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Transitions: From Novice Participation to Expertise, Pre-school 'Matters' in an Irish Pre-School Community.

By

Frances Mary Clerkin

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the
Degree of Ph.D. School of Education
University College Cork

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Dr Anna Ridgway
Head of School: Professor Kathy Hall

April 2014

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted to any other institution, and is, except where otherwise stated, the original work of the author.

Signed: _____

Frances Clerkin

Date: _____

April 2014

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Abstract

This in depth, qualitative, participant observer study tracks children's transition experiences from novice to experienced membership of their pre-school community. It also considers adult roles in mediating this process in the context of the recent introduction of a universal free-pre-school year for children growing up in Ireland. Participation and the space to negotiate a participatory identity is understood in this study as a key element of positive experiences of early years transitions, within pre-school and beyond. The underlying theoretical framework is socio-cultural. This approach shifts from a scientific positivist view of thinking and learning as an individual *inside the head* process and asserts the historical, social, cultural as well as the situated context of learning and meaning making All participants, including myself as researcher, are recognised, explored and valued as embedded in the cultural context studied. In a sense, this approach tilts the worlds being observed through participation in them and reflects them in new light. The aim is to interpret and reflect the multiple realities constructed in this context rather than seek a *truth out there* waiting to be found. Special efforts are made to be invited in to and acknowledge children's expertise in the cultural worlds they negotiate with peers and adults in pre-school. The aim is to better understand what children may find motivating, interesting or problematic as they interpret reproduce and transform meaning within their play and learning worlds.

My aim is for an honest rendering of the voices of stakeholders in pre-school communities from teachers, parents, and policy makers to children themselves. It makes visible constraints; potentials and possibilities within everyday Irish pre-school practices in the situated context studied as well as the broader societal, legislative and macro policy influences it reflects. Casting light on the taken for granted opens the possibility of adaptation or transformation. Transition itself can act as a tool to meet the changing needs of children on their developmental pathways across the life cycle.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale

This thesis brings to life a unique slice of pre-school journeys in a particular Irish pre-school community at a particular time, that can never be repeated. The overarching question considers pre-school 'matters' and what matters in pre-school practice? Pre-school matters in Ireland have attained new prominence with the recent introduction of a universal free pre-school year. My direct participation in the pre-school community described as 'Rainbow Road' enables insights into transitions processes (over time) associated with learning and identity formation within and across communities of practice. These experiences are linked to theoretical, policy, and empirical studies for interpretive analysis. My study considers pre-school matters in terms of the value that is placed on young children's learning journeys and/or destinations by parents, teachers, policy makers and especially children themselves.

The central premise of this study is that learning and development occur through evolving levels of participation within socio-cultural interactions and is rooted in Vygotskian Socio-cultural theory, embodied in the Community of Practice model (COP) (Wenger 2008). Through such lenses each learning community consists of unique individuals, disposed to learn and negotiate meaning in unique ways. It is the very diversity within individuals and therefore learning communities themselves that makes each individual and each community unique. How learning and development are interpreted is variable across as well as within cultures. Banks and Banks (2010, p. 8) propose that:

> *Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artefacts, tools or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret and perceive them.*

This study considers how members of a particular Irish pre-school community interpret and participate in culture. Participation is argued as the means to interpret or negotiate the meaning of these 'intangible aspects of human societies'. As cultural beings, the tools (including language) that we use and the artefacts we create (including children's play

artefacts), become meaningful sources of communication within our everyday relationships (Vygotsky 1978, Wenger 2008). The impact of pre-school in shaping children's early years experiences in Ireland and specifically, the processes and impact of transition from home to pre-school on young children's evolving learner identities, is under-researched. This is in contrast to considerable research that has been undertaken in relation to children's transition to, and experiences within the junior cycle of the formal school system (Hayes 2004, Murphy 2004, O'Kane 2007). The sparse attention to pre-primary transitions is reflected in international research, which until recently has tended to focus on what have been described as vertical transitions to formal school and children's adjustment to and formation of the new identity of school child (Kagan and Neuman 1998, Brostrom 2002, Fabian and Dunlop 2002, Brooker 2002, 2008, Dunlop and Fabian 2007). In Ireland and elsewhere increasing numbers of children, at younger ages, participate in horizontal transitions throughout the day or week. This can include transitions from home to services such as crèches, day-care and child minder services, to pre-school unto after school care. It is proposed that deeper reflection and analysis on earlier transitional roles and identities (prior to formal schooling) such as the identity formation of pre-school child can usefully inform the complex processes of transition in early childhood and beyond. In Ireland, a focus on pre-school practices supporting early learning and identity formation may be particularly salient given the recent transition here to universal provision of pre-school education in 2010.

The Irish Government's decision to provide a one year universal free pre-school place to children growing up in Ireland is an unprecedented investment in early years education (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014). We also now have Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009, 2014) a framework for early learning with themes of *Well being, Identity and Belonging, Communication and Exploring and Thinking.* This is supported by Síolta a National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006). These initiatives indicate that pre-school matters have attained a new prominence at macro institutional as well as meso community level (Bronfennbrenner 1979, Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1998). We now need to ask what matters at the personal level in the micro world of children's lived experiences and explore

how and why pre-school matters in children's lives.

Whereas transition studies have tended to focus on key events such as the transition to formal schooling, this study tracks the experience of children from their initial transition from home cultures to pre-school. Such experiences encompass what Vygotsky (1978) understood as small moment to moment microgenetic developmental changes (transitions). Transition within this study is conceptualised as a process of coping and adaptation and transformation over time (Elder 1999 p.5) as children move from novice to experienced membership and explore and negotiate new pre-schooler identities within a pre-school Community of Practice (Wenger 2008). This study also draws on Rogoff's (1990; 2008) socio-cultural perspective and three planes of analysis incorporating the community/cultural, the interpersonal and the personal (Rogoff *et al* 1995 pp. 47 - 48).

1.1.1. Early Childhood Care and Education - The Community/Cultural Plane

Rogoff (2008) has conducted many cross cultural studies of young children's learning and development in diverse social and cultural communities. Rogoff (1990, p.11) elaborates her concept of development in terms of transition and transformation:

> *...transitions of a qualitative (as well as quantitative nature) that allow a person to manage more effectively the problems of everyday life, relying on the resources and constraints offered by companions and cultural practices to define and solve problems.*

In this Rogoff theorises development as a series of large and small transitions over time with a continuous interplay of the biological and the social and cultural. Rogoff (1990) draws on Vygotsky's (1978) description of the overlap of developmental transitions including the *ontogenetic* (development across the life cycle), *microgenetic* (development in time spans including moment to moment) and *phylogenetic* (historic societal/species changes). Through such a lens childhood can be viewed as an important foundation for all future developmental transitions.

In Chapter 2, the association of early learning and development with a separate or specially prepared environment is elaborated through the Enlightenment theories of Rousseau and Locke. Both theorists applied different emphases with the inference that childhood required separate spaces, or what Montessori (1996, p.36) would later describe as a *prepared environment.* The specially prepared environment as *third educator* (in addition to teacher and curriculum) has become an embedded part of western early years theoretical understandings traceable through the progressive philosophies of Froebel, Montessori, Dewey, and others. Kernan and Devine (2010, p. 371) observe that:

> *one feature of modernity has been the institutionalising of childhood space – the demarcation of specific places within which children are gathered primarily for the purposes of play, learning and caring.*

Pre-school is one such place which along with formal school is recognised as a separate specially prepared space designed and supervised by adults. Whatever the curriculum or underlying philosophy, pre-school is traditionally associated with play, and the processes of learning and development with the support of caring and responsive adults. In the western world today, children spend more time in pre-school, day care and ECCE settings and less time in *learning at the elbow* apprenticeship type activities in the home, or in outdoor exploratory play with neighbourhood children. Latterly, questions arise as to how the spaces and places that children inhabit outside of home may suit their needs, rights and evolving identities as learners. This study will consider children's own agency in navigating their experiences of pre-school as well as adult roles in mediating this process.

At times of transition, individuals bring with them diverse dispositional tendencies and expectations based on the affordances of their previous social and cultural experiences or what Bourdieu (1989c , p. 87) describes as the *habitus*. Various perspectives can complement each other, pose challenges, initiate change or resistance to change within the practices of any given cultural community (Wenger 2008). Bruner (1997, p.13) suggests that 'Understanding something in one way does not preclude understanding it in other ways'. This study explores and seeks multiple perspectives on what is valued and supported culturally as well as what may give rise to challenge within the situated context

of the community studied. Historically, early years environments and adult roles within them have varied in accordance with understandings of what children require exposure to or protection from (Postman 1994, Gittins 1998). It is within the space of pre-school that these historically mediated, competing or contrasting purposes and aims will be explored in this study. It will be argued that differing views of childhood can dominate or co-exist. Such views are evident in policy, legislation, regulations, place, resources and the space to mediate meaning within everyday practices (community/cultural influences). It is furthermore argued that the role of the adult also varies in accordance with the perceived view and expectations for and of the child.

This study tracks the transitions in thinking that occur for both adults and children as we develop our participatory identities and navigate and negotiate through the pre-school year. It looks at what is important or what matters about participation in these everyday routines and activities from multiple perspectives. It is argued that such participatory practices make each cultural community a unique example of multiple cultural contexts. The findings of the study may not be easily generalised or transposable to new settings or even to the same setting at a different time. However, the tools for thinking applied within the participant observer roles adopted (Research Design Chapter 5) are argued as applicable across a range of communities of practice, within and beyond the situated context of the study. This is important because the application of such tools can usefully inform policy and practice to meet changing societal and cultural needs.

1.1.2. Interpersonal Plane - Flexible Roles and Shared Meaning Making

A main aim of the study is to reflect and interpret child perspectives of the cultural worlds they negotiate and inhabit within pre-school. These worlds incorporate children's peer interactions and constitute what could be described as *worlds within worlds* (Clerkin 2013) of children's multiple experiences of play and learning within pre-school. James *et al* (1998, p.87) assert that 'something which could be called 'children's culture' exists only in the spaces and times over which children have some degree of power and control'. Such a view concurs with the participant observations of this study. Included in this are examples of children's active engagement in their cultural worlds at informal times at the interstices of adult control. At such times, a flexibility in the participant/observer role afforded the

possibility of switching between teacher and learner roles and perspectives. However, Warming (2005) cautions that participant observation does not allow the researcher a direct access to the child's view, but rather a mediated view which leads to meaningful interpretation. As James (1996, p.315) puts it:

> *to claim to write from 'the child's' perspective, is not to make claims to reveal the authentic child but more humbly, to provide a rendering of what childhood might be like*.

The various requirements of the research roles in this study argue for flexibility and encompass: researcher, volunteer, teacher and learner and encompass the role of least adult in children's self-initiated play and learning activities. But these roles did not start with my research, the development of these roles can be traced back to my own social and cultural influences or what Rogoff *et al* (1995) describe as the personal plane for interpretive analysis.

1.1.3. Personal Plane - Researcher in Context and the Context of Research

As a child growing up in the sixties in Ireland I, my siblings and most of my peers followed the cultural practice of transition directly to primary school from care at home with our mothers at age four. Pre-school services outside of cities and even within cities were not widely available. I was the second of four children growing up in a working class neighbourhood with lots of children younger than myself. From an early age, I enjoyed my older sibling role which I experienced as caring for, telling stories and playing games with my younger siblings, and neighbourhood children. From these playful early relationships, I felt drawn to the idea of working with young children. However, opportunities to work in early years services were few and in my secondary school experiences it was never suggested as a career option. In fact, I followed my older sister's path and competed in public service examinations attaining a clerical position in a culturally valued s*ecure, pensionable job* where I was employed for a number of years before pursuing a long held ambition to travel and work abroad. In my twenties, having returned from a working holiday in Australia and New Zealand, I arrived back to an Ireland deep in the late 1980's recession. The same skills that had financed my travels abroad continued to make me a

living in our capital city, but I longed for new challenges. I first recall hearing about Montessori education through friends and acquaintances with children attending pre-schools in Dublin. I was inspired by conversations with my friend's four year old son. I discovered that his playful joy in language and learning was supported by guidance in the use of aesthetically attractive and sensorial materials within the specially prepared environment of a Montessori pre-school. I enjoyed this child's communication of his love of learning, his confidence, competence and persistence with every new challenge, dispositions which happily have followed him in to his adult life. My own confidence, well-being and positive sense of self has always been bolstered by my love of stories, spoken and read, dispositions nurtured and enriched in my home and many of my later cultural experiences.

Following from this early learning trajectory, (Wenger 2008) subsequent voluntary work with adults with various levels of illiteracy proved illuminating. My students displayed courage, intelligence, and competence in coping with the isolation of participating in a literate society with inadequate literacy skills. A further barrier to participation, making it difficult to seek help, was the shame of not knowing or understanding these taken for granted social and cultural means of communication. It seemed to me that these people who were struggling so valiantly to overcome these difficulties might have benefited from different and more supportive early learning experiences. I saw in Montessori education the possibility of children gaining a positive sense of self and realising their own potential in a way that might sustain them and afford them a sense of belonging and agency over the life course. I went on to attain qualifications and work in Montessori pre-school settings in the U.S.A. and latterly in Ireland. On return to Ireland, I found it necessary to return to clerical work to supplement my income. When raising my own children, I embraced the opportunity to return to work again in a Montessori sessional setting. This meant reduced income but increased work satisfaction and the welcome opportunity to spend more time with my daughters. Initially, what could be described as an apprenticeship developed in the sphere of Montessori education. This initial experience evolved as I connected with the wider Early Childhood Care and Education community whose interests were supported through organisations such as the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association (IPPA) and the

National Children's Nursery Association (NCNA). I attended meetings with IPPA (now known as Early Childhood Ireland) and became increasingly interested in theories and issues of topical interest in ECCE. As a community (of interconnected communities of practice) we discussed and shared insights and ideas from our everyday practices as well as the questions and challenges these entailed.

My learning journey continued in University College Cork BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies) and it was here I came to understand how my own situated social and cultural experiences combined with my early learning dispositions had brought me on a particular path that both enabled and at times constrained me in the pursuit of my aims. The cost in time as well as the economic cost of pursuing further education were two constraints. However, these factors also motivated me to achieve the best possible degree I could attain. This achievement enabled me to obtain an Erasmus scholarship for a taught European Masters in Early Childhood Care and Education. The Masters programme involved collaborative work within a community of students and lecturers from Ireland, Scotland, Malta, Germany, Norway and Sweden. Apart from visits to a range of ECCE settings in Scotland and Malta, I had the privilege of representing the group of four Irish students and attending the European Early Childhood Research Association conference in Norway (2008). The workshop and poster session on Early Years Transitions held by Sue Dockett and Bob Perry at this conference fuelled my interest in children's learning and development at key times of transition. Throughout this learning journey, my emergent understanding has been that who we are or can be is not a solitary matter, we shape but are also shaped by our social, cultural, and historical circumstances.

1.2. Research Questions

This study explores how and why pre-school has become a matter of personal, social and cultural importance in Irish society. It specifically considers conflicting or contrasting societal images of children and childhood and associated roles for adults in mediating children's early childhood experiences. The overarching question acknowledges that pre-school is a matter of increasing significance at a structural level in Irish Society and asks what matters at the local level of everyday practice? The three emergent and interconnected themes explored in this study are play, relationships, and language and

communication. In retrospect each of these themes surfaced in terms of what matters in early childhood education whether in my own roles as a student, a parent, a practitioner, or a researcher. They also manifested within the interconnected experiences of the young children in my care or the care of other parents and practitioners. All of our early dispositions in learning appear to emerge from those first playful communications with the adult world. The playful emotional connections communicated within our early relationships connect us to a social world of meaning in which we collaborate from our earliest days (Trevarthan 2002, Shonkoff and Phillips, 2002, Laevers 2004, Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). The *play* of this thesis involves actors from multiple backgrounds within a setting at a particular time and place. The story is presented firstly by tracing some of the background influences that bring us to this place in time before considering the potential pathways afforded in the present and future. The COP model is usefully applied to frame this study from the perspectives of the participants in one pre-school community within its situated cultural and historical context. It provides valuable insights into children's navigation of new roles and identities during pre-school transitions, and teacher and parent roles in mediating this process. The four main research questions addressed in the literature and the empirical data are as follows:

1. *What views of the child and the role of the adult are implicit or explicit in the policy and practices of early childhood care and education in Ireland?*

2. *How do children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school and what roles do adults play in mediating this process?*

3. *What are the indicators of positive experiences of transitions in ECCE?*

4. *How does the community cope, adapt and transform itself over time, to meet community/cultural, interpersonal and personal needs?*

1.3. The Layout of the Thesis

In this Chapter I have presented the background and rationale for the focus of the study and listed the main research questions. The next chapter looks at key aspects of the emergence of early childhood care and education in Ireland. Conflicting and contrasting discourses on what *children* and *childhood* are or can be are explored. It also explores theoretical understanding traced back to the Enlightenment on how such interpretations have influenced and continue to influence early year's policies and practices and associated roles and identities of pre-school participation in Ireland. The historical association of early years education in Ireland and internationally with play based practice and the ground up influence this may be exerting on ECCE in Ireland at a policy level is explored. In Chapter 3, the socio-cultural research lens applied in this study seeks illumination on how meaning is negotiated by all participants within the cultural community studied, situated in its broader historical and social context. The COP model which acts as a theoretical frame for the pre-school cultural context under study is elaborated. This is referenced to Rogoff's conceptualisation of developmental progress linked to the valued skills and goals of learning communities. Contextually, how adults structure children's opportunities for learning and development will vary according to what is valued and aimed for in the cultural contexts studied.

Chapter 4 focuses on theory, policy and empirical literature in Ireland and abroad on early years transitions and provides indicators of what may constitute positive experiences of transition. It also elaborates the rationale for research in to the understudied area of pre-primary school transitions in Ireland. In this current study there is a shift from emphasis on transition to and within the formal school context to that of the pre-school sector. The literature reviewed helps make the case for a study of the processes of transitions as they play out within the historical, social and cultural context of an Irish Pre-school Community of Practice implementing the free pre-school year scheme.

The qualitative, participant observer lenses, within the study research design (Chapter 5) offers a unique and in depth look at every day practices throughout a pre-school morning, week, month and year in a particular Irish pre-school community. The COP framing of the study provides tools for thinking and understanding of participatory identities in Pre-school. This Chapter describes the methodological tools and approach developed in Phase 1 of the study and adjusted and adapted in Phase 2. Ethical considerations on consent and assent when working with young children are foregrounded as is the importance of building relationships of trust with all study participants. This is followed by Phase 1 (Chapter 6) which introduces *Rainbow Road* pre-school, some of the main actors (adults and children) and adopts multiple lenses to interpretively analyse everyday practice. Within this, the study also tracks my own experience of moving from a peripheral participatory role (Lave and Wenger 1991) to increasing involvement in my various roles within the setting. Phase 2 (Chapter 7) starts out by exploring narratives of ‘ being and becoming’ (James *et al.* 1998, p. 207) in Rainbow Road. Through daily participant observations it tracks participants as they develop and negotiate 'participation repertoires' (Carr 2001, p.10) and in the process develop an 'identity of participation' (Wenger 2008, p.52). The research lens focuses on the ongoing transition experiences of two of the children who joined Rainbow Road in Phase 1. These children's individual and group participatory identities are tracked over the full pre-school year. The recurring themes of play, relationships and language/communication are explored as are the influences of the more experienced pre-schoolers on new arrivals to the setting.

Chapter 8 follows children's use of the place and space of Rainbow Road pre-school. This is elaborated through their own cultural artefacts, and play and learning experiences drawn from, participant observations, field notes, photographic data and audio recordings. These efforts at collaborative meaning making are argued as providing pathways into children's cultural worlds. In this, are reflected glimpses of what such worlds might look, feel like or appear meaningful from child perspectives. This data is juxtaposed against data from the end of year semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents of the key informant children. The interview data drew on the many informal conversations with parents and teachers over the full pre-school year. Parents provided useful insights in to the home

experiences, broader cultural influences and expectations impacting on their child's experience of pre-school. Similarly Teachers brought their own pedagogical influences and dispositional interests to bear on their negotiation of everyday practice.

The concluding Chapter (9) revisits the research questions and reflects on and interpretively analyses the findings of this study. This final Chapter argues for the usefulness of a socio-cultural lens in reflecting the multiple perspectives of any given Community of Practice. The findings, emergent themes and images of children within and beyond the context of the study are discussed, along with some implications for policy, practice and ongoing research.

Chapter 2. Back to the Future - Exploring Historical Transitions in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland.

> *Any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told. (Bruner 2004, p.709)*

2.1. Introduction

Life can be conceptualised as a series of ongoing and interconnected stories unfolding over time. Each of us arrives at a particular point in a particular place and time and participates in an unfolding story within a broader societal story. It is argued that historically mediated ideas become socially and culturally valued and will influence the types of roles and identities we appropriate as well as what may be available for appropriation. Perspectives on what childhood is, or can possibly be, are not stable and vary across time and space. How stories of children's lived experiences unfold relate to other stories embedded in the circumstances into which we are born including those told about gender, class and ethnicity. An aim of this study is to highlight dominant and often taken for granted concepts of childhood at structural levels in society. Such views are argued as validating particular ways of being a child that may implicitly exclude others. This Chapter begins to address the research question, *What views of the child and the role of the adult are implicit or explicit in the policy and practices of early childhood care and education in Ireland?* This is approached by considering some of the historically mediated storying of childhood agendas impacting on the current landscape of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

From infancy, our experiences are influenced by many variable factors including dominant views (stories mediated over time) on the nature of childhood itself. Bruner (2004) suggests that stories carry within them a *what if?* possibility. What if we were to tell the same story from a different perspective? How might the possibilities change and develop? The child historically has been viewed as in need of socialisation due to the vulnerability and relative helplessness of the new born human infant. What form this socialisation should take, by whom, and for whom continues to be the subject of debate. An aim of this

Chapter is to make visible some of these storied understandings including less visible imaginings of childhood in order to consider their *what if* ? possibilities within children's lived experiences in ECCE in Ireland.

Major influences on ECCE in Ireland are traced back to transitions in educational policy and practice during the early days of our post-colonial history and latterly as members of the European Union. These influences include historical and cultural changes resulting in new roles for women, changing family structures, and subsequently increased out of home experiences for young children. Ground up developments since the 1960s in early years' services are identified alongside top down influences within primary schooling and particularly the junior infant classes catering for children from age four to six. Historically, gender is an important theme in terms of female roles and citizenship and associated citizenship rights for children. Some of the seismic shifts in thinking about childhood as well as the possibilities for adult roles in the child rearing process are explored. These can be traced back to the Enlightenment era in Europe; otherwise known as the *Age of Reason* which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries.

2.2. Historical and Social Constructions of Children and Childhood

The emergent new scientific and rational world view of the Enlightenment era was characterised by challenges to traditional perceived wisdom about man and nature and, by inference, the nature of children and childhood. New parental concerns with modes of child rearing at this time have been equated with the rise of literacy in the merchant classes (Pollock 1983, Postman 1994). This was further facilitated by the earlier invention of movable type which literally *spread the word,* gathering increasing momentum and in the process creating new stories and perceptions of what childhood is or ought to entail. Cranston (1957) elaborates how one such story or construct of childhood is revealed in Locke's (1632-1704) concept of the child born neither good nor evil but as *tabula rasa* or blank slate. This perspective of the child moulded and shaped by societal expectations assigns adults a critical role in development; with childhood viewed as a time to lay down the foundations for all future learning. Another *Apostle* of the Enlightenment, French Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) held a view of humanity that challenged the Christian tradition of the child born with *original sin* (Cranston 1991). Gittins (1998)

characterises Rousseau's perspective as promoting a new view of childhood as a time of *original innocence*. In his classical work on the fictional Émile, Rousseau espoused a view of innocent childhood, unfolding in nature under the guidance of an adult mentor and free from the influence of a corrupting society. This idea of inherent human goodness would later find voice within humanistic psychology. Another earlier perspective constructs the child as shaped by but also shaping her/his development, where both nature and nurture interplay in a dialectical relationship Comenius (1592 -1671) as cited by Quick (1910). This dialectical understanding of the child shaped by both nature and nurture re-emerged and became linked to the philosophical outlook of Emmanuel Kant (1724 -1804) described by Rohlf (2013). Within this storying of childhood, is a view that from earliest infancy children may be biologically pre-disposed to reason and develop in social contexts. Such views precede the socio-cultural and psychological perspective of Vygotsky and post Vygotskian theorists (elaborated in Chapter 3) and also reflect contemporary ideas on the functioning of the human brain from neuroscience.

It has also been argued that the story of childhood as a separate state of dependency, with children viewed primarily in need of adult protection and/or surveillance is a relatively modern concept associated with western industrialisation. Philippe Ariés (1996) in his seminal work *Centuries of Childhood* hypothesises that in the past, children may have been viewed as *miniature adults*. Ariés recalls a time prior to industrialisation where young children were actively participating in or apprenticed into roles in society rather than socialised separately. Industrialisation placed new demands on children with the imposition of compulsory schooling and much longer periods of time spent in institutional forms of education from the early years onwards. Locke's and Rousseau's belief in the need for social reform was reflected in their insistence that early education required a specially controlled environment, paradoxically viewed as more *natural* and free from the corrupting influences of the wider society. Both theorists differed considerably in their views on the form that the learning environment should take, and indeed what they considered as corrupting influences. In Locke's *Thoughts concerning Education (*1692) he adopted a role of expert in response to the growing unease and fears in society. His writings (directed largely at the emerging middle class) were aimed at inculcating a sense of responsibility in

young children and provided direct instructions on bringing them up (Yolton and Yolton 2000). In contrast, Rousseau's advocacy of the *natural* promoted opportunities for the child from infancy to learn through the senses; to actively and bodily explore natural surroundings and in so doing learn about self and the world (Boyd 1956). Arguably both the rationalism of Locke and the romanticism and sentimentalism of Rousseau also constructed and imposed a new vision of adulthood. Adults, particularly those of the middle and upper classes, were to become gatekeepers of childhood, and responsible for provision of their specially prepared educational environment usually separate from mainstream social life. The industrial revolution of the first half of the 19th century took hold in Europe with Britain leading the way. With industrialisation, children's traditional early apprenticeship to the mature activities of society switched to the extended preparation for adulthood imposed by the age graded school system. The new demands of the industrial age required a literate population. Education was made compulsory for the masses in Britain and its colony Ireland in 1892. In Ireland two influential *Intellectual heirs* (Postman 1994, p. 58) of the Enlightenment impacting on the theorising and development of early childhood care and education in the Industrial Age would be Froebel and in the 20th century Montessori.

2.3. Froebel and the Cultivation of Early Childhood Care and Education

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) developed his pedagogic theory and practices in the German state of Thuringia in the 1830's (Adelman 2000). His term *kindergarten* translates as children's garden and represented a specially prepared space for children to learn. It also acts as a metaphor for a botanical view of children analogous to seeds in need of cultivation and nurture. Out of his botanical studies, Froebel came to an understanding of a mystical influence of God in nature. Froebel related the inner/outer development of the child to the image of a plant growing above and below the surface. The very concept of a garden suggests a taming or cultivation of the natural. Kindergartens were set in natural locations, surrounded by gardens for flowers and vegetables which the children themselves were taught to cultivate and nurture just as their adult guides would nurture and cultivate the interests and activities of the children (Lilley 1967).

Froebel gave particular emphasis to *mother love* in early development (MacNaughton 2007 p. 152). Froebel also saw a significant role for women in the kindergarten itself; so legitimising a role outside of the home for women. Central to his philosophy was the significance of play which he viewed 'as the highest level of child-development and the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling' (Lilley 1967, p.83). In this understanding, Froebel precedes Vygotskian theory in his identification of an emotional link between play and learning. Play is viewed as a means by which children communicate physically and verbally what motivates and interests them. Out of these understandings, Froebel developed pedagogical tools which he called *gifts.* These related to the children's own interests and were used as indicators to their adult guides of areas to be encouraged and developed. In addition to these, were *occupations* which allowed children to play and explore with, and formulate as well as communicate their interests and understandings (Liebschner 2001). Froebel believed social cohesion would be enhanced by bringing children together to communicate in a circle (Henniger 1999). The practice of C*ircle Time* with its democratic principles has latterly become an embedded part of modern western pre-school practice. Froebel would become best known as the Father of early year's education encompassing concepts of kindergarten, play-school and pre-school (O'Connor 2008). However, in Ireland, Froebel's lasting legacy would be associated with the more formal environment of primary schooling.

The first Froebelian kindergarten was established in Rathmines Road, Dublin by Eleonare Heerwart (1835 – 1911) who had studied as a student of Froebel's wife Luise Froebel (Hayes and Kernan 2008). In some cases, Kindergarten became associated with girls secondary education (in Ireland and abroad) and older pupils who wished to train in Kindergarten education. Consequently, 'Schools and colleges for women helped to expand the sphere of paid employment for middle class women' (Hayes and Kernan 2008, p. 18). The Dominican order began Froebelian teacher training (for primary school) in St. Dominic's College, Belfast and latterly in the Dominican College, Sion Hill from 1943 to 1st of September 2013, when it moved to Maynooth University. It is now known as the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. Significantly, the Frobelian view of the child learning through play, and the aspirational intent that children

be actively engaged in this process existed at a curricular policy level from the 1900s in Ireland. However, the implementation of a Froebelian approach at practice level in national schools was inhibited by the high pupil teacher ratio where students ranged in numbers from 50 – 60 with one teacher (Douglas 1994). However, a modified version of Froebel education continued in primary schooling in Ireland until the 1920's and the establishment of the Irish Free State. Arguably it would be another intellectual heir of the Enlightenment in the form of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) who would exert some of the most extensive influence on the practices informing modern early years pre-school practices in Ireland.

