

# Play and Autism in Irish Primary Schools

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Image 1: Bing (2021).

# Research Context



Image 2: The Hanen Centre (2016)

## Topic: *Play and Autism*

- Educators should have playful approaches, have designed and planned effective play environments, make provision for play, and ensure their strategies support learning and teaching through play (Wood, 2010).
- Familiarity of Aistear, Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, in provision of educational settings for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, ranged from unacceptable to good with very few targeting play skills in IEPs (NCCA, 2009; NCSE, 2016).



# Aims & Objectives

*To explore how play is supported for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) up to 7 years old, in Irish primary school settings*

- Compare mainstream, special classes for ASD and special schools provision for play
- How beneficial are Aistear and Síolta to teachers and students?
- How are children supported in outdoor play environments?
- Which school personnel support children with ASD during play?



Image 3: Love to Know (2021)

# Research Design & Data Collection

## *Qualitative Research*

- Semi-structured interviews using Narrative Inquiry & grounded theory concept to examine multiple realities of teaching students with ASD with prior knowledge by researcher (Ford, 2020; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).
- Purposeful sampling: six teachers interviewed - two from each educational setting
- Online interviews using Google Meets and recorded on Voice Recorder app
- Ethical considerations: informed consent, gatekeeper letters, pseudonyms (Teacher 1 etc.), data storage.

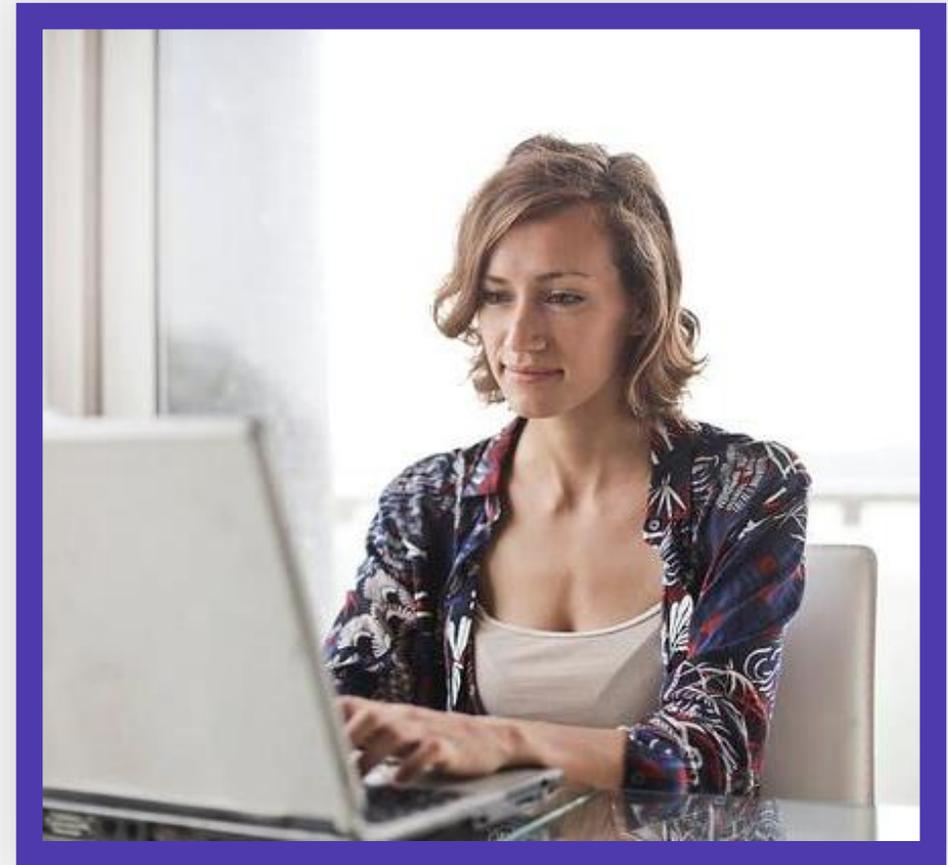


Image 4: Angelfish Fieldwork (n/d)



Table 1: Colour-coded data

Teacher 1	Improving their social skills, communication skills, modelling the language, giving them new vocabulary Benefit massively from sensory play Extending play PE – improve movements, teach playground games	Social Communication Language Sensory Physical Teach games
Teacher 2	Learn...co-operative skills, communication skills, language skills, ability..to get on with ...their peers Wouldn't be used to playing with other kids – cooperatively in group. He gets very excited...hyper His lack of language doesn't really affect him...they're laughing and giggling and the other children are doing the talking It's just more inclusive for him	Cooperation Communication Language Social Pleasure Inclusive
Teacher 3	It increases the child's social skills Will increase their language development Fun and enjoyable Work of children Expand on new ideas It helps them to use their problem solving skills	Social Language Well-being Imagination Problem solving
Teacher 4	I think that everything you do you can learn it through play Social skills, life skills	Social Life skills Learning
Teacher 5	Learn through hands on experience If we enjoy it, we play It's exploring and being surprised	Hand Well
Teacher 6	Socialisation I think the Aistear play particular is so important for any of the life skills If you were just teaching normal curriculum subjects be teaching a lot of the Language development	Social Language Life skills

