

Exploring the Impact of *Aistear* on Montessori

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of implementing *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) on Montessori education. It also examines the extent to which *Aistear* and Montessori can be integrated successfully. Although this article is just a snapshot of a wider piece of research, which was guided by the overarching question 'Can the Montessori curriculum be integrated with *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and delivered as one unified curriculum?' It presents some evidence that current Early Years (EY) regulations have the potential to create a monopoly of *Aistear* play based services, and that increased reliance on government funding could cause an imbalance of power between the inspector and the provider that undermines the Montessori approach.

Whereas Montessori is based on a socio-constructivist theoretical approach to learning and development, with emphasis placed on cognitive play and independent learning (Colgan, 2016), *Aistear* is underpinned by a socio-cultural theoretical approach to learning and development, with emphasis placed on pretend play and social learning (Daly & Forster, 2010). Montessori classrooms are generally divided into five curriculum areas; practical life, sensorial, numeracy, language and culture. Each area has a range of didactic Montessori materials. Designed to help children develop physical skills and understand specific concepts (Prochazaka, 1993). In contrast, *Aistear* play based settings are usually divided into play areas, such as home corner, construction, small world and messy play. Within these areas children learn and develop while playing with open-ended toys and natural resources (NCCA, 2009).

Findings in this study show that the Montessori curriculum has been undermined in settings and some services had abandoned their Montessori curriculum altogether. Most of the participants succumbed to inspectors recommendations because they feared losing their funding and were concerned regarding the future of Montessori in Ireland. While *Aistear* is considered a positive step it is important that its implementation does not dominate the sector. As Moss (2006) argues “there is not, nor should there be, one agree upon understanding of early childhood education.” Attaining quality and high standards is vital. But a monopoly of *Aistear* play based services, all following the same format, may not necessarily achieve this. Therefore, this article considers should registration with the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme be contingent on all services agreeing to implement *Aistear*.

CONTEXT

Montessori preschools are embedded within the historical development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland (OECD, 2004). They follow the Montessori curriculum using specific didactic materials and adhere to the Montessori principles of teaching and learning (Flood & Hardy, 2013). However, significant changes to early years policy, including the mandatory implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum framework (2009) supported by the ECCE scheme (2018), the introduction of Early Years Education-Focused Inspections (EYEIs) (DES, 2016) and the continuation of TUSLA (the child and family agency) inspections (2011), could have a significant impact on Montessori services and practices.

As an overarching framework, *Aistear* was designed to support existing pedagogical curriculums, such as, Montessori, Froebel, Steiner and HighScope (Kernan, 2007). It focuses on learning and developing through play and building relationships with parents and families

(Daly & Forster, 2010). It was also intended to provide continuity across settings, raise standards and improve quality (NCCA, 2004). Both TUSLA and the DES inspections are guided by the principles of *Aistear*. To ensure services are implementing *Aistear*, settings which seek public funding under the ECCE scheme must demonstrate that they are adhering to the principles and standards of *Aistear* (Pobal, 2016). Other preschool services, not funded under the ECCE scheme, are under no obligation to implement *Aistear*.

However, the attractive nature of the ECCE scheme has led to an increase in parents sending their children to preschool. It is worth noting that the ECCE scheme was introduced during a time of recession. In 2009 the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) contacted all parents in the State, encouraging them to actively recruit their current service provider into the scheme, stating; “If your child is already attending a preschool service... you can ask the service provider if they plan to participate in the scheme” (OMCYA, 2009 cited in O’Donoghue-Hynes, 2011, p.7). This strategy proved to be successful. Within the first year of the scheme participation rates were in excess of 90% (Wolfe, et al. 2013). From my experience of working with parents (during this time) it was a case of register with the scheme or go out of business. Today 95% of all eligible children in Ireland are availing of the ECCE scheme (Pobal, 2016). As a result, most preschools are now financially dependent on state funding (Wolfe, et al. 2013).

Currently, Montessori preschools must implement *Aistear* in order to access or retain public funding. Moloney (2016) suggests that regulatory compliance can be linked to fear. In the context of this study, fear of losing ECCE funding may result in some practitioners making significant changes to the Montessori curriculum. Providers are now in a position whereby they have all the responsibilities of running their own business, but very little of the say (O’Donoghue-Hynes & Hayes, 2011). It is worth considering the implications of state funding on service providers.

METHODOLOGY

This research was guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach. As the implementation of *Aistear* is currently affecting the majority of practitioners in Ireland, it was perceived as a phenomenon. Phenomenological research seeks to uncover the participant’s individual perceptions, regarding a phenomenon or experience (Mertens, 2015). The researcher’s intent is to understand and describe the experience from the participant’s point of view (Mertens 2015, p.247). Considering the dearth of empirical data on the integration of

Montessori and *Aistear*, it was important to gain practitioners perspectives on this phenomenon.