2.4. Montessori and Shifting Perspectives of Children and Childhood

Maria Montessori was born in Ancona, Italy in 1870. She excelled in school and college and become the first Italian female physician (Lillard 2005). As a doctor, and scientist her observations of developmentally disabled children lead her to develop sensorial materials for their cognitive stimulation. These children went on to pass state educational tests designed for children of so called *normal intelligence* and thus aroused international attention (Lillard 2005). Subsequently, Montessori worked with young children from impoverished backgrounds, establishing her *Casa dei Bambini* (translated as Children's House) in a slum area of Rome. Montessori concluded from her in depth observations that young children construct themselves based on the relationships and resources they encounter in their early years environments (Montessori 1984). Out of this constructivist understanding Montessori insisted that children's experiences in pre-school not be trivialised or their value underestimated by describing them as play. Montessori asserted that for the young child 'Such experience is not just play…. It is work he must do in order to grow up.' (Montessori 1984, p. 168).

MacNaughton (2007, p.93) has described Montessori's approach as a 'conforming to nature' model which infers supporting nature without attempting to force or control its direction. Montessori (1996) also believed that part of this nature included *sensitive* or *critical* periods (varying in timing from child to child) for different forms of learning including language acquisition. This fits with contemporary ideas of the relative plasticity of the brain during the early formative years (Shonkoff and Philips 2002) and also the influence of early relationships in the development of language (Bruner 1975, Trevarthan

2002). Historically, Montessori is recognised as a feminist (Brehony 1999). She was vocal in her concern for children's rights which she envisioned as manifesting through progressive education encompassing a view of children as citizens with rights. In letters to all World Governments (Montessori 1947), she would refer to the child in society as *the forgotten citizen*, stating 'Man must be cultivated from the beginning of life when the great powers of nature are at work'. Similarly to Froebel, Montessori evokes a botanical image of the child in need of care and nurture in a suitably rich *soil*. There are also echoes of Rousseau's view of the child's nature as naturally unfolding, if not stifled by corrupting aspects of the adult world. Montessori became instrumental in setting up training colleges and her educational influence spread through Europe and America. Within the historical context of Montessori's arrival in Ireland, her image of the child would meet with a mixture of support and opposition.

The first Montessori Kindergarten was established in Waterford by the Catholic Sisters of Mercy in 1920. However, Fr. Timothy Corcoran, a Professor of the Theory and Practice of Education at University College Dublin was a scathing critic of Montessori and other forms of progressive education. He condemned Froebelian schools of thought and also the philosophy of her contemporary John Dewey (Titley 1983). Corcoran (1924) believed that 'folly is bound up in the heart of a child, and the rod of correction shall drive it away'. He also deemed it unacceptable that Montessori had developed her methods for typically developing children, from work with children who had special needs. Embedded in Corcoran's storying of childhood is the image of a deficit view of children, with deviance from a perceived norm, inferring a child somehow less human or less entitled to participate in society. Fr. Corcoran's central influence on educational policy in post- colonial Ireland succeeded in excluding Montessori from the State School System but not from the voluntary/private sector.

Montessori returned to Ireland several times during the 1930s including a visit to the Sacred Heart Convent Leeson Street, Dublin for a training course in 1938 (Hayes and Kernan 2008). Catholic nuns have a long association with education in Ireland and in the new Free State era occupied some of the few roles for women legitimated outside of the

home. The Dominican order would cement the establishment of Montessori education and training colleges in Ireland. The Dominican order (also established Froebel training colleges in Ireland) opened up a Montessori *children's house* in Sion Hill, Dublin in 1928. In 1946 an Irish Branch of Association Montessori International was established followed by a one year evening course offered by the Dominican order. By 1957, the Sisters had extended their courses to include a one year graduate course. Latterly, full-time three year courses are offered at the college (now located at the Mount Saint Mary's Campus on the Dundrum Road). In the 1970s, the St. Nicholas Montessori Society also established their training School in Dublin (Hayes and Kernan 2008). Montessori Honours Degree courses are now accessible in Ireland through Colleges of Further Education such as Cork Institute of Technology.

2.5. Post-Colonial Ireland–Defining Women's Roles, Confining Childhood?

Two years after the establishment of the first Montessori Kindergarten in Ireland, twenty - six counties of Ireland separated from Britain and set up the first Irish Free State Government. First wave feminists such as Hannah Sheehy Skeffiington had at this point secured votes for women in Ireland (several years before British women) and the right for women to stand as candidates in elections (O'Dowd 1987). However, the foundation of the state heralded the dawn of a patriarchal, Catholic Church influenced conservative era. Subsequently the level and impact of female activism rapidly diminished or was rendered silent by the dominance of Church influenced state governance. The Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hEireann) was created in 1937 and was heavily influenced by Catholic ethos and teachings. The Constitution has been criticised for the gendered role it assigns women (National Women's Council of Ireland 2012). Effectively the rights of women and children were subsumed under the dominant male patriarchical ranking. The authority of husbands over their wives, and fathers over their children had legal and social backing.

Cunneen (2001) traces global patterns of gender socialisation from ancient times to the present day and provides rare historical insight into gender roles in Irish society. In particular, she identifies the historical patriarchal power structures of agricultural

inheritance from the Potato famine (1845-1849) leading to differential social and educational practices for males and females in Ireland. This differential treatment was compounded by the powerful influence of the Catholic Church who insisted that schools be gender segregated. By the end of the 19th century the majority of schools in Ireland were segregated by sex as were the teacher training colleges. Male teachers received a higher rate of pay. Differentiation also occurred in subject areas such as woodwork for boys and needlework for girls. Such practices, including affording males a higher rate of pay for the same work extended well in to the twentieth century in Ireland. The role of the woman's place within the home is given particular emphasis in the Irish constitution Articles 41 (Bunreacht na hEireann 1937)

> *In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.*
>
> *The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.*

Any notion of women neglecting what were viewed as their primary responsibilities was frowned upon by Church & State. Women were socially and legally discouraged from engaging in the workforce. A Civil Service *Marriage Bar* where women were obliged to give up their jobs, once married, lasted until the 1970s (Fallon 2007). The historical lens indicates that women's roles within the home were reified at structural levels (Legislative and Constitutional) in Irish society. However, the associated constraints on women's rights and agency are argued as impacting on how children were viewed or afforded opportunities to participate in society. Historically, an image of the active child learning through play and reciprocal relationships was aspired to as far back as the 1900s in Ireland when the Froebelian based national school curriculum was introduced. However, in the twenty-six counties of Ireland the transition from British colony to Free State imposed new nationalistic cultural priorities for education (O'Connor 2008). It was not until the 1950s that the ideals of the progressive movement (evident in Froebelian and Montessori philosophy) began to again resurface in Irish primary school education.

2.6. The Rhetoric of Progress – Play, Relationships & Language/Communication Matters?

This culminated in the influential Plowden Report in Britain 'Children and their Primary Schools' (1967). Hayes and Kernan (2008) identify Sr. Simeon Tarpey, Head of the Froebel Teacher Training College in Sion Hill Blackrock (1950s – 1960s) as a key catalyst in the promotion of the progressive approach underlying the New Primary School Curriculum (Curaclam Bunscoile) Department of Education and Science 1971. In a published lecture (Tarpey 1963) Sr. Simeon stated 'activity on the part of the learner is more important than activity on the part of the teacher, who in a certain sense is subordinate to the pupil'. This statement challenges ideas which were taken for granted of the traditional teacher as all knowing expert and transmitter of knowledge. The view of the child as an active playful learner with the teacher in a guiding and responsive rather than didactic role, has a Piagetian influence that permeates the 1971 Primary School Curriculum. This perspective was hailed as a radically new approach (Hayes and Kernan 2008). The advocacy of individual and group teaching over traditional whole class teaching methods was aimed to enable practices of 'each child progressing at his own natural rate' (Department of Education and Science 1971, p.16).

The influence of progressive approaches to education on how children are conceptualised contain certain common elements. These include the view of play as significant to young children's learning, as well as the associated development of cognition through the senses. The importance of relationships and the use of observation as a guiding tool for practitioners is also identified. This guidance role extends to the encouragement of self-regulation and self discipline amongst young children (MacNaughton 2007). Perhaps the most important legacy of progressive education is that such approaches do not differentiate or discriminate against children with different ability levels, age, class, gender or social background. In terms of meaning making, each child is valued for his/her unique contributions to society. In Ireland, given the historical strength of combined Catholic and State influence on peoples' lives, particularly the lives of women and children, the progressive movement in education could indeed be considered radical. However, societal changes over time gradually began to impact on parental roles and children's earlier (prior

to formal schooling) out of home experiences in Ireland. Until the late 1960s in Ireland, most young children were cared for by their mothers in the home prior to attending primary school. Socially and culturally, early years care and education of young children was seen as a private familial matter primarily the responsibility of the mother (Fallon 2007). Historically, much of the drive for development of early year's services outside of the formal school came from voluntary organisations such as Barnardos and the Civics Institute of Ireland (Douglas 1994, Hayes and Kernan 2008). Another significant influence was the formation and evolution of the Irish Pre-school Play groups Association, a primarily female lead organisation which latterly amalgamated with the National Children's Nursery Association. This organisation is now known as Early Childhood Ireland (ECI 2014).

2.7. The Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association – New Roles for Women

In the 1960s, the playgroup movement established in New Zealand during World War II, began to spread to Britain. The war years had created circumstances where women needed their children cared for as they were required to step in to formerly male dominated roles outside of the home (Douglas 1994). After the War, the playgroup movement developed momentum alongside the women's rights movement and the desire for women to support their children's learning and development. The movement also enabled women to pursue identities, roles and employment outside of their home experiences. A central aspect of the Pre-school Playgroups Association was its voluntary basis and establishment as a charitable organisation. Prior to the establishment of the IPPA, other voluntary organisations such as the Civics Institute of Ireland were influential in setting up playgrounds around Dublin city with staffs of voluntary helpers and also nursery centres such as St. Brigid's Day Nursery in Mountjoy Square in 1940 (Hayes and Kernan 2008). Their work would set the scene for later Government targeted interventions and programmes for children in areas identified as disadvantaged, such as the 1969 Rutland Street Project (Hayes and Kernan 2008). The National Committee of OMEP (World Organisation, Early Childhood Education and Care) was set up in Ireland in 1966 and began exerting an influence and advocacy on 'the importance on the early years of life for future development and the needs of the pre-school child ' (Douglas 1994, p. 22). Amongst

the many recommendations made by Lady Plowden (Plowden Report 1967), one related to the belief of the importance of pre-school education for young children and the need for increased provision.

Into this climate of societal change, the IPPA held its first meeting on May 14th 1969. The founder members were seventeen women, mostly mothers of young children involved in providing playgroups in Dublin. The playgroups met several times a week to support each other in their intentions to find play and socialisation opportunities for young children (Douglas 1994). This was at a time when women working outside of the home were not only frowned upon, the marriage bar was still in operation and women in civil service jobs were obliged to give them up once they married (Fallon 2007). Some of the founding members of the IPPA extended their community links with the Civics Institute and OMEP resulting in the organisation of seminars and talks by key speakers with the purpose of meeting some of the needs for those undertaking work in the field. At the time, concerns about the need to develop professional qualifications lead to many of the women involved training in the aforementioned, now well established Montessori method, respected for its long associations with both education and care (Walmsley 1987). As women sought to exert their rights and professionalise their work with young children they, in turn, were exposed to more rights based and agentic views of children and childhood. The playgroup movement provided a social outlet for children and mothers as well as a forum to develop and disseminate information on the field of early years care and education. Latterly, ECI (formerly the IPPA and NCNA) continues to provide training and development and disseminates information on current theory and practice in ECCE. A further development was the setting up of the first Irish speaking playgroup, known as a *Naíonra,* in Shannon, County Clare in 1968 (Douglas 1994). The popularity of these bilingual playgroups in reviving interest in the Irish language and culture has grown over the years alongside the development of Gaelscoileanna (Irish speaking primary schools), most of which are based outside of designated Gaeltacht areas.

Up until the 1990s, in Ireland, the I.P.P.A. and the Irish Naíonraí Association (For Irish Medium Playgroups, The Comhchoiste Réamscolaíochta) and the National Children's

Nurseries Association established in 1986 were the main drivers of support for the development of early year's services. Other voluntary and philanthropic support came from various charitable organisations such as Barnardos, OMEP and the afore-mentioned Civics Institute of Ireland. From the 1970s onwards, there was a steadily increasing demand by parents of young children for early years services particularly for children age three and prior to their traditional transition to formal school at age four (Hayes and Kernan 2008). Government involvement and investment in this process had not extended beyond the aforementioned initiative of the Rutland Street Project in Dublin. However, there was a steady response to public demand in the increased countrywide development of private crèches and nurseries which developed alongside the I.P.P.A. Challenges to the perspective of the woman's *natural* role as an altruistic nurturer within the home emerged with new demands for out-of home care for young children. This was due in part to the lifting of the civil service marriage bar and new attention towards women's rights and pay parity with male colleagues, influenced by Ireland's entry in to the European Economic Community in 1973 (Fallon 2007). There slowly followed a shift away from a mono-cultural type insularity, and a gradual loosening of Catholic Church influence at state and societal level (Stopper 2006). More women went on to further education and continued to work after the birth of children. The nature of family structures became far more diverse, ranging from two parent, both parents working to single parent families. Divorce became Legal in Ireland in 1996.

Today families are smaller, the traditional male breadwinner model still central to our Constitution, no longer dominates. By the 1990s, the trend of mass emigration had reversed due to a booming economy. Affordability and accessibility to quality early years services became an ongoing concern. Our society had become multi-cultural and the demand for early years services that recognised the needs of a changing society had never been so great. The raft of legislative and early years policy development over the 1990s up to the present day was in part a response to the traditionally, ad hoc, fragmented and unregulated nature of early years service development in Ireland.

2.8. Constructing Early Learners – Policy and Legislative Development

Some key early years policy and legislative developments (from the 1990s) are charted below. There follows analysis of their collective aims, along with some evaluations of their effects on current images of children, and perceptions of the roles, aims and goals of adults in Irish pre-school policy and practices.

Table 1 - Legislative and Policy Development in ECCE from the 1990s.

Year/Acts/reports	Description	Effects
Childcare Act 1991	updates 1908 legislation & legally defines the 'child' as under eighteen years of age with entitlement to the protection and welfare of the state	Section VII of the Act crucially provides a context for regulation of ECCE settings.
Pre-school Regulations Act 1997	Requires providers to give notification of intention to provide a service.	Supports regulation of services but many child minders exempted. No qualification or training requirements specified for providers of ECCE services.
UNCRC 1989 ratified by Ireland 1992	Introduces new images of the child as a citizen with rights and expertise in her/his own life. Acknowledges the right of the child to a voice in all matters that concern her/him	Influential in rights based policy development, ongoing research and investment in ECCE.
Early Start Intervention Project 1994	Network of pre-school classes for 3 years olds in areas of designated disadvantage, staffed by primary school teachers and childcare assistants	Targeted investment for children viewed as 'at risk' of later school failure.
National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998)	Brought together stakeholders In early years care and education	Encouraged public debate on rights of children as citizens and concerns about the lack of a National curriculum outside of formal school.
The CECDE 1999	Formation of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education	Undertakes the development of A national framework for early learning in conjunction with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
The National Childcare Strategy (1999a)	Proposed 7 year strategy for development and management of the childcare sector	Group forms from Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to review recommendations.

The Revised Primary School Curriculum (1999b)	Notes the special nature of early childhood	Identifies teacher dual role as 'carer and educator' within the infant classes.
'Ready to learn' 1999a	White paper on Early Childhood Education	Presents view of *school ready child*
Children First (1999)	Guidelines for the protection and welfare of children	Formulated by the Department of Health and Children. Emphasises societal responsibility for all adults to protect children.
Our Children-Their lives; the National Children's Strategy' (Ireland, 2000)	Set out objectives to guide policy on children up to 2010	Presents a rights based view of childhood.
Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 1990s	Allocation of over 400 million through the National Development plan covering capital investments, staffing grants for disadvantaged communities and establishment of city and county childcare committees.	Interim report in 2003 identified difficulties in meeting demands to increase childcare spaces and support social inclusion through provision of affordable childcare. Emphasis on supply rather than issues of quality.
Revised Pre-school Regulations 2006	Inspectorate teams continue to focus on health and safety over more dynamic elements of children's everyday experience within pre-school.	The lack of requirement for qualifications or training of staff remains.
Appointment of the Office of the Minister for Children 2006)	Coincides with establishment of the Early years Education Policy Unit from the Department of Education	Cements a new visibility of children in society and recognition of early care and education as a significant part of children's lives.
Síolta (2006)	The National Quality Framework	Designed to support the framework for early learning and provide support for quality improvement across all areas of practice in ECCE including children from birth to age six.
Growing up in Ireland longitudinal study. (January 2007)	Phase 1 of study launched (as part of National Children's strategy). Conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin.	Study of a representative sample of children over a period of time. Aims to identify key factors supporting or undermining child well-being and development. Ultimate aim of informing and developing responsive polices in ECCE.

CECDE (2008) Closure	Following economic downturn, Government withdraw funding and close the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education	Indicator that Government investment in the two ECCE frameworks developed by the CECDE may be delayed.
Aistear (2009)	The National Framework for early learning is launched.	In conjunction with Siolta provides an emergent framework for early learning intended for all stakeholders in early years care and education, including parents, teachers and children themselves as acknowledged in their portraiture study.
Introduction of Universal free pre-school year 2010	First universal provision of funding for early years services in Ireland	Opens new debates on importance of early years care and education as well as issues of quality and funding.
First Appointment of Minister for Children and Youth (2011)	Minister Frances FitzGerald Commits to 'to protect children by putting 'Children First' on a statutory footing, to deliver a Children's Referendum, to establish a dedicated agency for Children and Family Services, to continue to offer a free pre-school year for children' (OMC 2013).	Acknowledges the importance of children and childhood and endorses a rights based view which includes investment in their early year's education and care.
Referendum on Children's Rights November 2012	31st amendment to the Constitution to strengthen children's rights under the Irish Constitution passed in 2013.	Gives recognition of children as rights holders in the Constitution. Responds to recommendations made by the UNCRC (1989)
Establishment of Department of Children and Youth Affairs 31/12/2013 under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013.	Headed by Minister for Children Frances FitzGerald.	Establishment of agency in response to systemic failures in delivering services to vulnerable children in recent years in Ireland. Minister FitzGerald commits to further reforms on service supports for children and families in the future.

2.9. Irish ECCE in Transition – From Parental to Societal Responsibility?

The emerging story of pre-school policy development in Ireland has been one of targeted investment, designed to address educational disadvantage, as in the Rutland Street Project of the 1960s, and latterly in the Early Start Programme 1994. Longitudinal research from the U.S.A. (Schweinhart and Weikart 1997) indicates that it is during the teenage years the benefits of such programmes become most evident. These benefits emerge in terms of increased levels of motivation, achievement and pro-social behaviour which result in reduced juvenile delinquency, remedial education and higher retention of teenagers in the school system. Added to these benefits are cumulative effects resulting in later increased employment levels. The targeted nature of such interventions carries an implicit view of childhood; one that values and justifies investment in early learning and development in terms of anticipated future adult roles.

The Childcare Pre-school Regulations (1996) introduced under the Childcare Act (Department of Health 1991) represented the first legislative control over early years services in Ireland; a position which had been lobbied for since the 1970s by the I.P.P.A. The introduction of the Childcare Act 1991 imposed a statutory obligation on the Health Boards to inspect pre-school services and ensure their adherence to the regulations. The introduction of the of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations (Department of Health 1996a), though widely accepted and welcomed in the early years sector, were also tempered with views that they did not go far enough (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform Expert Working Group on childcare 1999). A study of the impact of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996 on the quality of early childhood services in Ireland was undertaken by O'Kane and Kernan (2002). The baseline data for the study was gathered as part of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (I.E.A.) Pre-primary Project, a longitudinal cross-national study of early childhood care and education. O'Kane and Kernan identify a tension in the relationship between regulations and quality. There is an inference that an emphasis on minimum standards can potentially compromise quality. They cite research from the European Commission Network on Childcare (1996) and Hayes (2002a). Both sources

deny the possibility of certainty in relation to what constitutes quality and indicate that a dynamic approach to quality requires continuous discussion and debate.

The 2006 revised regulations again adopt a primary focus on health and safety. However, Regulation 5 of the Revised (Pre-school Services) Regulations 2006 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) emphasise the importance of supporting children's learning and development. It promotes the provision of *appropriate* opportunities for interactions, and activities supportive of children's well-being. Implicit in this, is a taken for granted understanding that childcare staff will have the knowledge and resources to provide such support. A review of the Regulations (Department of Health & Children 2006, p.40) made the recommendation that settings 'should aim to have at least fifty percent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children'. The inference being that a minimal qualification would be sufficient. Latterly, incentives to professionalise ECCE roles have been promoted through the associated higher capitation grant available within the free preschool year scheme. Research evidence consistently links high quality adult/child interactions in ECCE to engagement of staff who are highly qualified and paid at rates reflective of the investment they have made in their education and training. The associated reduced level of staff turnover supports quality by increasing the continuity for children and families accessing ECCE services (Shonkoff and Phillips 2002, Melhuish 2004)

Recently undercover investigative research has sparked growing public concern and debate on dynamic issues of quality such as staff qualifications, training and development. In May 2013, the National Broadcaster (Radio Telifis Eireann 2013) produced a documentary with hidden cameras in response to complaints made about a number of early years services in Dublin. Disturbing images were broadcast revealing adult lack of empathy, kindness or awareness of the developmental needs of children. One commentator observed that the children were treated as *objects* rather than *small people with emotions.* What was also clear, was a general lack of support for what appeared to be young and poorly trained staff. Such situations were not helped by absent managers and inadequate adult/child ratios, in

direct breach of the Pre-school Regulations. Questions over what constitutes the stated requirement (of the Pre-school regulations) for a *competent* adult arose. The implicit suggestion is that the younger the child the less valued is the professional skill level and expertise required of the adult role. Some of such understandings may be linked to the historical and cultural trend to reify the *natural* role of the mother (Bunreacht na hEireann 1937, Article 41) and extend this notion to the idea of an instinctual mothering role which presumably a *competent* carer of young children would personify. The traditional ground up influence of voluntary organisations on the Irish early years sector continues to draw attention to such issues of quality. One such organisation, 'Start Strong' (2013) describes itself as 'a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children's early care and education'. Their recent report responded to societal concerns about quality in ECCE in Ireland (2013, p. 29) and observed:

> *There is little data available on the quality of early care and education services in Ireland. What evidence there is suggests that quality is variable. While some services meet the highest standards, some services fail to meet minimum standards set out in the Regulations.*

It is acknowledged that what matters or what constitutes a high quality experience is subjective. However, as this recent controversy in Ireland has highlighted, the importance of adult qualifications, training and opportunities for ongoing training and professional development, are recurring areas of concern for the early years sector. Some steps towards furthering professionalism in the sector are being met with the Ministerial announcement (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013) that standards for minimum qualification requirements for staff working in pre-school services are being increased.

A drive to push quality to the fore of ECCE in Ireland was boosted in 2011 by the introduction of the longitudinal 'Growing up in Ireland Study' (G.U.I. 2014). The first study of this scale to be conducted in Ireland involved the participation of 20,000 children and their families over a period of seven years. The value of longitudinal research is recognised for its role in promoting evidence based policy suited to the social and cultural contexts studied (Melhuish 2011). G.U.I. has two cohorts, an infant (9 months) and a child (9 year)

cohort. The infant study focuses on children at 3 time points, nine months, three years and five years. Interviews of study participants (in the children's homes) take place at the identified key times. In line with life cycle studies (Elder 1999) the research seeks critical information on the causal relationships between children's early experiences and outcomes in later life. The two cohort approach aims to provide a wider more timely range of policy relevant data through tracking and making available the research findings on the experiences of the same sample of families and children over time. The later cohort also takes in to account transitional influences in Irish Society, such as the economic boom time (*Celtic Tiger*) and latterly the economic downturn on children's life experiences.

Some of the key findings from the infant cohort provide evidence that slightly over one third of children in Ireland experience various forms of non-parental childcare by the age of nine months, increasing to 50% of children at three years of age (Williams *et al* 2010). The most widely used form of childcare at 3 years was found to be centre based. The informal role of Grandparents was found to be significant in terms of care and particularly for lone parents in terms of added financial support. McNally (2013 p. 10) notes that 'informal support is very important for children throughout early childhood, but this is not currently reflected in Irish childcare policy'. This may be particularly important for the 11% of families who for various reasons did not have regular contact with Grandparents. Findings show that on average infants were spending 25 hours a week and 3 year olds were spending 23 hours per week in out of home care (Williams *et al* 2010). In data collected through questionnaires, Key quality indicators were based on the number of children in the settings, the education level of the childcare providers and the adult-child ratio. These indicators of quality have also arisen in debates around the aforementioned Primetime programme. The G.U.I. (2014, p. 3*)* Infant Cohort at three years Report, findings note that:

> *At three years of age many children were in regular non-parental care, including childcare aimed explicitly at providing school-specific experiences and increasing school readiness.*

The emphasis in the research report on childcare explicitly aimed at *school readiness*

reflects an underlying association of pre-school as a time for development of a *school ready child* (Dunlop 2002). There is a further suggestion that adult/child interactions and curricular approaches in formal school differ from the type of education and/or care experienced by younger children. Possible implications of a readiness approach in terms of children's pre-school affordances will be further elaborated in the following Chapter of this study. G.U.I. observe that 'Research and opinions on the effect of non-parental care for infants is still divided, partly because the issue is so bound up with the quality of the care provided' (Williams *et al* 2010, p. 97*).* Specific data on children's experiences of the free-preschool year and parental satisfaction with the quality of this programme has not yet come on stream though recorded uptake of the scheme has been high at 95%. (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013).

The complexity and breadth of the G.U.I. data has only been touched upon in this Chapter but the potential for longitudinal study to support baseline evidence for effective policies supporting children and their families is apparent. While such data can provide a picture of the childcare sector, some of the more qualitative experiences of adult/child and peer interactions within pre-school communities are arguably not so easily read from quantitative approaches such as questionnaires. Historically, evaluations of early year's policy and practice in Ireland have been situated within a traditional top down process of higher investment in the later and more established forms of early year's education such as primary schooling (junior and senior infant classes).

In this regard, the Irish Primary School Curriculum which covers the age range from 4 -12 years has undergone various changes and evaluations. An evaluation of the 1971 curriculum by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (1985) equated difficulties in implementing the curriculum to lack of substantial state investment. The historically recurring obstacles of inadequate funding, insufficient training and development opportunities for teachers, and high pupil teacher ratio were to constrain its implementation. However, Devine (2001, p. 145) asserts that the history of Irish Primary Education is reflecting adult discourse on childhood as 'centering primarily on the socialisation of children in line with future adult-defined needs and expectations'. Devine

(2001, p.146) suggests that the difficulties of implementation, rather than the curriculum itself, are symptomatic of ‘the absence of a 'rights' discourse in relation to the education of children in Irish society’. Ireland's ratification in 1992 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) pushed rights and status issues to the forefront of Irish Government policy. The signing of the Treaty brought increasing momentum to ideas of partnership in education for all stakeholders including children themselves. Devine argues that despite these significant steps, the 1999 Revised Primary School Curriculum excluded children themselves (the main stakeholders) from the partnership process. She notes that this *adult centred* view of partnership occurred despite children being described as *active agents.* There are hints that for the potential within active playful learning to be realised another story of childhood needs telling and perhaps as Devine suggests heard in a different less adult centred way.

However, it is arguable that the extent to which teachers can use their own discretion and agency in implementing a curriculum responsive to children's needs is hampered by structural aspects of primary schooling. Morgan (2003), Hayes (2004) and Hayes and Kernan (2008) have been critical of the demands placed on teachers to meet the ever expanding subject areas of the Revised Primary School Curriculum. Elsewhere, Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) have equated demands of an over packed curriculum to limited opportunities for children to engage in meaningful play.

Alongside curricular and policy development in primary school, early years policy in the 1990s continued, fuelled in part by the economic boom known as the *Celtic Tiger*. Out of this, came the need to address a supply and demand crisis in childcare. The Report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education 1998 was followed by the publication of the National Childcare Strategy (1999). This lead to a number of supportive papers and reports including the Report of the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science 1999a) and *Children First,* National guidelines for child protection and welfare (Department of Health and Children 1999). The National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children 2000) set out policy guidelines for Children up to 2010. Over 400 million Euros was allocated through the National Development plan to

cover areas of capital investment in the early year's sector. A National Coordinating Childcare Committee was established creating links with newly set up local City and County Childcare Committees and national voluntary organisations. In 2006, the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children gave new visibility and status to early childhood. Cohesion was supported by relocation of the childcare section for the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to the Department of Health and Children and the establishment of a new Early Years Education Policy unit from the Department of Education.

This was followed with the publication of Síolta (meaning a seed), the National Quality Framework (CECDE 2006), and Aistear (meaning a journey) the Framework for early learning (NCCA 2009) spanning birth to age 6 and, therefore, bridging home, and out of home care such as pre-school and the junior and senior infant classes of formal school. Síolta is an evidence based quality assurance programme developed from and informed by existing national and international research data. It is intended for usage in conjunction with Aistear to enhance early years practice. Aistear aims to support all adults involved in the care and education of young children from birth to 6 years regardless of whether this takes place in the home or out of home services. Síolta, in contrast, focuses on the support of adults directly engaged in early years services for children from birth to age 6 including the junior and senior infant classes in primary school. Aistear emphasises principles for learning and development while Síolta emphasises quality standards with a focus on clearly defined policy, procedures and practice. The content of Aistear outlines learning and development with reference to four themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. Each theme presents detailed aims and learning goals supported by sample learning opportunities. Central to these themes is the image of the child as a 'competent, confident learner' (NCCA 2009). Guidelines on good practice are provided which focus on building relationships with parents and families, learning and development through interactions and play and supporting learning and development through a thematic approach to assessment (applying four themes above). Questions and sample plans to support planning and reflective practice across different types of setting are offered. These include samples of how services can begin to use

Aistear, Síolta and (where relevant) the primary school curriculum together.

