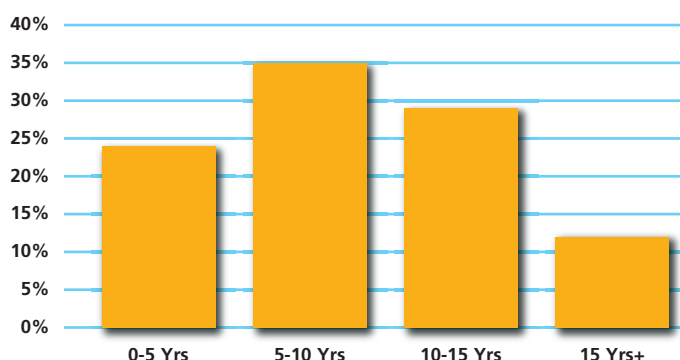
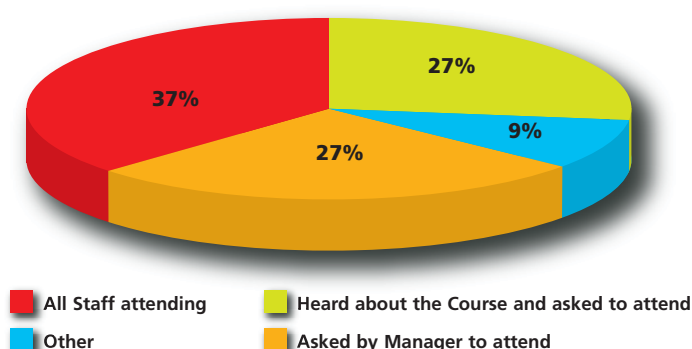


Figure 2 indicates that the majority of participants had between five and ten years' experience in their career prior to the training.

Figure 3: Reasons for Attendance



In addition to general demographic information, the questionnaire also sought information on participants' reasons for participating in the training.

Three options were offered in the questionnaire and, as can be seen from Figure 3, all three options were relevant:

Other reasons for attending the course, as stated by participants, included:

"I needed to learn more about Aistear as parents were asking about it" (Home School Liaison Coordinator)

"As I trained in Aistear in College I wanted to refresh my knowledge" (Teacher)

"Continuing professional development" (Teacher)

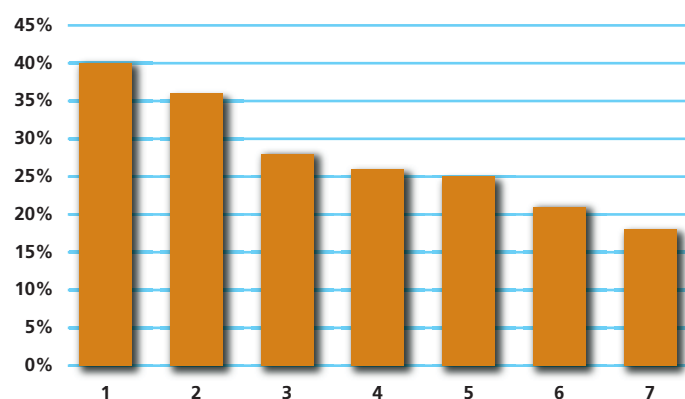
"I received a call from NEYAI" (Early Years Professional)

"Childcare settings were asked to attend in conjunction with Ballyfermot Partnership/ NEYAI project" (Early Years Professional)

3.2 The Training Programme

The questionnaire provided participants with a list of factors relevant to the training programme and, in the first of two questions relevant to this list, respondents were invited to tick the factors that they liked about the training programme. Respondents could tick as many factors as they deemed appropriate. Figure 4 shows the overall number of ticks that each statement received:

Figure 4: Popular Aspects of the Training



In order of popularity the statements read as follows:

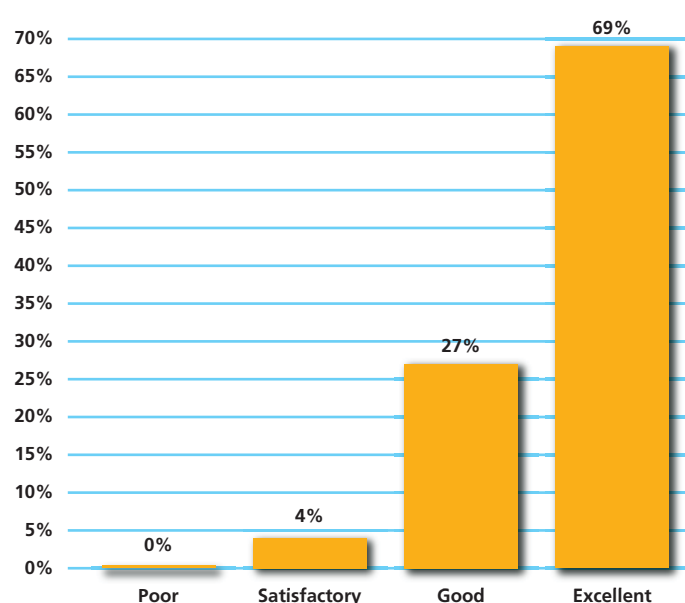
- 1 Location of training sessions
- 2 Training alongside staff from other types of settings
- 3 Expertise of tutors
- 4 Aistear framework
- 5 Topics included in training
- 6 Training methods
- 7 Time of training sessions

A second question was presented in relation to this list of factors, as participants were asked to rate each statement as 'poor', 'satisfactory', 'good', or 'excellent'. Each statement will now be displayed visually in relation to the number of responses in each category. Quotations will also be used to support statements. These will be taken from the RPDs, and from any notes on questionnaires:

3.2.1 Location of Training

Participants generally viewed the location of the training as a positive aspect of the training programme:

Figure 5: Rating the Location of the Training



Sixty-nine percent of respondents described the location as excellent:

"Very local" (Early Years Professional)

"Location was great" (Early Years Professional)

"In my local area" (Early Years Professional)

"As it was on in the premises where I work" (Early Years Professional)

"It was in where I worked which suited me perfect" (Early Years Professional)

"At my place of work was convenient" (Early Years Professional)

"On site training best" (Early Years Professional)

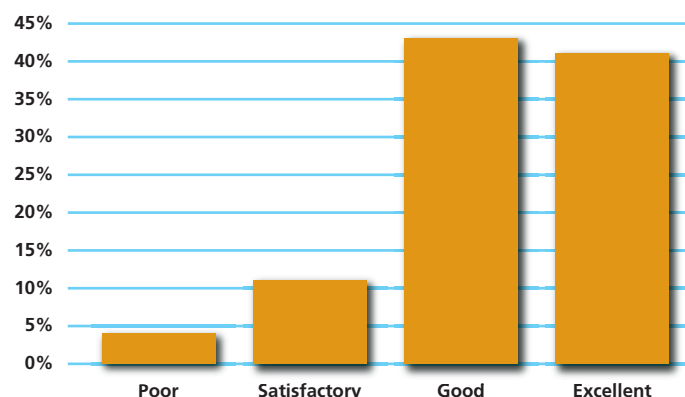
Some participants, however, did make suggestions in relation to the location being one where the Aistear ethos was more visual:

"A setting with more of a visual Aistear feel would be better." (Early Years Professional)

3.2.2 Training alongside Staff from other types of settings

The Ballyfermot Aistear Training focused on teachers and early years professionals being trained together. Qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the questionnaire provided a generally positive picture. Figure 6 indicates the range of ratings for the cross-sector approach taken in this training programme:

Figure 6: Rating the Cross-Sector Approach



A large majority of respondents rated training with staff members from other settings as either good or excellent. Supporting statements in relation to this include:

"The early learning group practitioners had very good advice for everyone."
(Part-time Resource)

"It was good to see others' perspectives on their learning and other rooms."
(Early Years Professional)

"Going to the other schools to see how their classrooms and play areas were organised was very helpful."
(Teacher)

"It was interesting to get others' points of view."
(Early Years Professional)

"I found it very interesting to learn how similar a preschool setting and a junior infant class are. I thought junior infants was much more formal and structured."
(Early Years Professional)

"It was great hearing other ways of using Aistear."
(Early Years Professional)

Despite the positives of sharing ideas and perspectives, and for learning more about each other's settings, respondents also provided qualitative data in which they highlighted a number of concerns in relation to cross-sector training.

Course Content

"As the group was mainly pre-school, I felt the course material was more directed towards them - not enough time given to explaining how this fits into primary school day and still get other required curriculum covered."
(Teacher)

"Didn't find it beneficial – was more beneficial hearing from other teachers about fitting the curriculum into Aistear."
(Teacher)

"I feel this course was very beneficial for teachers."
(Early Years Professional)

"Crèche and classroom very different."
(Teacher)

Social Interactions

"Teachers and early years practitioners did not mix at all."

(Early Years Professional)

"There was very little communication between the two groups even though we preschool practitioners tried to engage in conversation."

(Early Years Professional)

"All teaching staff were from the same setting so as a group we didn't get a huge idea of different approaches. A large group from one particular setting can be intimidating for others."

(Early Years Professional)

"I saw the training as a way to build relationships with teachers from this area. This did not happen."

(Early Years Professional)

Attitudes

"Even though I enjoyed the training with primary school teachers I felt it was very much an 'us and them' situation."

(Early Years Professional)

"I felt we were treated separately from the primary school teachers. I felt we were slightly undervalued and teachers are more important."

(Early Years Professional)

"We are a Level 4 Siolta accredited Early Years centre who follow the High Scope curriculum and Aistear framework, but we were made to feel less important than the primary school teachers."

(Early Years Professional)

Overall, the comments made did not appear to align with the assigned ratings. Respondents seemed to recognise the difficulties with such training, however, and suggested ways to reduce these:

"I feel it's a difficult mix- teachers and childcare workers- natural bias could be addressed in one of the introductory sessions."