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling technique, which required making theoretical informed decisions as to whom would be included in the research sample (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). As Montessori practices vary, I wanted to gather a range of opinions. Therefore, preschools were grouped into four categories. (1) Preschools registered with the Irish Montessori Education Board (IMEB). (2) Preschools that are part of the Montessori primary school system. (3) Private Montessori preschools. (4) Crèche Montessori preschools (see table 1). It must be acknowledged that this study is limited by the fact that it does not include the voice of inspectors or a representative from the Montessori associations, (American Montessori International (AMI) and St Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association (SNMTA)). The findings provide an insight from a small cohort of participants and should not be generalised to the wider population.

Ten semi structures interviews were carried out over a period of five weeks (two Interviews per week). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The data gathered during the interview process was then analysed using a qualitative coding method, which enabled organising and grouping data into categories (Creswell, 2014). For this study a data organising system was created. I immersed myself in the data by transcribing all of the interviews, reading the transcripts, and precoding. Precoding involved highlighting significant quotes and colour coding responses that where similar, different or unusual (Saldaña, 2009). As categories developed, themes related to the study began to emerge. The data was then reviewed alongside the literature review and the research question. The final themes were named for the presentation of the findings when no further themes were being identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Type of pre-school	Participant	Qualification	Registered with Montessori Association
Private sessional Montessori	A1	Level 6 Montessori Diploma (1992)	No
	A2	Level 6 Montessori (1998)	Yes
	A3	Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2003)	No
Crèche/Montessori	B1	Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2008)	No

	B2	Level 6 Montessori Diploma (2007)	No
	B3	Level 6 Montessori Diploma (1993)	No
Registered with IMEB	C1	Level 8 Montessori Diploma (1993)	Yes
	C2	Level 8 Montessori Educator (2014)	Yes
	C3	Level 7 Montessori Diploma (1990)	Yes
Associated with Montessori Primary School	D1	Level 7 AMI Montessori Level 8 Montessori (2010) Level 9 Masters in Special Ed (2015)	Yes

Table 1 - Participant Profile

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from this study show that factors such as, government funding, inspections, qualifications, and a lack of support from Montessori associations could be having a significant impact on Montessori practices in early years service provision. All participants asserted that there was pressure from inspectors to incorporate *Aistear* play areas into their Montessori classrooms. Five private and crèche Montessori settings disclosed succumbing to pressure, out of fear of losing their funding.

“The inspector wanted the Montessori shelves gone and the materials incorporated beside *Aistear* play stations. I didn’t feel like I had a choice, because don’t we have to for Pobal, to be part of the ECCE scheme” (A3).

This report is concerning because the recommendation appears to be at odds with the research that underpins *Aistear*. Kernan (2007) asserts that *Aistear* supports and acknowledges different pedagogical approaches, and their emphasis on different aspects of organisation. This would suggest that incorporating Montessori materials within *Aistear* play areas is not compulsory. Findings revealed that participants who engaged in this practice found it difficult to follow the structure and order of the Montessori Method. Three participants considered that changing the environment and placing Montessori materials in *Aistear* play areas created

confusion and “days when it is just chaotic” (A3; A2; B2). Four participants stated that they mostly focused on implementing *Aistear* and would consider that they are currently *Aistear* play based settings, rather than Montessori settings. Therefore, embedding Montessori materials within *Aistear* play areas may serve to undermine the Montessori curriculum.

In contrast, IMEB participants considered that changing the Montessori environment would compromise the method. These participants felt that the Montessori curriculum areas provided children with all the same learning experiences as *Aistear*, “so why should they be changed” (D1). For example, the practical life area provides children with home corner and messy play experiences. The sensorial area reflected *Aistear*’s construction play. The culture area reflected *Aistear*’s small world play. The nature table encompassed natural resources, and children had ample opportunities to engage in arts and crafts. IMEB participants did not add *Aistear* play areas into the classroom. Consequently, they considered that they were implementing Montessori and *Aistear* equally. This suggests that Montessori can be integrated with *Aistear*, but not to the extent to which Montessori curriculum areas are replaced by *Aistear* play areas.