There is an assumption in this that the views of children and associated roles of the adult across different settings are complementary or open to negotiation to meet with local cultural needs. The Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science 1999b, p6) emphasises the individuality of each child in the statement:

> *The Primary School Curriculum celebrates the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development.*

Aistear (NCCA 2009, p. 6). presents a somewhat more dynamic impression of young children as learners with a view:

> *...that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others.*

Both statements indicate the child's potential to actively learn and develop as individuals. However, the latter image emphasises the social context of learning and development, suggesting the value of collaborative relationships between children and their peers and between children and adults. Aistear and Síolta differ from more structured frameworks and might best be described as 'emergent'. The influence of Te-Whariki a framework for early learning (New Zealand 1996), is evident in the adoption of a thematic approach aimed at promoting children's dispositional interests as learners. Similarly to subject based curricular frameworks (such as the primary school curriculum) and play based early years programmes such as Highscope (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997), detailed aims and goals for learning are identified. However, greater emphasis is placed on development of dispositions for learning or what Carr (2001, p. 47) describes as supporting children to be *ready, willing and able to learn.*

The Maori word Te-Whariki means *woven mat* and is a metaphor intended to convey the weaving together of diverse cultural influences of the population as a foundation on which

all can stand. An overarching aim of this framework is to provide culturally appropriate environments for early learning supported by the themes of 'well-being, belonging, contributing and communicating and exploring' (New Zealand 1996). The themes of Te-Whariki are linked to an assessment tool developed by Margaret Carr (Co-author of Te-Whariki) known as *learning stories.* These consist of short, long or linked narratives and show progression in children's learning and development over time (Carr, 2001). They may include child, parental and pedagogical input (involving texts, photographs, drawings, artefacts etc.). Learning stories can act as a basis for reflection and responsive planning (Carr 2001). This approach to assessment aims to make visible children's learning and allow for different forms of expertise to be valued and developed. The kernel of any emergent type framework appears to be the promotion of a ZPD like reciprocity where individuals and communities develop collaboratively. This would appear to be generative of a flexible type of scaffolding supporting all participants. Te Whariki and other emergent type frameworks for learning such as Reggio Emilia in Italy emphasise the relationships within and across learning communities (Gandini 1998, Rinaldi 2004).

Given such an understanding, the consultation process leading up to the production of Aistear upheld the view of partnership as including the voices of all stakeholders. Those included were parents, practitioners and childminders, agencies, organisations, academics and government departments as well as children themselves. The idea being that everyone most especially children themselves (in relation to their own lives) have expertise and active agency. This interesting turn in the partnership process involved the consultation of children by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

This qualitative approach, described as *portraiture,* involved seven NCCA researchers working with 12 children across a representative culturally and linguistically diverse range of early childhood settings. These included urban and rural, community, statutory and private provision (Daly *et al* 2008). The boys and girls who participated in the study ranged in age from 9 months to six years. Portraiture involves a qualitative methodology of enquiry aimed at capturing the complexity of children’s feelings and experiences. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997 p. 4) describe this approach as *painting*

with words. Cognisance is taken of the many ways, verbal and non verbal, that children communicate and data collection includes multiple methods from observations, to involvement of children and adults in photography, audio recordings and video-taping. The study also required and obtained informed consent and assent of children and their families. Several key messages were identified through this study which in turn informed Aistear. The messages included:

> *...the importance of holistic learning and development through play and first hand experiences, the importance of relationships, especially the crucial role of parents, the power of communication, the importance of a sense of identity and belonging and the benefits of observing and listening to children (Daly and Forster 2009, p.61).*

Interestingly, three themes traceable to the socio-cultural roots of this study recur. These are (1) the significance of play in early learning, (2) the importance of relationships and (3) the power of language/communication. Key emphasis is placed on all children having a right to play and to benefit from those experiences. The connection of these themes to children acquiring a sense of *identity and belonging* has inferences for the adult role and emphasises the creation of strong links between home and school. The roles of adults are envisioned as incorporating a *pedagogy of play.* This is to be supported by observing and listening to children and acknowledgement of their interests, individuality and cultural diversity as well as allowing for interactions that extend and expand their play opportunities. A thematic approach to assessment of early learning is promoted incorporating Aistear's themes and within this is an understanding that children can be supported to develop abilities to assess their own learning. Both Aistear and Síolta are intended to act as useful resources for adults engaged in the care and education of young children. It is notable that the Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE) which was responsible for this rich policy development, with a small staff and limited resources was one of the first casualties of the collapse of our Celtic Tiger economy (Finlay, 2013). To date, neither Síolta nor Aistear have been rolled out on the national basis anticipated by the CECDE.

The current debates on ECCE in Ireland suggest tensions between various views of children and childhood and the associated roles for adults still compete. A rights based

approach, though evident at policy level, is less obvious in terms of investment in ECCE in Ireland. The storying of childhood as rights based has latterly drawn on high investment models in the Scandinavian countries. This has been applied to support the argument for continued and expanded investment in ECCE services in the Irish context. The underlying discourse views childcare and education as a societal responsibility and a right for all children. A further inference is the application of universal rather than targeted supports. Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, in her pre-budget speech (2012) argued for a safe, affordable and accessible childcare system 'similar to what is found in the Scandinavian countries whose systems of social protection we aspire'. Minister for Children, Frances FitzGerald challenged the assumption that a Scandinavian model can meet the specific needs of children's experiences within an Irish cultural context. She asserted that 'We don't need a Scandinavian model in childcare, what we need is a uniquely Irish model that meets needs of children' (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013). The inference is of the unique cultural and historical circumstances that characterise and mediate children's experiences in all Irish early years contexts, including pre-school communities. However, the call to negotiate a distinctively Irish model of policy and ongoing investment should not, or arguably ought not, to close off the possibility of learning and being informed by other models of ECCE; or indeed by young children themselves or adults who advocate on their behalf.

The idea of the child in transition between home and early years services and what this may mean for early identity formation has become entwined in discourses of *lifelong learning*. Documents such as *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science 1999a) champion the idea of the school ready child with pre-school identified as a period to acquire the necessary competences and skills to meet perceived future roles in formal schooling and beyond. An alternative discourse views early learning in terms of development of children's dispositions as learners. While neither ideas are mutually exclusive, an emphasis on dispositions for learning aims to support children's early years transitions but also transitions across the life cycle (Katz 1995, Carr 2001). Historically, adults have concerned themselves with what children in their early learning and development need protection from or exposure to.

2.10. Conclusion

The question posed at the beginning of this Chapter asks: *What views of the child and the role of the adult are implicit or explicit in the policy and practices of pre-school education in Ireland?* The story of government investment in early year's education in Ireland has emerged as one of a gradual transition from a targeted interventionist approach. The introduction of the universal free pre-school year scheme is indicative of transitions in thinking about the nature of children and childhood, suggestive of a more rights based perspective. Such an understanding infers the aim of affording all young children in Ireland access to quality early years services. Currently, policy development and government investment is an indicator that the care and education of young children is increasingly being viewed as a societal rather than parental role. What constitutes quality has been identified as open to ongoing questioning and evaluation.

The recurring theme throughout the policy literature seems to imply that older children appear to be somehow, more important than younger children which may relate to a view that equates closeness to adulthood with higher status and worth. The historical expectation for parents to provide for the inferred less important early years has meant that such services have developed in an ad hoc way with a mixture of voluntary, community and private providers. Our traditionally interventionist approach to early years education presents an image of children and families viewed as *at risk*. Pre-school becomes a means to inculcate school readiness and guard against later school failure. The role of the early years professional (outside of formal schooling) in Ireland has evolved as both low paid and of low status, and reflects a view of the role itself as an extension of the traditionally altruistic mothering role. Consequently, the effects have been a lack of value in professional expertise as reflected in the lack of requirements for specific qualifications in the 1998 or 2006 (revised) Pre-school regulations. The story of children as citizens with rights has slowly filtered in to Irish policy and practices. A view of children's citizenship in the here and now arguably still competes with views of children as future adult citizens. Implicit in the introduction of the free pre-school year is a concern for the learning and development of the pre-primary child. However, younger children (birth to age three) are not equated the same status or investment. In this, there are shades of Lockes's child as

tabula rasa, a universal child to be shaped and moulded to reach adult expectations of his/her future role.

Findings from the longitudinal G.U.I. Study are already starting to pose new questions for more qualitative types of research. Questions arise as to what may be understood by *school readiness* in Ireland and how this relates to pre-school aims and goals for young children. What views emerge of the pre-school child and what is the perceived role of the adult within the place and space of pre-school? The physical space and affordances of pre-school in terms of children's transition to and within the pre-school community are worthy of further consideration. Findings from empirical research in Ireland on the space and place of pre-school will be discussed in Chapter 3. Within these transitional moves at policy and practice level, there is an emergent view of children and childhood as complex and diverse. This contrasts with the *universal child* story driving much of previous policy and practice suggesting the historical dominance of a maturational view of children. Images and constructions of childhood have been traced back to the Enlightenment and their recurrence, adaptations and transformations tracked through Irish policies and practices. In the progressive theoretical approaches discussed as influential in ECCE in Ireland of (Froebel, Montessori, Plowden) images recur of the active, playful child unfolding in nature and guided by a nurturing adult. The contrasting view of the child as tabula rasa to be moulded and shaped to meet parental, teacher and societal expectations also emerged at Constitutional, Legislative and Policy level. The lack of a rights based view of children is reflected in the traditional lack of investment or resourcing in ECCE outside of areas of designated disadvantage. There has also been an historical lack of resourcing to enable pre-school and primary school educators to fully implement the type of play based curricula advocated at policy level. Less evident in our history is the image of the child as a competent and collaborative learner, shaping and being shaped culturally and socially. The forthcoming Chapter considers these multiple and competing images of children, childhood and adult roles in their learning and development. History tells us that transition is not only inevitable in life, it would appear to be necessary for development to progress. How we are shaped and how we ourselves shape this process will be argued as better understood through multiple socio-cultural lenses.

Chapter 3. Transitions in Thinking – Socio-Cultural Lenses

> *Learning to see the three-dimensional image serves as a metaphor for what it takes to see the community of learners philosophy; it takes patience and learning to see in a particular way which may conflict with one's usual habits of looking.* (Rogoff 1994, p. 219).

3.1 Introduction

How people think or make meaning is often seen as an individual activity, a process that goes on inside each individual's head. Similarly, theories of learning and development from cognitive and behavioural science are often of 'fixed intelligence' or 'entity theory' (Bandura and Dweck 1985) 'because intelligence is portrayed as an entity that dwells within us that we can't change' (Dweck 1999, p.2). Such understandings suggest that knowledge and skills are individual attributes which can accurately be assessed by practices such as IQ testing. Latterly, this perspective has been challenged by cultural theories that emphasise the social context of learning including the development of language and communication in playful ways from earliest infancy.

Rogoff's metaphor of the three dimensional image usefully conveys the type of transitions in thinking required to view learning and thinking through socio-cultural lenses. This infers shifting perspectives and capturing glimpses of a world of possibilities we might otherwise miss. In Chapter 2, an historical, cultural and social look at ECCE in Ireland produced recurring themes of play, relationships and language/communication. These themes are revisited in this Chapter and traced to the Vygotskian socio-cultural roots of this study. This is elaborated through subsequent, post Vygotskian lenses including the *Community of Practice* model (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 2008). This COP model acts as a frame, or type of stage set in which this study, its play, players and our various participatory identities, relationships, language and tools of communication can be interpreted and analysed.

3.2. Recurring Themes - Play, Relationships, Language/Communication

Studies by Bruner (1975) attest to the early *mutuality* between infants and carers which he views as the foundation of language learning. Similarly, Trevarthan's (2002) analysis of films, videos and sound tracks of mother and infant interactions reveal a type of *communicative musicality* or early *proto-conversations.* Such playful mutuality evidences in infants abilities to turn-take and communicate intentions through anticipation of the *narrative flow* of playful motherese interactions. Trevarthan (2002 p.4) opposes the generalisations drawn from standardised testing of children, which he asserts 'is often more suited to demonstration of what they cannot do than to discovery of their characteristic motives and abilities'. Contrastingly, Trevarthan's findings (1998, p.95) indicate that by the age of three or four (pre-school age) children 'will have become accomplished collaborators with siblings or peers as well as adults'. Studies by Wells (1987) provide evidence of children who appear to lack knowledge and comprehension or the means to articulate understanding in classroom contexts. The same children were found to display mastery in expressing meaning in their familiar social interactions and practices in the home. Similar findings occurred in cross cultural studies where research subjects were confronted with culturally disembedded questions or practices (Irvine 1978, Fleer 2003, Rogoff 2008). As an example, Rogoff observes that the school like practice of asking questions to which the researcher already knows the answer can be confusing in societies where schooling is not a central practice. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) was critical of theories of development, which inferred that development occurred within individuals, becoming manifest independent of the social and the cultural. The individual is viewed as embedded in, rather than separate or developing independently of his or her culture. Such a perspective challenges researchers to question taken for granted cultural assumptions. Vygotsky's contemporary Piaget also propounded interactionist/dialectical views in his understanding that cognitive development required both an inner and outer process. From Piaget's perspective, development moved from the individual to the social through an inner to outer process of schematic assimilation and accommodation within a staged developmental process.

> *Children should be able to do their own experimenting and their own research. Teachers, of course, can guide them by providing appropriate materials, but the essential thing is ...for a child to understand something, he must construct it himself; he must re-invent it (Piaget as cited in Piers 1972, p. 27).*

The child is conceptualised as a type of *lone scientist* or architect of his own learning, inferring a somewhat peripheral adult role as guide rather than instructor or transmitter of knowledge. Piaget has contributed to the socio-cultural perspective in his challenge to educators to look beyond learning as transmission and provide pedagogy and resources supportive of children's learning and development. In Vygotsky's (1978, p. 57). contrasting outward inward theory he asserts:

> *Every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level: first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual human relations between individuals.*

The ability to make meaning as individuals is understood as rooted in our social relationships. Neither Piaget nor Vygotsky denied that children follow a certain biological maturational process (which can nonetheless have wide variations in timing). Piaget has been critiqued for a primary focus on individual cognitive processes at the expense of the dynamic social and situated contexts of learning (Wertsch 1993, Lave and Wenger 1991). Traditional staged theories emphasise normative (biological) rather than dynamic aspects of learning (social and cultural). The dominance of the normative view over some of the more nuanced contextual understandings of learning and development has become embedded in western educational practices. Age streaming in education is one consequence of this perspective. Children of five (and in practice many four year olds) are expected to make the transition from home or pre-school to formal schooling which arguably places very different demands on them as learners. These differences in practice manifest in discourse on what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice at different ages and stages of development. This focus has emphasised norms of what children can or cannot do at particular ages and stages within a discourse of scientific certainty (National Association

for Education of Young Children 2009). The associated concept of a universal childhood and a universal child has been critiqued (Dahlberg *et al* 1999, James *et al* 1998, Woodhead 2005). A mediated view of meaning making recognises the creative and imaginative potential of language and communication within situated social and cultural relationships.

3.3. Play and The Mediation of Meaning

In traditional developmental psychology, study of children's language, sign usage and other symbolic activity took place in laboratory conditions. In such contexts language was studied independent of everyday usage as though the two were unrelated. Some of the main tenets of Vygotskian theory relate to the processes of mediated meaning through the tools and sign systems of language. Within this context of mediation, Vygotsky also highlights the significance of play, emotions and relationships in learning and development. By age three, children are already aware of tensions between emotional desires which cannot be instantly gratified and their wish to experience and express them in the here and now. The power of imaginative play is said to provide children with temporary solutions to these problems as children enact and express the longed for through play. Vygotsky (1978, p. 102) tells us that:

> *In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies, in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development.*

Accordingly, the child engaging in play actively constructs meaning and in so doing develops and transforms self and attains higher levels of cognitive functioning. Play is said to start out as more imitative of real situations. The dynamics of imagination and the constraints of implicit rules without which the play would lose its continuity are said to cause qualitative developmental changes. Play matters for young children because it is through play that transitions in development occur as children start to acquire an 'elementary mastery of abstract thought' (Steiner & Souberman 1978, p.129). Vygotsky (1978) also challenged traditional views of development as an individual process that necessarily precedes learning The suggestion being that children learn or make meaning by

playing with ideas including what their learner roles (such as pre-school or school child) may entail. This perspective has a learning by doing inference that also hints at the significance of relationships, social and cultural expectations and children's emotional connections to learning.

The child's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). What we actually mean by *play* and the value we place on it in relation to learning and development varies widely and defies any single definition. There appears to be an ongoing tension between what is considered work and what may be constructed as play. In societies where children take a more active role in the adult world, research indicates that play tends to be more imitative of the adult world of work (Woodhead 2005, Rogoff 2008). In other contexts, children in play commonly incorporate characters and themes from television and media in their play enactments (Singer and Singer, 1992, Corsaro 2003, Marsh 2005). Woodhead (2005) challenges constructions of childhood as work-free and the re-construction of children's work contributions in western society as play. A discourse that adults work and children play, tends to trivialise play and suggest that work is the reserve of the adult world. Sutton-Smith (2001, p.5) attests to the diversity of play phenomena by listing play possibilities. In this he includes daydreams, fantasy, solitary play, playful behaviours, play as performance, celebrations, contests, vicarious audience play, and extreme sports. It would appear that play is a ubiquitous part of life across the life cycle. Whether we label these actions as work or play, play infers players and 'There are infants, preschool, childhood adolescent and adult players, all of whom play somewhat differently' (Sutton-Smith 2001, p.5)

From her observations of various play scenarios (child, adult and animals) Moyles (2004) argues as do other theorists (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Sutton-Smith 2001), that play is not always leisurely and fun. Play can involve challenge, deep concentration, interest and involvement (Laevers 2004, 2005). Similarly, it is argued that *work* can at times be playful and relaxed. In practice, it may be that work and play have similar and overlapping facets. Empirical studies by Bruce (2004) attest to children's motivations to engage in self-initiated *free-play* cross culturally. Bruce promotes the value of children’s free play and its

potential to develop positive social interactions including sensitivity to others' personal agendas. However, Bruce also insists that what can be understood as play must be volitional. It is also arguable that children will at times play or feel coerced to do so in order to be accepted in a peer group or in the case of adult directed play in order to meet with adult expectations. Whether this constitutes play is debatable. Children, and also adults may at times be playing a role or roles to meet certain cultural expectations and a desire for acceptance and belonging.

Play infers *players* and to play or enact roles may be so embedded in our everyday practices that we fail to recognise them as play or ourselves as players. Moyles (2004, x) cites the example of interview preparation. 'Prior to and during the interview, at least in the early stage, we attempt to play the role we believe conforms to the expectations of the interviewers'. Even Moyles use of the word s*tage* indicates the embededdness of performative aspects of play in everyday language and social practices. Moyles adds that children and adults all wear *different hats* in different situations and asserts it is acceptable that we do so. The inference being that not to do so reduces our feelings of competence and suitability to meet new social and cultural expectations. It follows that preparation for or enactment of a role may evoke a feeling of competence and belonging. Children's desire for acceptance and belonging extends to and may be reflected in their gender role play. Research observations indicate that very young children regularly express and enact stereotypical ideas on gender through their play (Kuhn *et al* 1978, Paley 1984, Hislam 2004). Such ideas are argued as mediated socially and culturally over time. Children and their families are subject to the influences of media and advertising and are targeted as consumers of culture (Marsh 2005). Stereotypical concepts of gender are constructed and embedded with ideas about male and female power in play artefacts such as a Disney princess gown or a Superhero cape. The constraints on children's agency, inherent in stereotypical gender play roles, pose questions for the adult role (of parents, teachers and policy makers) on how such ideas may be interpreted or challenged in early year’s education.

Language as a mediating tool may be particularly significant in the subtle and not so subtle

messages the adult world conveys to children about gender. Cunneen's (2001) observational data in Irish early year's settings revealed similar gender socialisation patterns to other studies (MacNaughton 1997, Howe 1997; 2000). Girls were found to generally engage in more passive and domestic activities and avoid confrontation with boys. Boys were found to dominate the play space and engage in more aggressive and action based play, and receive more practitioner attention. In Corsaro's ethnographic studies (2003, p.80) appropriation of play spaces by girls sometimes acted as a means to provoke boys into chase games. A kind of mutuality ensued indicating 'play about not wanting to play with boys is actually play with boys-but on the girls' terms. Evidence was also found of children's participation in role play that blurred or expanded gender stereotypes. Some theorists observe that incidence of play fighting is found in the young of all the higher mammals and in humans may serve creative and adaptive functions (Sutton-Smith 2001, Brown and Vaughan 2009) The historical, social and cultural images adults hold of children have been argued as influential on the play and learning opportunities we provide.

3.4. Play and Learning in the ZPD – 'Obuchenie' in Expert/Novice Roles

In ECCE settings, play is also commonly recognised as a tool for learning and early years frameworks frequently refer to the active and playful child. There is a widespread understanding that play in educational contexts should not be purely recreational but have learning consequences of social and cultural relevance (Moyles 2004). This also implies educational goals, aims and evaluation of what is being learned. Burning questions arise as to how adults can achieve such aims without draining all the joyful meaning making motives out of children's play.

Regarding play as a learning tool also infers a need to evaluate what is being learned. Vygotsky was critical of assessment of children that focused on what they currently knew, rather than their potential knowing or pathways for learning as evidenced through his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. In this theoretical concept, the child is said to learn at a level higher than is currently known through interaction with more experienced peers or adults. For Vygotsky The *zone of proximal development* represented a

parallel between school instruction (adult directed) and play (child initiated) with both viewed as means to engage in new mediated levels of higher cognitive functions. The ZPD has often been referred to as a scaffolding process between expert and novice (Bruner 1997). However, Moll (1990, p. 24) argues for a different interpretation linked to the Vygotskian term 'Obuchenie':

> *The term 'obuchenie'... although often translated as... 'teaching' in fact can be used for the activities of both students and teachers, implicating a double sided process of both teaching and learning, a mutual transformation of student and teacher.*

In this understanding, there is an implication for ZPD to be understood as a reciprocal meaning making process. Experts and novices can potentially switch roles as they collaborate to make new meanings. One implication of such reciprocity is acknowledging children as citizens and respecting their expertise in their own lives, including their play and learning worlds. Internationally and nationally we have discourse of children as citizens with rights and *experts* in their own lives (UNCRC 1989). Article 31 of the UNCRC identifies children's right to play:

> *That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.*

Rogoff (1990) advises that we should follow children's motives and intentions in order to better support their learning needs. A reciprocal understanding of ZPD (*obuchenie*) involves a bi-directional process, a meeting of minds, where either participant can potentially adopt learner or teacher roles and mutually share expertise. In terms of research this has implications for the type of role or roles that may be adopted. William Corsaro (1998, 2003) has fielded ethnographic research and perspectives that consider what matters or is important from inside children’s cultural worlds. Corsaro's research findings (1992; 1993;1998) and Evaldsson's and Corsaro's findings (1998) indicate children's abilities to not only *interpretively reproduce* but through imaginative improvisations or what could also be described as transitions in thinking, shape and creatively produce their own cultural

worlds. This is evoked by descriptions of children as active agents in their appropriation of information from the adult world and the production of their own unique culture. Davies (1982, p.170) furthermore observes of children that 'They cannot be adults but they can play at being adults and the use of the adult world as a source of fun'. Corsaro's (1998, 2003) participant observer data is peppered with incidents where the children weave him in to their various play scenarios. He becomes the customer in a barbershop in one scene, in another a *locked up* prisoner. The props of his research role (notebook and pen) are sometimes appropriated and written in by children. Sometimes children appropriate and imitate his research role, scribbling, intently (usually in pretend writing) in their own notebooks. Often these observations provide insights into children's outside of pre-school experiences out of which they build narratives of shared meaning.

Corsaro is regularly included as a novice, somewhat passive participant. His very appearance as an adult validates the play as the *barbers* delight in trimming and combing a real beard. The *police* role is empowering as the children get to imprison a life size adult rather than a child pretend version. Some children observed by Corsaro adopted a play version of his note taking. In play these children appeared to be finding ways to recreate, participate in or appropriate a version of Corsaro's research role themselves. This is suggestive of a certain admiration or longed for expertise and skills associated with the powerful status of adulthood. In other play contexts discussed in Chapter 4, the literature reveals a more facilitative role in play and learning is envisaged for adults (Moyles 2004, Hislam 2004, Bruce 2004). Some studies propose approaches to engage children's motives for play involving structuring of play activities in preparation for small and large transitions (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, Brostrom 2007). Daniels (2001) cites Popkewitz (1998, p. 538) who observed that Vygotskian theory similarly to Deweyian theory 'saw all teaching and learning as conditional and contingent'. This idea has developed in some of the post-Vygotskian lenses that have evolved from Vygotsky's psychosocial theory. Included here is the 'Communities of Practice Model' (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 2008) which frames this study and locates the participants in pre-school (including researchers) as players and learners within a pre-school community of evolving practice.

3.5. Conceptualising Pre-School as a 'Community of Practice'

Wenger (2008, p.51) advises that 'Practice is first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful' In other words, what is meaningful about what we do is about more than the mechanics of the experience. What we experience becomes meaningful within the emotional connections we relate to being, seeing and doing in the world. Wenger argues that *meaning* in this sense is not a given, such as the meaning of a word taken from a dictionary. Meaning has situated contextual inferences which he asserts require negotiation. Wenger references this negotiated process to both dynamic and historical effects. Accordingly, everything we do is connected to a shared past, a present unfolding and the potential future this enables or constrains. The meanings we make are not independent of the world we inhabit and the practices we inherit, but neither is meaning simply imposed on us. The term 'negotiation' suggests a give and take of ideas, with the possibility of including contestation, and/or collaboration towards new meanings. The term *mediation* has an inference of expert/novice dyads. The possibility of fluidity in such expert/novice roles (obuchenie) has also been identified within the socio-cultural theoretical framework.

Just as Vygotsky emphasised learning as a movement from the social to the personal, Wenger (2008 p. 57) emphasises the 'profoundly social character' of learning and meaning making. We are connected to the physical world via the bodies we inhabit, and our perceptions of the world inhabit us through our bodies, and senses. Language generates words, which turned inwardly, act as signs for our thoughts and emotions. Turned outwardly, language is a tool of meaning that creates other physical tools and artefacts rooted in our social relations in everyday practices (Vygotsky 1978). These social relations connect us to each other and to the world. With participation comes an *identity* or *narratives of identity*. These storied realities involve repertoires or *identities of participation* (Wenger 2008). The concept of a Community of Practice stems from the perspective that learning occurs as people participate together with the tools and artefacts of a shared socio-cultural endeavour such as pre-school. Wenger (2008, p.70) asserts that 'our sense of ourselves includes the objects with which we identify because they furnish

our practices'. The inference is that meaning also exists in things or rather valued objects act as tools for mediating meaning including a sense of identity. Wenger (2008 p. 214) proposes some of the broader implications of rethinking learning as an individual process and shifting to a focus on participation:

> *For individuals*, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities.
>
> *For communities*, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practices and ensuring new generations of members.
>
> *For organizations*, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organisation knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organisation.

From this perspective, learning is not simply absorbed or acquired by individuals in prescriptive ways. Learning is also mediated and negotiated through practice as individuals interact with each other and their environments and respond creatively to the challenges of the unfamiliar or unexpected. A focus on participation practices suggests community potential to adjust and adapt to meet new challenges, and build continuity and innovations that sustain and develop practice cross generationally as well as across communities of practice. Organisations are the broader contexts of communities of practice. From this theory, it seems that bridging links between interconnected communities ensures ongoing effective participation. Through this perspective, knowledge does not simply reside in individual heads, the organisation itself, is in a sense knowledgeable, though this knowledge is not in a static form and continues to be negotiated within and across communities of practice.

One such community is pre-school, viewed here at organisational level as a structural feature in society whose meanings have been negotiated culturally and historically. The pre-school is also an actual physical site of study as well as a conceptual space for the negotiation of meaning through everyday practice. A close look at this practice provides interesting indicators of how meanings are made and problems and challenges negotiated. The COP model does not assume that there is any single *right way* for a community to

engage in practice; neither does it assume that all ways are fine. In this understanding learning through every day practice occurs at the individual, community and institutional/organisational participatory levels. These structural and agentic aspects of practice are described by Wenger (2008, p.52) as involving *reification* and *participation.* Within this, he elaborates the idea of *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP) and how participation and even non participation influence the process of meaning making over time. Identity and participation are also closely linked to evolving learner identities and movement from novice to experienced and more expert levels of participation.