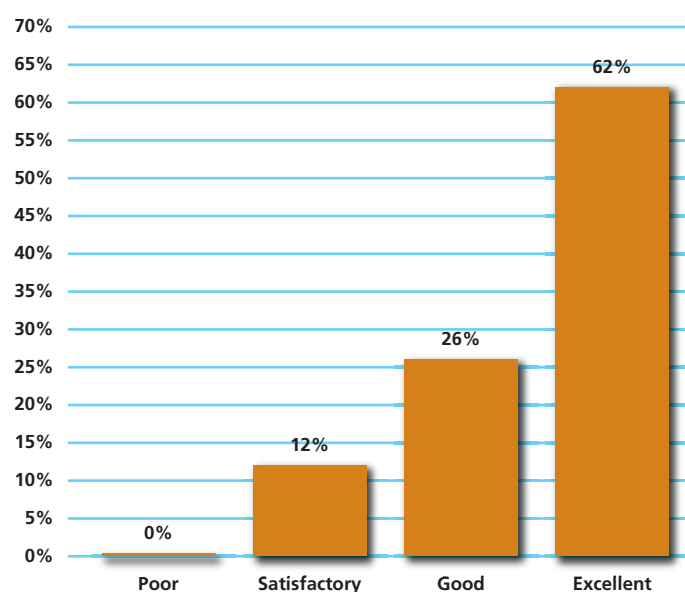
(Early Years Professional)



3.2.3 Expertise of Tutors

Respondents were very positive about the expertise of the tutors (Figure 7):

Figure 7: Rating the Expertise of Tutors



Respondents appreciated the tutors and 88% rated them as either good or excellent.

Supporting statements include:

"Found X excellent" (Teacher)

"Tutors were very good" (Teacher)

"Personable and knowledgeable" (Early Years Professional)

"The tutors' experience and knowledge was great." (Early Years Professional)

"They had lots of practical experience." (Early Years Professional)

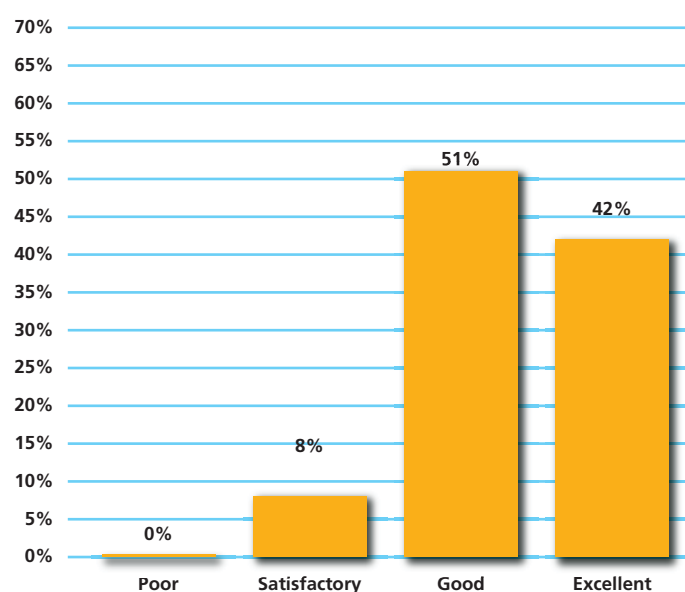
"Tutor was well prepared." (Teacher)

"Tutors were very experienced and can relate to all areas." (Early Years Professional)

3.2.4 Aistear Framework

The Aistear framework was held in high esteem by respondents (Figure 8):

Figure 8: Rating the Aistear Framework



Ninety-three percent of respondents described the Aistear framework as either excellent or good. Supporting statements include:

"It was very interesting to see how the children learned through play and how beneficial it was for them." (Teacher)

"Before I wouldn't have realised how much work went into play- know now it's much more constructed." (Special Needs Assistant)

"I see the importance [play] has in child's learning." (Early Years Professional)

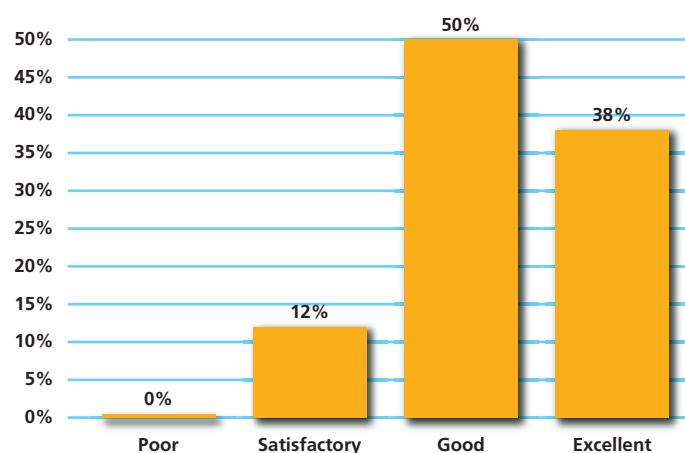
"Since the training we have discussed Aistear and know it is a very beneficial tool." (Early Years Professional)

"I think Aistear is an excellent idea but still think it might be difficult to implement fully while keeping up with the demands of the curriculum." (Teacher)

3.2.5 Topics included in Training

In total 88% of respondents described the topics covered in the training as either good or excellent (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Rating the Topics covered



Positive aspects mentioned by participants about the topics covered included the content covering both age groups, and the opportunity to visit an Aistear setting:

"Covered both childcare and school age."
(Early Years Professional)

"I enjoyed visiting another school to see the layout."
(Teacher)

"Seeing another classroom was an excellent opportunity- it's always good to visit other settings."
(Early Years Professional)

Despite the positive ratings, however, participants had suggestions to make regarding the setup and content of the training sessions. Some felt that the structure could have been changed:

"Too long spent at meet and greet."
(Early Years Professional)

Others felt that more innovative ideas were needed for those already practising Aistear in their classroom, that more could have been done on the Aistear framework itself, and that more time needed to be spent on documenting Aistear in the setting:

"Slightly bored because we practise using the Aistear curriculum." (Early Years Professional)

"Could have done more on Aistear principles, as well as hands-on." (Early Years Professional)

"Would have liked more information around documentation." (Early Years Professional)

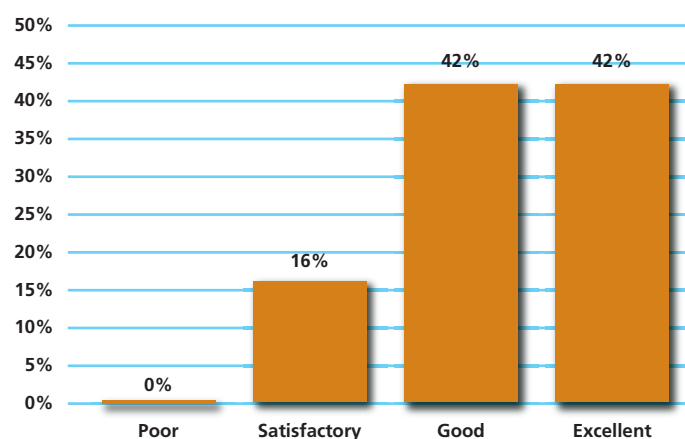
"On a personal level I feel I'm ready for more but as an introduction it was well done."
(Early Years Professional)

"I would love to do another course as I don't feel I've learned from the last one." (Teacher)

3.2.6 Training Methods

Overall, respondents were positive about the training methods, with 84% rating these as either good or excellent

Figure 10: Rating the Training Methods



Comments to support these ratings include:

"Video slide- great equipment"
(Early Years Professional)

"Activities were linked to Aistear."
(Early Years Professional)

"Very interactive." (Early Years Professional)

"We all got involved in the practical side of the course." (Early Years Professional)

"Videos are good." (Teacher)

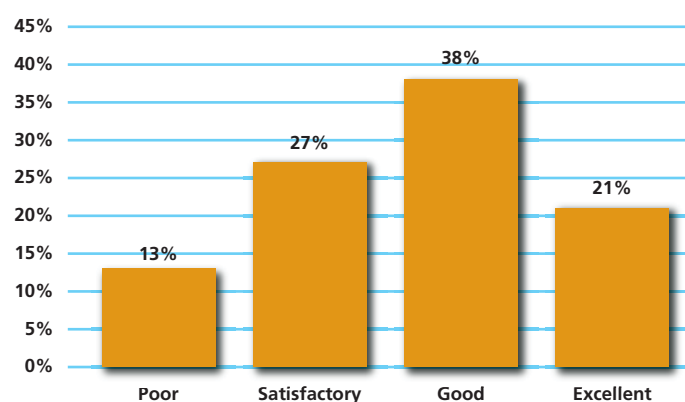
A suggestion for future training sessions, however, was made in relation to the mixing of teachers and early years professionals:

"Good use of group work, slides, practical learning- could have mixed teachers and childcare staff more. Teachers from other settings may have added more also." (Early Years Professional)

3.2.7 Time of Training Sessions

The time at which training sessions were held received mixed reviews from the participants with the majority describing it as 'good', but with 27% describing it as 'satisfactory' and 21% as 'excellent'

Figure 11: Rating the time of Training Sessions



Positive comments about the time of training sessions included a focus on convenience regarding time and location:

"Having training straight after school was helpful- not having to go home and back again" (Part-time Resource)

"It was in work hours and didn't take up personal time." (Early Years Professional)

"It ran an hour over our regular working day but I felt it was a good compromise overall."

(Early Years Professional)

However, respondents commented frequently on how the training could also be tiring straight after their usual work day, and how it could be an inconvenience regarding family life:

"Two hours after a school day was very tiring." (Teacher)

"Training after work was a bit much because of family commitments." (Early Years Professional)

"Felt tired going straight from work." (Early Years Professional)

"Was a little inconvenient as we had to leave work half an hour early." (Early Years Professional)

"After-work hours very inconvenient - had to organise alternative childcare." (Early Years Professional)

The length of training sessions was also discussed with participants commenting on both sides of the argument:

"I think the 2 hour slots were sometimes not enough." (Early Years Professional)

"Sessions were too long so lost focus." (Early Years Professional)

One final discussion about the timing of training sessions was in relation to the duration of the entire programme. Some participants felt that it could have been completed in a shorter time frame, or perhaps in a more intensive period:

"Could have completed course in shorter time frame." (Teacher)

"Could be less weeks." (Teacher)

"I feel a two day session spread out would be better." (Early Years Professional)

"It would have been better had it been during school hours and also it was a bit dragged out." (Teacher)

3.2.8 Overview

Overall, participants were generally positive about most of the aspects described above. However, suggestions were made specifically in relation to the location of the training and the timing of the training programme. Suggestions were also made in relation to the topics that were covered, the training methods and, finally, to the training alongside staff members from other settings.