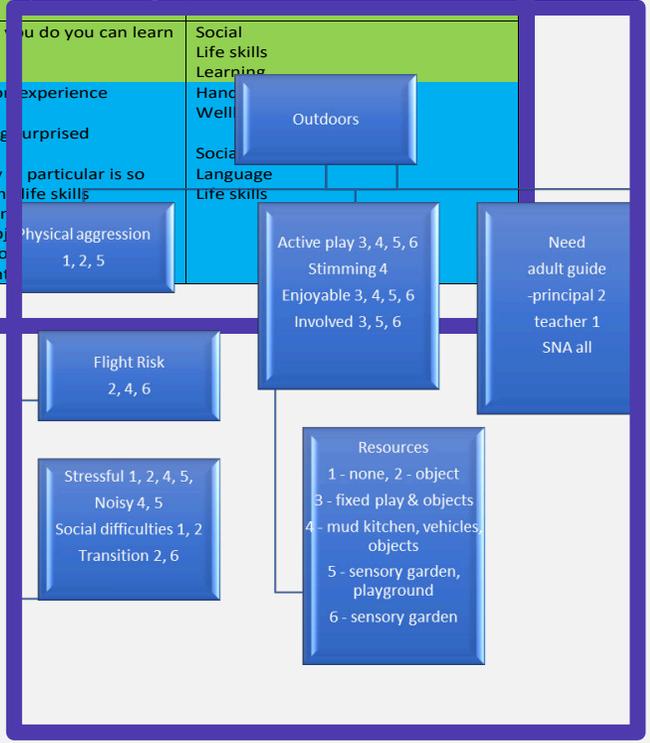


Table 2: Thematic matrix

# Data Analysis Approach

## Thematic and comparative analysis

- Thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).
- Comparative analysis of similarities and differences between schools to offer alternative solutions (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017)
- Transcribed and read data, becoming immersed in it
- Sorted data into tables for each question and colour-coded to setting type for ease of comparison (Table 1).
- Critically analysed codes for themes until three main themes emerged. Table 2 shows a matrix of the theme Outdoors



# Key Findings

## Theme 1: Outdoor Play

- Unstructured Play: outdoors was seen as 'freetime' and only two schools had fixed play equipment
- Adult Supervision: to keep others safe from physical aggression, to play when invited, to help with social skills
- Challenges due to ASD traits: social communication, transition and noise sensitivity

## Theme 2: The role of the SNA in supporting play

- "Integral to play" (Teacher 4)
- Spend the most time with students with ASD
- Playful approaches, warm relationships, anticipate needs, teach social skills, observation, modelling play, accompany to 'Aistear'
- Keep play safe and regulated
- Less support in one mainstream class and one special school

## Theme 3: Aistear as a means to play

- Skills Development: social, language, life skills
- Levels of Well-being & Involvement: Highest in areas of choice of play, lowest in mainstream outdoor play or when adults led play
- Play Strategies: Aistear, scaffolding by SNAs, modelling, visual supports



# Limitations

- Scope of research study doesn't allow for further exploration and comparison of additional settings
- Limited participants so cannot generalise findings to all experiences in that settings.
- Experience due to Covid-19 pandemic.

# Recommendations

- Assess well-being & engagements levels, environments & sensory profiles of students with ASD to provide rich, resourceful and tailored play experiences that meets their needs.
- Mandatory CPD in special education for SNAs and teachers including 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Qualification.
- Assess teacher's time to increase engagement with students and collaboration with staff.
- Increase inspectorate visits nationwide and include Aistear, indoor & outdoor play environments in assessment to ensure importance of play addressed.
- Explore challenges in Aistear Síolta applications by examining the possibility of a single education department for pre-school early childhood education and primary school education.



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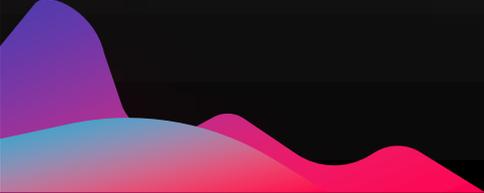


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# Thank You

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# Abstract.

This study has set out to examine how play is supported in Irish primary school settings for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders under seven years old. There were six teachers interviewed from three educational settings: mainstream, special classes and special schools. Qualitative methods of grounded theory and Narrative Inquiry were used. Thematic and comparative data analysis approaches were taken. Three themes emerged: 1. Outdoor play was significant as children spent a lot of unstructured play outdoors; mainstream students particularly had challenges due to ASD traits; and adult supervision was needed. 2. The role of the SNA was central to supporting play. 3. Aistear was a means to play, and for skills development, though levels of well-being and involvement varied. Similar strategies were used to support play. This raises the question of how to ensure children with ASD have access to quality play experiences across all settings and in the outdoors. There is no denying the dedication that teachers showed to their students. Unfortunately, the lack of macro-system supports deny teachers the time needed to give individual support to students in play. While three adults to six children may seem a high ratio, the findings show that intense one-to-one teaching is also needed for each child. The amount of interaction in mainstream and special schools appeared to entail even less individual teaching time, due to pupil numbers. There should be accountability from the Department of Education to provide high quality play provision for children with ASD. The current literature on the challenges of Aistear Síolta, combined with the findings from this study could be a bridge to further study. A broader examination of the barriers that exist on play provisions should be examined, while also looking to the strengths of the system, such as the expertise of SNAs in supporting play for children with ASD.