3.6. Learning and the Negotiation of Identities of Participation

Lave and Wenger (1991, p.12) equate a *sense of identity* with the process of learning, going so far as to say 'learning and a sense of identity are inseparable. Their research into learning communities of various kinds observed the learning and problem solving experiences of people engaged in diverse communities. The groups studied included, claims processors, midwives, tailors and recovering alcoholics, with the research lens focused on the dynamics of their ongoing formal and informal daily interactions. Central to analysis was the conceptualisation of learning and identity, shifting from novice to expert membership through increasing levels of participation. The theory is founded on three basic concepts, *negotiation of meaning, participation and reification.* Wenger draws our attention to the situated contexts of learning. In this Wenger (2008) distinguishes his interpretation of cultural identity or *habitus* from Bourdieu's perspective of habitus:

> *Social reality exists so to speak, twice in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside agents. And when habitus encounters, a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water'. It does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu 1989c, p.87).*

Bourdieu's concept of habitus argues for the reproductive power of underlying structural effects on individuals actions and dispositional leanings to behave in particular ways. However, within the COP model, habitus is viewed by Wenger as an emergent aspect of participation inferring a more agentic less pre-determined role for participants:

> *Even when the practice of a community is profoundly shaped by*

> *conditions outside of the control of its members, as it always is in some respects, its day-to-day reality is nevertheless produced by participants within the resources and constraints of their situations. It is their response to their conditions, and therefore their enterprise (Wenger 2008, p.79).*

Wenger also aligns his understanding of habitus to Gidden's (1986) notion of structuration. In this understanding, structure, or what is reified, only becomes meaningful because of social action and exists because of social action. Habitus exists and becomes meaningful through participation and therefore is constantly being negotiated. Such an understanding infers diverse possibilities for agency as social actors individually and collectively respond to intended as well as unexpected aspects of their day to day reality. Each community consists of unique individuals who together negotiate meaning in unique ways and in the process of participation change both themselves and their communities. Wenger (2008) also draws on Bourdieu's concepts (1997) of *symbolic* and *cultural capital* as a means to better understand what counts as currency within the localised contexts of communities of practice. Bourdieu (1997) defines capital in broad terms including symbolic capital which may incorporate material things of economic value, but which also confer status or *symbolic value* on the owners (associated with notions of prestige or authority). *Cultural Capital* relates to what is valued or considered tasteful (choice of music, food, and ways of speaking or dressing) within any given culture and is also reflected in patterns of consumption.

Wenger (2008) indicates that the sense of identity we achieve from community participation is not confined to our experiences within any one community. We carry a sense of identity with us from familiar situations in to new situations. Communities in this view cannot be understood in isolation and everyday life requires crossing of boundaries. Wenger (2008, p.103) conceptualises communities of practice as sources of boundaries but with the potential to create continuities and connections across communities of practice. He observes of communities of practice that 'Their members and their artefacts are not theirs alone. Their histories are not just internal; they are histories of articulation with the rest of the world'. Accordingly all participants bring a sense of identity and dispositional

interests and expectations negotiated (and renegotiated daily) in their home cultures (home habitus) to the new culture (in this case) of pre-school. Wenger (2008, p. 56) goes on to explain a concept of 'mutuality or shared recognition in socio-cultural interactions'. Mutuality does not infer equality. I relate this concept to the pre-school community. An experienced pre-school child may simultaneously recognise herself as *big* (in terms of knowledge and experience) when comparing her pre-school status to a new arrival in pre-school or to a younger sibling at home. The same child can simultaneously be positioned as *small* and less experienced by an older sibling attending formal school. Different power relationships co-exist within and outside of communities. Children occupy less powerful roles than adults, experienced members, whether adult or child have a *knowing other* status having negotiated meaning and acquired knowledge of the implicit and explicit rules of everyday practice over time.

The concept of mutuality, though not inferring equality does, according to Wenger (2008) infer recognising something of self in others. This type of intersubjective knowing is said to evolve as participatory repertoires or *identities of participation* develop. This dynamic process results in individual changes or transitions in thinking but also changes/transitions within the community as a whole. Wenger (2008) implies that the community in a certain sense takes on its own personality (narrative self) and continues to carry its accumulated knowledge and values even as new members arrive and old members move on. Accordingly the community in some ways acts as a receptacle of knowledge. However, what is reified as valued knowing within the community is always according to Wenger open to negotiation and transformation. Just as each individual is unique so is each learning community.

As children move from their home cultures (primary habitus) they are exposed to new roles and identities (secondary habitus). *Old-timers* within any given Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) described in this study as *experienced members* will already have appropriated roles and identities (in this case as pre-school child). These evolving skills and participatory repertoires of experienced members exert influence on the participation of newer members. Wenger's model (2008) does not intend to infer homogeneity or a

simple understanding of agreement. Negotiated meanings can according to Wenger incorporate different beliefs, agreement and disagreement as part of the process. Wenger (2008) links the connectedness of communities of learners to other communities which he refers to as *constellations*. The COP model suggests tools for analysis and interpretation of the roles and identities open to appropriation by novice participants during their transitions to and within their pre-school community. It also offers lenses to explore the roles available for appropriation by adults, including teachers and parents. For Wenger, learning and identity formation in any Community of Practice is both enabled and constrained by the processes of *reification* in conjunction with everyday participation.

3.7. 'Reification' and 'Participation'

What Wenger conceptualises as reification is viewed as inextricably linked to the process of participation and the development of participatory identities within communities of practice. Wenger describes how terms such as *economy* or *democracy* are part of everyday discourse and described as existing as though they have concrete form or agency rather than meanings we have projected and negotiated through our practices. Reification can also be applied to actual concrete objects or artefacts and the negotiated meanings embedded in their usage. A ball is an artefact which historically has become associated with the concept of play. A ball can be understood as a child's participatory play thing or as a tool engaging players and spectators connecting communities of practices across a vast array of international sports. For the child, kicking a football may be enjoyable in itself and simultaneously act as a means of participatory identity linked to the role of an admired international football player.

I relate reification to pre-school language, which commonly includes discourse on play. As an example, the collective play actions of a group of children may be attributed with a form or personality of its own. Examples from pre-school practice might include adult observations such as *the play is becoming too loud and aggressive*. Or *the children are really engaged by the water play.* Both examples infer play itself is a taken for granted part of everyday practice. In both instances, the narrative suggests that the children are engaged by their play choices. Engaging children in play is implicitly understood as important but loud and aggressive play in this example is conveyed as problematic. Questions and

possibilities for the negotiation of meaning in this context arise. For example, might the play be experienced and conceived differently if moved outdoors? Would the pedagogical aims and goals still be met? Would children continue to be engaged by such play? What might it be about the water play that engages interest and how might this interest be extended and sustained over time? Such questioning can act as a tool of enquiry asking why we have come to do things particular ways, as well as the relevance of these practices to the current social and cultural situation.

Reification has the very real effect of focusing our thinking in particular ways. Reification and participation in everyday practices are important because their interplay results in continuities or discontinuities of meaning making across time and space. Wenger (2008) argues for a balance between reification and practices, where what is or can be reified is open to negotiation, renegotiation, affirmation and or/ transformation of meanings. He argues that too much reification constrains the creative possibilities within practice and too much practice without reification causes discontinuities. In the latter case, meanings are lost and in both cases voices of the less powerful (in this context children) can remain unspoken or go unheard. What is reified will influence the types of participatory identities available for negotiation including opportunities to move from novice to expert.

In this, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise the significance of what they refer to as legitimate peripheral participation as new members start to participate in the everyday practices of communities. Participation from this perspective can range from non-participation where individuals resist participation, (this in itself is considered a form of participation), to participation along a continuum from observation from afar to full active engagement. In pre-school contexts, participation can vary in accordance with the pedagogic approaches adopted, which themselves may vary in accordance with individual teachers interpretation of their roles (narratives of identity built up through participation). Participation can also vary in accordance with individual's dispositional interests and motives for learning and ongoing trajectories for learning. Rogoff (1994, p.368) observes that 'Humans develop through their changing participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities, which also change'. Rogoff provides some compelling arguments to

support the value of a participatory perspective to better understand and interpret the processes of learning and development.

3.8. 'Apprenticeship' and 'Guided Participation'

> *A metaphor that has appealed to many scholars who focus on the mutual embeddedness of the individual and the sociocultural world is that of apprenticeship.* (Rogoff 1990, p.60).

In Rogoff's empirical studies, she elaborates this structuring process through the concepts of *apprenticeship* and g*uided participation* within cultural communities. While a process of adult guidance was found in all communities what was viewed as appropriate learning and teaching practice varied considerably. Interestingly, these variations were also related to place and space and how much children's lives and participatory affordances were segregated from or included in the adult world of work. Rogoff's (1994) empirical studies included video-taped observations of home visits in Mayan and middle-class European American communities. She recorded interviews about daily routines and interactions of toddlers and care-givers. Included were toddler/care-giver interactions when introduced to novel objects or problem solving activities such as getting toddler arms through shirt sleeves. Within the Mayan family homes, caregivers were observed to simultaneously engage with the group present whilst remaining alert to signs of the child's needs for guidance. Similarly the toddlers themselves participated in group activities sometimes through observations of adults which they then adapted to their own activities. Rogoff describes the *mutuality* which contributed to the process including adult sensitivity to the toddler's efforts at problem solving. This guidance (*mutual recognition* in Wenger's terms) was more likely to take the form of gestures than words. Furthermore, the adults did not insist on a *right way* of doing things but would make suggestions and orient children towards the activity.

Contrasts in middle-class European-American families revealed a different more dyadic and adult led structuring of the learning situation. Adults observed were more likely to create an adult child learning situation with didactic lessons with a specific approach or by

inference 'right way' to conduct the activity. Verbal communication was found to be more dominant (and taken for granted) than in the Mayan cultural context. Generally when the adults were not focused directly on the toddler, they ceased to guide their activities and became engaged in dyadic interactions with other group members. Interestingly, Rogoff (1994, p. 216) notes that European-American researchers often failed to see the complexity of participatory actions that occurred in the Mayan communities 'Because they see the attention and fluency of conversation between a mother and another adult, for example, they assume that the mother is doing nothing with the child'. Rogoff suggests that such interpretations may relate to models of learning and taken for granted ways of thinking connected to researchers own communities.

In the west, young children usually experience segregation from an early age from the main stream activities and opportunities to observe and participate in the adult world. Specialized ECCE settings including pre-school are run by adults (often female) to create learning situations ostensibly to meet the social and cultural aims and goals of the society. Contrastingly in the Mayan cultural example children do not experience such segregation but are expected to participate collaboratively in the day to day mature activities of the community. Rogoff (1994, p.209) proposes a paradigmatic shift in thinking may be required to view development as 'transformation of participation'. Similarly, Hall (2007, p. 94) challenges some deeply embedded cultural understandings of learning and development in the statement 'Teaching is not an explanation for learning. Teaching is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to occur'. Children participate in learning scenarios all the time in ways intended as well as unintended. For Wenger, Apprenticeship focuses on the involvement of newcomers in activities by more experienced community members. These *knowing others* (teachers and more experienced peers) mediate the interactions between the participants and the institutions, cultural tools and reified (valued) practices.

Rogoff (1990) observes that the apprenticeship model has been applied to expert-novice dyads but relates to more than dyads. It refers to specialized groups within communities

organised to adopt interrelated roles in pursuit of certain goals. These group activities and roles may extend into the community and beyond the immediate group. During the process of participation, expertise is shared and apprentices become more participative and able to adopt or appropriate more complex roles and expertise. To appropriate in this sense means more than to simply acquire. Such appropriation requires the development and transformation of meaning within self. The appropriation of increasingly more complex roles is said to be generative of further relational participation within and sometimes beyond the immediate community. Rogoff (1990) references this transition from novice to mastery as evolving out of a contextual process of *guided participation* by adults and more experienced peers over time.

3.9. Time, Timing and Narratives of Identity

The influence of time and timing on learning and development is embedded in the aforementioned concept of life-long learning. What we learn throughout our lifetimes can be contextualised in terms of generational influences; what Elder (1999) refers to as the social dynamic of *linked lives.* Such timing can be applied to frame macro and micro influences impacting on a generation of children such as the introduction of a universal free pre-school year in Ireland. The social change generated by such structural influences (reified) impacts on generational cohorts of children whose lives are linked at key times of transition. In Ireland, such influences will impact the timings of when or if individual children will make a transition to pre-school. Timing of pre-school participation will in turn influence the timing of children's transitions to formal school. Other influences include how long, and for how many days per week children attend (influencing their microgenetic transitions from novice to increasing levels of expertise in their pre-schooler identities). Elder's analysis (1999, p.5) of longitudinal research on life span concepts of development emphasise stages such as 'transition, coping and adaptation' across life-cycles. His empirical studies of life cycle effects emphasise timing of social historical influences expressed through interlinked and interdependent lives. His findings indicate generational disruptive effects of untimely social change such as economic depression and war across life cycles of birth cohorts. He also acknowledges the prominence of concepts of *human agency* in life history studies. The processes of transition coping and adaptation are also

emphasised in this study in terms of movement from novice to experienced participation in a pre-school COP. Such transitions are argued as representative of individual and group interpretations as participants individually and collectively negotiate meanings within and across time, space and learning communities. Participants may share certain disruptive and/or positive effects of transition but how they are interpreted and experienced will change in the negotiation of individual and collective perspectives. Bruner (2002, p.64) relates our actual experiences of such changing situations across the life cycle to our interpretations and reinterpretations of our storied realities.

> *We constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future'.*

Bruner's description presents time and its effects on our personal narratives in a non typically linear way. Who we are, or rather who we think we are, were or can be changes in remembering. Memory involves recalling a past influenced by present and related perceptions of a future possible self. This study has considered some of the 'coping, adaptation and transition' strategies (Elder 1999) of young children as they move from novice to experienced membership with the possibility of developing an orientation towards mastery in their pre-school learning community. Framed within the COP model, the study sought illumination on the narratives of identity created by all participants (including myself) as we engaged in everyday practice. Individual and collective memories of what is sayable and doable in the pre-school context influenced our navigation and negotiation of our shifting participatory identities over time.

A closer look at our narrative constructions brings with it the issue of power in the negotiation of meaning. Wenger (2008) denies the presence of a physiologically separate individual identity. He argues that identity is mutually constituted between the individual and the collective. Given this understanding, personal narratives constitute stories of who we are but also why we are who we are. Analysis of cultural narratives poses questions on what is considered valuable. It looks at practices in terms of what is enabled or constrained

in the telling of stories and the meanings to be made. Narratives of meaning are argued as constructed in interaction with young children. These constructions occur through formal adult-led (reified) contexts, informal child lead (active engagement) or collaborative (child and adult) aspects of everyday pre-school practices. The place of children's own agency in negotiating this interplay between what is reified and the practices generated has implications for how children are perceived. There are further inferences for the construction of adult roles in supporting children's learning and development. It is posited in the context of early years practices that some of the informal child led aspects of early learning may constitute matters of particular importance to and for children.

The Socio cultural lens argues for the concept of meaning as constructed through narrative or storying. Acknowledging children as citizens with rights has been reified in terms of voice and children's right to be heard (UNCRC 1989). Concepts of rights, citizenship and valuing different forms of expertise have given rise to *listening* discourses. What may actually be meant by listening opens up questioning of areas of discord and introduces the possibility of change. Listening or giving voice to young children through the multiple perspectives of socio-cultural lenses infers that adults (whether as parents/carers or teachers) as advocates for children also need to feel listened to. This framing process poses questions with regard to interpretation and analysis of children's narratives of identity. How are their narratives of meaning heard? Also, what cognisance may be taken of the many ways, verbal and non verbal, that young children express themselves? Bruner (2002, p.87). suggests that:

> *Culture itself is dialectic, replete with alternative narratives about what self is or might be. The stories we tell to create ourselves reflect that dialectic*

The Vygotskian view of the centrality of language and the dialectical movement between the social and the personal in development is reflected in Bruner's statement. Story or narrative constructions are embedded in everyday social interactions. Goouch (2010) cites Rosen (1988, p.9) who suggests that *story* is an intrinsic part of who we are. It is possible to conceptualise man deprived of all cultural tools from the tools of technology to books

*'*but strip us of all the accumulation of stories, heard and told, reported and invented, traditional and spontaneous and what is left of us*?'* We tend to think of story as something made up or not real. The story form whether based on the play of actual events or imagined occurrences becomes real and palpable through the tools of the imagination. All meaning or what is viewed as reality is in a sense *made up* given that each individual appropriates and negotiates meaning in multiple possible ways. No two histories are identical biologically, socially or culturally.

A fascinating study by Goouch (2010) gathers narratives of early years professionals and observations of their professional practice. Her study zones in on adult narratives of professional identities. Out of this she poses questions about what matters to and for young children in early years contexts. Her analysis produced several interlinked themes including redefinitions of the traditional teacher role (expert/novice) to one of reciprocal meaning making, the significance of *talk* in children's lives and the potential to support children's learning and development through play. Goouch argues for *playful teachers* and *playful pedagogies* and an intuitive ability to develop intersubjective responses to children's in the moment play objectives. She elaborates these intuitive responses as a means by which 'teachers are able to trust that cognitive development will occur in these kinds of play contexts and playful interactions without contrivance, hijacking or subverting children's intentions' (2010, p.48). Such a pedagogical approach pre-supposes teachers with a willingness to step outside of their own perspective or habitus in order to pursue the possibilities within children's cultural worlds. Goouch challenges readers to focus on the purposes and expectations as well as taken for granted assumptions often made about education. Her multi-layered narratives include rich analysis of policy narratives, and teacher narratives interwoven with the researchers own narrative approach. Similarly, within this current study, the COP model acts as a frame for an unfolding story linked to other narratives within and outside of the time and space of the context studied.

3.10. Conclusion

Questions arise such as: What stories of individual and group selfhood are open to negotiation by adults and children in the study? What narratives embedded in policy and practices may be reflected in their dialectic interplay? And which practices complement or create tensions between what is reified historically and politically and the narratives constructed and negotiated through every day practices? The table below summarises the theoretical roots, associated concepts and tools for thinking and their applicability to practice within the theoretical framework (COP) of the current study.

Table 2 - Key Socio-Cultural Theorists, Concepts and Tools for Thinking.

Theorists	Concepts	Tools for Thinking	The Practice/Application
Vygotsky (1978)	Social and Cultural Theory of Development	Mediated Meaning Social – Individual *Obuchenie*	ZPD Adult as Learner and Teacher. Reciprocal Meaning Making
Lave and Wenger (1991) Wenger (2008)	Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Communities of Practice	Reification and Participation	Negotiation of Meaning. Participatory Repertoires. Identities of Participation.
Rogoff (1990, 1994, 2008)	Development as Transformation through Participation.	Apprenticeship & Guided Participation	Novice – Mastery. 3 Planes of Analysis: Community/Cultural, Interpersonal and Personal
Corsaro (1998, 2003)	Children's Cultural Worlds interdependent on Adult Culture	Interpretive Reproduction	Creative Improvisation and Transformation
Elder (1994,1999)	Life Course Theory	Time and Timing	Transitions, Coping, Adaptation
Bruner (2002)	Life as Narrative	Storied Selves	Participatory Narratives

Post Vygotskian lenses have produced new understandings that progress his theories and extend their possibilities across diverse communities of practices. Wenger (2008, p. 74) asserts

that 'Being included in what matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community's practice, just as engagement is what defines belonging. Wenger's concepts of evolving identities of participation (*newcomers to old-timers*) and Rogoff"s (1990) notion of adult *guided participation* and *apprenticeship* are appropriated in this study. Within this participants narratives of meaning making are tracked and interpretively analysed. The study lens also seeks access in to children's cultural worlds and their creative reproduction and continuous negotiation of adult culture. Such tools for thinking (Table 2, p. 72) offer new ways to view and interpret the small microgenetic changes (transitions) theorised by Vygotsky (1978) as affecting learning and development. This arguably provides a richly textured frame for further interpretation and analysis. Links between what is reified and what is or can be negotiated through every day practices have been established. In Chapter 1, past, present and future possibilities combined to reveal ECCE in Ireland as an emergent world undergoing rapid transitions. Within the socio-cultural framing of this study, pre-school has been set as the stage for a story, defined in this study as a story of transitions, in time and space encompassing individual and collective transitions in thinking over time, within a pre-school Community of Practice. The forthcoming Chapter will introduce and review some of the associated theoretical and policy literature and findings from empirical studies on early years transitions, with a focus on what may constitute a positive experience of transition.

Chapter 4. Transitions in Early Childhood – Perspectives From Theory Policy and Empirical Studies

> *For young children's transitions to be successful, we must recognise that early childhood is a life phase carrying the same rights and importance as any other. It is not merely a training ground for becoming older, but a time for societies to help children cross new thresholds. Peers, families and communities play a critical role priming children for their next steps in life. (Pramling Samuelsson, & Kaschefi-Haude 2010, p. 7)*

4.1. Introduction

A key assumption of this study is the recognition of meaning as socially, culturally and historically constructed (Vygotsky 1978). The over-arching question concerns pre-school matters and what matters in pre-school practices? The key research question of this Chapter asks *What are the indicators of positive experiences of transitions in ECCE?* These are referenced to young children's transitions from novice to experienced membership within a pre-school community in Ireland implementing the free pre-school scheme. Within this field of play, the transition from home to pre-school requires children to physically as well as conceptually *cross new thresholds*. Children have to try on new roles and identities as they communicate within relationships, places and spaces connecting them to a new social and cultural situation (Garpelin *et al* 2010). The concept of transition can also be viewed as a catalyst or tool for learning and development with children, their parents and teachers viewed as participative agents in the transition process (Rogoff 1990, Dunlop 2007, Brooker 2008). From this perspective, transitions in thinking occur as children participate within the relationships, roles and rules of the new cultural situations they encounter.

As children cross into *new thresholds,* transitions involve movement from the familiar to the strange along with challenges to their emotional and social well-being. Brostrom (2002) defines positive early years transitions in terms of children's sense of 'well-being' or sense of acceptance, value or 'suitability' within a new social situation. A holistic view of transition is also reflected in the influential 'Te Whāriki' New Zealand Framework for Early

Learning (2014). Similarly to Aistear (Irish framework for early learning), Te Whāriki promotes development of the dispositions of well-being and belonging. How children are supported or constrained through this process and how they themselves experience and shape the process of transition relates to both biological and socio-cultural inheritances. Through this lens, all learning and thinking is understood as situated within the context of social and cultural interactions (Lave and Wenger 1991, Bruner 1997, Rogoff 2008, Wenger 2008).

Historically and culturally, government policy and investment in Ireland has traditionally focused on pre-school as the locus for developing *readiness* for formal school (G.U.I. 2014). The language describing early years settings such as pre-school and readiness practices and their underlying discourse will be further explored. This is not a comparative study, but the Irish and the U.K. contexts historically exhibit some similar structural features and practices including a traditional early formal school start (in practice age four or five). With this in mind, Brooker's seminal socio-cultural research (2002 p. 1) provides interesting insights on 'young children learning cultures' during transitions to and within a formal school setting in the U.K. In her findings, Brooker acknowledges that the ethnocentricity of a western view of learning and development may fail to recognise or translate into currency, the cultural knowledge children bring from home cultures. In this qualitative study, Brooker provides an understanding of transition as both an individual and collective process, requiring strong links between home and school to ensure a positive transition.

The Chapter continues with a focus on the Irish context and rationale for the study. Until recently there has been a dearth of research into early years transitions in Ireland. The current study is informed by O'Kane's research (2007) which comprehensively maps out the Irish context in relation to early years transitions. Similarly to Brooker (2002), O'Kane (2007) centres her study on children's transition to formal schooling and their experiences during the first year in primary school (junior infant classes in Ireland). Review of this study helps identify gaps in ECCE transition studies in Ireland and explain the intentions

of the current study. A limitation acknowledged by O'Kane (2007) in her study was the lack of data on children's experiences in pre-school prior to their transfer to primary school in Ireland. The unprecedented transition in Irish early years policy from targeted investment, to the provision of a universal free pre-school year, poses new questions about our cultural expectations of pre-school and also carries inferences about our social, cultural and historically mediated views of children and childhood. The themes of play, relationships and language/communication recur in the transitions literature discussed in this Chapter. Within these themes the place and space of pre-school for developing participatory identities is explored.

4.2. Theorising Transitions - Perspectives on 'Being' and 'Becoming'

A rights based perspective (validated by Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC 1989, (in 1992) acknowledges all children as citizens with rights including the right to survival and development (Article 6). Article 31 of the Convention acknowledges the child's right to play. Contextually this suggests pre-school as a site for children to experience universal rights to development and play and poses questions about adult roles in supporting this process. How such rights may be interpreted, given diverse cultural expectations and approaches to learning and development, poses difficulties. Woodhead (2005 p.4) challenges the view that development, can be defined in universally relevant ways and argues instead for a concept of 'pathways to development'. Such a perspective is reflected in discourses of *life-long-learning* promoting development in terms of early years learning dispositions or learning trajectories over a narrower focus on skills and knowledge (Broadfoot 2000, Carr 2001, Wenger 2008).

The targeted intervention approach traditionally favoured in Irish ECCE policy was bolstered by Longitudinal studies for early years intervention programmes. These investments were targeted at disadvantaged groups of children and their families (Sylva and Wiltshire 1993, Schweinhart & Weikhart 1997). At times, such investment has been constructed and justified as an inoculation against later school failure, and in the long term promotion of an adaptive and productive workforce (Bruner 1997). New paradigmatic understandings of children and childhood have emphasised children as *beings* in the

present with all the inherent qualities that make them human and capable of further development. Contrastingly, traditional developmental psychology constructs children as future *becomings*, with adulthood viewed as the pinnacle of development (James *et al* 1998). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2006, p.141) has proposed childhood as having intrinsic value in itself 'A time for childhood can never be repeated'. Ethnographer and sociologist Corsaro (2003, p. 5) cautions against the typical adult tendency to construct children's everyday experiences as always being about learning opportunities that prepare them for a distant and future adulthood. The normative or maturational view of development implicit in such views has the effect of constructing a universal view of children and childhood that does not allow for social and cultural variations and expectations.

Rather than polarise understandings of children as beings or becomings, Uprichard (2008) argues that these very states infer temporality and are necessarily complementary rather than opposing ideas. We are constantly in a state of transition both being and becoming. Such an understanding has useful implications for research with, rather than on, children as 'it conceptually places children in the real situation of being present and future agents of their present and future lives, and ultimately of the social world around them' (Uprichard. 2008, p. 313). This infers a view of an agentic, competent child both shaping and being shaped socially culturally and historically. It follows that how children are viewed also has inferences for the ways they experience transition.

However, transition as a concept requires further elaboration. Transition and the practices or matters associated with transition in the context of early years care and education have been defined in various ways. Kagan and Neuman (1998, p. 366) describe such transitions as 'the continuity of experience that children have between periods and between spheres of their lives'. Elder's life cycle psychology extends these understandings:

> *Issues of timing, linked lives, and human agency identify key mechanisms by which environmental change and pathways influence the course and the substance of human lives. (Elder 1994, p.5).*

Such a focus applied to early childhood transition infers the influence of timing and the creation of links or discontinuities in the spaces that children inhabit and the relationships they engage in at key times in their lives. Transitions have also been described as 'a phase of intensified and accelerated developmental demands, that are socially regulated' (Griebel & Niesel, 2002, p. 64). Transitions of all kinds may involve a level of uncertainty, and challenge for young children (Yeboah 2002, Dunlop 2002; 2003a). Dunlop and Fabian (2007) elaborate these positions as they emphasise both the accelerated effects on children as individuals and also simultaneously as members of a family experiencing transition How we view ourselves as we *cross new thresholds* has been linked to our sense of well-being and belonging in new social situations, and also how we believe others view or value us (Brostrom 2002, Dunlop 2002). Empirical studies by Fabian and Dunlop (2002) in pre-school and primary settings in the U.K. offer analysis of transition through a reflection of parent, child and teacher perspectives. In this, Dunlop (2002, p. 98) suggests that a major aspect of transition is how children are viewed as learners:

> *different views of children as learners, including the children's own, may shed some light on why some children find such transitions easier than others.*

Variations between how children are viewed and how they themselves view their roles in pre-school and primary emerge from the literature (Kagan and Neuman 1998, Griebel and Niesel 2002, Perry and Dockett 2003, Dockett and Perry 2004; 2007, Brooker 2008.). There are some consistent indicators that children tend to be viewed (by themselves and adults) as more competent and capable in pre-school than in primary school (Hendy and Whitbread 2000, Brostrom 2002, O'Kane 2007, Brooker, 2002; 2008). A Scottish longitudinal study tracks continuity and progression in children's early years experiences (Dunlop 2003a). Educators, and their managers in 8 pre-school and 4 primary school settings were interviewed and observed as 28 focus children in a cohort of 150 children were followed during their final year in pre-school and their first year in formal school. Assessment profiles of children by their pre-school teachers (during late pre-school) and

by their primary school teachers (in early primary school) indicate different perspectives of children as learners. Differing views of the learner are argued by Dunlop as creating the conditions for learning. In one such example, a child assessed under the heading of 'communication and language' is described as 'having a positive attitude to learning' particularly in terms of language and communication (pre-school assessment). The same child is assessed in early primary school and acknowledged as 'She talks with confidence' , in terms of 'listening' the teacher states 'She finds it very difficult to sit still and listen to stories, she often misses instructions'. Dunlop (2003a, p. 75) queries whether this child is actually so different in the context of primary school. She goes on to speculate that 'perhaps talk is valued more in one setting and quiet attentiveness in the other?' Some of these differing perspectives of children have been related to differences in language usage between pre-school and primary school. Understanding of *independent learning* can vary widely from different perspectives.

In another empirical study by Hendy and Whitbread (2000), views of 48 children from 3 to 8 (nursery to year two of the English primary school system) as well as their parents and teachers were sought. Methodology included anonymised questionnaires (given to parents and teachers) and structured interviews with children. Interviews of children revealed their interest in making independent choices and preferences for various activities from age 3. The children showed full awareness of the requirement for adult help at certain points in relation to utilising these choices. Questionnaire responses by parents of the children suggested that children as young as two were capable of independent thinking and that children tended to seek solutions to difficulties themselves prior to requesting adult help. Interestingly, questionnaire responses from teachers of older children suggested that children's abilities for independent behaviours occurred much later than the perceptions of parents or teachers of the youngest age children. Teachers of older children said that the children were likely to ask for adult help as a first response when encountering a difficulty. There is a suggestion in this of children's sensitivity to adult expectations of the *rules* of what is sayable and doable. There is also an implication of teaching practice where the image of the universal child prevails and children's sense of their own competency to cope

independently or work from their own starting points is diminished in more formal settings.