3.3 New Practice and Knowledge

The final section of the questionnaire focused on new practice and knowledge. Participants were asked about any new practice they have developed since the training programme, and about new knowledge they have gained as a result of the cross-sector training.

3.3.2 New Practice

Respondents to the questionnaire identified new practice in relation to the following areas:

Children taking control in the classroom

- Children become peacemakers
- Children take the lead
- More child freedom
- Listening to children more

More ideas for play

- Using themes
- Using big books
- Changing the room layout
- Relating the play to home

Enhanced profile of play

- More time for play
- Adult more involved in role in play
- More assessment in play
- 'Mo Aistear' portfolio books
- More time in structuring play
- Less formal structure of play
- More pencil and paper to play

3.3.3 New Knowledge

Participants were questioned about any new knowledge of other settings that they had gained through their involvement in the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. Responses included:

General responses in relation to management of other settings and the types of practice in these

- Interesting to see how they were run
- How much is done in preschool
- There's some serious education going on in preschool
- Formality of assessment in preschool

Similarities between settings

- We all have the same goals to help children develop
- How similar preschool and junior infants are

No learning

- To be honest I expected more. In our centre we were doing more than the course was about
- I found it didn't actually help with implementing it into our setting.

Tips on implementing Aistear

- No money is needed to implement Aistear
- Implementation techniques in other settings
- Room layout and how to use the space you have
- Using work stations or play stations
- Lots of ideas for play and for transition
- Share perspectives

New knowledge about play

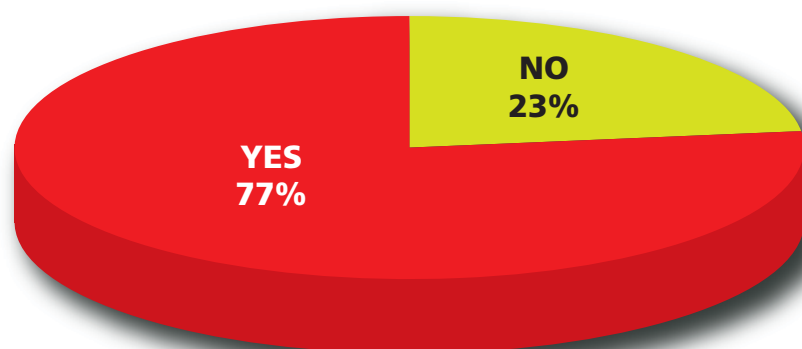
- Play fully engages a child and allows them to learn
- For teachers it was a revelation that children learn through play

3.4 Value of Training

Overall participants offered mixed reviews about the training. In rating the various aspects they identified most aspects as positive, but also suggested areas for improvements. In relation to new practice and knowledge gained, participants identified a number of areas in which they developed, including their perceptions of play, their practices regarding play and their knowledge of what is done in preschool and in the primary school.

When asked if the course met their expectations a majority said 'yes' (Figure 12):

Figure 12: Were your expectations met?



Supporting statements to back this up are as follows:

"Overall enjoyed course immensely" (Job title not given)

"Thoroughly enjoyed the course- brought it back to basics which is needed for everyone no matter how long you are in childcare." (Early Years Professional)

"Yes it gave me a more in-depth approach to Aistear in my setting focussing more on the richness of play." (Early Years Professional)

"Yes it made me look at my setting and how we could change things for the better." (Early Years Professional)

"We already introduced Aistear but it was good reassurance that we were doing the right thing." (Early Years Professional)

"Yes I learned a lot about other services, it was good to network and liaise with primary school teachers. However, I would have liked to learn more about documenting the Aistear curriculum." (Early Years Professional)

"The course exceeded my expectations. I found it a lot more interesting than I thought I would." (Early Years Professional)

In contrast, however, some respondents claimed that their expectations were not met:

"I didn't learn anything from this training or from visit to Aistear classroom in school." (Early Years Professional)

"I would like more training as I don't feel I got enough out of it. I think a full day or two half days may have been more beneficial." (Early Years Professional)

"No because I thought we would be shown how to document and write reports. I also thought we'd be shown how to implement it." (Early Years Professional)

"A lot of what we done, we were aware of from college." (Early Years Professional)

"No to be honest I expected more. In our centre we were doing more than the course was about." (Early Years Professional)

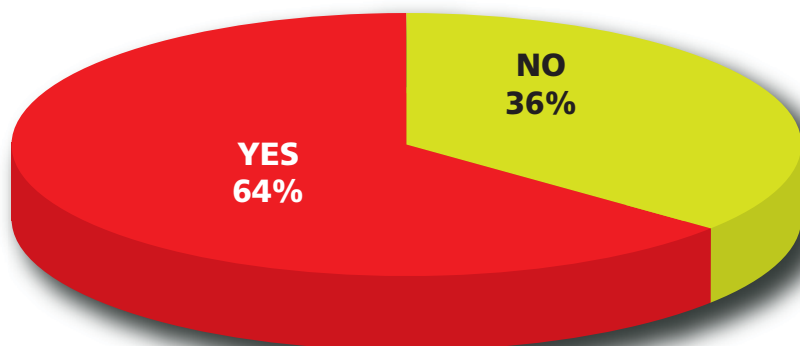
"It would have been more beneficial if it was entirely focused on primary school setting." (Teacher)

"No, I didn't feel I understood it at the end." (Teacher)

In conclusion, a majority of respondents claimed that their expectations were met and that the training was valuable. Again, suggestions were made to enhance the training, and to make it more useful. These included adding sessions on documenting Aistear, more time spent on paperwork and not just practical activities, and possibly changing or amending the timing of the programme.

Participants in the training programme were also asked whether or not their perceptions of Aistear had changed, following the training (Figure 13):

Figure 13: Have your perceptions changed?



Respondents were divided, with 64% stating 'yes' and 36% saying 'no'. The question posed referred specifically to 'the value of playful learning' in Aistear, and how their perceptions of this had changed following engagement with the training programme.

Participant responses answering 'yes' to the set question included the following:

"Before I wouldn't have realised how much work went into play- now it's much more constructed."
(Special Needs Assistant)

"I thought it would be very chaotic with a lot of tidying up." (Teacher)

"I am approaching play with more creativeness, introducing more real play opportunities and always trying to promote language and literacy opportunities in a child's play environment." (Early Years Professional)

"My perception of how the future of junior and senior infants will learn has improved. If Aistear is on board in schools it will help the transition from play-based learning in preschool." (Early Years Professional)

"I feel it's more interesting and fun watching and engaging with the children through play. I learn from them sometimes." (Early Years Professional)

"Yes- I found the interaction between child and teacher has a more important role and that the child comes first." (Early Years Professional)

"Yes I was impressed by how structured the play is and how much learning can be achieved in this informal setting." (Early Years Professional)

Conversely, some participants claimed that their perceptions of Aistear had not changed:

"I knew how valuable Aistear is already."
(Early Years Professional)

"Working with young children I obviously value play and before starting the course I was already very aware of Aistear and its goals." (Early Years Professional)

"I always believed play was the best and most suitable medium for children's learning and development."
(Early Years Professional)

"Already had Aistear in place in setting so do not need to change much but was good to have interaction between EYPs and teachers." (Early Years Professional)

"I think Aistear is an excellent idea but still think it might be difficult to implement fully while keeping up with the demands of the curriculum." (Early Years Professional)

"I already know the importance of play and understand how children learn through it. It helped me link the learning goals to activities, however, and get a good grasp of all the learning goals under the four themes."
(Early Years Professional)

Despite not changing their perceptions of Aistear, some participants above identified the value of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training in developing relationships with other settings and individuals, and in making the links between activities and outcomes explicit.



Chapter 4

Focus Group Discussions

4.0 Focus Group Discussions

This chapter details the findings from the Focus Group Discussions. A total of twelve focus group sessions were held. Six sessions were held with early years professionals, and a further six with teachers. Two groups of early years professionals and two groups of teachers were involved in focus groups both prior to, and after their training. The remainder were with groups who had completed the training at a previous time. The table below presents each focus group title, duration of recording and provides an alias for this group, which will be used to identify extracts of particular focus groups:

Table 2: Focus Group Alias, Title and Length of Recording

Focus Group Alias	Focus Group Title	Length of Recording
1	Pre-training Teachers 1	11mins 54
2	Pre-training EYPs 1	8mins 18
3	Pre-training Teachers 2	8mins 53
4	Pre-training EYPs 2	9mins 32
5	Post-training Teachers 1	10mins 54
6	Post-training EYPs 1	12mins 50
7	Post-training Teachers 2	14mins 21
8	Post-training EYPs 2	12mins 4
9	Post-training Teachers 3	17 mins 28
10	Post-training Teachers 4	17mins
11	Post-training EYPs 3	22mins 45
12	Post-training EYPs 4	27mins 45

All focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed at a later date.

A copy of the focus group schedule is provided in Appendix 2.