It is worth noting, the findings of this study suggest that the integration of Montessori and *Aistear* is impacted by a practitioner’s qualifications, professional knowledge and skills. Participants holding a level 6 qualification indicated that they mostly implemented *Aistear*, and two implemented Montessori and *Aistear* equally, but not simultaneously. In contrast, all participants holding a level 7/8/9 qualification considered they implemented Montessori and *Aistear* equally. This would suggest that professionalising the sector prepares practitioners to better integrate both approaches. Findings indicate that some practitioners, especially those who hold a level 6 Montessori qualification and qualified prior to the introduction of *Aistear*, may benefit from specific Montessori and *Aistear* training.

DISSATISFACTION WITH MONTESSORI ASSOCIATIONS

Cullen (1996) emphasises that merging Montessori with ECCE frameworks requires collaboration and training. However, half of the participants in this study asserted that they were not aware of any specific Montessori and *Aistear* training courses. Surprisingly, the Montessori associations were severely critiqued by participants for not supporting their members, and the wider Montessori community in this way. Nine participants expressed disappointment with both the dearth of Montessori and *Aistear* training courses, and a lack of support regarding DES inspections:

We feel that our association has been really disappointing, they choose to stick their head in the sand and pretend it (*Aistear*) was not going to affect them. They have desperately let us down (C3).

We emailed our Montessori association for their advice, after our inspection, but they weren't interested.....we were so overwhelmed with the changes. So we just gave ourselves over completely to *Aistear*. I'm delighted with how *Aistear* is working. But there is an element of me that feels like something has been lost by losing Montessori (B3).

It is concerning that service providers believed they were working within a contract that offered them "no choice" (A2). The sense of anxiety regarding pending inspections was palpable. It is equally disheartening that the Montessori method is being compromised in some settings and the Montessori associations "choose to stick their head in the sand" (C3), at a time when they most needed to provide support.

CONCERNS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF MONTESSORI IN IRELAND

At the time of this study five participants were Montessori preschool owners and practitioners. Consistent with researchers O'Donoghue-Hynes and Hayes (2011), findings indicate that they all had the responsibility of running their own business but were sometimes excluded from the decision-making processes: "When Pobal came in they effectively took over your business. This is what we want; this is what you have to do" (A2). While participants all agreed that *Aistear* helps raise standards and quality (Freeman, et al. 2016), they were also concerned that the government "just wants a one size fits all" (A2) method of education. Participants working in crèche Montessori settings explained that "A lot of schools are becoming more *Aistear* based because the government are paying them" (B2). Employers are predominantly looking for practitioners with *Aistear* qualifications, as opposed to Montessori, meaning those wishing to pursue a career in ECCE may no longer consider Montessori a viable option.

Concerns that *Aistear* would constrain Montessori practices did not arise during the consultation phase of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2005). However, findings in this study suggest that it should be considered. Participant feedback suggests that there is potential for a monopoly over early years settings by *Aistear* play based services. Should the ECCE scheme be contingent on all services implementing *Aistear*? Moss (2006) argues there should not be one understanding of early childhood education. To have one only serves to limit the choice of children, parents

and practitioners. Especially in services where the practitioner holds a major award in Montessori, Froebel, Steiner or HighScope. This is something that the government, inspectorate, and all those invested in early childhood education should bear in mind.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explore whether *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* can or should be integrated with the Montessori method in Irish early years settings. Although this was a small study, it provides some evidence that factors such as, government funding, inspections, and surprisingly, a lack of support from Montessori associations could be undermining the Montessori curriculum.

It would be helpful if the Montessori associations run a series of courses based on integrating and implementing Montessori with *Aistear*. Attending these courses could improve practice and reduce the fear of inspections. In conjunction with the DES, Montessori associations should produce a guide to Montessori and *Aistear*. Such a guide would provide continuity and support practitioners and the inspectorate. A Montessori and *Aistear* coordinator should be available to offer support regarding the structure of the Montessori environment, inspections and curriculum content. This would promote best practice in Montessori settings. Equally, it would offer service providers with support regarding inspections.

The research that underpins *Aistear* supports and acknowledges different pedagogical approaches and their emphasis on different aspects of organisation (Kernan, 2007). Therefore, it is recommended that the inspectorate assesses the children's learning experiences within the Montessori environment. If the children are being offered the same experiences, and they are achieving the learning goals and aims of *Aistear*, there should be no pressure to add *Aistear* play areas.

There was anecdotal evidence in this study that the inspectors were "not in favour of Montessori" (B1). There was also anecdotal evidence that practitioners were "told" to incorporate *Aistear* play areas into the classroom. While the data gathered was extremely interesting, not including the voice of inspectors and a representative from the Montessori associations limited the study. Therefore, to gain an insight into the inspection process, it is recommended that a further study encompassing a wider range of Montessori practitioners, and inspectors is required.

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