Many studies attest to children's own concerns in adjusting to school as related to knowing the *rules* both explicit and implicit (Carr 2001, Dockett and Perry 2002, Brooker 2002 O'Kane 2007). If, as research suggests, independent thinking may be interpreted differently in pre-school and primary school, children will have to process new understandings of their anticipated participatory identities to successfully meet the demands of their new social situation. This may require children to leave some ways of thinking and being behind. Our views of children relate to the space we provide for them to retain as well as develop identities of participation (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, Dockett and Perry 2004). In some studies, children and parents emphasised the importance of sibling bonds, current friendships, anticipated new friendships, and also recognition that transition to primary school means some friendships and relationships will be left behind. Small scale studies also attest to the significance of friendship in building children's sense of belonging, interest and participatory involvement levels when compared to children who started school without a friend or neighbour's child (Brooker 2002, Brostrom 2002).

The literature also indicates that children from low socio-economic backgrounds, children with special or additional needs, and children who do not speak as their first language the dominant language of the culture, are more at risk of a difficult transition (O'Kane 2007; Brooker 2008; Rous and Hallam 2011; Bernard Van Leer Foundation 2006). Reasons suggested for difficulties in transitions include the effects of low teacher expectations and also lack of acknowledgement or recognition of children's cultural knowledge or *the funds of knowledge* they bring from their home cultures (Fleer 2003, Brooker 2008). Johannson (2007, p. 34) suggests that 'transitions usually involve transitioners changing roles, status and identity'. It is arguable that the process of transition as a lived experience for children is embedded in historically mediated social and cultural practices. There are also indications that positive experiences of transition occur when children are afforded opportunities to be initiated gradually and develop participatory identities within new

social and cultural situations. Corsaro and Molinari (2000) describe such a process as *priming.*

The importance of these processes is also embedded in traditional rituals (Van Gennep 1960) such as coming of age ceremonies, and can be observed in the less formal rituals and familiarising everyday routines of transition practice in pre-school communities. According to Van Gennep (1960) transitions are dynamic processes which follow a threefold sequential pattern: He divides these transitional states into the *preliminal*, the *liminal* and the *postliminal.* In the case of a pre-school child, the preliminal can usefully be understood in terms of the child's expectations of separating from home to a new setting (such as pre-school). This might incorporate conversations and acquiring the props of the new pre-schooler identity (new, clothes, a backpack and/or a lunchbox). The liminal stage (*threshold rites*) or transitional stage could then be said to occur on the child's first contact with the setting and teachers (usually prior to the official school start day). This stage would also encompass the first day of school and separation from parent/s. This is followed by the postliminal stage where the child has evolving experience of the roles, relationships and rules of the new setting and has started to take on or enact a new identity or identities (in this case of *pre-school child* and member of a particular pre-school community). These rites (related to new status) and rituals occur across time and space. Research by Moss and Richter (2010 p.165) of U.K. students individual and group experiences of transition to University community halls observes that 'Space is re-interpreted in relation to past experiences, present needs, relationships and future desires'. This fits with the concept of being and becoming as a transition process that extends across life transitions. Moss and Richter's study employed questionnaires, reflective logs and semi-structured interviews with a representative sub-sample of the groups studied. In the latter stage of the study, focus groups acted as a means to explore students collective experiences of transition. Students were observed to recreate familiar routines (such as communal *Sunday lunch* mealtimes) from their previous lives. Transition was said to be *accomplished* as students carved out new roles and identities through individual and collaborative routes and routines. The significance of the place and space of pre-school for

children to play, recreate familiar experiences to meet the needs of the present and enact new roles will be further explored over the course of this Chapter. Identity formation over time and space is frequently linked to major or *vertical* transitions such as the transition to primary school. This brings us to the aforementioned contentious idea of *readiness,* a term usually associated with children's preparatory experiences in pre-school for formal schooling.

4.3. Transitions and 'Readiness' for Formal School

The very term *pre-school* is dominated by an inference of preparedness for future roles in formal school. The view of young children embedded in this term infers a qualitatively different way of being. In practice, other terms have been applied including *play school nursery, or kindergarten,* terms which have quite different connotations. The term *play school* suggests the possibility of children trying on and playing with, or enacting, rehearsing and perhaps interpreting future anticipated roles in school. The term *Nursery* is frequently applied in the U.K. to early years services provided in advance of formal schooling, and evokes images of care and nurture associated with botany (nursery for plants) but also traditionally associated with health, welfare and the nursing profession. Kindergarten translates as children's garden and tends to be associated with a Froebelian image of the child unfolding in nature, a type of seedling who will bloom under the expert guidance of a nurturing gardener (adult role). Confusingly, the term kindergarten has been applied in different cross cultural contexts to pre-primary settings but also to the first years in formal schooling (as in the U.S.A.). In Ireland, the Department of Education defines the first two years in primary school as *Kindergarten stage* (Drudy and Lynch 1993, p. 4) when significantly 'neither parents nor teachers would tend to define it this way'. Wenger (2008, p. 80) asserts 'it is the community that negotiates its enterprise' suggesting that the actual practice of any given community is always mediated and therefore open to change. The term *play school* suggests the possibility of children trying on and playing with, or enacting, rehearsing and perhaps interpreting future anticipated roles in school Perspectives on what constitutes readiness are embedded in everyday intuitive cultural ideas about how children learn and how adults believe they can support that learning (Carr 2001). Bruner (1997, p.120) elucidates on this idea of preparation for school or school

readiness as:

> *a mischievous half-truth, because a teacher does not wait for readiness to happen; you foster or 'scaffold' it by deepening the child's powers at the stage where you find him or her now.*

While the traditional readiness approach infers a deficit view of the child in need of shaping and moulding to fit to the school system, Bruner's view supports the idea of the *child ready school* as opposed to the former emphasis on *school ready child.* A traditional focus on more quantitative aspects (structural and procedural) of transitions has latterly made way to a focus on the attitudes of the participants in this process, including parents, professionals and children themselves. The concept of the child ready school or schools (as in pre-school and formal schooling) has inferences for transitions practices that build coherence and continuity across settings. This paradigmatic shift in thinking locates multiple perspectives (including those of the researcher) in a local social and cultural context. This approach was epitomised in a qualitative socio-cultural study undertaken in the U.K. by Liz Brooker at the cusp of the millennium.

4.4. Shifting Perspectives - Transitions through Socio-Cultural Lenses

Brooker (2002) adopted an ethnographic case study approach in telling what she describes as the *story* of her study of a group of 16 working class ethnic minority families whose four year old children were experiencing transitions to reception classes (nearest equivalent of Junior infant classes in the Irish context) of an English urban primary school setting. Her adoption of the multiple lenses of a socio-cultural perspective are evident in her related book entitled 'Starting School, young children learning cultures'. Brooker's interest stemmed from her own experiences as a Reception teacher and memories of the young children (usually from ethnic minority or poorest white families) 'who spent two years in my class without noticeably latching on to learning' (preface, 2002). Brooker expressed dissatisfaction with explanations from research inferring a deficit view of children and their families as explanation of some children's inability to succeed in formal schooling. This dissatisfaction fuelled her interest in exploring the transition from home cultures to school cultures. Brooker describes her ethnographic fieldwork as being 'at the heart of the study', (2002, p. x) which immersed her in the lives of the children, families and teachers. Brooker

positions her own role (socio-cultural framework) as requiring shifts in thinking as she moves from the habitus of teacher to researcher and the fluidity of identity this implies.

As a fieldwork researcher, her starting point was getting to know the children, families and teachers, as she participated on a voluntary basis in the classroom setting. At times, she was called on to act in a teacher capacity, she does not go in to explicit detail as to how this may have affected children's understanding of her relationship to them. This is a study aspect that seems worthy of further attention given that Brooker emphasises the concept of 'listening' to and interpreting children's perspectives. In conjunction with her participant observer role, Brooker applied multiple research methods including field notes, semi-structured interviews with parents, and staff, parent questionnaires, document analysis, analysis of children' products and ongoing records, etc. In describing her role as research student, Brooker applied an apprenticeship metaphor and painted a vivid picture of moving from a relatively novice position 'scaffolded' by her supervisors to a level of expertise or 'mastery' to where she could 'instruct them in turn' (2002, p. x). Her new role from former teacher to academic researcher also caused her to reflect on and question her taken for granted ideas about what that role had and might entail. Brooker referenced the cognitive shifts in thinking required to navigate from lived experiences to abstract theorizing as akin to the *higher order thinking* described by Vygotsky and latterly the educational psychologist Bruner (1997). This approach of stepping outside of the everyday habitus opened up questions on structural features of schooling (that which is reified) that Brooker concluded result in practices that 'lead us to treat some children unequally even in the most well-intentioned classrooms' (2002, p. x.). Brooker (2008, p. 8) answers the question of readiness with new questions that ask not what children know or do not know but rather 'are they able to apply their knowledge in this setting? This asks a very different question reflecting a Vygotskian view of the learners potential or ZPD learning which will not be the same for every child. Brooker’s question can equally be applied to assess the quality of transitions experienced in pre-school, primary school and beyond. There is a further inference that pre-schools and formal schools need to recognise and build on the funds of knowledge children bring from home. Furthermore, Brooker (2002) reconceptualises

Bourdieu's concept of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) and applies the term *transitions capital* that each child brings in varying degrees from the home habitus.

In Ireland, similar tensions within the pedagogy and practices of pre-school education and formal school are identified in O'Kane's study (2007). Structural differences between pre-school and formal school emerge as influential in how children are viewed as learners and consequently the aims and goals, affordances and constraints of their learning cultures. The results of O'Kane's study (2007) provide the first major data on the policies and procedures in use in Irish preschools and schools with regard to transition.

4.5. Empirical Evidence and Analysis of Irish Early Years Transitions.

O'Kane (2007) frames her study mainly through a bioecological perspective. Within this model she reflects on macro and micro socio-cultural perspectives in her conceptualisation of children's experience of transition (in this case) between preschool and formal school which she describes as:

> *embedded within their relationships with people and the links between them, in combination with the ecology and historical context in which the transition takes place (2007, p.13).*

Given this understanding O'Kane (similarly to Brooker 2002) seeks multiple perspectives framed within a Bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979) on the processes of transition. The first phase of her study involved a questionnaire being sent to a representative sample of preschool teachers and teachers of junior infant classes nationwide. The aim of this was to provide insights into the practices and policies in place in both learning environments relating to the area of transition. The questionnaire also sought to establish the practices which both groups felt were of most benefit to children experiencing transition to formal school. O'Kane (2007) also introduces a qualitative case study element in phase 2 of her research where she employs observational tools and semi-structured interviews to garner the views of key informant children, their families and teachers on the perceived processes as well as any barriers to successful transitions. The quantitative aspects of O'Kane's study (2007) have a traditional focus on procedures and policies, but also attitudes in relation to transition practices. Importantly her findings

address gaps in knowledge of the reified structures for framing early years transitions in Ireland. She interprets this data with reference to her own qualitative studies and related studies on early years transitions. In drawing her conclusions and recommendations O'Kane (2007) identified four themes for interpretation and analysis of her research data.

Children Facing Transition
Families facing transition
Professionals supporting transition
Continuity & Communication

These thematic titles are a little confusing as O'Kane draws much of her conclusions from the perspectives of children, families and professionals experiences in the actual process of transition to and within primary school.

4.5.1. Child Perspectives on Transitions

Children in O'Kane's study expressed preferences for activities where they had a level of autonomy or control. The discussion group data with the children suggested they made strong distinctions between what they considered *play* and what they viewed as *work* Children particularly identified the enjoyment of *free play* time on Friday mornings

Mary: *And what do you do on the other days?*
Daragh: *We just do work.*
Ruairi: *We do listening.*
Mary: *So you do work and listening.*
All: *Yes (O'Kane 2007, p.256).*

In the above, the children emphasised their value in 'free play' (where they exerted choice), there were also indications that the children seemed accepting or at times keen to embrace the fact that their new roles entailed new rules and ways of behaving. Children identified the importance of knowing the *rules* for starting primary school. O'Kane (2007) suggests that in primary school, children are becoming more aware of each other and recognise what is valued and likely to gain them positive or negative feedback. It is not perhaps surprising that children seemed *accepting* of the new situation given their relative lack of

power to change it. O'Kane (2007) conveyed a sense of children's pride in knowing or the potential for shame in not understanding or being misunderstood. This she related to children's experiences of the rules of participation whether implicit or explicit. Trevarthan (2002) identified similar emotional responses to learning in infancy as young children engage adult responses to make meaning of new social situations.

When speaking of differences between pre-school and primary school, children in O'Kane's (2007) study frequently made references to outdoor play and the types of play resources available to them in pre-school as opposed to the limited play resources in the outdoor school yard. A recent nationwide qualitative study by Start Strong Ireland (2011) highlighted pre-school children's perspectives where they stressed the importance they place on relationships, outdoor space and resources for play.

4.5.2. Parent Perspectives on Transitions

In the situated context of the study (an Irish primary school) O'Kane's findings (2007, p. 289) indicated that:

> *Although schools may consider that they have an open door policy, it could be questioned as to whether parents feel comfortable approaching staff. Indeed parents in the current study who would be considered empowered in terms of ability to approach teaching staff noted reservations about initiating contact.*

O'Kane (2007) suggests that schools understandings of an *open door* policy for communication may differ considerably to parents perception of what this might mean. Similarly to Brooker's term 'transitions capital', O'Kane appropriates Bourdieu's term 'cultural capital' to the accumulated capital that families bring with them to primary school and how this acts or fails to convert into currency in terms of their new parent roles. She identifies the powerful role of the school (as a structural feature in society). The school as an institution reflects the prevailing values and beliefs of the pedagogic discourse (reified ways of being, seeing and doing in school). These reified practices will interpret the cultural capital of the child and the funds of knowledge he/she brings from home. Other Educational theorists (Comber 2000, Carr 2001, Brooker 2002, Brostrom 2002)

corroborate this perspective, acknowledging that the wider the gap between home cultures and the school, the greater the difficulty in children achieving the sense of well being and belonging associated with positive transitions.

4.5.3. Professionals Mediating Transition - Play, Relationships and Language/Communication Matters

Primary school teachers questioned (through questionnaires and/or semi-structured interviews) and/or interviewed by O'Kane in her study emphasised the appropriateness of *active learning* for young children. The suggestion was that for much of the day the children are learning in an active way, through play-based pedagogy. O'Kane's case study observations confirmed children's active engagement in various activities including singing of action songs, rhymes, storytelling and dancing. Interestingly the children observed by O'Kane did not perceive such practices as play. To the key informant children of O'Kane's study what they describe as *play* has a volitional quality which adults working with them would define as *free play*. This type of play also conforms to aspects of what Bruce (2004, p. 193) defines as *free-flow* play a feature of which is that 'it is intrinsically motivated' and also that 'it exerts no external pressure to conform to rules, pressures, goals, tasks or definite direction.' In reflecting the views of primary school teachers in her study on skills deemed important for readiness O'Kane observes:

> *The balance between acting independently when required yet also sitting still when required may well be a difficult balance for children of four and five years old to understand (O'Kane 2007, p. 305)*

O'Kane stresses that the onus for readiness should not lie with the child, but rather with professionals working in ECCE (pre-school and primary school teachers) to work together towards approaches that support children (and by inference their families) during transition.

In her advocacy for 'equal partnership between preschools and schools' she appears to be issuing a challenge. There is a suggestion of a need for the top down dominance of formal schooling's apparent demands (in everyday practice) for compliant passive learners to be challenged by the ground up culture of pre-school's traditional construction of the active

playful child. This is referenced in her questionnaire findings suggesting that confidence and emotional skills were valued more highly at pre-school than at primary level. Generally her conclusions suggest significant differences between the rhetoric of what is valued (such as 'active play'), at policy level and in the interview data and what O'Kane (2007) observed in everyday practices. Conflicts or *dichotomies* between structural features of ECCE settings (such as pupil/teacher ratio's and resources) and everyday practice related to concepts such as *readiness* and what constituted *active play* from adult as well as child perspectives.

O'Kane's study (2007, p. 306) indicated that 'parents had a wealth of information on their children's strengths and weaknesses, both in academic, social, and emotional terms'. Contrastingly, (and similarly to Brooker's findings in the U.K.) the study noted a lack of procedures in Irish formal schooling to enable parents to share their knowledge of their children. Brooker's (2002) methodology involved informal conversations and semi-structured interviews in children's home cultures prior to and after their formal school start, as well as participant observations (in school), questionnaires to parents, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers and focus groups with key informant children. Contrastingly, O'Kane's (2007) study had a smaller ethnographic element and the children and families studied comprised of a mix of working and middle class families who in comparative terms of social and cultural capital appeared more advantaged and less at risk of difficult transitions. Both studies foreground the importance of a children's rights perspective and the importance of 'listening' to children. In this regard, both Brooker and O'Kane used focus groups with children, affording them opportunities to express their own views (whether in agreement with their peers or otherwise) without the concern that there might be a *wrong* answer. Given the unequal power relationships between adults and children, listening also infers interpretive analysis of what have been described as 'the hundred languages of childhood' (Edwards, Gandini and Foreman 1998). To this end Brooker (2002) proposes a 'Mosaic' type (Clark and Moss 2001) participatory approach for accessing the perspectives of younger children such as playing games, taking photographs, storytelling and drawing. Brooker has since followed this study with her book 'Supporting transitions in the early years' (2008). The latter work continues to apply the birds eye

bioecological perspective (commonly applied to transitions studies) but usefully incorporates a communities of practice model as Brooker conceptualises her evolving sense of researcher identity. She describes her discovery of having joined 'a community of transitions researchers' that stretches around the world (and beyond the early years). The importance of developing shared conceptual frameworks creating 'meeting points' across communities is also taken up by Dunlop (2002, p. 109) in relation to early years transitions. Dunlop advocates that parents, and educators (pre-school and primary) acquire a shared conceptual framework of the child at school entry level.

> *Without such shared understanding children will find a dissonance in how they are viewed from competent and accomplished people with a variety of strengths and needs to incompetent novices unable to exercise responsibility or make contributions in the interests of their own learning (2002, p. 109).*

In this perspective, Dunlop alludes to the significance of affording children participatory identities from novice to experienced membership extending across communities of practice (such as pre-school to primary school). However, differences in how children are viewed as learners as well as how they contextually view themselves are highlighted as setting the context for learning. Children's experiences during transitions suggest that they themselves are aware of their changing roles and identities and equate these with a new status that involves new ways of being, seeing and doing (Carr, 2001, Dockett and Perry 2002, Brostrom, 2002). In some instances, this may require leaving old behaviours and views not only of self but how children believe others view that self, behind. Given the imbalance of power between adults and children, acceptance of children's right to be heard infers a mediating role for adults. Consequently, how adults (including researchers) view their roles in their relationships with young children and their families emerge as another significant influence on transition practices.

4.6. Transitions in Thinking Within Places and Conceptual Spaces

Hislam's empirical studies (2004) indicate that the way a play area is introduced, described and/or resourced affects young children's collective play patterns. In her observations of the 'Home Corner' (commonly named area in pre-school usually resourced with

implements for domestic or doll play) this area was rejected by one young boy as 'girlish'. His peers also avoided play in this location. Following a visit and talk from police personnel, teachers added new props to the play location (telephone, police station sign, and typewriter etc.). There is a suggestion in this that the cultural text (Sarup 1996) embedded in the descriptive language of the play space presented a challenge to a group sense of what it is to be male. The same child and his male peers quickly *flooded* the newly defined play space (*police station*). While the girls continued to occupy this space, new patterns of play were observed. Some of the girls retained and adapted the domestic play, while others assisted the capturing and incarceration of *robbers* in cells. Hislam cautions against the tendency to interpret such changes along stereotyped lines. An initial impression that the space was now being overtaken by the boys was revised. Effectively, the play space had become more appealing to boys. As a consequence, transitions in children's thinking occurred and required ongoing negotiation and complex meaning making in order to sustain the exciting new play possibilities.

In the Irish context, the place and space for play in ECCE, particularly outdoor play has gained increasing attention in research. Hayes & Kernan (2008, p. 163) comment that in Ireland 'Over the years, changes in school architecture have had little to do with good design in spaces for children's environments' and more to do with health and safety regulations. In Chapter 2, similar critiques were observed in evaluations of the revised pre-school regulations. Hayes and Kernan (2008) propose the usefulness of viewing children's participation within ECCE places in terms of *affordances*. Furthermore, they differentiate between *space* and *place* describing place as encompassing a space. Place is associated with security and a sense of belonging while space is understood as the possibility of experiencing the *longed for* (Vygotsky 1978) as in the space to play, explore, and have fun. Kernan's ethnographic study (2006) of four ECCE settings in Ireland identified certain key characteristics. She presents an image of early years settings as protected separate spaces where children's participation is confined within pre-school (and mostly within indoor experiences) and does not extend or link to the broader surrounding community/communities. Kernan (2010, p.3) argues that a separateness and 'invisibility' of children from the public space affects children's participation as it is difficult for children

to 'sense the outdoors while indoors and to perceive and utilise affordances outdoors'.

In each of the settings studied by Kernan (2006), opportunities as well as space to play outdoors was limited. This was exacerbated by structural features such as limited resources and building designs that did not facilitate easy access between indoors and outdoors. Kernan and Devine's study (2010, p. 371) of ECCE outdoor play in Ireland identifies competing discourses 'of safety and protection versus play and autonomy' indicating that children's access to meaningful outdoor experiences are becoming increasingly marginalised in what may be a risk averse society. Her findings confirm other studies (Valentine & McKendrick 1997) that highlight adult beliefs that children lack sufficient opportunities for play. Such views have been juxtaposed against adult protectiveness and fearfulness related to perceived ideas of children as vulnerable to danger and risk when outdoors. However, research findings indicate that many ECCE settings in Ireland currently have poor or inadequate outdoor areas with 11% of settings overall lacking a dedicated outdoor space (Department of Children and Youth Affairs Scholarship programme 2011). The potential affordances of the place and space of pre-school at key times of transition are argued as related to the physical space but more importantly the conceptual space within this for children to form participatory identities.

Research conducted by Corsaro and Molinari (2000) and Brostrom (2007) propose approaches to engage children's motives for play involving adult structuring of play activities in preparation for small and large transitions.

4.7. Anticipating Future Roles - 'Priming' & Play as 'Transitory Activity'

In their longitudinal ethnographic studies within Italian and American pre-schools Corsaro and Molinari (2000, p. 18) introduced the concept of *priming events.* Central routine activities (such as morning meetings) said to produce a sense of belonging in the group acted as a means for 'creative embellishment'. These familiar routines became the place and space of playful participatory activities directing children's attention to upcoming events and anticipated changes in their lives. Over a period of several months, children worked on a project about *The Wizard of OZ,* discussing, producing and displaying various

scenes in their art work. The final stage ended in a collaborative production of and reading of the story, a copy of which each child took home. The project aims included development of individual and group participatory social and literacy skills (including planning, action, discussion and evaluation).

Other aspects of the priming process included special events, such as an end of year school party (parents and grandparents invited) and children's visits to the school that most of the children would be attending next term. Discussions followed the field trips where children were able to ask questions and share their own understandings. At this point children in the study also started to address emotional aspects of change such as separation from friends (attending different schools). Interestingly, many children appeared eager to start primary school but all expressed some concerns and worries which teachers tried to ease. Teacher concerns about transition centred around the need for children to adapt to a more structured school day with the expectation of children having to pay attention and sit for long periods. Many parents interviewed expressed similar concerns.

The effects of priming in children's peer cultures was observed in their growing vocabularies, skills of negotiation and appropriation of literacy activities during free play. In art work, children often sought assistance to print words or write something in the researchers notebooks. These play interests (representative of future anticipated roles) were interpreted as evolving directly from children's collective participation at more structured times engineered by the teachers. Teachers interviewed insisted their primary concern was not with teaching specific skills, but rather with orienting children's interests (dispositions) towards key skills such as listening carefully and comprehending stories. One teacher stated 'It is more important to establish all the pre-requisites for them to acquire certain skills. You need prerequisites, those of attention of comprehension'. (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, p. 26). Priming also appeared to occur in the home culture often in informal ways. Parents interviewed frequently referred to the influence of older siblings in motivating children's interests in their new school child roles. For many children the idea of being able to do *homework* was an eagerly anticipated part of the transition to primary school Studies

by Dockett and Perry (2002, 2003, 2004, 2007) corroborated these influences including children's anticipation of homework in a positive light.

Brostrom (2007) describes a process similar to Corsaro and Molinari's *priming* as a means to *cross boundaries* between pre-school and school cultures. Brostrom's research (2002) found some children who evidenced competence and confidence as learners in pre-school experienced a loss of confidence, anxiety and a sense of not feeling *suitable* (lacked a sense of belonging) when experiencing the transition to formal school. Brostrom applies Lave and Wengers (1991) idea of *situated learning* as a central hypothesis. In this learning is viewed as social and contextual, embedded in as well as bound by specific shared practices. These practices are understood as evolving and continually being negotiated over time. In this understanding, learning from one area does not necessarily transfer to another. In terms of transition, this poses difficulties of adjustment and adaptation for young children to new social contexts. Brostrom proposes that this difficulty can be overcome or alleviated by introducing transition practices (similar to the concept of priming) which are not context bound.

Within this Vygotskian socially mediated approach, Brostrom proposes the usefulness of play as a *transitory activity,* In what Brostrom describes as *Frame play* (similar to priming events), he speaks in terms of a cognitive transition between a motive to play towards 'real motivation for learning'. Embedded in this is the understanding that children are motivated to play for the sake of play and its sheer enjoyment. According to Brostrom, the envisaged transition in thinking would require children to incorporate specific aims in to their play. These would include skills and competences that fit with (and therefore appeal to the children) in their envisaged new roles. In frame play, Brostrom's findings suggest that the motive increasingly leans towards an aim or goal.

Time and timing has also been identified, as an important aspect of adjustment, coping and adaptation to the challenges of and contexts of transition (Elder 1999). It is noteworthy that

the children in these studies had a formal school start at 6 or seven years and a long experience of negotiating and mastering a pre-schooler identity of confidence and competence. Arguably these children may have been *ready, willing and able* (Carr 2001) to anticipate and explore the challenges and opportunities of a new school child role. Nonetheless, both parental and teacher concerns expressed about transition (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, O'Kane 2007) suggest that the structures of formal school (in terms of size, resources, and differing pedagogical approaches and curricula) may limit children's affordances to feel competent and confident during the transition to formal school. Three and four year olds in pre-school in Ireland, England and elsewhere also have less time than some of their European counterparts to playfully grow in to their pre-schooler roles and identities and anticipate future roles.

4.8. Conclusion

Pre-school matters and concerns about what matters in everyday practice have been addressed in this Chapter, in terms of transitions. Specifically, this Chapter asks: *What are the indicators of positive experiences of transitions in ECCE?*. The concept of transition is sometimes, conceptualised in the literature (and also within this study) as a catalyst or tool for learning and development. However, the literature also indicates that transition can create challenges, related to children's well-being and sense of identity and belonging in new social and cultural contexts. At a structural level in society, the school (or in this current study the pre-school) exerts powerful historically mediated influences on everyday practice (*reification*, discussed in Chapter 3). This influences what is sayable and doable, in terms of regulation, curriculum, pedagogy, and also architectural design and resourcing of the indoor and outdoor spaces. Educational theorists surmise that the greater the discontinuity between the home culture and the school the more difficult it is for families to acquire the cultural or 'transitions capital' (Brooker 2002) necessary to act as currency in the new social context

Findings from empirical studies indicate that some children who are viewed as competent, independent learners in pre-school may be perceived as lacking 'readiness' to meet the challenges of formal school. In Ireland and the U.K. a focus at policy level has been on

how *ready* children are for school and the related concept of a *school ready child* which, traditionally, (in Ireland and the U.K.) involves children as young as four. Some differing views of children and changing roles for parents (during the transition to primary school) have been suggested as related to structural differences (such as size, and pupil/teacher ratios) between pre-school and primary school, as well as differences in training, curricula and pedagogical practices. Children in Ireland and elsewhere reflected understandings of these differences (between pre-school and formal school) in their perceptions of obedience and compliance as requirements of the new role of *school-child.* In these empirical findings children also link the significance of knowing the *rules* to their new identities in formal school. These understandings have been interpreted as part of children's coping and adaptation strategies at times of transition. These new roles and identities are played out within the reified rites, routines and rituals of a new social situation, one where children are no longer the *little masters* or expert members but must start again as novices (Garpelin *et al* 2010). The complex notion of priming children for transitions to primary school incorporates differences in the cultural stance and play based pedagogy of pre-school to the more formal experiences and differently resourced cultures of formal schooling. How children are perceived in terms of 'readiness' influences perspectives on the aims and purposes of pre-school. There are further implications for the associated adult roles in mediating children's experiences of transitions and the participatory affordances available in new social and cultural contexts.

The image of the child as a citizen, with rights at policy level, and specifically the right to play (UNCRC, Article 31) promotes ECCE curricula and practice affording children play and learning opportunities (*theme, play matters*). In Chapter 3 variations in perspectives on what constitutes *play* in ECCE were discussed. Latterly, research has sought new ways to access and interpret children's negotiation of the space for play and learning, within their cultural worlds. These study approaches infer transitions in thinking requiring adults to adopt more fluidity in their roles in order to develop a mutuality that can reflect child perspectives (Chapter 3). Study findings in Ireland (O'Kane 2007) indicate that children value and differentiate between play (where they have a level of choice) and *work*

described by primary school teachers in Ireland as *'play based'* activities. In Ireland there are indicators that the emphasis on play and active learning acknowledged in the primary school curriculum and latterly in Aistear (Irish framework for early learning) and Síolta (National Quality standards) is not reflected (at least not to the extent advocated at policy level) in every day practice. Empirical studies, (In Ireland and elsewhere) attest to the significance of play and play spaces and affordances for children's learning and development. Such findings are significant in the ongoing debate on what constitutes *readiness* and suggest that the concept of the *child ready school* is less prominent than top down demands for a s*chool ready* child.