Findings are grouped under four key themes:

The Value of the Training Programme

Perceptions of the Aistear Framework

Experiences of Cross-sector Training

Recommendations for Future Practice

4.1 The Value of the Training Programme

In the pre-training focus groups participants were asked about their expectations of the programme. A number of general responses were identified:

1. Knowledge of Aistear

- *"More experience" (4)*
- *"Knowledge of Aistear- we're doing a lot of our own stuff with Siolta but we've not had any workshops on Aistear so just to get to know more about it and how to implement it in our centre. There's little things we're probably already doing but just how to document it so that if the HSE come in then they can see that we are doing that." (2)*
- *"Learn what we're supposed to be doing with children, and what you as the teacher are supposed to do." (4)*
- *"Get a better idea of what it's all about really." (2)*
- *"Practical ideas" (3)*
- *"I work in junior infants and I'd like to know the work behind it. I don't really know what Aistear involves - I suppose the theory behind it." (1)*
- *"I'm a senior teacher and I've never had an infant class so if I ever did I'd like to have a knowledge and experience of it." (1)*

2. Recording and making time for Aistear

- *"How to record play in a simple way that will already go with the work that we're doing." (4)*
- *"The structured format of Aistear" (4)*
- *"More about the assessment of play" (3)*
- *"Understand how it fits into the curriculum more and how things are going to change for us." (3)*

Other Issues

- *"Learn how to marry up what we're already doing with what they do in primary school." (4)*
- *"How to deal with any issues that might arise with children's parents." (3)*

In the post-training focus groups, participants were asked if their expectations had been met. There was a range of responses. Some participants claimed that their expectations had been met:

- *"Well I learned what it's like to go to school- it'd be great to go back- no I mean for children starting school it's totally different- it's not as daunting as it was 40years ago. It's great to get that insight- it's like a playschool still." (8)*
- *"I got a better picture of things from the teachers' point of view- what they're up against as well. From that point of view of us all we have gained the perspective and they've gained ours so we achieved that anyway." (8)*

- *"For someone who has been doing Aistear for two years I thought I'd learn more – but I was surprised at how much I'm actually doing and I was quite proud of myself for that- for the past six weeks we've had a tutor in the school- but not to say I didn't learn anything I did, the themes and it refreshed it for me to go back into the classroom, but I was surprised already at how much I am doing and that I knew. I found for me it was good to know I was doing okay." (7)*
- *"I wanted to know what it was as a senior teacher, and how it works, and how it would integrate with the other subjects, and I got that." (5)*
- *"The two teachers were very enthusiastic General agreement – they were great...And they were very easy to understand...And they used examples of what happened in their class...You couldn't fault them at all...It was nice to see a teacher doing the training." (6)*

However, conversely, some participants did not feel that their expectations had been met.

These participants addressed the lack of time spent on documenting and recording Aistear, and how too much time was spent on practical activities. Early years professionals, particularly, identified how the inclusion of play activities appeared to suggest that it was more geared towards teachers:

- *"No - there's quite a lot of paperwork going to be involved and I think she devoted 15/20 minutes to that - the whole thing is geared towards the teachers- we didn't get much out of it really. General sounds of agreement We do the things... We do all the play with them- we know how to do it through play and all these things- the teachers obviously didn't so it was right for them but I don't think there was enough time spent on the paperwork." (6)*
- *"I feel that the Aistear themes as well- I think we could have done more understanding of what each theme is; maybe a theme a week or something like that- so that we were more familiar because they were kind of just overviews of the 4 themes- we didn't really go into much detail about how to document them or anything like that- maybe- don't get me wrong I enjoyed the training and I do think there was a lot of learning and some fresh ideas, but yeah I'd have liked more about the themes and it was a lot about how the teachers can bring it into their day- we do this everyday... General agreement ... especially when we have kids ourselves They're doing the same things in preschool as big school and it is an awful lot of documentation and how do you have to do it? It's about how to play- we know that. She has us playing and making play dough and I've done that... We've all done that- and the training we do... I would have liked well we still don't know where to start as regards filling out sheets and that." (6)*
- *"We did 5 minutes on it last week and we went back to our setting and we were very unsure how to do it- we sat down and we had no time away from the kids and we tried to grab 5 minutes here to do it ourselves and the pages, there's boxes everywhere and we were trying to figure out how she wants us to do these, then she told us last week it doesn't matter what way you do them as long as you do them...but obviously they have to be done in a certain way for the agency or whoever, but she's trying to say that you can do them anyway- just tell us what way you want them done and explain that- but there was only ten minutes for that. It opened up and the first week was all about making play dough- then there's junk art- we've all done junk art. Last week we spent maybe an hour playing with little toys- we do that with the kids everyday. Why not play with the toys the same length of time that you spend on paperwork? Swap it around." (6)*

- *“Even if it was an hour of planning and an hour of activity- I thought I would come away knowing that here’s the Aistear folder and here’s everything that needs to go into it- if an inspector comes you just take it out. I’m no better on than I was when I came in. Like she said you can do a day, or you can do it weekly or monthly- like what do the agency want? Do they want a weekly report? And she said you can do one on every child, on a set of them, but like if we were to do it on every child we’d have no time to do anything else. I just want to know what way they want it done- do they want it weekly? Monthly?” (6)*

Participants exhibited frustration in relation to the documentation of, and assessment within, Aistear. They felt that their expectations had not been met, as the time spent on these issues was less than they had hoped for.

Participants who had completed the training at a previous training period, however, did not exhibit the same frustration. They claimed that the training met their expectations and that it motivated them in their practice:

- *“My expectations were met- I got a lot out of it- very motivated.” (12)*
- *“It was good to do the workshop to get the reassurance and guidance that you’re doing the right thing. I feel confident and really motivated.” (12)*



4.2 Perceptions of the Aistear Framework

The second theme to arise from the focus group data was in relation to the Aistear framework and participants' perceptions of it. In pre-training focus groups, participants were asked about their initial views of Aistear. Many held positive views of play and its place in children's learning and development:

- *"Play is about giving them opportunities and especially opportunities to succeed." (4)*
- *"If they play at school it helps to give all children an experience of play because some might have toys at home and some might not." (4)*
- *"I think as well though that we need to remember that play is for the sake of play – it doesn't always have to be focused on the development or learning, children have to enjoy it as well. Sometimes a child just wants to play for play's sake!" (4)*
- *"Play is the easiest way for them to learn- it's the easiest way to get them – a more regimented approach doesn't work." (4)*
- *"I think it's good- it's different for them- they become social and some children become more alive in play - the whole classroom becomes more animated during play- it's like they're a child- and they really enjoy it through play." (3)*
- *"They don't realise that they're learning. It's only time when you sit with them 1:1 and see what they actually know." (2)*

Some participants also expressed concerns about play in the classroom and in education, taking a more critical stance and initiating debate between focus group members:

- *"Sometimes it might not fit a curriculum like we're supposed to teach, and that's the issue for me at the moment- I'm trying to figure out and fit things in... Sometimes it's very chaotic and the teacher's supposed to know everything that's going on." (3)*
- *"It's very difficult for the children - do they end up not liking school?"
"Yeah they play and then all of a sudden they have to sit on their chair and learn."
"It's really tough on them in first class- they find it very difficult the transition from the Aistear programme to school."*

"There's only some play in Aistear: the children have to understand okay now it's play time but then the next lesson is sitting down. It's not play all day and I wouldn't like them to be playing all day either. Because they wouldn't understand the real meaning of school- you know this is where they have to sit down in their seats and by the time they get to first class it's a shock. It wouldn't be something that I'd like anyway. The hour or so is fine but not all day"

Researcher: Do you think play and learning are separate?

"Yes in some ways- in relation to classroom practices..."

"Well they really use their imagination and the children have lots of input... Yeah the class teacher would ask the children what they would like to do for the next play, for example the hairdressers was chosen for last week and I got my hair done! It just teaches them stuff of society."

"A balance between play and learning is okay for an hour but that's fine – they know they still have to do work." (1)

- *"There's a lot of conflicts." (2)*
- *"Sharing's hard, and sometimes they don't play well with each other." (2)*
- *"I believe though you could still take the easy way out and I think people are still doing that."*

"Not every teacher's like X in the classroom in how involved they are in play and in assessing that."

"And you do need to be awful organized where I would be organized but it doesn't leave scope to suddenly change a theme or something because you have to be so organized in it. How we play now if you suddenly go off on a whim and think this might work better you don't really have that scope because you have this all set up, with that theme for that month. So to venture out of that- you're tied in."

"Because the children have full control of it the strong personalities do tend to take over and the children who are not as baulky in putting themselves out there, maybe aren't getting as much out of it as others. I do feel that they might be left out to the side where they do need the instruction and the help- they need the organization from the teacher and it's difficult for them to do it themselves."

"It can't work for them all- it cannot. There are some children who do not...Children for special needs for example it's a big problem- the noise- it can be quite daunting for them all the time at that level. Some children with special needs don't like working with other children. There's a sense that it won't work for every child in every classroom." (5)

In the post-training focus groups participants were asked again about their perceptions of the Aistear framework. Some responded with surprise at how much they already knew and were already doing in Aistear:

- *"We've already been doing it but just didn't know we were doing something called Aistear. There's no name on it but now there is." (8)*

Some participants discussed the opportunities Aistear would give to other professionals and teachers:

- *"I think it's a great opportunity for the teachers. They weren't allowed that free play and they probably would have loved it, but now they can."*

"Yeah" General Agreement

"Yeah it's new for them" (6)

- *"It's nice for the big school where they're working a lot and it'll give them an hour of relaxation and if they can learn through it (as what Aistear's supposed to be) good on it! Some of the teachers said that they're actually bringing it out to the yard- so there's less hustle and bustle in the yard and they're playing and they're learning out there. It's good that way." (6)*

Some identified how their views of play itself changed:

- *"I would have thought there wasn't as much to it- having done the courses I discovered there's quite a lot more to it than just going in the first day and playing. I think the course lets you see the background and why it's good and how." (5)*
- *"I would have thought the teacher just put everything out and you just play but it's more constructive." (5)*
- *"I thought it was great to see how the children came on – I mean in the videos and that." (5)*

Finally, some participants discussed the effect of the play on the children:

- *"There's more competence in my experience and more confidence because they do things in their own time." (5)*
- *"It's great - it is working and children are learning through play. It's just it's a lot of planning and organization and you just have to be really involved in it." (7)*

One other area addressed by participants was in relation to parents and parental attitude to play. This occurred both prior to, and after the training programmes:

- *"I think getting the parents to understand- when the parents come in and see their child at the home corner every day, they're like 'oh they're just playing at the kitchen all day- is that all they're doing like?' You know, parents need the knowledge that they're actually working and learning through play and in a particular corner this is what they're learning. Like, it's just to get parents to know why we're doing that- it's getting parents to understand that at a particular area there's huge benefits and what they are. They're more than just playing. They're playing all day but there's actually substance." (2)*
- *"You have to sell it to parents as well- we all see the benefits but they think the kids are playing and there's no reason for it...especially when the only experience parents have of school is when they were in school themselves. So you compare it to what you've done and your experience and you compare this to it and it looks like we're not doing the same. Their only experience is when their child walks out with a load of junk art and they're not in the classroom so they don't really see what's going on." (7)*
- *"I think myself that the Aistear should be explained to the parents- a group of parents should be brought in...We do have parent meetings but when it's out of context it's hard to explain." (7)*

Participants of previous training periods identified the change in how their setting viewed and implemented Aistear following the training:

- *"We were using the Aistear framework in our setting to some extent I think for us we were kind of focusing more on the Aistear documentation. We were labelling boxes and stuff and children were coming in surrounded by the four themes of Aistear and we were documenting Aistear for each individual child. But coming out of the training I think something completely different about Aistear now - I'm thinking more about what's actually happening in the classroom and in children. It's more about the practice and the kind of activities we're doing and the way we approach the activities. I've a different outlook now." (12)*

4.3 Experiences of Cross-Sector Training

Participants appeared to enjoy being trained with practitioners from other settings. They identified the development of relationships with others, and how this promoted mutual awareness and respect:

- *"I just thought it was great to see what a teacher is actually like today, so young and like that girl said 'I don't want to but I have to' but they actually do listen to the children whereas we were always told to sit down and be quiet and nobody was interested in listening to you- and that's totally different to today. And if the teachers are younger they're more open to trying out these things." (8)*
- *"I think the relationship with the teachers- I found that helpful. Like I knew x from friends of ours so even just towards the end there for them to say what they admired about the EY practitioners - that's nice to hear because you do find when you're there all day you think you're just babysitters."*

"Even the whole 'we don't understand your kind of training' or whatever- like there's people there that go to college for a few years to actually do what we're doing but they think that you just go in and do it probably, where they were trained for 4/5 years to be a teacher. Like my Level 6 is going to be 2 years - you know I'm going through it and I've done Level 5 and I've done Level 4. They don't expect the same skills as us- by the end I'll probably have done the same amount of time as them and all the stuff on top of that that we're doing - like training for Siolta, and we have to do updates on courses every two years, where they probably don't have to do everything like that."

"And they got to see how little holidays we get as well. They get more but I suppose that's their job and they've done the training and all."

"But, you really have to admire the teacher who gets control of the room of 22 kids."

"Exactly." General agreement (6)

- *"I do think that was good for relationships and it was good for sending children to a school - it's nice to have the name of a teacher and be able to come down to the school and bring the child to visit and I think we do appreciate aspects of each others' roles by working together." (6)*
- *"I think it's very positive because they'll get to see the importance of what we do at an early age and I'm sure that teachers will have children that have been in our centres will see the benefits for the children when they come compared to the kids without an early years education - so I think it can only be a positive thing really." (2)*
- *"We also have a lot of children in our centre who would come to this school and go into preschool - and I think just building up and having those relationships and links can only be a positive." (2)*
- *"It was nice to see what goes on in early years education- I didn't know and now I've got a lot more experience." (5)*
- *"You'd have thought they were just minding them before but I think we've all realised that they*

play a huge role in the education before they come to school...A lot of it is learned in the preschool.” (5)

- *“It was a little bit awkward at first and you had to be so careful not to offend anybody in what you’re saying and you also have to be careful not to be offended. You know there is a kind of awkwardness but it did dissipate through the weeks and it did become more natural and I definitely enjoyed it and learned loads. I still think initially, you know I’d never done anything like that before with EYPs and it was different. The way we do things are perceived as being so different and you’re so conscious that your way is the best way but then not offending their way...but then I kind of realised that we’re doing a lot of the same stuff anyway so there wasn’t the need for...you know the way you’re protective of your profession or whatever or your work yourself but there was probably no need for that feeling.” (7)*
- *“I was a little bit apprehensive coming in because I thought it was going to be practitioners versus teachers but I found we all bonded and gelled well together and we could see where the other was coming from and the teachers had needs that we could answer and we had questions that the teachers were able to answer. There was a good link there between the two.” (12)*
- *“We need to move forward through working together and keeping that communication going. Using similar forms that are succinct and accessible and just linked. It’s nice to see what’s happening in the early years.” (10)*

The value of the cross-sector training for children’s benefit was also noted. Progression and continuity in children’s teaching and learning experiences was identified as a benefit of such an approach:

- *“It’ll be good that they’re doing the same training so the children will be coming into the classroom - it’ll be continuous for the children and they’ll know what to expect.” (1)*
- *“You can definitely see where they’re coming from- it’s good children get used to the structure before they come [to school] and I think we all realised the value of EY education and how they use a curriculum which we didn’t know before and it’s that thought that it’s sort of like that babysitting service” (7)*

The value of mixing with other settings and sharing ideas was also highlighted:

- *“It’ll be good to see what they do and pick up some pointers- how they structure, how they do it, how they cope with conflicts, you know?” (2)*
- *“It’s good- we don’t get to mix with anyone or other settings.” (5)*

Important to note is how some participants felt in relation to the orientation of the programme, as a result of the cross-sector approach:

- *"I didn't mind it- we're all here to learn but I thought the course was very much based around teachers and not practitioners."*

"Yeah I'd agree with you there."

"Definitely."

"We kind of didn't get much of a say in it."

"That's because we already do play and..."

"They're being introduced into it just."

"It wasn't about practitioners."

"There was praise for us though- that we set the stepping stones for learning."

"I think the teachers have gained a greater knowledge and respect for EYP and what we do- and they said that today."

"They've realised that we just don't sit and play."

"But the course was more for teachers." (8)

- *"Just – a lot of it is based around teachers because it's new to them- but a lot of it is new to us too - and they were saying 'oh we can't fit it in' but they can...We all do it already like." (8)*

This was a contentious issue and some participants appeared frustrated about this. As a result they identified areas for improvement in the training programme.



4.4 Recommendations for Future Practice

Both teachers and early years professionals identified areas for improvement regarding the Ballyfermot Aistear Training. These were in relation to the following areas:

4.4.1 Content of Sessions

- *"Yeah- get rid of all that play stuff out - **laughing** ...well it's fair...more emphasis on...I mean I'm no wiser as to what I have to do – I know what the girls in the room have to do because they're doing it anyway - but I'm no wiser as to what I'm supposed to be doing and to make sure it's properly done." (6)*
- *"I think more time needs to be spent for teachers on the planning and assessment...We still wouldn't know how to plan for play...If they gave us a book or something and we had to plan a session of play or something where we could do assessment- that's what we're asked about...Yeah more samples of planners or something, or making planners...We have all the curriculum books, the first steps and the Aistear on top of it to incorporate and it's a lot- checklists and stuff...If we had access to samples we could move on and step up after this course and get to a higher level." (5)*
- *"I just thought it would be good for everyone to see Aistear in action **General agreement**...To see the kids and what actually happens...Be a part of 2 hours or something...See the room and the teacher...The whole work experience as such- see planning, playing and assessment...Yeah even to see how X takes notes as she walks around- That would have been good." (5)*
- *"I suppose ideas and where to uncover more ideas- we were shown stuff but not how to find more ideas." (7)*
- *"I'd like to have seen more video clips of Aistear in action- like we did see some but I think you learn only by seeing it." (7)*
- *"I would have loved to have seen some videos of the preschool- of the day we visited the school the children were there but were taken away- I thought it would have been nice to see them engaged in play." (7)*
- *"More on documentation and planning would help. And observations- it would have made it more meaningful for us...And it would have brought it all together." (8)*
- *It's excellent and I think it's very progressive that Ireland has such a good framework but I think with implementation there's the downfall because it's a big book to get through, so I think more training and workshops like this for people working with children everyday it would help with understanding the whole framework. This course was very practical and it made sense afterwards. I think the implementation of Aistear needs to be looked at." (12)*
- *"A planning session where the groups are separate." (10)*
- *"Opening it up to the floor for discussion- a mixture of formal and informal discussions." (10)*

4.4.2 Timing of the Programme

- *"Duration- it's very long and there's a lot of repetition in it. You could do it in three weeks."*
General agreement (5)
- *"It could be cut in half or an hour and a half for each session or something."* (5)
- *"We talked a lot around things and we were familiar with them anyway and we just talked a lot- and did activities that you kind of knew anyway."* (5)
- *"Especially the ones from early years they do those activities anyway- they know the benefit of them - maybe for us it's nice to go back but for them they knew that anyway."* (5)
- *"The timing of it (2 hours) at the end of the day was very hard to concentrate and to take it in and then it's hard to bring yourself back and think how am I going to put this into practice- I don't know a way around that but it should be considered. And also maybe EYPs have an advantage because they're going back to work anyway- it's like a break in their day to do something new but for us it's at the end of our day- we've worked and are supposed to be finished so it was very hard. I don't know if one hour over longer weeks you'd get anything done or days or what I don't know- maybe a summer course is good but it can bring issues too."* (7)
- *"Would it be a benefit to condense the training into one day? I felt myself with the gap of Easter it was a bit dragged out and disjointed- maybe that was just our session – but it was really spread out! I felt it was a bit long drawn out."* (8)
- *"It was a good session and we all interacted and if that's what it is, it is. But the distance between the sessions meant there was always a period of time initially where we were uncomfortable and had to settle in again. I don't feel we maximized the potential of our group because it was disjointed. We might have got more out of it had it been all in one session. Our session did suffer a bit."* (8)







Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The overarching aim of the research study was to evaluate the Ballyfermot Aistear Training carried out by the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative with a focus on deciphering:

**The Value of the
cross-sector/shared training**

The impact on practice

Views on the value of Aistear

**The quality of the experience for
those participating in the training
programme**

Based on the empirical evidence presented in this report some general conclusions come to the fore.

5.1 The Value of the Cross-Sector/Shared Training

The majority of early years professionals and infant teachers perceived the shared training aspect of the Aistear training programme as principally positive. The main benefits that were highlighted included the enhanced mutual respect that both sectors developed for one another, the improved collaboration that took place between the sectors and the greater awareness of the other settings that resulted from training alongside one another. However some limitations were also voiced by representatives from both sectors in terms of effectively meeting the varying needs of the participants. In particular a number of early years professionals considered some of the training to be too 'teacher' focused and not meeting their specific needs within the pre-school context. Likewise both groups of early years educators were of the opinion that inter-sector preconceptions still persisted at the end of the training programme and therefore had not been dealt with effectively. In addition some of the educators were of the opinion that more opportunities to share ideas with different colleagues within their own sector would also be helpful, instead of simply attending as a large group from principally the same setting.

Nevertheless, the advantages of the inclusive training programme appeared to outweigh the disadvantages and stakeholders interviewed were unanimous in their thinking that this issue was an integral feature to ensuring improved transitions for young children in general and should be paramount in any future training that might take place.



I got a better picture of things from the teachers' point of view - what they're up against as well. From the point of view of us all we have gained the perspective and they've gained ours, so we achieved that.

Early Years Professional

5.2 The Impact on Practice

There were mixed views about the impact on practice of the Aistear training programme. Positive feedback focused on the enhanced knowledge gleaned in terms of the physical environment e.g. improved understanding of play areas and room layout. Increased awareness of the differing pedagogical strategies that can be availed of within a play-based curriculum was also commented upon favourably, in particular the emphasis placed on ensuring that children are active agents in their own learning and how early years educators can become actively involved in the play experience. Likewise both early years professionals and infant teachers emphasised the way in which the training had raised their awareness of the importance of becoming reflective practitioners in the early years context and enhanced their understanding of the interplay between both theory and practice. The principal benefit to be attributed to the Ballyfermot Aistear Training by both sectors of the early years workforce was the enhanced profile of play, in particular the time and value that was ascribed to play in the different settings as a result of participating in the programme and how curriculum content can be effectively infused into the play experience to ensure learning takes place.

Contrary to the positive feedback received, however, some educators were of the opinion that the course had impacted very little on their practice because either they knew most of it already or the issues that they had hoped would be addressed were not.

I tried out a few things already- but one thing I'd heard a lot of the EYPs talking about was free access to paint and stuff – so I tried it and I put it all out and I put out blue and I put out white and one children made six different shades of the one colour and that was just amazing. They loved it and I loved it and I'll definitely do that. I'll be using it again and the children are helping each other and they're asking one another how they made certain colours and they're able to explain what colours they mixed. It sounds so basic but I think they never got that whole thing about colours from doing that usual lesson mixing colours that I told them. But for their first basic experience of paint I just loved it. It was brilliant!

Teacher



5.3 The Value of Aistear

The training appeared to impact greatly in particular on the teachers' understanding of Aistear and the value they attributed to it. Although prior to the training programme the early years professionals seemed to be fully aware of the benefits of play for young children's learning and development, some teachers appeared quite sceptical about its place in an infant classroom. Before undertaking the training, many teachers appeared to make a clear distinction between play and work, where play was accredited some merit for settling children to the school day but that after one hour of play, the real work around delivering the curriculum would begin. However after the Aistear training sessions, the majority of teachers appeared more conscious of the learning potential within high quality play and more prepared to give it time and space within the classroom context. In the main, they even appeared more confident about selling its potential to parents and allowing them the opportunity to see it in practice.

Handing it over to the children is very different from what we usually do where we may dominate their play. Play was sometimes a bit of an excuse to hear their reading groups but now I wouldn't do that because I know the value. I see it more as playing with a purpose rather than a distraction- using the language and giving it to them is good and you can hear it back from them as they're playing.

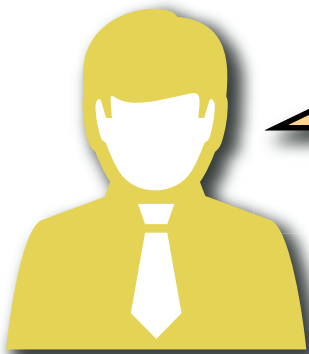
Teacher



5.4 The Quality of the Training Experience

Overall there appeared to be a consensus amongst the early years educators and the stakeholders that the quality of the Ballyfermot Aistear Training experience had been generally positive. In general both early years professionals and infant teachers seemed to enjoy the experience and learned something from it, even if it was a simple reassurance that what they had been doing was right. It was interesting to note however that the infant teachers as a whole appeared to glean more from the training than the early years professionals who, it could be argued, gave the impression of having a greater knowledge of Aistear than the infant teachers before the training took place. It tended to be early years professionals who commented unfavourably about the time spent on the practical aspects of play in terms of making dough, junk models etc., and it was they who emphasised the need for higher level training on more complex aspects of implementing Aistear effectively for example observation, planning and documentation.

In terms of the programme logistics, the respondents from both sectors tended to approve of the local location and the opportunity to train alongside staff from other settings. However the timing and duration of the sessions appeared to attract some disapproval despite the best efforts of the organisers. Although some positive responses were raised regarding the convenience of having the training straight after work, several educators were of the opinion that such timing resulted in a very long working day and interfered significantly with their family life.



Thoroughly enjoyed the course- brought it back to basics which is needed for everyone no matter how long you are in childcare.

Early Years Professional

I would have thought there wasn't as much to it- having done the course I discovered there's quite a lot more to it than just going in the first day and playing. I think the course let you see the background and why it's good, and how.

Teacher



5.5 Recommendations

Recommendations to arise from the evidence collated from this small-scale research study are enumerated below. It is commendable that some of these recommendations have been anticipated by the project team through course feedback and evaluation procedures and this has already led to steps being taken to begin implementation (for example, follow-up support visits have been provided and plans are underway for further workshop sessions).

5.5.1 Shared Training

- Continue to provide shared training experiences that attract both early years sectors but ensure that there are more direct opportunities for intra-sector and cross-sector mixing.
- Ensure that there is adequate challenge within the training to cater for the variety of needs and levels of understanding by providing breakout groups and greater choice on the part of the participants.

5.5.2 Impact on Practice

- Provide opportunities to see Aistear in practice in a typical early years setting/class with typical young children, while children are present and engaged in play.
- Supply some form of follow-up support for educators after the training sessions to ensure the appropriate translation of new ideas into practice.

5.5.3 Quality of the Training Experience

- Ensure better consistency of delivery and content between the different training programmes.
- Spend less time on ice-breaking tasks within sessions.
- Inject greater innovation into the training content in terms of playful examples.
- Provide opportunities for participants to have some influence on the course content.
- Reconsider the timing of the course and offer prospective participants some degree of choice.
- Ensure that further training is provided to build on some of the issues addressed within the Ballyfermot Aistear Training to tackle more complex issues such as documentation, observation and assessment.

6.0 Personal Accounts

"Over the six weeks that the workshops took place, I learned a great deal about Aistear and how to implement it in our setting. Before going into the workshops we were already labelling areas of the classrooms and using photographs to document children's learning and using the four themes of Aistear to display these for parents and visitors to see. We were also caught up in the idea of written documentation and had come up with our own templates to document children's learning and development in written form. We had also introduced the learning journal to document children's learning and emerging interests through the use of pictures, photographs and children's comments.

Early Years Professional



So when I went into the workshops, I had a fair idea that I knew pretty much all I needed to know about the implementation of Aistear. I was never more wrong! The workshops threw a whole new dimension on how Aistear works overall in the setting. It not only includes written and illustrated documentation but it also includes the important role of how children play in the setting. So your space, layout, equipment themes and children's interests running through the setting all play a huge role in the implementation of Aistear.

We made some big changes to our room layouts and we were very lucky to have some funding at the time to invest in furniture that allowed us to organise room layout at its best. The different play areas in the rooms are much easier to distinguish now. We introduced a junk art area in one of the rooms which is spacious enough for the children to explore with the materials comfortably. The children really love this area as it allows them to be as creative as they want without any limitations on what they can do. Everything now is at children's reach so that they can make all their own choices about what they would like to do. This also encourages independence for children to carry out tasks and activities on their own.

Creating an interest area allows children's interests to be explored and so far we have had hairdressers, a library, the baby clinic and an x-ray department!!! With these interest areas we have introduced real life objects associated with the interest making it more real for the children's play. They absolutely love it! They really encourage children to interact with each other in role play thus helping to children to make decisions and problem solve, improving communication and social skills.

It's good to know that these interest based play areas will still be a huge part of children's learning when they move into a Junior Infants that has implemented Aistear. This was something I was not really aware of before



Early Years Professional

doing the workshops. With the funding, we had a loft built for one of the rooms, with a quiet area on top and home corner underneath. This enhanced our space in the room but also created a cosy area away from the hustle and bustle of floor activities.

Small World Play was another eye opener for me during the workshops and it really gives children and practitioners a chance to indulge in imaginative and creative play. Before the workshops, small world for me was about dinky cars, train tracks, little people, blocks etc. Now it is about creating a small world that is almost as real as the real thing! So in our small world area the children are exploring with different kinds of textures, real and pretend items. So for example, when we made our small world beach during the summer, we included shells, sand, small pebbles and rocks as well as some water. When we created our Dinosaur small world we introduced soil, rocks, bamboo branches and twigs to create a more real small world as well as the toy dinosaurs themselves. These elements immediately draw the children's interests and encourage them to explore for lengthier periods of time. Mark making has been another big change not only for the children but also for practitioners. Templates were always widely used more so than giving the child a piece of blank paper and a pencil. The staff are getting used to the change and seeing the benefits of creative and imaginative mark making and templates are only ever used occasionally. We have ensured that there is mark making activities in every room and in our interest areas.