In various studies, (some longitudinal) a recurring aspect of positive experiences of transition (expressed by parents, teachers and children themselves) relates to making or keeping friends and (where relevant) being connected to siblings. Research also indicates that children link favourite play spaces such as the outdoors to relationships (*theme relationships matter*) and the potential to connect with friends and siblings, or make new friends. Children's experience of positive transitions appear to relate to their evolving participatory identities and how, if, or when, they are facilitated to contribute, explore and think in their everyday peer and adult interaction. Empirical studies in Ireland and elsewhere emphasise the building of links between home and school to children's desire to feel a sense of well being and belonging within a new cultural community. Differences in how children are perceived (and how children perceive themselves) may also relate to differences in the language between pre-school and primary school (*theme language/communication matters).* The perception of a primarily one way transfer of knowledge (from School to home) is highlighted in studies by Brooker (2002) in the U.K and O'Kane (2007) in Ireland. Both studies also emphasise the wealth of knowledge that parents have on their children's learning and development and the lack of a mediating process to communicate this information (supportive of positive experiences for children) during the transition to formal school. This poses questions on how such knowledge can be shared and developed within and beyond the less formal structures of pre-school.

Transition studies have highlighted the need for continuity as children cross boundaries into new social situations such as pre-school and formal school. Discontinuities have been identified where knowledge and being able to participate in one context does not necessarily translate as currency in another (also highlighted in Chapter 3). A key message from the literature reviewed is that experiences of transitions in early childhood and across the life cycle are about more than the individual. Transition emerges as a collective process of participation, meaning making and identity formation. Furthermore, the cumulative effects of transition, starting in early childhood, can impact positively or negatively as children seek a sense of well being and belonging, within diverse and shifting social and cultural contexts. How children are viewed, as well as how children view themselves, will influence their experiences of transitions. The literature reflects competing and contrasting images of the child (also discussed in Chapter 2) as active and playful, vulnerable and needy, citizens with rights in the here and now, or citizens of the future. Such images continue to vie with each other within the place, space and reified structures of ECCE in Ireland and elsewhere

Throughout the literature reviewed, the interconnected themes of play, relationships and language /communication recur as matters of significance in early year's transitions. This also has implications for the adult role in ECCE. With this in mind, the research design adopts a flexible exploratory approach with methods aimed at accessing what day to day and moment to moment experiences of transition may look and feel like from the perspectives of participants in pre-school, particularly children themselves.

Chapter 5. Research Design/Methodology

> *The meaningfulness of our engagement in the world is not a state of affairs, but a continual process of renewed negotiation. From this perspective, meaning is always the product of its negotiation, by which I mean that it exists in the process of negotiation. Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world (Wenger 2008 p. 54).*

5.1. Introduction

Within this socio-cultural perspective, the study lens observes how children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school. Initial questions centre around the what? why? where? and when? of the everyday routines, activities and practices as observed within the setting. What are the explicit and implicit rules that govern adult (parents and teachers) as well as children's participation in these practices? What are the adult aims and goals? What are children learning and how is meaning mediated and negotiated? How do peer relationships develop? How do children appear interested and involved and what might give rise to crisis? Importantly, what might the pre-school world/s look and feel like from child perspectives? In short, the study considers the dynamic relation of participating in and making meaning within a pre-school community.

Chapter 2 highlighted the historical tendency for government investment in early years services in Ireland to be confined to children within families viewed as disadvantaged and/or in need of early years interventions. The recent introduction of a universal free pre-school year carries an implication of access to pre-school as more rights based (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014). Contextually, the study will throw light on how children in this study experienced early years transitions as they moved between the home habitus and the secondary habitus of a pre-school Community of Practice. Chapter 3 elucidated how a socio-cultural perspective on children and childhood privileges the situatedness and relational aspects of learning and development. It also highlighted the significance of meaning as multiple and how all participants in an activity bring their histories, experiences and agendas to bear as they interpret and act in their various

contexts.(Vygotsky 1978, Bakhtin 1981, Wertsch, 1993). Within this perspective of childhood or childhoods there is no universal child, but a foregrounding of the diverse possible constructions of childhood reflecting multiple realities (James *et al* 1998). The social and dialectical nature of meaning making in these multiple realities/worlds is argued as constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. In Wenger's terms, meaning or knowledge is not out there waiting to be found but exists in the dialectics between what is reified and everyday practice. Similarly, this study sets out to illuminate what is negotiated as meaningful and what matters and is valued or validated, as well as to why to the participants in the community under study.

This Chapter will elaborate the rationale for the qualitative, participant observer approach and ethnographic research elements adopted in this study. The COP model (introduced in Chapter 2) is the unit of analysis and context for research within a pre-school Community of Practice in Ireland. An exploratory participant observer approach is adopted, encompassing a fluid researcher identity, where both *novice* and *expert* participation is sought. Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study are described and within this are highlighted access, field entry, data production and the research procedures/ protocols as well as their adaptations for analysis and interpretation. The strengths and limitations, benefits and concerns of the research approach and methodology are put forward. These include ethical considerations in research with young children. The importance of recognising children's rights to participate or withdraw at any point during research is foregrounded. Furthermore, this places an onus on the researcher to recognise children's verbal, as well as non-verbal, communication throughout the study. The Chapter concludes with an explanation and further justification of the interpretive analytical approaches applied, including explanations of the concepts of *triangulation*, *crystallization* (Richardson 2000) and *Human as Instrument* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as means to reflect multiple perspectives for interpretation and analysis.

5.2. Rationale for Research Design and Interpretive Approach

Edwards (2001, p.121) suggests the enlightening potential on professional practice of qualitative research by 'providing information which questions assumptions and offers fresh ways of interpreting familiar events. The COP model frames the study in terms of

reification and everyday practice and offers such means to question and perceive everyday events from multiple perspectives. My study argues the value of a socio-cultural approach that seeks insights into the process of both being and becoming within a Community of Practice. It seeks the type of *thick descriptions* or *local knowledge* of lived experiences proposed by Geertz (1993) and described by Edwards (2001, p.120) as 'rich information about locally embedded ways of understanding and acting in the world.' This involves tracking children's transitions from novice to experienced membership of a pre-school community, leading up to the next big transition to primary school.

The socio-cultural lens employed seeks to make visible the contextual influences of positioned power relationships on everyday meaning making. The inference for this type of research is the requirement of interpretive analysis of research data. This approach denies the idea of researcher objectivity and argues for the inclusion of the personal voice (positioned and influenced by personal habitus) in the research context. Such a perspective requires an approach addressing what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe as the *crisis of representation.* The crisis relates to the proposal that all learning/meaning making is subjective, value laden and cannot be context free. The interpretive analysis inferred suggests a requirement to reflect multiple perspectives. Within this study, participant observation was the main methodological tool and this incorporated ongoing reflection and reflexivity, both in, as well as on everyday practice (Schön 1987). Reflection and reflexivity allows for the researcher to be responsive to the unanticipated, and where appropriate, to reshape elements of the research design. Edwards (2001) highlights the need for qualitative researchers to be *self aware.* This study seeks critical awareness of the personal habitus and the community habitus (of all participants including myself). The aim being to make visible and challenge the taken for granted or *fish in water* aspects of participating in everyday practice.

5.3. 'Validity', 'Triangulation' and 'Crystallization'

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001 p. 203) assert the importance of 'reliability, replicability and validity' in all forms of research. However, they also acknowledge the significance of context in how these terms are applied. Quantitative research often starts with a hypothesis and concerns itself with the degree or goodness of fit between the data

gathered and how researchers theoretically represent it (usually involves confirming or disproving a hypothesis). Contrastingly, qualitative research starts with no such assumptions. The approach is more exploratory and may include ethnography and participant observations. Ethnography encompasses a holistic approach which 'forces the fieldworker to see beyond an immediate cultural scene or event ...Each scene exists within a multilayered and interrelated context' (Fetterman 2010, p. 18). Such a holistic approach is sought throughout this study. However, a traditional ethnographic approach would require immersion of the ethnographer for a considerable and continuous length of time in the community or context studied. Accordingly, ethnography can be a costly process in terms of time and economic costs. Given the constraints of such costs, this current study did not adopt a purist ethnographic approach but involved my gradual increased levels of participation, over time, in the Community of Practice studied. This process included opportune periods of continuous involvement (two five week periods in Phase II) which will be further elaborated on later in this Chapter. A central aspect of most ethnographic research is to understand perceptions of reality from an emic or insider/native perspective as well as an etic or outsider viewpoint. Both perspectives are sought within the participant/observer research role of this current study. 'Native perceptions may not conform to an “objective” reality, but they help the fieldworker understand why members of the social group do what they do'. (Fetterman 2010, p. 20). Documenting multiple perspectives of reality in a given study context is central to developing understanding of why people think and act in the different ways they do. The type of thick description (Geertz 1993) afforded by ethnographic research approaches have been applied in qualitative research so that behaviours in situated contexts become meaningful to an outsider. A danger in ethnography is the possibility of *going native* so that what is reified socially and culturally becomes taken for granted and subject to biased interpretations. The ethnographer 'can guard against the more obvious biases, however, by making them explicit and by trying to view another culture's practices impartially' (Fetterman 2010, p. 24). Reflectiveness and reflexivity is advocated in ethnography (Davies 1998). In this study, reflection on everyday practice was approached through a daily reflective journal. Reflexivity was attained through a learning story approach (Carr 2001). This involved the linking of and continuous reflection on participant

observations (with children, teachers and parents) over time. Flexibility within the participant/observer role adopted in this research created constant challenges to view reality from multiple perspectives. Sometimes this resulted in *fish out of water moments* which were often uncomfortable and initiated re-interpretation and re-negotiation of new possible ways of understanding.

The paradigmatic shift in early years research towards a study of multiple perspectives was highlighted in Chapter 4 in relation to research on early years transitions (Brooker 2002; 2008, Brostrom 2002, 2007, Dunlop 2002, 2003a, Dockett and Perry 2002; 2007, O'Kane 2007). Such an approach infers a range of possible methodological tools allowing multiple possible interpretations for the reader/s to draw conclusions as to the validity of the research. Replication and reliability in qualitative research are argued as solved (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2001, p. 203) 'by providing a clear and explicit account of the research process'. Brooker's ethnographic case study of young children starting school in the U.K. (Chapter 4) adopted a narrative approach providing the type of rich thick description (Geertz 1993) and insider perspectives unavailable from more unitary methods of research.

O'Kane's study of early years transitions, (the first major study of its kind in Ireland) triangulated data providing both quantitative (survey/questionnaires), and qualitative (participant observer) means to increase internal validity. *Triangulation* (Richardson, 2000) has become increasingly applied to qualitative research such as interviews, statistical data and observational data to provide a kind of comparative analysis that aims to bring *validity* or new interpretive meanings to data studied. The survey data findings from O'Kane's studies and other literature sources on transitions (Chapter 4) acted as valuable secondary sources for comparative analysis with my study findings. However the use of quantitative methods such as surveys as a primary research method were not applied in this study. The exploratory nature of this study required time for the questions and new themes of importance to emerge from everyday participation in the context studied. Accordingly, the Triangulation processes of other studies usefully informed this study, but the constraints of time and costs of survey or other quantitative methods were not deemed feasible for use in

this small study. Instead the process of *crystallization* was aimed for. In qualitative research this approach combines multiple methodological perspectives in order to bring more in-depth understanding to the research focus. This is facilitated by a Human as Instrument approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985**)** used as a cross check across the various methods. In this, researcher responses can reflect personal experiences as a community member and the constraints and possibilities within the various roles adopted.

A limitation acknowledged by O'Kane in her study (but addressed in the situated context of this study) was the lack of data on children's experiences in pre-school prior to their transfer to primary school in Ireland. Hayes (2003) has commented on the dearth of early years research on middle class children in Ireland. A research focus on middle class children was not the intention of this study (chosen as a convenience sample). However it is acknowledged throughout the study that the social class of the participants is significant in terms of the transitions capital (Brooker 2007) this affords children and their families. At the time of this study, the participants (primarily from middle class backgrounds) were experiencing social and economic changes (including the introduction of the free pre-school year) influencing both the timing of pre-school start and the subsequent length of time children spent in pre-school. The historical milestone of the introduction of the universal free pre-school scheme was also starting to open pre-school access (in this setting and elsewhere in Ireland) to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (increasing families' transitions capital). In this regard the generational effects of *linked lives* (Elder 1999) at key times of transition are acknowledged in this study. The choice of a pre-school Community of Practice as the research model and unit of analysis for the study will now be elaborated.

5.4. Unit of Analysis – Pre-school as a Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise the significance of what they refer to as *Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP)* as novice members start to engage in various communities. Through this transitional process, participants initially acquire a sense of what it looks and may feel like to adopt a more experienced role. There is a sense in this of reading the cultural scripts, identifying with the perceived characteristics of the new role/s before trying them on and rehearsing or enacting and becoming them. The player must acquire a

sense of what it is to look and feel the part before adopting the participatory repertoires required to make the role his/or her own. This idea equates with Vygotsky's (1978) conceptualisation of children's play as the creation of larger than life identities through which they gain abstract ideas of their own potential. Similarly Lave and Wenger (1991, pp. 110-11) emphasise the adoption of roles and the formation of identities in communities of practice; they are critical of approaches that 'focus quite narrowly on task knowledge and skill as the activities to be learned'. The participant observer role is as suggested an active rather than passive observational role and one that can encompass functional aspects of the research role as well as participation in moment to moment events under study. In this manner it affords access to insider information about events and groups under study in a manner that would otherwise be unavailable (Yin 2009). This study seeks analysis and interpretation of the roles and identities open to appropriation by novice participants during their transitions to and within their pre-school community. It also considers the participatory roles available for appropriation by adults including teachers and parents and I myself as participant observer.

The research setting is a pre-school offering sessional pre-school services as well as after school care (the latter aspect is not featured in this study). At the point of field entry, the pre-school had been in operation for almost eight years, having received funding as part of a community project. It is located in an urban area a few minutes from the centre of an industrial town in a quiet lane way close to a number of local primary schools. The sample is primarily a convenience sample because of ease of access geographically. Costs of travel to and from the setting were factored in to the research design. Another criteria for selection is that the pre-school is registered with the Health Services Executive and is currently implementing the universal free pre-school scheme described in Chapter I. Added to this was the school's reputation for accommodating research students. These factors were significant in view of the intended long-term, participatory, nature of the research. The majority of the children would transfer to one of several primary schools in the locality which could have been useful if ongoing studies of key participants involved in the study became a consideration.

5.5. First Steps – Negotiating the Participant Observer Role

My Supervisor, Dr. Anna Ridgway, made initial contact with the pre-school and provided them with some background information to support my accessing this environment. After an introductory telephone conversation with *Leona* the manager (all names in study changed to preserve anonymity) we met at the school in mid February 2011. During the course of the morning, I met with the two other members of staff and was also introduced to the children. I was invited to join in the morning activities such as Circle Time and to observe and interact during the children's free play time. After morning snack, the children went on a nature walk with their teachers and Leona invited me in to her office to discuss my research intentions and plans. Initially we spoke about the morning's interactions and how the children themselves seemed at ease with a visitor to the setting and initiated much of the contact by inviting me in to their play areas (such as the *Home Corner* or *book corner*). I then gave a general outline of my own background and training and how my research interest in children's transitions to and within pre-school had developed. Included in this conversation were some of the theoretical aspects of the literature, such as participation within a Community of Practice and concepts such as *apprenticeship* in thinking and *guided participation*. Leona related some of these concepts to her own theoretical orientation and went on to describe related aspects of the curriculum in place in the setting. She described how all children are encouraged and guided to participate in group activities at certain times such as planned cooking and structured arts and crafts activities. She explained that the curriculum has evolved over time and that the principles and learning goals of Aistear, the Irish framework for early learning, inform weekly plans.

We then discussed the proposed participant/observer/volunteer role/s, the number of visits this would require, and how my presence in the setting would be explained to parents, staff and children themselves. It was agreed that initial visits would be Monday and Friday mornings from approximately 8.45 a.m. to 12.00 noon (official school hours) and for 15 – 20 minutes after that for cleanup/ discussion and planning, up to and including the final term which ended in the last week in June 2011. Leona agreed to notify parents providing details of my background and explaining my role as volunteer with an intention to conduct research on children's transitions to and within the pre-school community. Other

information supplied would include details of the days I would be present in the setting and my willingness to answer any questions parents or staff members might have. Before leaving, I spoke again with Lisa and Sue the two other teachers in the setting. We discussed the exploratory nature of my intended research and my intention to act as an *extra pair of hands.* I conveyed that I would welcome their support in *learning the ropes* about what this might entail. I also explained that I would appreciate the possibility of sharing their insights and experiences of everyday practice. Both teachers seemed amenable to this idea and I also stressed my willingness to answer any questions or concerns they might have at any stage.

To the children, I would be introduced as a new *teache*r (all research students introduced in this manner). My interest in exploring the stories of what was important to the children about their pre-school experiences would be explained on my first day but also as and when children requested information or seemed curious about my role. Leona's Gatekeeper role afforded me access to the setting but cognisance was taken of hierarchical elements of such a role and any unwillingness either verbal or non-verbal of children or adults (staff or parents) to my presence in the setting would be treated very seriously. In this regard, the initial engagement with the setting in Phase 1 afforded the opportunity to build relationships of trust with staff, parents and children. This proved a crucial element of the research process without which the project could not have developed to Phase 2.

5.6. Consent, Assent and Selection of Key Informants

Adult participants include, the staff and parents of key informant children and myself as participant/observer. Leona, the manager acted as both an administrator and a teacher in the setting. Lisa was a full-time teacher, Sue was a part-time teacher (usually employed for two mornings per week). The key child informants in Phase 1 (February to June 2011) consisted of five children (three girls and two boys) selected on the basis that they had been members of the setting since or prior to February 2011 when Phase 1 of the study commenced (Chapter 6).

Table 3 - Phase 1: Teacher Key Informants

Adults	Roles	Attendance
Leona	teacher/manager	5 mornings per week
Lisa	teacher	5 mornings per week
Sue	part-time teacher	2 mornings per week
Frances	volunteer/researcher	2 mornings per week

Table 4 - Phase 1: Child Key Informants

Children	Age	Attendance
Mark(n)	3 years, 10 months	5 mornings per week
Marie(n)	3 years, 8 months	2 -3 mornings per week
Helen (n)	3 years, 7 months	2 -3 mornings per week
Robbie(n)	3 years, 9 months	2-3 mornings per week
Monica (n)	3 years, 8 months	2-3 mornings per week

All names apart from Researcher name have been changed to preserve anonymity.

(n) represents novice pre-schooler.

In Phase 2 (September 2011 to June 2012) three more boys and two more girls were selected randomly from the September 2011 intake of children to become participants of the observational data production (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). In this latter phase semi-structured interviews were held with the teachers and also parents of the ten key informant children. In total there were 22 child participants in the study, consisting of ten girls and twelve boys between the ages of three and five. Parental consent was received for all of the twenty two children. Assent of children in the setting was continuously negotiated throughout the research observations and data production.

Table 5 - Phase 2: Teacher Key Informants

Adults	Roles	Attendance
Leona	teacher/manager	5 mornings per week
Lisa	teacher	5 mornings per week
Sue	part-time teacher	2 mornings per week
Frances	volunteer/researcher Employed as teacher for two five week sessions	2 mornings per week Extended to 3 mornings in January 2012 November/December 2011 and February/ March 2012

Table 6 - Phase 2: Child and Parent Key Informants

Children	Age	Attendance	Parent interviewed
Mark(k)	Age 4 years, 5 months	5 mornings per week	Claire
Marie(k)	Age 4 years, 3 months	5 mornings per week	Julie
Helen(e)	4 years, 2 months	5 mornings per week	Laura
Robbie(e)	4 years, 4 months	5 mornings per week	Orla
Monica(e)	4 years, 3 months	5 mornings per week	Kevin
Eileen(n)	3 years, 11 months	5 mornings per week	Angela
Neil(n)	3 years, 11 months	5 mornings per week	Joe
Marian(n)	3 years, 5 months	5 mornings per week	Sarah
Rory (n)	4 years, 2 months	5 mornings per week	Pamela
John (n)	Age 4	5 mornings per week	Una

(k) represents key participants Marie and Mark

(n) represents novice (newcomers to Rainbow Road pre-school)

(e) represents experienced pre-schoolers with previous experience of participation in Rainbow Road pre-school during Phase 1.

Parents of the 10 key informant children were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews towards the end of the pre-school year (Interview consent letter, Appendix 2, p. 263). The aim being to discuss how the year went, parents perceptions on the purposes of pre-school education and their participatory roles in their child's experiences of transition. Similar Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the teachers in the setting to discuss their perceptions of their roles and their engagement with transition practices throughout the school year (Interview consent letter, Appendix 3, p. 265). Informal conversations (throughout the pre-school terms) with the staff and parents, combined with theoretical understandings from the literature and themes arising from the data form the basis of questions, during these semi-structured interviews (Interview protocols Appendix 6, p. 269, and Appendix 7, p. 271). Similarly, to Brooker's study (2002) and O'Kane's study (2007), the participant observer role acted as means to build relationships of trust and identify emergent themes of importance within the community studied. This in turn informed the semi-structured interview process. The emergent, overlapping and intersecting nature of research required a flexible research design, one that acknowledged and was able to deal with the inherent complexity without losing sight of children as embodied beings who live, breathe, experience and are central to the daily practices under study.

5.7. Phase 1 - Multiple Methods of Piecing Together The 'Quilt'

Phase 1 was initially intended as a pilot stage. The intention was to become familiar with the setting, assess the potential to acquire *rich thick data* (Geertz, 1993) and if this was confirmed to track the experiences of children availing of the free pre-school year scheme over a full pre-school year (September 2011 – June 2012). Within days, it was apparent to me that not only was there suitably rich data to be gathered but that tracking the experiences of children who had started pre-school prior to September 2011 and would not yet be transferring to primary school in June 2011 could better inform this study. This relates to Wenger's (2008) socio-cultural research that explicates the influences of *old-timers* defined in this study as *experienced members* on the acculturation of *newcomers* defined here as *novice participants* (in this case children joining pre-school in September pre-school intakes) within a Community of Practice.

Five children from Phase 1 entered pre-school in September 2011 with a familiarity garnered from various levels of participatory experience. Some of these children (notably *Mark* and *Marie*) had a longer attendance than others and all five had attended between two and five mornings per week. Just as the research role required a *learning the ropes* initiation, these five children knew the ropes in varying degrees of how to navigate the world of pre-school. Identification of these children as key informants (those likely to continue in pre-school in September 2011) was made early in Phase 1. Confirmation that all five of these children would be attending the pre-school for the following school year was not really feasible until the end of Phase 1 (June 2011). At this time, parents received confirmation (if sought) of their child's acceptance in primary school settings and made final decisions about whether their child would accept such a place or remain in pre-school. Consequently, daily field notes, informal conversations with staff, parents (of the key informant children) and the five children themselves retrospectively became part of the research design and methodology (including ethical clearance requirements).

The concept of data production is applied in this study rather than data in a static form that is there for the gathering (Warming 2005). The reciprocal nature of this process at times shifted or changed the direction of the research and so required a flexibility in research roles and design. This understanding incorporates an ethical approach that respects children's ability to negotiate meaning of what matters and is important to them. As an example children have ideas about where, when, how or if they want photographs taken of their cultural artefacts such as block constructions or art work. Such relationships require time and continuous negotiation to develop a mutuality that affords respectful shared meaning making. Accordingly, data production for the end of year pre-school book did not commence until considerable time had been spent developing my participant observer role.

In March 2011, this fieldwork commenced on Mondays and Fridays of each week. From the start of the pre-school year in September 2010, the pre-school cohort consisted of an unusually even ratio of boys to girls 1:1 (22 children in total), with no more than twenty children attending on any given day. At morning Circle Time (9.00 to 9.30 am.) I was introduced as a new *teacher* in the setting. I explained in simple terms to the children my

interest in the *stories* of what happens in pre-school. Over the next few weeks, daily field notes and a reflective journal recorded my guided participation (by the teachers) in to my volunteer teacher role. Headings were created to identify the more adult directed or child initiated activities over the course of a typical morning.

From the start of Phase 1, there was evidence that children individually and within groups had established ways to conform to, resist or bypass the pedagogic discourse. For the most part, this could be described as flexible and incorporated guided participatory and apprenticeship type adult roles (Rogoff 1990). Initial findings suggested that relationships and pedagogic practices within the setting supported children to have considerable freedom of movement, active participatory experiences, and a level of personal choice. The words to describe physical features of a setting contain embedded socially and culturally mediated discourses or cultural texts that on a physical and mental plane generate rules implicit and explicit about their usage (Sarup 1996). As an example, the term *Resting Loft* described a raised wooden area with stairs in the centre of the pre-school classroom. When children sought means to bypass embedded ideas about restful and quiet play associated with this location, the adults and sometimes other children would verbalise, in explicit ways, the inferred *rules* of usage. However, the subjectivity of meaning making is not stable and within social, cultural and historical contexts it is mutable and subject to change or transformation (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). In practice, situations where the *Resting Loft* and other places and spaces in Rainbow Road could be defined and experienced in new approved and/or unsanctioned ways were also negotiated. These will be elaborated on and interpretively analysed over the forthcoming empirical Chapters.

The socio-cultural lens of this study infers continual and contextualised interpretation and analysis. In this regard, daily interactions with the staff supported this process. After the last children left each day, the staff completed any final clean up tasks (usually between 12.00 and 12.20). The informal discussions at these times related to the day's events including future plans or proposed adaptations to curriculum or approach as well as some general conversation unrelated to pre-school. Such times acted as useful means to build relationships with the staff, as well as to ask questions and receive background data or to

share and clarify details of my field notes and observations. This provided culturally contextualised layers of meaning for further reflection and reflexive analysis. In the final weeks of Phase 1 of this study (June, 2011), the relationships and evolving practices within the study started to become visible to me in new ways. The analogy of *quilt maker* fits with the piecing together of multiple layers of cumulative fieldwork notes, informal discussions and other data gathering processes with the children and adult participants in the setting. These *pieces of quilt* acted as tools for thinking and started to take on patterns and become meaningful through their combined usage:

5.7.1. Field Notes/Participant Observations

Starting in Phase 1, daily field notes included ongoing interpretation and analysis of *cultural texts* in the form of policy documents, curricular plans as well as the architecture, layout and resources of the setting. Field notes, during Phase 1, were written up daily immediately after school and later transcribed to my laptop in a daily reflective diary format where cognisance was taken of reflections both *in* and also *on practice* (Schön 1987). From the beginning emergent themes for interpretation and analysis were highlighted in blue, and reflective/analytical sections were added and highlighted in green. Particular attention was paid to the five children identified as possible key informants.

Regular re-reading of field notes and (where necessary), checking what was recorded (during data production or in the aftermath) reflexively contextualised interpretations of everyday practices. This ongoing process resulted in further reflective notes following informal discussions with the children, staff and sometimes parents. An inventory was taken of typical daily routines (Appendix 5, p. 268) and any variations or new events were noted daily. The layout and resources of the setting indoors and outdoors were also noted and will be elaborated on in later Chapters.

5.7.2. ZPD – Obuchenie and The 'Pre-School Book'

Documentation as a means to access children's cultural worlds and produce a type of a *learning story (*Carr 2001) or *portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997) as a means of listening to children's verbal and non verbal meaning making is proposed in the literature (Clark and Moss 2001, Brooker 2002, Rinaldi 2004). This approach also

acknowledges the many languages of childhood including the playful shared meaning potential of humour (Pollard 1985). Aspects of these methods are appropriated and developed as a methodological tool in Phase 1 of this study. During the morning *free play* times, children's collaboration, in creating a book of some of their everyday activities was sought. Some photographs (indoors and outdoors) taken by myself and the teachers were gathered documenting various activities throughout typical pre-school days. These included structured activities such as painting, cooking, baking and gardening, children's free play choices (including socio-dramatic role play, games and puzzles indoor and outdoor play). It was practice in the pre-school for teachers to routinely take photographs (with parental and child permissions) for documenting in children's individual observational schedules. Some copies of these photographs were offered to me (in agreement with the children) for the pre-school book. Speech bubbles as a medium of communication were explained to the children and added where they wished to dictate their thoughts about their favourite activities.

On the final day of school, Rainbow Road traditionally stage a party marking the end of the pre-school year and also for a majority of the children the transition to primary school. Parent/carers and other family members are invited to this rite of passage type ritual (Van Gennep 1960). In the final weeks in pre-school, the book became a useful tool for engaging children's interest in discussing what was meaningful to them individually, and also in terms of their collective negotiated identities of participation in pre-school. The book also acted as means to further communication between myself and the teachers and parents regarding children's evolving participatory identities within, and outside of, their pre-school experiences.

Phase 2 of the research process ran from September 2011 to the end of June 2012, and incorporated, the use of, and/or adaptation of research instruments as developed in Phase 1. Chapter 8 extrapolated some of the data produced for the end of year pre-school book. It considered how as well as why children made use of space in particular places, as well as the types of artefacts produced and meanings negotiated. Interpretative analysis was provided with references to the literature and also via three participatory planes (Rogoff *et al* 1995).

5.8. Phase 2 - Research Instruments, Challenges and Adaptations

In Phase 2 of the study, I commenced taking daily participant observations of the core group of key participants (five children from Phase 1 and five children from Phase 2). After the first few days, the research lens was narrowed down and focused on Mark and Marie (as long standing members of the pre-school) who were tracked over the course of each morning (unless absent). Observational data on the other children (focusing mainly on the core group of 10 including novice and experienced members) was also recorded where their interactions overlapped with the two key participants (Mark and Marie). Short and long observations (usually between five and fifteen minutes) were recorded throughout the morning routines and rituals in a pocket notebook. Initially, these notes were recorded in what has been described as a *common sense* style, (Hedegaard *et al* 2008) without any attempt to attribute intentions to the participants. Snippets of conversation and the actual words of the participants (as much as possible) were recorded. At the transcription stage layers of additional contextual details were added (linked to previous participant observations).