Following on from the course, we had a site visit from one of the facilitators of the Aistear workshops. Again, even though we had made some great changes within the setting there was still a lot more we could do in order to practice Aistear at its best.

The children in our Preschool unit now undertake a process of self-registration when they come into the setting by putting their photo with their name on the wall of the room that they are playing in. We are working on some other aspects like ensuring that there is more play based activities in our practical life area of the Montessori room. Such activities include pouring water from a porcelain tea set, or pegging dolls clothes on to the washing line. This new dimension to the Montessori room is going down a treat with our Preschool group. We have made changes to our snack room, bringing in books about food, a play kitchen with play food and a lot of our table top activities in this room have a food theme about them. As our children move from room to room throughout the session, we are ensuring that there is some soft area or rest space in each room.

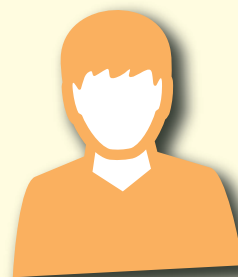
All in all, the experience was very worthwhile. Staff show more enthusiasm and the children are more creative and imaginative in their play. They are enjoying all the new experiences in the setting. Allowing them to make the choices and plan their own activities encourages more interactive learning, so while providing opportunities for small and large group time, there is still a strong element of children's choices and interests evident in each room."



"Initially I was sceptical and worried as to how I would get through all the other demands of the primary curriculum if I was implementing Aistear in my class for an hour a day. My fears were soon dispelled as I quickly began to realise the wealth of experiential learning opportunities Aistear provided for the children and how these could then be used to feed into my plans and provide meaningful learning experiences in other curricular areas throughout the school day.

Aistear for me is no longer an addition to my busy school day but rather an integral part of teaching and learning in my classroom. I am very fortunate to have a large bright and airy classroom which has been a huge asset in setting up the available space to suit the needs of myself and the children and facilitate the Aistear implementation process. We have three Junior Infant classes and three Senior Infant classes in total. To help facilitate the sourcing, cataloguing and distribution of Aistear resources we set up an Aistear team who meet once a month to share ideas and resources. Below are some of the systems and ideas we have found helpful to put in place;

Junior Infants Teacher



- One central locked storage area for all Aistear resources not currently in use
- Each junior and senior infant teacher have resourced two role play boxes each (e.g. vets, post office, camp site, doctors surgery, restaurant, school, construction site etc) This gives us 12 boxes in total which are rotated between the six classes every month. Boxes contain signage for the role play area, writing templates and where ever possible real life resources.
- Each infant class has a sand pit which is used not only for sand play but also as a setting for our small world. On different months the sandpit is filled with different media to suit the small world theme e.g. we filled the sand pit with soil, leaves, sticks, plants and plastic insects when mini-beasts was our theme. During farm small world month the sandpit was filled with straw. For jungle, desert and dinosaur themes we left it filled with sand but added additional media such as bamboo shoots and rocks. Our superhero small world was a huge success. Miniature superheroes were placed in the sandpit along with any real life resources that sparked the children's imagination e.g. small bits of rope, twigs, stones etc.
- In the summer months we brought our small world outdoors and let the children play and explore with them in a natural setting.
- Each junior and senior infant stream has a large water tray for water play which they rotate between the classes. Sign in and out sheets for the resources are kept in the central storage area.
- For junk art we have a large bin in the staff room where teachers and visitors place suitable materials that can then be dipped in and out of as the infant teachers require.
- There is a selection of construction materials in each class and materials for making play dough are kept in the parent's room.
- We have a mix of four stations on the go at any one time for the duration of one month. Each station is print rich and has ample opportunities for emergent literacy and numeracy e.g. each station will have clipboards and writing materials, real telephones are placed in the stations to encourage communication, real computer screens and keyboards are placed in role play areas, signage and real life print experiences e.g. magazines, newspapers, menus, telephone books, flyers etc are placed at each station.



Junior Infants Teacher

To facilitate integrating Aistear into our planning we have found some of the following pointers very helpful:

- Basing our small world theme for the month on the current big books we are doing. The majority of infant big books are about animals and usually set in jungles, farms, deserts etc. Tying this in with your small world provides children with opportunities to sequence stories and discuss settings, alternative endings, problems and solutions etc using small world creatures. The wealth of oral language opportunities is amazing.
- Using our role play area theme for the month as the stimulus for our discreet oral language lessons during the week provides meaningful communication experiences and opportunities for vocabulary development. Outside of Aistear time and during station work we would often bring a group to the role play area to discuss new vocabulary and problem solving scenarios.
- The Aistear planning process where the children divide into the groups, plan their own play and then feedback on it is a strategy we now use when delivering other curricular lessons. We have seen a huge improvement in participation and confidence in those children who would previously have found it difficult to take part in discussions. The wealth of peer learning is a joy to see.
- Placing our Irish puppets at one or two of the stations as a conversation prompt has not only encouraged communication in English but also 'as Gaeilge'.
- The majority of our free play and experiential maths learning takes place during Aistear. Being clever with our planning allow us to do this e.g. if doing capacity in maths ensuring water play is part of our Aistear theme or if doing 3D shape having construction in our rota, hiding 3D shapes in the sand etc. Having numeracy print rich stations means children are constantly exposed to numbers in real life settings. This chance to explore and experience numeracy in action feeds seamlessly into the rest of your discreet numeracy lessons during the week.
- As with numeracy SESE (Social, Environmental and Scientific Education) themes are planned carefully to fit in with Aistear e.g. opportunities to sequence stories with small world characters, filling the sandpit with soil and insects when mini-beasts is our topic in science etc.
- Because the children take so much ownership over their learning in Aistear we use this motivation as a stimulus for other curricular lessons during the week e.g. in literacy if we are focusing on recount as a first steps genre we will get the children to recount their experiences in the different play areas or maybe write a report on an animal from our small world or create a narrative based on their role play that week.

Aistear in our infant classes has been such a worthwhile and positive journey for both children and teachers alike".



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8.0 Appendices

Appendix 1: Synopsis of Ballyfermot Aistear Course

WEEK 1

- Open, welcome. Talk about the fact that this is a new way of working together (primary school teachers and early years practitioners) and that both groups have a wealth of experience that we will draw on throughout the programme. Both tutors give examples of misconceptions that we had of each other's settings when we first started out putting the course together.
- Mention that a lovely aspect of this way of working is that it is based in the community of Ballyfermot where the children are the common factor. Many of the teachers and early years practitioners will have worked and be working with the same children and families.
- Introductions - Tell your partner a little about yourself, your occupation, the age of the children you are working with and also what you hope to get from the course and what you know about Aistear already.
- Similarities and differences between the teachers/early years practitioners (large group)
- Introduction to Aistear – PowerPoint presentation: a general introduction to the how and why of Aistear, which caters for children from 0-6 years, i.e. the children in both of settings
- Exercise around the themes of Aistear. Groups brainstorm what the themes, Wellbeing, Exploring and Thinking, Communicating and Identity and belonging might mean in relation to the children in their setting.
- What do we want for children? (mixed small groups) A task that will highlight that although our settings are very separate our ultimate priorities for the children in our care are very similar.
- Making play dough-experiential exercise in mixed groups. In order to explore the use of play as a key methodology for children's learning the two groups work together to make play dough without a recipe.
- Assessing learning, meeting objectives This experiential exercise will be followed by a feedback session where participants will tease out how beneficial this experience would be for children and what Aistear themes have been addressed and also what Primary School Curriculum objectives have been met.
- Play as the context for learning – Video clip of a group of primary school children playing with play dough, highlighting the benefits of such an activity to their oral language, imagination, confidence and co-operation.
- Participants are asked to try out making playdough with their children and to bring in photos/learning stories to share with the group next week.
- Session Evaluation - Plus/Delta Exercise (positives/negative about the session)

WEEK 2

- Welcome, open session, session aim
- Review previous session
- Sharing of photographs/learning stories taken by participants during the past week relating to use of play dough as a methodology.
- Participants brainstorm the types of play that children engage in – recorded on a flipchart.
- PowerPoint presentation detailing the types of play as defined by Aistear
- Experiential exercise: Participants look at a large variety of photos of children at play in both settings and discuss in groups which category of play they might fall under. This activity will lead to discussion about the similarities of both settings and also how children can be engaged in multiple types of play at any one time.
- Videos of children planning play in a play huddle and reviewing their play through press conference type question and answer session with classmates and finally of teacher playing with children in a pretend play situation
- Discussion around videos regarding quality of interactions and validity of planning and review of play in both settings
- 2 groups discuss the challenges and concerns surrounding the implementation of Aistear into their settings and feedback to large group
- Key learning from session – tutor input
- Session evaluation, Plus/Delta exercise
- Tutor input on the role of the adult in :
 - 1 Creating a play environment
 - Planning the resources
 - Planning the learning opportunities to build on and extend children's learning
 - Providing opportunity for the children to plan their play
 - 2 Supporting the children at play
 - Playing as a co-player
 - Respecting children's choices
 - Assessing and documenting children's learning
 - 3 Reviewing the play session
 - Making changes to play areas where necessary to plan for future learning
 - Helps children review their play

WEEK 3

- Welcome, open session, session aim.
- Review previous session with focused question linked back to last session.
- Experiential exercise to explore the importance of creative play in children's learning. Half of the participants are given a detailed template to colour in and the other half given blank pages and crayons to create their own drawing.
- Feedback discussion on how each group felt to be given the task. Reflecting on how giving children templates to colour in can curb their creativity, damage their confidence in their own artistic abilities and also be quite boring!!
- Tutor input on the value of creative play
- Experiential exercise; Mixed groups are given a range of junk art materials, scissors, sticky tape etc and working in pairs or alone asked to create something.
- Small-groups feedback to large group on how the experience was for them how it might be for children and what the key learning was.
- Input from tutor linking activity with learning outcomes relevant to themes of Aistear and objectives of the Primary School Curriculum.
- Video clip of Junk Art in action and discussion around it.
- Key learning from session – tutor input.
- Session evaluation - Plus/Delta Exercise
- Discuss arrangements for visit to school and pre-school setting the following week.

WEEK 4

The session this week will take place in a different school/setting with visits to a junior infant classroom and pre-school that have Aistear implemented

- Open, welcome, aim of this week's session
- Review previous session with focused question linked back to last session on creative play and the role of the teacher.
- Introduce the setting(infant class and pre-school)
- Brainstorm what is meant by the terms literacy and numeracy
- Visit to the pre-school setting and primary school classroom – with the pre-school teacher and infant teacher present to talk participants through their room layout, resources, changes they have made since implementing Aistear, best practice gleaned from Aistear framework
- Experiential activity: in small groups- look around the classroom and pre-school with a view to exploring how each of the settings supports literacy and numeracy. Fill in A3 sheets of paper divided in two sections documenting evidence of how literacy and then numeracy is supported in the environment of each setting.
- Feedback after the visit - Large group
- Similarities and Differences in the settings – Large Group
- Importance of the role of the environment in supporting and extending children's play and therefore learning- tutor input
- Sharing Practice – Large Group
- Planning for play- four groups 2X primary school teachers and 2 X early year practitioners draw up a draft plan for their classrooms/ settings to incorporate some of the new ideas gleaned from both the visit to the settings and each other's input on best practice.
- Key learning from session – tutor input.
- Session evaluation - Plus/Delta Exercise
- For the next session take some photographs/ videos of your setting showing how you have changed an area/room to reflect Aistear framework in action

Appendix 1: Synopsis of Ballyfermot Aistear Course

WEEK 5

- Welcome, open session, session aim.
- Review previous session with focused question linked back to last session.
- Participants present photographs/ videos of their setting showing how they have changed an area/room to reflect Aistear framework in action
- Planning for play using a Big Book – tutor input on starting from a story to plan a play environment in classroom and in particular the pretend corner.
- Videos of children at pretend play 'On the Bus', 'The Baby Clinic', 'The Vet'
- Learning story from preschool detailing a body of work completed by the children around the topic of the hairdresser.
- Experiential exercise to explore the value of open ended materials in children's learning – range of small world materials, blocks, animals etc including some materials from the natural environment. Participants, as previously, play with the resources with a view to exploring how they might be used in their settings.
- Feedback from small groups to large groups linking the experience with learning goals and aims of both Aistear and the primary school curriculum
- Play Plan - planning for play in teacher/pre-school peer groups with support from tutors.
- Key learning from session – tutor input.
- Session evaluation - Plus/Delta Exercise

WEEK 6

- Welcome, open session, session aim.
- Review previous sessions with focused question. How has the experience of working together been? What have we gained?
- Reflection on changes to practice in light of programme – small mixed groups. What has changed? What have you tried? What are your views on Aistear then and now?
- Building connections with families – large group
- Transitions- building bridges between the early years setting and the primary school
- Reflective practice question: Based on your new learning, what can be done to support transitions for children?
- Shared meaning and understanding of children's learning - Experiential exercise – small mixed groups. Range of creative art resources. Groups to create a poster/leaflet/flyer to support the transition of children from pre-school to school
- Programme evaluation – participants to complete evaluation forms
- Session evaluation - Plus/Delta Exercise
- Presentation of Certificates
- Group close

Appendix 2: Focus Group Interview Schedule

Post-Training Focus Group Questions

- 1 What were your expectations of the programme, and do you feel they were met?
- 2 What are your feelings towards Aistear as a framework for early years education, following your participation in the training?
- 3 Did you use anything from the training in your practice?
- 4 How do you feel about using a cross-sectoral approach to training for programmes like this one?
- 5 Any changes to the training programme?

Pre-Training Focus Group Questions

- 1 What motivated you to become involved in this programme?
What do you hope to gain from your participation?
- 2 What are your views of Aistear at this point?
Most valuable/ least valuable?
- 3 Do you think the training will affect your practice? How?
- 4 How do you feel about the prospect of cross-sectoral training within the delivery of this programme?

Appendix 3: Structured Telephone Interview Schedule

Ballyfermot Project Telephone Interview Questions

(April 2013)

Ballyfermot (EY Language and) Learning Initiative to promote quality improvement in EY settings through the use of the Aistear and Siolta frameworks.

- 1 What was/is your role in the project?
- 2 How did the project originate?
- 3 What are the main purposes of the training programme?
- 4 Do you think the training content is appropriate for EY practitioners in ROI?
(any suggestions of changes to content)
- 5 Do initial responses suggest that this training has had an impact on the implementation of Aistear and/or Siolta in the practice of participants? (How/why)
- 6 Why did you adopt a cross-sectoral approach to training for this project?
(potential benefits/challenges)
- 7 Do you have any recommendations for future training?
(content, process, relevance for EY services in ROI)
- 8 Do you have any further comments on any aspect of the Learning Initiative project?

Many thanks for agreeing to take part in this telephone interview.



Appendix 4: Reflective Practice Diary

BALLYFERMOT EARLY YEARS LANGUAGE AND LEARNING INITIATIVE

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE DIARY

Please complete at the end of each training session (5 minute slot)

1 Key learning points for me from today's session

2 How will this learning affect my practice?

3 What challenges do I expect if I implement this in my setting?

4 How might I overcome these difficulties?

5 Learning implemented from a previous week's training

Appendix 5: Questionnaire Survey

BALLYFERMOT EARLY YEARS LANGUAGE AND LEARNING INITIATIVE AISTEAR TRAINING: FINAL EVALUATION

- 1 Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
- 2 Years of Experience in working with children: ☐ 0-5 ☐ 5-10 ☐ 10-15 ☐ 15+
- 3 What is your job title? _____
- 4 Which of the following did you like about the training programme?
(Please tick all that apply and comment to explain)
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time of training sessions Aistear framework | <input type="checkbox"/> Training methods |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Location of training session | <input type="checkbox"/> Topics included in training |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expertise of tutors | <input type="checkbox"/> Training alongside staff from other types of settings |
- Additional Comments: _____
- 5 Please rate the following aspects of the training and make any comments below each one.
- Time of training session: ☐ Poor ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
- Comment: _____
- Aistear Framework: ☐ Poor ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
- Comment: _____
- Location of training session: ☐ Poor ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
- Comment: _____
- Topics included in sessions: ☐ Poor ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
- Comment: _____
- Training methods: ☐ Poor ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
- Comment: _____

Expertise of tutors:

☐

Poor

☐

Satisfactory

☐

Good

☐

Excellent

Comment: _____

**Training alongside staff from
other types of settings:**

☐

Poor

☐

Satisfactory

☐

Good

☐

Excellent

Comment: _____

6 Why did you attend the course?

☐

I was asked by my manager to attend

☐

All staff in my setting attended

☐

I heard about the course and asked to attend

Other? (Please state): _____

7 Did the course meet your expectations? If so, how? If not, why not?

8 Have your perceptions changed towards Aistear, in particular the value of playful learning as a result of your engagement with the training? If yes, explain how.

9 Which ONE aspect of your practice have you changed as a result of the training?

10 Which ONE most interesting thing did you learn about other settings?

Thank you for taking the time to complete

Consortium Members of Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative

Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership (Lead Agency) 4 Drumfinn Park Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Mary Queen of Angels Early Start Gurteen Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Michael's Pre-school Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	The Base Early Education Centre Blackditch Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Ballyfermot Star 7 Drumfinn Park Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Mary Queen of Angels Primary Schools Gurteen Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Michael's Primary School Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Treasure Tots Nursery Le Fanu House 3B Le Fanu Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre Lynch's Lane Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Claire's Playgroup Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre Lynch's Lane Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St. Raphael's Pre-school Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Woodlands Crèche Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre Lynch's Lane Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Ballyfermot Travellers Action Project Civic Centre Ballyfermot Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Gabriel's Pre-school Ballyfermot Rd Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St. Raphael's Primary School Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Director of Public Health Nurses HSE Ballyfermot/Palmerstown Primary Care and Mental Health Campus Ballyfermot Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Cherry Orchard Community Childcare Service Croftwood Crescent Cherry Orchard, Dublin 10	St Gabriel's Primary School Ballyfermot Rd Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Ultan's Primary School Cherryorchard Avenue Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	HSE Speech and Language Therapy Acorn Unit Cherry Orchard Hospital, D10
Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service Cherry Orchard Family Centre Cherry Orchard Avenue, D10	St Louise's Early Start Drumfinn Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Ultan's Childcare Centre Cherryorchard Avenue Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	
Markiewicz Community Centre Crèche 205 Decies Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Louise's Primary School Drumfinn Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Vincent's Early Childhood Development Service Ballyfermot/Palmerstown Primary Care and Mental Health Campus Ballyfermot Rd Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	
	St Matthew's Playgroup 5 Drumfinn Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10		

Centres involved in Aistear Training as part of the Ballyfermot Early Years Language and Learning Initiative

Ballyfermot Star 7 Drumfinn Park Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Claire's Playgroup Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre Lynch's Lane Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Michael's Pre-school Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Vincent's Early Childhood Development Service Ballyfermot/Palmerstown Primary Care and Mental Health Campus Ballyfermot Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Cherry Orchard Community Childcare Service Croftwood Crescent Cherry Orchard, D10	St Gabriel's Pre-school Ballyfermot Rd Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Michael's Primary School Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	The Base Early Education Centre Blackditch Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Markiewicz Community Centre Crèche 205 Decies Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Gabriel's Primary School Ballyfermot Rd Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Raphael's Pre-school Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Treasure Tots Nursery Le Fanu House 3B Le Fanu Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Mary Queen of Angels Early Start Gurteen Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Louise's Early Start Drumfinn Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Raphael's Primary School Kylemore Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	Woodlands Crèche Ballyfermot Family Resource Centre Lynch's Lane Ballyfermot, Dublin 10
Mary Queen of Angels Primary Schools Gurteen Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Louise's Primary School Drumfinn Road Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Ultan's Primary School Cherryorchard Avenue Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	
	St Matthew's Playgroup 5 Drumfinn Park Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	St Ultan's Childcare Centre Cherryorchard Avenue Ballyfermot, Dublin 10	

Aistear in Action



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