In order to reflect multiple perspectives, the data was regularly and reflexively reflected upon (in light of ongoing data production) and interpreted through application of' three analytical planes of the community/cultural, the interpersonal and the personal (Rogoff *et al* 1995). At the write-up stage a series of vignettes focusing on the key informants (recorded in the present tense) was used to build pictures of the unfolding play of events for ongoing interpretation and analysis. These vignettes appear in the empirical Chapters (6, 7, and 8) and show transitions in children's learning and development (novice to expertise) over time. Further sample vignettes appear in the appendices of this thesis referenced to such transitions. These encompass children's transitions in thinking and also the influences of experienced pre-schoolers on novice pre-schoolers. Three of the five children from Phase 1 will be referred to by their names (all names changed to preserve anonymity) followed by (e) which represents experienced pre-schooler. Marie and Mark are identified by their names followed by (k) which represents *Key participant* acknowledging their long term experience of Rainbow Road. The five new informants in Phase 2 are also referred to by their names followed by (n) representing novice participant.

Children who were new to the setting in January 2011 are referred to by their names followed by (n2) denoting their second wave novice status.

Over November/December 2011, Lisa (full-time teacher) was absent for five weeks and there was a vacancy for a pre-school teacher, my application for this post was accepted. My decision to pursue this role was influenced by Brooker's study (2002) in which she successfully adopted a fluid identity, moving from volunteer/researcher to teacher/researcher at different stages of her fieldwork. A second five week post (again as temporary pre-school teacher) was offered me in February/March of 2012 which I accepted. These unanticipated opportunities opened up new possibilities for my participant observer role and eased some of the financial aspects of conducting research. However, the adaptation of the research role/s was not without challenges. Firstly, my concern was whether my new full-time teacher role would create barriers for my participant observer role. Certainly, there were some tensions between the two roles. Overall, children themselves appeared to accept the fluidity of my roles and invitations to my participation in their self-initiated play activities continued. However, meeting the responsibilities of my new role, tracking key informant children and simultaneously taking detailed observational data at this time proved difficult. Instead, detailed field notes were written up straight after school while still fresh in my mind, and verified later (if necessary) with the participants involved. An advantage of the new role was greater access and opportunity to build relationships with the staff and parents/carers of the children. Part of my new role was to greet parents and children and keep the morning register. Parents got to know me by name and would ask questions about my research or share information and/or seek some information about their children's daily experiences in pre-school. These ongoing conversations offered first hand insights in to the dynamics of the relationships influencing the home habitus of key informant children. Another important aspect was direct experience of the responsibilities of the teacher role. My role went from peripheral participant or helper to team member.

During Phase 1, fieldwork took place every Monday and Friday. Following my experience, employed as teacher, in the setting in November/December 2011(during Phase 2) my participation in the setting increased to three times per week (Monday, Wednesday and

Friday). The intention being to support the ethnographic approach sought and sustain a sense of continuity of interactions with the children, staff and parents. This proved effective and allowed enough space in between participation for logging, reflection on and preliminary analysis of fieldwork data and emerging themes. In Phase 1, the pre-school book was used as a means to develop the participant/observer role and share what is meaningful in children's cultural worlds. This approach was influenced by the portraiture study used in Aistear the Framework for early learning (Chapter I). This acted as a means to listen to and interpret the voices of even the youngest of children in the verbal and non verbal ways they chose to communicate. Photographs were taken of everyday practices such as cooking, outdoor play and arts and crafts, and children's own artefacts (with children's permission and also following requests of children) which formed the basis of discussions. Quotations from the children (again with their permission or at their personal requests) were added to the book and acted as a means to connect with their parents, teachers and carers.

In Phase 2, all of the children (both the key informants and children who were not part of the core group) were invited to collaborate in the pre-school book. Similarly to Phase 1, all children were interested in contributing (to greater or lesser degrees). In addition to photographic data, audio recordings were also added (with children's permission or at their own requests) and some of this data was transcribed and added to the book. The book acted as an enjoyable means for the pre-school community to share their everyday experiences with peers, staff and their parents/carers. Additionally, the data produced provided further means to track the interests and involvement level (Laevers 2004) of key informants in everyday practices including their own self-initiated artefacts, games and participatory repertoires. However, the powerful role of the adult and in this instance, the participant/observer research role in negotiation of everyday practice cannot be underestimated. Throughout the study and particularly during data production with the children, ethical concerns were continuously a focus of this study and how they were addressed will now be discussed.

5.9. Ethical Considerations and Building Relationships of Trust

An underlying tenet of any research must include respect for the person. In this regard a child's right to be heard and the 'right to voice opinions and influence decisions in matters relating to their own lives' (UNCRC 1989, Article 12) informs this study. Such guiding principles acknowledge the powerful role of the adult in research. It is recognised that children may indicate reluctance to be involved in the research process in verbal as well as non verbal ways which need to be respected (MacNaughton *et al* 2001). Consent was therefore sought from the parents/guardians of all of the children in the study (Appendix 1, p. 260). Consent or *assent*, of the children involved in the research process was also sought throughout the study process (Cullen *et al* 2009). Explanation of what the research involved required presentation in an age appropriate way (MacNaughton *et al* 2001). At our initial meetings, I explained to the children my interest in finding out about what they most enjoyed doing in pre-school and why. I further explained I would like to take notes, ask them questions, take photographs and write down some stories about the things they did in pre-school in a book we would make together. Children's interest in participation varied (sometimes from day to day or even within the day). Any verbal or non-verbal indicators in relation to participation were always respected as were children's wishes to become more involved. This might mean allowing children to experiment with having their voices recorded or answering their requests to photograph or help them with some of their constructions, or to read back some of my notes, which they sometimes added to or changed.

The Parents/Guardians of the children were given details of the nature of the research including the right to withdraw children from the research at any stage. Assurance was given that any verbal or non-verbal signals from the child of reluctance to participate would be respected. Parental and informed consent/assent procedure was also applied for specific parts of the project such as photography and audio recordings (Cullen *et al* 2009).

Respect for the privacy of research participants is a key ethical consideration. In this regard, University College Cork guidelines require specific ethical and legal procedures be followed in relation to confidentiality including appropriate coding and storage of data. Ethical guidelines to safeguard research participants interests and recognise any possible

conflicting concerns should they arise are adhered to in this study. My application conforms to the requirements of University College Cork's Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was confirmed on 12th May 2012 (Appendix 4, p. 267).

Initial contact, with School Manager and Teachers, was made in February 2011. A broad outline of the research intentions and time-scale was provided. Phase 1 of the research fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2011. Phase 2 of the study commenced in September 2011 and continued until the end of June 2012 which encompasses a full pre-school year.

5.10. Research Methodology - Strengths and Limitations

The advantages of the participant observer role have already been presented as a means to gain insider knowledge that would otherwise not be accessible. Drawbacks of this approach relate to the potential for the production of bias including a bias in favour of the organisation studied (Becker 1998). Increased participation can result in a *fish in water* effect and reduce the possibility of seeing what has become part of embedded and reified practice. While adoption of more than one role may make this possibility less likely there is the added problem that the participant/observer role may make demands that reduce time to take notes, follow observational themes or raise questions about events witnessed (Yin 2009). Being in the *right place at the right time* is another difficulty but perhaps less so in the open plan context of this pre-school setting. Capturing the numerous interactions that take place over a typical morning was not without complexity.

It was decided early on not to use video camera as this may have posed concerns about confidentiality and consent as well as assent. It would also have necessitated a more passive observational type role than the participative one envisaged. Corsaro (2001) and also Brooker (2001) have observed that adults often ask children questions that they themselves know the answer to rather than enter a real dialogue as to what may be meaningful or of interest to children. I agree with Brooker's (2002, p.165) assertion that 'children's communicative competence improves when they are given control over the content and direction of the conversation'. Drawing on this understanding several attempts

to take audio recordings (in Phase 2) were made with varying degrees of success. Children's diction was not always clear and the recordings were prone to fluctuating levels of background sound exacerbated by young children's tendency to move about or move out of recording range. However, at opportune times (particularly those requested by the children themselves) both indoors and outdoors, audio recordings, combined with field notes and photographs acted as a useful means to discuss, document and access children's perspectives. Rogoff (2008) and Hedegaard *et al* (2008) recommend a dialectically oriented framework for analysis which can raise new questions reflecting what is meaningful or important from different cultural perspectives such as the *institutional, community and personal.* Or (as applied in this study) three interpretive planes (Rogoff *et al* 1995) of the *community/cultural, interpersonal and personal*.

The informal approach to interviewing (also adopted in transitions studies by Brooker 2002 and O'Kane 2007) allows for a responsiveness and reflexivity to the issues involved in the study and infers a fluid rather than a rigid structure (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). However a disadvantage when it comes to interviewing key persons such as the staff or parents of the children is the need to incorporate other peoples time schedules and availability in to the research time scale (Yin 2009); as well as having a suitable place or space to conduct the interviews. Informal discussions with the staff were a regular daily occurrence. In Phase 2 of the study, my ten weeks of employment (as teacher) in the setting increased the opportunities for regular informal contact with parents. The Staff agreed to accommodate the semi-structured interviews in late May or early June 2012. Leona offered the use of her office for the planned interviews with parents in the setting. The time-scale for research and the busy schedules of parents meant narrowing the sample number of parents for interview (confined to parents of key informant children). The interviews were conducted with the most available parent (usually the parent most likely to bring the child to pre-school). The interviews took place in pre-school once the child had settled in to the morning routine. It was decided that interviewing the parents of the key informant children in late May or early June could fit well with the intention of tracking children's transitions from novice to expert status in pre-school.

The interview process itself requires the adoption of an unbiased approach and avoidance of *leading* questions in order to serve the dual purpose of following the research line of enquiry and maintaining a conversation that meets those needs (Yin, 2009). Becker (1998) advocates the use of *how* rather than *why* questions in such interviews to avoid any possible sense of defensiveness on the part of the informant. The *non-threatening, friendly* and *open ended* nature of such an approach is said to promote an atmosphere that can elicit useful data on facts as well as opinions and insights from key informants (Becker, 1998). Such a view is borne out in this study by the responsiveness of staff to informal open ended discussions during Phase 1. Access to parent perspectives were relatively limited in Phase 1 of the study, but opened up in Phase 2 and afforded greater opportunities to explore the influence of children's home habitus on the secondary habitus of pre-school. The willingness of parents and staff members to share their observations and insights are key aspects of the effectiveness of the methodology. Key also is the openness of children to the participant/observation role.

Throughout the study, the research tools themselves had been subject to changes and adaptation. The study required interpretive analysis of the broader contexts of the children's learning. These contexts ranged from the resources available, from materials to their usage as influenced by training of the practitioners and their underlying pedagogical philosophies, or folk theories. Discourses from the broader cultural contexts of children's lived experiences were analysed through study of cultural texts in policy documents including the mission statement, curricular and other policies (Appendix 8, p. 272) as well as children's play themes and production of cultural artefacts. Macro policy influences include *Aistear* and *Síolta* the Irish frameworks for early learning and how, or if, the discourses embedded in their structure were negotiated and interpreted within the curricular plans and policies of the setting.

Ideally, the study would follow the children through the next stage of transition, to primary school but this was beyond the scope and timescale of this study and is acknowledged as a limitation. This study focused on one Community of Practice at a particular time within a particular social cultural and historical context. O'Kane (2007) identified the importance of positive experiences of transition for all children and identified a need in Ireland to

research other important themes such as the experiences of transition for children (and their families) who have special or additional needs or children for whom English is not their first language. Brooker identified ethnic and cultural differences between the home habitus and the secondary habitus (in her study of the junior cycle of primary school) as a barrier to communication requiring bridging during transitions. Some of these important themes did not emerge as significant for the participants in the context and timing of this study. However, what the study does show is the usefulness of the tools for thinking of a COP model within and extending across communities or constellations of practice.

5.11. Conclusion

Becker (1998) advises researchers to use the *trick* of assuming all actions *make sense* (at least at the point of action) from the perspective of the actor. It follows that to initially suspend the tendency to attribute intentions to behaviour creates a practical frame for later analysis. From a socio-cultural perspective a multitude of interpretive lenses can be applied to elucidate different aspects of the research questions. These might include using a Vygotskian (1978) *zone of proximal development* conceptual lens. Through such means levels of reciprocity and collaborative meaning making (*obuchenie*) in everyday practice can be gauged. Interpretive analysis perspectives applied in this study incorporate three interpretive planes of the *community/cultural, interpersonal and personal (*Rogoff *et al* 1995*).* As in Phase 1, the data production was informed and contextualised with references to the literature and also through ongoing interactions with parents, teachers and children themselves. Themes emerging from the observational and fieldwork data influenced the choice of interview questions. The analysis procedure for interviews relates to the research questions and aims to better understand children's, parents and teachers experiences of transitions to and within the pre-school community. Each interview was analysed separately and later compared for similarities, differences and unique aspects. The participant observer role has the advantage of allowing the researcher to compare experiences, emotions and personal responses as a comparative tool in analysis of those researched. Subsequently the findings from the interview data were juxtaposed against the findings from the collaborative pre-school book. This acted as a means to reflect and explore emergent themes such as changes brought about by children's experiences of the

free pre-school scheme, gender issues, school readiness, and a discourse of the 'natural' permeating the interview data.

The socio-cultural, participant/observer and human as instrument approach adopted in this study challenges supposedly *objective* scientific and positivist claims of validity. All participants in the research process are viewed as embedded in the cultural context studied. The aim is for interpretation and reflection of the multiple realities viewed as constructed in this context, rather seek an outsider view of objective truth. The worlds within worlds of any given Community of Practice are arguably more akin to a crystal. Richardson (2000, p. 934) says

> *crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays casting off in different direction.*

As in triangulation, there is an inference of the use of multiple methods but each method be it participant observation, semi-structured interviews, or analysis of cultural texts opens up multiple and changing perspectives. If the crystal is seen as a metaphor for the research context, the analysis process involves multiple and competing perspectives of the context, and potentially sheds light on evolving patterns evident in everyday practices. Whether the interpretive lens seeks child, parent, teacher or policymaker perspectives, all are interrelated and can be re-interpreted in order to cast new light on the context under research.

> *crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of "validity" (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves) and crystallization provides us with a deepened complex thoroughly partial understanding of the topic (Richardson 2000, p. 934).*

Crystallization is argued in this study as means to help researchers and readers to step outside of the habitus and put personal bias to one side. The aim being to allow other *stories* and meaning making processes to surface in more nuanced ways. The next Chapter introduces the study setting, focusing on key actors and various interactions and events leading up to the start of a new pre-school year. In these narratives of pre-school

experiences, the intention is to convey a sense of life unfolding and the meanings being made in the moment to moment engagement in everyday practices. It follows actors (myself included) positioning ourselves and being positioned as we take on various roles, and grow in to new participatory identities. It questions and problematises the purposes and aims of everyday pre-school practices from adult as well as child perspectives. It looks at what individual and group identities are available for appropriation within the structural features of pre-school. It considers why, as well as how these constructions of self or group selves are negotiated and become meaningful to the participants within the enabling and constraining features of everyday practice in Rainbow Road.

Chapter 6.

Painting by Artist Alison Ludlow (2014)



Young children are a precious gift. Early childhood is a special time. Through the care and education of young children, a society constructs and reconstructs community and economy, ensures continuity of tradition between generations, and makes innovation and transformation possible. (Woodhead 1996, p.9)

Chapter 6. Phase 1 – 'Learning the Ropes', Narratives of Being and Becoming

6.1. Introduction

In common with all communities, each Community of Practice shares the quality of being the same, in the paradox that each community is unique. As Wenger puts it, within every Community of Practice 'is a complex collectively negotiated response to what they understand to be their situation' (2008, p.78). It is posited that tracking this collective process of the negotiation of meaning can provide powerful indicators of what matters about transition from the perspectives of the participants, especially children themselves. This matters because it opens the potential for insights into meaning making processes extending beyond the immediate context of the research.

During my very first days in Rainbow Road pre-school, my own participant observer role was somewhat on the periphery. I was not a passive observer but somewhat feeling my way, a form of LPP (Lave and Wenger 1991). Getting to know everyone, and where I might fit in as a participant observer was itself a process of transition, familiarisation as well as adjustment and adaptation over time (Lave and Wenger 1991, Elder, 1999, Corsaro 2003, Warming 2005). This Chapter firstly revisits these early field work days and recalls in more detail initial impressions of what it looked and felt like through community/cultural, interpersonal and personal lenses (Rogoff *et al* 1995) as a newcomer to Rainbow Road pre-school.

Through this socio-cultural lens all participants in the study can be understood as players as we try on and enact new participatory identities (Wenger 2008) within the roles rules and rituals (Van Gennep 1960) played out in everyday practice. In Chapter 3 a socio-cultural perspective placed play as central to children's cultural worlds (not separate from, but interconnected to the adult world). In children's self-initiated play they are understood to creatively interpret and reflect back the adult world (Evaldsson & Corsaro 1998, Corsaro, 1998, 2003). In this Chapter, both concepts of play are acknowledged. The notion of participatory play roles (for all participants in the COP studied) are interwoven with

multiple narratives negotiated in children's cultural worlds of play and learning. These are presented and interpreted through a series of interconnected vignettes.

Indicators were sought of how children, within the constraints and enabling features of this setting positioned myself and other adults in relation to themselves. It is proposed that these positionings in turn went some way towards understanding how various roles and interactions including my own could develop over time. What is reified socially and culturally relates to implicit and explicit rules of being, seeing and doing embedded in actions, as well as cultural artefacts (Wenger 2008). The dynamic relations between reification and the everyday practices of negotiating meaning are what make each learning community unique. Weaving together the different strands of transition experiences takes into consideration all participants with the lens specifically focusing on two key novice child participants, namely *Mark* and *Marie.* Both of these children were relative newcomers to the setting during Phase 1 (March to September 2011) of this study. Towards the end of Phase 1 of the study, these two children were retrospectively identified by me as two of the actors who could usefully be viewed as *veterans* of the pre-school. Both children started in pre-school prior to my arrival. This story did not start with my arrival, but my arrival did start the exploration of these stories of transition along their developmental pathways. Three other children *Robbie, Helen,* and *Monica* would also be identified as key long term members (novice to experienced) of pre-school, as would be their anticipated influences on the new arrivals in Phase 2 of this study. But firstly the scene must be set and the first images of Rainbow Road introduced.

6.2. Setting the Scene – Meeting and Greeting Routines

The pathway to Rainbow Road was flanked by cheerful clumps of daffodils in the long stretch of green grass outside of a single story building with wide, glass panelled, entrance doors. Inside the rooms were bright spacious and the atmosphere was welcoming. Some children were being helped by parents/teachers with their coats and bags in the entrance hall which lead on through double doors in to the main school room. The doors had clear glass panels so that the main room was visible, even if the doors were closed. On one wall was a self registration board (at child eye-level) with the sentence *Who is in today?* Experienced pre-schoolers (those

who attended last term and did not go on to primary school) each picked up their own photographs (with Velcro backing) and placed them on the Registration board as they arrived. Children also picked up a Velcro backed name tag and placed it under a coat hook, each of which had a picture symbol such as a rabbit or a butterfly. Newly arrived children were guided (by parents and teachers) in to these practices. The office had an entrance door to the left of the entrance hall. Lisa (pre-school teacher) invited me into the main room and introduced me to Sue (part-time teacher) and explained that Leona (manager) was (at that time) with one of the parents.

Children were busily occupied in various play activities around the main room. My eyes were drawn to an imposing centrally located, tree house type structure, with an upstairs and a downstairs. Some of the children had creatively improvised (Corsaro 1993, 1998) a way to enter the downstairs section, by wriggling behind a pole (much too tight a space for an adult to manoeuvre). There was a bookshelf to the right of the wooden structure. A child followed my gaze and commented loudly 'the teachers call this the Home Corner'. I responded 'what do you call it?' She replied confidently 'the Home Corner' and volunteered that the upstairs section was called 'the Resting Loft'. Leona (pre-school manager) later confirmed this and also remarked that they (teachers) tried to keep this space for 'more restful type play', but there was also some flexibility in this and that children themselves might, on different occasions, refer to this space as a *castle*, *spaceship* or something else.

During the initial free play time, I was offered many *cups of tea* and *fruit drinks* and invited to join in various spontaneous games. I sensed that my responses such as 'could I have some more please?' were welcome, provided I allowed the more experienced players to lead. Some children were curious and asked questions 'are you a mother? I answered 'Yes but my children are in big schools now'. 'Are you a teacher?' I confirmed that 'yes, sometimes I am a teacher'. A small girl wearing glasses explained 'We are just kids, we are not teachers'. Another child said 'today I am Leona' (pre-school manager). The other children revealed that this was not her real name but that 'she likes to be Leona sometimes'. The child with glasses explained 'that's Leona over there (as she emerged from the office) she has glasses too' helpfully adding 'but I am not Leona'. After a quick introduction to a

smiling Leona, I was invited to join the morning routine. Leona described this as 'a kind of breathing in the day' where there is a sense of predictability and order. This was followed at different stages with a type of 'breathing out', described by Leona as involving children's own creative play both indoors and outdoors.

6.3. 'Play' and Negotiation of Participatory Identities

An understanding of play in the term 'play school' (sometimes applied by parents and teachers in this study to describe Rainbow Road) infers performative aspects of children's construction of new identities during the transition from the home habitus to the secondary habitus. A significant and recurring aspect of the everyday routines of Rainbow Road (secondary habitus) was the morning ritual of Circle Time. Vignette 1 is an example of how such daily events were enacted and the types of participatory roles available (moving from novice to experienced) for all participants, including my own initially peripheral role (LPP). Examples of the roles available and their performance within these morning rituals are interspersed with other examples of children's self-initiated free play activities (Chapters 6, 7, 8). The research lens commenced by following the transition experiences of Mark(k) and Marie(k) as they grew in to their pre-school identities.

During Phase 1 of this study, Mark(k) was a relative newcomer, a novice pre-school child, who already appeared to be carving a role for himself as somewhat of an expert within the more structured spheres of pre-school life.

6.3.1. Circle Time - The Play and the Players

(February 2011)

The following vignette (where Mark was a key player) introduces *Show and tell* an aspect of Circle Time practice which teachers informed me, developed spontaneously (initiated by children) during a previous pre-school year. This new aspect of the daily routine had subsequently become established as part of everyday practice in Rainbow Road.

Vignette 1 - Mark's Role of Expert

The Scene

'Circle Time': Adults and children bring their chairs to the large carpet by the windows. Everyone sits for the morning routine of introductory songs, followed by 'Show and tell'. Children are seated in a circle, each on their own chair personalised with a name and symbol. Lisa and I are seated on 'teacher chairs' (a bit larger, do not have names or symbols). One by one, children choose to convey some news or go to the entrance hall and bring back some item (from their cubbyholes) to show the group. Alternatively, they can simply listen and watch, if they so choose.

The Players

Mark, his peers (aged 3 to five years) and Lisa (teacher)
Frances (participant/observer)

It is Mark's turn and he proceeds to show everyone his plastic dinosaur. This he does very slowly walking within the circle of children, tilting the dinosaur so that each child can view it from different angles. Lisa asks is that a T-Rex?. Still moving, slowly and carefully, and without looking up Mark responds 'No, it is a Velocitor'. Lisa nods in agreement. Mark returns to his chair and Lisa begins to read from a colourfully illustrated book, drawing the children's attention to a tiger's appearance which Mark describes as 'camouflage'. Lisa affirms that this word describes how tigers can use their stripes and seem invisible in long grass and tall trees. Mark smiles broadly at this validation of his input. End of vignette.

The interpretive tools of Rogoff *et al* (1995) offer lenses that highlight the links between different relations and relationships, in this case within the connective layers of Mark's experiences; what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) describe as *proximal processes* driving development. On a personal level, Mark commanded the stage in this brief observation. He was unhurried and took his role of expert seriously, a role validated by teacher's acceptance of his knowledge, and also by the interest and willingness of his peers to listen (community/cultural). On an interpersonal plane, Mark had connected with both adults and peers as a more experienced, or *knowing other* (Vygotsky 1978). During our

talks after pre-school, the teachers told me about the small dinosaur book which Mark kept in his cubbyhole that he would refer to when unsure of a dinosaur name. If this failed, Mark had the additional home support conveyed in his frequent observation 'I can just ask Mummy'. Teachers acknowledged and affirmed Mark's adopted role, of *resident dinosaur expert*, encompassing his extensive vocabulary and ability to engage other children's interest. In the morning transition as children started to arrive in pre-school, Mark and his Mum would arrive early and have long chats in the entrance hall about his many interests (including soccer, science and nature and art). In Mark's relationships with adults there appeared to be an embedded understanding that knowledge, particularly knowledge that can be shared and further explored, was valued in both his home and pre-school cultures (primary and secondary habitus).

6.3.2. Negotiating Participatory Identities

On a community/cultural level, the morning Circle Time routine provided a forum where Mark was able to extend and elaborate a participatory identity of competent expert. For Mark this was not pretend or self-initiated socio-dramatic play, but a role he negotiated, embodied, and appeared to be gaining a sense of mastery from. He was supported by the guided participation of the teachers within the structures of the reified morning ritual (Rogoff 2008, Wenger 2008). However, at less structured times, such as *free-play* where the rules of engagement were less explicit, communication with peers appeared to be more problematic for Mark.

Vignette 2 - Enter the Dragons
(March 2011)

I sit on the mat as Mark and two other boys engage in a game of 'dragons'. One boy adopts the role of 'good dragon', Mark and another boy adopt 'killer dragon' roles, blowing 'fire' from their mouths. Mark wears a scarlet cloak which he regularly engages me to fix (even though it is not falling off). As I fiddle with the Velcro fastening, Mark eagerly explains that 'these are my wings.' He does not speak to his peers but participates with growls, and other dragon sounds. The game is fast paced, aggressive in tone (growls and snarls and large threatening movements) and increasingly in danger of sanction by adults, including myself. Explicit rules state that running indoors, pushing and/or hurting other children is not

allowed. There is an underlying discourse in the dragon play of masculine identities where the purpose is for good dragons to fend off, or destroy the bad dragons. Sometimes this encompasses the idea of 'protecting the girls', an idea that doesn't seem to interest Mark who regularly embraces a bad dragon role. I continue to observe somewhat tensely, hovering near Mark. The game lasts for five minutes in all until clean-up time is announced by the shaking of a tambourine. The dragons have somehow avoided an actual physical clash and revert back into small boys. Mark hangs up his scarlet wings. End of vignette.

In the above scenario, I felt a tension between the intentions of my research role (accessing children's cultural worlds) and my perception of my responsibilities as an adult volunteer helper within the setting (concern with child safety). As the game heated up, I teetered between fascination with following its direction and a sense of an impending clash between the *dragons* and some unsuspecting child crossing their paths. Timing was on my side and intervention by me did not seem necessary on this occasion. It was interesting how quickly the boys were able to discard their dragon selves when the implicit rules (interpersonal understanding) of behaviour in pre-school marking the morning transitions were engaged (reified practice of shaking the tambourine).

6.3.3. Positioning and Being Positioned

The teachers expressed (interpersonal) concern about Mark's lack of verbal interaction with peers during some free play interactions. They recounted occasions where play fighting (particularly outdoors) had ended with Mark or another child hurt or in tears. At such times, Mark would subsequently run away and refuse for some time to speak to anyone or (in the latter case) to come indoors again. My field notes confirmed that during other informal and less highly charged contexts (emotionally and physically), such as snack time, Mark readily engaged peers and adults in cheerful conversation. Sometimes Mark also used such times to appropriate adult help to right a perceived wrong.

Vignette 3 - Mark Shares His Point of View
(March 2011: Morning transition – hand washing prior to snack time)

In my volunteer capacity, as an 'extra pair of hands', I stay by the sink in the bathroom

assisting any children who request help.

Mark walks in with tears in his eyes

Frances: *Is something wrong? you look sad.*
Mark: *Yes Graham hit me.*
Frances: *He hit you?*
Mark: *Yes, you tell him not to (commanding tone).*

As Mark starts to wash his hands I step in to the main room and relay my conversation with Mark to Lisa. Lisa reveals that the matter has already been discussed and 'dealt with' and that Mark 'still wants people to listen'. Seconds later Mark emerges from the bathroom, looking more cheerful.

Frances: *Graham said sorry to you Mark, he knows it is not okay to hit you.*

Mark nods and seems to be coming to terms with his emotions as he locates his seat at the snack table. End of vignette.

In this scenario, Mark appeared to be positioning me as a powerful adult. On an interpersonal level, Mark regularly engaged adults in conversation, conveying a sense that we were expected to provide answers to his questions (positions us as experts) and also (at times) to take action on his behalf. However, this communicative confidence was less evident in his interactions with peers. In our after school discussion, Lisa observed that she was keen to see signs of development within Mark's peer communications. She felt that this would require him, at a personal level, to adopt a less 'egocentric' view of the world. As part of a community/culture, Mark's sense of self seemed vulnerable and unsure during less structured and therefore less predictable times. The teachers collectively expressed concern that Mark had not yet begun to recognise 'cause and effect' relationships, or at times to accept responsibility for his own behaviour. However, Sue, on reflection observed that Mark actually may have been taking 'full responsibility' in that he appeared to be 'very angry with himself' but unable to comprehend why the games he enjoyed so much sometimes ended badly. When Mark's mother arrived, (home time) she would usually spend a few minutes talking to him and members of staff about how his day went. At this

point Mark tended to avoid eye contact with his mother if he had experienced difficulties over the morning. Sue's interpretation of events fits with Trevarthan's (2002) theory based on empirical evidence about the power of the emotions of pride and shame (even in infancy) to shape children's learner identities. Mark may have been experiencing shame at his own lack of self-control. His frustration appears to have been related to his inability to sustain the play whenever his intentions (to his mind) were misunderstood by adults and/or peers. These emotions contrasted sharply with Mark's appearance of pride and confidence (smiling, interested and involved) during more predictable daily routines such as Circle Time.

I observed that in terms of timing, Mark was usually one of the last children to finish his lunch or be ready to go out or come back inside at times of transition over the morning. Leona confirmed that Mark often required extra time to complete tasks, especially ones that captured his interest and involvement, such as artwork (Laevers 2004). The teachers made allowances for this, believing that Mark would, over time ‘get better' at coping during daily transitions. The teachers also conveyed an understanding that there was a fine line between supporting Mark and allowing him opportunities to develop his ability to navigate the complexities of independent behaviours, and the more interdependent relations of peer interactions. They observed (as my field notes confirm) that Mark could play independently for long periods of time (20 minutes or more) but his play interactions with peers appeared to be less successful or sustainable. In this, there appeared to be some tension between underlying discourses of independence and interdependence mediating everyday practice.

6.3.4. A Stormy Transition from Home

My first introduction to Marie(k), a more recent novice pre-schooler was more dramatic. It would reveal that Marie initially, resisted seeking a role, or any attempts to have a role imposed on her, of pre-school child. One morning before I got to the front doors I heard a child crying and screaming.

Vignette 4 - Marie Makes an Entrance

(March 2011**)**

Marie stands near Leona, who is working with a group of children at the crafts table. Marie starts to pace around, tears rolling down her cheeks intermittently yelling 'Me want Mummy.' Leona says softly 'Yes I hear you Marie, and Mummy will be back later.' Lisa takes me aside and explains that Marie was lifted, kicking and screaming from the front doors because every time they were opened she tried to bolt through them after her mother left. Mark's Mum exchanges anxious looks from Marie to Lisa and back to Mark who is playing intently on the mat with some dinosaur toys. I answer a child's request to lift some building blocks unto the mat. Marie wanders towards the entrance door, she is holding her fists tightly and the volume of her crying increases in pitch and volume. A startled Mark looks up in Marie's direction, then makes eye contact with me (we are both sitting on the mat). He says 'I think she is calming down now' before turning his attention back to the dinosaurs. Marie's cries do start to subside and she stands near me, studying the wooden blocks scattered over the rug. Without any exchange of words she takes the wooden block I offer her and starts to create a type of wooden pathway. End of Vignette

When this incident was discussed later with the teachers, Leona remarked that she felt that this child did not want to be comforted or even spoken to immediately after her mother left, but rather required space to 'process her emotions' (personal). All of the adults present during these moments of crisis felt upset to witness Marie's distress (interpersonal). Sue commented that she always felt a certain relief when Marie stopped crying and started to scream because this was an indicator that she would become calm soon. This interpretation fits well with Mark's intuitive reading (interpersonal) of the situation and his comment 'I think she is calming down now.' Concerns were also expressed about the effect of Marie's reactions on other children. Lisa suggested that parents may think that 'we are doing nothing and letting the child suffer' she also wondered if it might be 'too soon' for Marie to start pre-school, suggesting a view of readiness that infers skills of independent behaviours. Leona was more optimistic and felt encouraged by the way Marie appeared to enjoy the activities and interactions in pre-school once her initial separation anxiety subsided. Again, there is a suggestion of some underlying tensions between discourses of

independence and interdependence at work in the setting (community/cultural).

6.3.5. Cultural Artefacts - A Pathway into Marie's World?

Following this stormy morning transition, Lisa expressed concern about the distress Marie's Mum may have been feeling and responded by forwarding some video footage (personal teacher strategy) of a *settled in* Marie playing intently with the blocks.

Vignette 5 - The Pathway
(March 2011)

Marie chooses about six rectangular shaped bricks from the box of wooden blocks. She constructs a type of path which she initially walks along, and then walks over (one foot either side of the path as she walks). She then places a number of bricks of various widths but all the same height at the end of the path. She stands on a section she refers to herself as 'my step' before looking around and then wading through the other children playing on the mat and picking up a flat piece of board. She places the board firmly on top of her step. The board is wider than the step. Marie carefully stands on the board and comments to herself 'it doesn't wobble', She then walks across her path once again. Circle time is announced with the implicit rule (sometimes explicitly stated) that play resources must be tidied away. Marie helps me to put the bricks back in the box and asks me to help her find her chair. End of vignette

Throughout this activity Marie showed an awareness of, as well as a curiosity about the properties of the materials (personal dispositional interest). On an interpersonal level, her actions and self-directed speech conveyed her intention to create a pathway or something similar (reified cultural understanding). This was communicated by Marie's deliberate choice and placement together of several of the same shapes. She followed up by testing the suitability of her construction, for walking on or over. Her declaration that the board did not 'wobble' was an indicator that this was not her first time exploring and thinking with these or similar objects. Marie appeared to be self-scaffolding (Bruner 1997) and making connections between her previous experiences, most likely from her home habitus. In adapting her experiences from one location to another, Marie was creatively identifying a way to be and do in pre-school. Her intense interest and involvement as a learner

(Laevers 2004) contrasted sharply with her earlier vocal rejection of, and apparent sense of alienation in pre-school. Her request for help in finding her chair, suggested a willingness to identify with her new pre-school role and the practices of everyday engagement. There were indications that Marie positioned adults such as myself as knowing others in relation to herself, willing to support and help her navigate in this new social context. In her appropriation of adult help, Marie was negotiating the conditions for her own ZPD learning (Vygotsky 1978).

Understanding teacher strategies to ease children's transitions to and within Rainbow Road is now approached through analysis of the discourses embedded in school policy documents.

6.4. Pre-School Transitions and Reification

A copy of the school policy document (updated yearly) was given to all parents and new teachers. In relation to morning transitions, policy explicitly encouraged adults not to linger (Appendix 8, p. 272). This seems to fit with reified western cultural practices that encourage individuality and independence. Rogoff (2008) in her cross-cultural research has identified differing adult expectations for children in different societies. In the west this has often meant children are encouraged towards independence rather than interdependence from infancy. This appears in early sleeping arrangements (usually separate rooms to parents) to regulating infants daily experiences of eating, sleeping, activities etc. The emphasis on individuality and independence has implications for children's experiences and transitions to new social situations such as pre-school. Pre-school is itself an artificially created world separate from and temporarily separating children from the home habitus in the daily transitions (horizontal) to out of home settings. The school policy document acknowledges the value of both *independence and interdependence*. A review of the policy document supported by my participant observations indicated that there was some flexibility in applying the *leaving quickly* policy (for parents) during morning transitions. There was also acknowledgement of the need to accommodate some adults who are compelled to leave quickly because of work commitments. On further questioning I discovered that Marie's mother had been offered the flexibility to stay longer but still chose to leave quickly. It is possible that she felt the weight of an implicit understanding

(Bourdieu 1997) that it was better to do so. Teacher's seemed to confirm this possibility in their remarks that allowing some parents to stay for long periods was not considered fair to other children who 'might decide they want their parents to stay longer'. This may well have been the case, though on this particular occasion most of the children (including Mark) seemed more preoccupied in exploring their free play opportunities than wanting their parents to stay (Mark's mother called his name twice to say goodbye before he noticed). In after school discussions Leona was hopeful that the holiday time (two weeks) might afford Marie opportunities to think about the things she liked to do in pre-school and to perhaps miss her time there and wish to come back. Leona's viewpoint reflected Lave and Wenger's theoretical perspective (1991) that participation (even when peripheral) can result in transitions in thinking, assisting actors to grow into new identities of participation.

6.5. Transitions, Coping Strategies and Adaptation (Elder 1999)

By the end of June 2011, both Mark and Marie had experienced their first major transition to a Community of Practice outside of their home habitus. Leona shared with me observational data taken by the teachers over the term. These documents consisted of short snapshot observations and assessments. The teachers, for the most part, based their assessments on the thematic approach and learning goals and aims of Aistear and Síolta (the Irish frameworks for early learning). The themes have resonance with the literature on early years transitions (discussed in Chapter 4) and included, as mentioned previously, 'Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communication and Exploring and Thinking'. Also included in these observation schedules were several longer reflective entries (following parent-teacher meetings). These incorporated strategies developed in collaboration with parents/carers to support children with any identified difficulties. When a child left Rainbow Road Pre-school, the observational schedule book complete with observations and photographic data was given to their parents (sample teacher observational schedules (Appendix 9, p. 273).

By the time of Marie's start in Rainbow Road, Mark was a regular attendee (usually five mornings per week, at his own insistence). When I first arrived Mark was a somewhat experienced pre-school child, familiar with the roles, rules and routines of the day. Mark embodied and conveyed a role of expert or enthusiastic seeker of knowledge during

various Circle Time and other informal discussion times. This role appeared to be validated in both his home habitus and the new secondary habitus of pre-school. During structured and/or apprenticeship type activities such as art and crafts and baking, Mark displayed high interest and involvement levels, persistence, and attention to detail and an orientation towards mastery in various tasks (Rogoff 1990, Dweck 1999, Laevers 2004). Mark also exhibited a tendency towards frustration and stress during free play interactions with other children, often manifesting in conjunction with times of transition. During free play his interactions with peers were mostly non-verbal, and sometimes physical. When enacting play roles (dragons and dinosaurs) play fighting regularly ensued and sometimes ended in tears. Mark frequently played alone, exhibiting deep interest and concentration and using a range of toy props, and much self-directed speech (different voices). Throughout the mornings Mark engaged adults in conversation of a questioning or instructional nature, switching rapidly between roles of novice and expert. Sometimes he asked to be read to in the Resting Loft, choosing favourite books or new material that had caught his interest. Mark politely interspersed these experiences with frequent questions or information such as ‘Frances can I tell you something about ...'. Mark displayed a thirst for knowledge and understanding alongside a desire to share and develop his own expanding knowledge. My role of novice to Mark's role of expert afforded insights into his dispositional learning interests. The reverse also happened as both of us drew on our funds of knowledge from within and outside of pre-school (*Obuchenie* described in Chapter 2) and this relationship allowed us to collaborate in a reciprocal arrangement where we mutually scaffolded each other to new levels of meaning (Vygotsky 1978, Wenger 2008).

During interactive games and songs, Mark tended to display frustration, if not afforded a leadership role. When Mark was assigned the role of leader, other children's inability or unwillingness to follow his interpretation of the rules caused Mark frustration and anger. Play sometimes ground to a halt as Mark insists 'but that isn't the way to do it ‘ (suggesting that there is only one ‘right way’). By the end of the school term, teacher observational data and analysis suggested that Mark was making progress in all areas of the curriculum (Appendix 9, p. 273). Mark continued to display a preference for solitary play over social pretend play with other children. There were also indications that he was better able to co-

operate and join in more rule bound play such as *hide- and seek* or board games with other children especially when adults mediated. Following discussions with his teachers and after careful consideration, Mark's parents decided that he would benefit from more time in pre-school. This decision was supported by the teachers, who felt that in terms of timing, Mark was not 'socially and emotionally ready' for primary school.

In terms of a participatory identity in pre-school it would seem that Mark still hovered in the state of LPP (Lave and Wenger 1991) during playful social engagement with peers. At other times Mark displayed an orientation towards mastery (Dweck 1999) and happily picked up on the guided participatory roles of his teachers (Rogoff 1990). Significantly routine times of transition (such as movement outdoors) where changes in participatory identity were required were particularly challenging for Mark. All of this seemed to confirm that Mark could benefit from opportunities and time to develop new participatory identities in pre-school.

Marie's attendance during the previous term had been inconsistent and this was reflected in the thinner volume of observational data available (Appendix 9, p. 273). Marie came to the pre-school two to three mornings a week initially, and my first impressions were of a child experiencing strong separation anxiety from her mother. Holidays, some bouts of illness and days when her mother would telephone and say 'she did not want to come today' meant that Marie's attendance had a sporadic and disjointed quality in her first term. Her general morning transition pattern was anger and tears followed by quietness, dejection, and a tendency to hover near adults rather than seek engagement with peers. Mark reflected an understanding of this as a 'calming down' process which he may have been connecting to his own pattern of coping during times of intense emotions. The teachers (including myself) adopted the strategy of staying close by Marie during the morning transition. For my own part (least adult role) this sometimes meant sitting while Marie stood and inviting her to join in some activity of her choice such as board games, arts and crafts or construction play. Marie often became engrossed in these activities and regularly used self-directed speech to guide her actions. This was interspersed with questions or requests to teachers for help in accessing or using resources.

Marie's participation with other children during free play or structured activities such as Circle Time was usually of a peripheral nature (LPP). She rarely spoke or volunteered information but listened intently to stories (regularly requested teachers to read stories of her choice in the Resting Loft). Marie was able, and usually willing to follow teacher instructions during times of transition such as clean up and getting ready to go outside. Sometimes she becomes anxious or tearful again as the time of transition to home drew close. As parents started to arrive, she frequently looked at or walked towards the main doors seemingly anxious for her mother to appear. Some days the transition from home to school went smoothly without tears or signs of anxiety. At these times, Marie displayed deep interest and involvement in activities such as construction work or arts and crafts (Laevers 2004). Over the term, teachers begin to anticipate difficulties after cumulative discontinuities such as Marie's absence due to illness or a bank holiday weekend. Their concern seemed justified because Marie's extended time with her mother appeared to heighten the impact of every new separation until once again, the morning transition would overwhelm her. Viewed through a *rite of passage* lens (Van Gennep 1960) Marie still appeared to be at a liminal stage, having some familiarity with Rainbow Road, its routines and practices (LPP). However, Marie had not yet fully managed to *cross boundaries* (Brostrom 2002, 2007) to the post-liminal stage of pre-school child. Marie had dipped her toes in to the water but she still clung to her participatory identity within her home habitus where she shared a special, familiar bond with her mother.

Over the term, observational assessments of Marie by the teachers (Appendix 9, p. 273) indicated progress in Marie's language, cognitive, physical and social and emotional development (based on Aistear and Síolta guidelines). However, ticking these boxes alone revealed only some of what was happening. For example there were clear signs of Marie *Building relationships with children and adults.* However, teacher observations suggested that this still required considerable adult mediation, particularly during the morning transition from home to school. Marie was identified as *participating in group routines* an aim (drawn from Aistear) of which was achievement of a sense of *Identity and Belonging.* However, the teachers also noted that Marie's participation at such times was as yet on a

somewhat peripheral level. There was a concern, shared by Marie's parents that she was not yet emotionally ready for formal school and that pre-school still presented her with a considerable level of challenge. Strategies were discussed for the next term to ease the initial transition, including bringing Marie to pre-school a few days after the first day of term in anticipation that this could prove less overwhelming for her. Implicit in this strategy was an added concern about the possible effects of a screaming/crying child on other children newly arrived in the setting. Another strategy adopted was to encourage Marie's mother to stay for gradually decreasing periods of time until Marie *settles in* over the first few weeks. This approach carried an implicit understanding that all of the children require a settling in phase (liminal) to build a sense of continuity and security during the transition to pre-school (community/cultural).

In relative terms, both Marie and Mark were still novice members of the pre-school community, finding their way and seeking identities of participation in the daily play of pre-school life. I too was a novice member at this time, albeit with a previous experience both as a pre-school teacher and as parent of young children attending pre-school in an Irish cultural context. Less familiar to me was the experience of what this particular context might look and feel like from child perspectives. Specific access to children's cultural worlds was sought through daily participant observations and towards the end of the school term (May 2011) the production of a collaborative pre-school book project. Discussion with the children was stimulated by photographs taken indoors and outdoors and shown to children during free play times. Teachers helpfully made available photographs taken on days that I was not present.

6.6. Accessing Children's Cultural Worlds

Children happily added their commentary to photographs in speech bubbles explaining their enjoyment of apprenticeship type activities such as cooking, or favoured activities such as playing or gardening outdoors, going on nature walks or art and construction play activities. All of the children participated in this process, but some children were more interested than others. Some children requested specific photographs to be taken of themselves, friends or their cultural artefacts for the book. One child drew a self-portrait and asked for help writing her name. This generated much interest and other children

produced self portraits or other drawings and commentary for inclusion in the book. From our related discussions, it became apparent that games like the *super hero* game and the *princess game* were part of daily group play themes, reflecting to some extent community and personal experiences drawn from outside cultural influences. At first, the *princess game* or *puppy and kitten* game (roles often embellished with invisible wings) appeared to be related to indoor play, primarily appropriated by the girls wearing Disney princess type costumes and sometimes involving a token male prince. This type of play usually centred in and around the *Home Corner* located within a wooden structure with a low ceiling directly underneath the Resting Loft (adults had to bend in order to enter). The more experienced pre-school children tended to define and direct the roles in the princess and superhero type play. The S*uperhero, Power Ranger or Dragon* games were characterised by lots of movement from the Resting Loft and involved running, loud sound effects (roars and growls), and *super powers***.** Play props such as cloaks (which sometimes became *wings*) were used along with *light sabres* (a type of weapon seen in the popular science fiction *Star Wars* films) represented by various tubular objects. Boys tended to pursue their superhero/dragon roles by appropriating the Resting Loft, and while not heard to refuse the girls entry, some girls such as Helen tried to engage adult interventions with claims that 'the boys won't let us upstairs'. Closer observation revealed incidences where the girls seized control of the Resting Loft and were successful in retaining it because their play, whether princess or other types of role play, was less noisy and boisterous and therefore less likely to incur adult sanctions.

This tendency for boys to acquire more adult attention than girls has been observed elsewhere (MacNaughton 1997, Cunneen 2001), suggesting that some of our adult gender expectations may be socially constructed. Documenting and discussing the children's multiple interests (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann 1997, Clark and Moss 2001) affords a kind of group *learning story* to become visible (Carr 2001) and insights into children's creative cultural reproduction to emerge (Corsaro 1993, 1998).

6.7. Bypassing The Rules and Flying under Adult Radar

Sometimes children found ways to bypass the implicit rules on what was sayable and doable in the pre-school setting. I witnessed boys furtively bring books upstairs as decoys to their real

intentions; these often involved planning the next stage of superhero or dragon play in hushed tones. At snack time, children would discuss their plans (for outdoor time) for the more culturally acceptable (within this pre-school community) *princess game*. It emerged from my discussions with the children for the pre-school book, that the *princess game* was in fact an elaborate game of chase involving princesses and superheroes/dragons etc. with child agreed rules of engagement and allowances made for children who wished to cross over in the gender roles available. Girls sometimes became Dragons or Power Rangers, though other Super Hero appropriations did not evidence. Boys sometimes adopted the role of prince or king though never (during this term) of princess or queen. Children's appropriation of individual and group identities suggested multi-layered influences from macro media inspired socio-cultural and often gendered role play (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Marsh 2005).

At the personal level, individual children sometimes pushed the boundaries of what might be accepted or viewed as acceptable by peers or adults. Toys constructed by the children as light sabres weapons were disallowed (by teachers) in play. However, I witnessed one child rapidly switch from wielding a kaleidoscope as an imaginary weapon to studying it as a kaleidoscope when his intentions were questioned by a teacher. When the superhero type play began to challenge the pedagogic discourse of what was sayable and doable in pre-school it incurred adult sanctions. Subsequently, children deconstructed and reconstructed their play themes in new more accepted ways, times and places (moved to free play times outdoors). This process suggested that both individually and as a group, the children had developed interpersonal awareness or *mutuality* (Wenger 2008) that enabled them to creatively improvise (Corsaro, 1993, 1998) new ways accepted (by them) and acceptable (to adults) to continue to develop, enhance and enjoy their play themes. These relationships and practices evolved and only became visible from a quilt like piecing together of fieldwork observations and discussions with the children and adults in the setting over time. The book as a methodological tool seemed to engage the children's interest as well as validate their perspectives on their play worlds.

6.8. Moving On

During the final weeks of term, new aspects of daily routines, influencing daily practices, emerged including preparations for the end of year party. This yearly occasion was identified in the study as a significant transition rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960). Through this annual ritual, children and their families were invited to mark and celebrate

the end of a full year in pre-school.

Vignette 6 - The Graduates
(June 2011)

There is much excitement at the end of term party, the room is festooned with colourful balloons. Party food and cold drinks are laid out on low tables at the back of the main room. Parents/Carers and some of the children's siblings sit on rows of chairs as the children gather excitedly on the large mat near the windows for the end of year ceremony. The children perform a cheerful rendition of the song they have been practising for some weeks 'we are going to big school now hurrah hurrah'. As the last line of the song fades the audience clap enthusiastically and cameras flash. Leona then introduces the 'graduation ceremony'. This starts with presentation of laminated certificates to each of the children, who are to remain in Rainbow Road next term (including Mark, Robbie, Helen, Monica, Marie is absent). Leona explains that these children will be the 'special helpers' next term. The children smile proudly as Leona shakes each hand and presents the certificate marking them as experienced pre-school members who have attained a level of mastery. Cameras flash and the audience applauds. The graduates wearing flat black caps with red tassels (reflecting ceremonial influences of adult culture) then line up to receive their scrolls. Following more applause and camera flashes, Leona ends with a short speech. I am formally introduced to the parents/carers most of whom I had met with at this stage. Leona also encourages those who have not already done so to look at the collaborative book project. End of vignette.

The pre-school book proved a useful tool for opening discussions with parents/carers around matters of interest to children in pre-school, and how these connected with their home experiences and ongoing experiences of transition. Many of the parents had children who were in the process of transition to primary schools in the locality, however their connectedness to other parents within the local community was important and may have influenced ongoing support for the study.

At our usual after school meeting, the teachers commented on how some of the children,

seemed to realise that despite the party atmosphere something special was coming to an end. I agreed that some children were quite subdued as they said their goodbyes. I could see both the staff, as well as some of the parents and children were feeling emotional as the last goodbyes were said and the last balloons handed out to eager little hands. Despite a certain sense of loss in this transition process, Leona commented that she felt that many of the children had 'gotten what they need from pre-school' and were restless and ready for the next stage. This observation relates to the central overarching question of this study 'pre-school matters and what matters in pre-school practices?' Contextually what do children need from pre-school? At a structural level (macro policy) who decides what children need from pre-school? And at a local level how can these needs be mediated? Crucially from the perspective of all stakeholders how are, and how can, children's needs be met? Phase 1 of this study presented a *slice* of pre-school life and started to address some of these questions. It provided some indications of what the pre-school worlds under study may look and feel like through various lenses (personal, interpersonal, community/cultural). The explicit and implicit rules governing practice were elaborated through engagement by all participants in the daily routines. From my very first visit, children showed an implicit understanding of what was coming next as well as the expectations about their participation. These understandings were developed through children's growing familiarity with and responses to the morning routines.

6.9. Fluidity of Identity - The Participant Observer Role

Over the course of Phase 1, it became apparent that the children as well as the adults may, at times have identified me with the functional aspects of the participant observer role. The staff often expressed appreciation for my interventions when a crisis occurred at transition times such as home time and a child was suddenly sick or upset. For the children, their perception of my role sometimes resulted in appropriation of my help, ranging from requests to access materials to mediating disputes with their peers. Children also appropriated me as a willing participant in play. Such invitations were facilitated by an openness to participation. Bodily positioning proved significant in this process (Warming, 2005, Corsaro, 1998, 2003). Seating myself on the floor or on a low chair (especially if the children were standing) placed me at more of a child eye level. This strategy elicited the likelihood of invitations to join the play and experience 'guided participation', where

children acted as experts (Rogoff, 1990). Overall children seemed to accept the ambiguity of my role. Interestingly, children tended to refer to adults in the setting as *teacher* when appropriating some form of help related to adult power (such as getting materials from the arts and crafts cupboard). At other times, when children wanted to share confidences or invite playful interactions we (adults) were usually addressed by our first names. The younger less experienced children tended not to know or use our names yet, or applied 'teacher' as a generic term. How children addressed me became a useful means to gauge when access to their cultural worlds might be open.

Indicators of adult aims and goals were evident in the observational data and the assessment tools they applied. These were found to relate broadly to the macro policy influence located in the thematic approach of Aistear, the Irish framework for early learning, and Síolta the national quality standards framework. How each adult in the setting mediated this understanding of the aims and goals was open to variation. These variations required ongoing and more in depth analysis based on participant observation and informal and more formal discussions with parents and teachers (semi-structured interviews) in Phase 2. The aim was to access the multiple perspectives on the processes and purposes of children's transitions to and within pre-school. A further aim was to reflect any variations, conflicts, continuities and discontinuities in this meaning making process.

From a child perspective, my participant observations suggested that children were learning to read cultural texts in their environment. Symbols and words had meanings and children appeared to gain a sense of identity and belonging by *reading* for example which chair was theirs, or requesting that their names be added to the cultural artefacts they brought home. Teachers mediated children's participation by explicit expression of the rules (particularly in the early days). This was facilitated by the meaning children themselves learned to collectively negotiate in their daily participation in Rainbow Road. Over time, many explicit rules became implicit. Children's fluctuating interest and involvement levels over a morning, a week, a pre-school term provided indicators of their motivational and dispositional learner interests and potential learning trajectories. Gender appeared to be an important and emergent theme embedded in historically negotiated

macro and micro cultural influences. Gender differences emerged in children's choices and usage of play space and resources. A closer look suggested that some of these differences may have been socially constructed and related to adult and societal expectations of gender difference. The children themselves were observed to collectively negotiate creative ways to extend and sustain play choices. Sometimes this meant bypassing or causing the implicit rules of play to change or adjust (superhero play reinvented as the *princess game* and moved outdoors). An ongoing theme related to adult aims and goals which sometimes seemed to be at odds with child aims and goals. In Phase 1, this conflict of interests gave rise to adult strategies (calming measures such as reading to children in the Resting Loft) and child strategies (adapting or disguising the nature of unsanctioned activities) which repositioned the players and negotiated new types of practice. Making visible these taken for granted aspects of everyday practices called in to question what was reified as well as why? Questioning what was reified opened the possibility of negotiation or transformation of everyday practice. The following chart summarises some reified aspects of everyday practice in Rainbow Road as well as some participatory challenges.

Table 7 - Reification and Challenges

Reification	**Challenges**
In between spaces	Accessing Children's Cultural Worlds
Rites, Routines and Rituals	Navigating Novice to Experienced/Masterful identities of Participation
Gender	Participatory Affordances and Constraints
Adult Aims and Goals	Sometimes at Odds with Child Aims and Goals

6.10. Conclusion

Phase 1 has introduced some initial scenes of the pre-school *field of play* (Bourdieu 1997) providing some indicators of participant perceptions of how to *do* pre-school in Rainbow Road.

As the pre-school term drew to a close, decisions had to be made, which players would still be cast members with more senior roles next term? and who would be making transitions to new *plays?* and how might the roles and identities of those who remained in Rainbow Road (both adults and children) adapt or transform in this process? The pre-school stage has been set, the adult players and the child players have been introduced. Of the two key child players, Mark was the more experienced participant, initially more familiar with transitions, routines and rituals of Rainbow Road than either Marie or myself, yet still a relatively novice member of this community of learners. These two actors shared the same stage set though rarely, as yet, many *scenes.* In Phase 2 the setting was the same, but many new players arrived and the experienced players (Marie, Mark, Robbie, Helen, Monica) were met with a new set of transitions, they now had knowledge, experiences and the potential to exert influences on the pre-school climate that had become part of the community habitus of acceptable ways to be, see and do in Rainbow Road pre-school.

For my own part, I had established a fluid identity as *an extra pair of hands* to the teachers as well as the children in the setting. I had also explored and found some success in accessing children's cultural worlds. At times this meant adopting a least adult and novice role where children could act as experts. In Phase 2, I took on the unanticipated role of replacement pre-school teacher for two five week periods (late 2011 and early 2012). This new role provided me with increased participatory access to, and opportunities to build relationships with the parents, other family members and carers of the children. Given the potential for tension between these various roles, the interpretive lens continued to consider how and why adults (including myself) positioned ourselves (in our various roles) but also how, as well as why children positioned us in multiple adult led or child led interactions.

Chapter 7.

Painting by Artist Alison Ludlow (2014)



Space is re-interpreted in relation to past experiences, present needs, relationships and future desires (Moss and Richter 2010, p.165)

Chapter 7. Phase 2 - Tracking Transitions To and Within Rainbow Road

> *Practice is first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful (Wenger 2008, p.51).*

7.1. Introduction

Here it may be timely to remind readers of the purposes of the study. The overarching question considers *pre-school matters*. This Chapter starts to address the following research questions: *How do children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school ? And what are the adult roles in mediating this process?* This has been bracketed within the concept of transitions including young children's transitions in thinking, identity formation and gradual transformations (novice to experienced unto mastery) within a pre-school Community of Practice, which itself was simultaneously undergoing transition. The literature suggests that transition to pre-school or school can usefully be viewed in terms of families as opposed to individual children undergoing experiences of transition (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002, Dunlop and Fabian 2007, Brooker, 2008). Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* (1997) has been borrowed to provide some of the backdrop (home habitus) of the unfolding pre-school narratives in what is conceptualised here as the secondary habitus of preschool.

This Chapter considers the influences of the five experienced pre-schoolers (including Marie(k) and Mark(k)) on the incoming children, as well as the ongoing adult roles in mediating the participatory process. Specifically, this Chapter will track children's movement from novice to experienced, participatory, roles and within this the interplay of more experienced pre-schoolers and novice players. To start with, the new pre-school year unfolded as experienced players and new players arrived, adjusted and adapted to meet the demands of a new pre-school year.

7.2. First Days: Setting and Interpreting the Scene

Children sported new hairstyles, shoes and light summer clothes. Most wore backpacks and carried a mixture of gender differentiated Disney princess and superhero type lunch boxes. The experienced children (those who had attended previously) were more likely to release their grip on a parental hand and run ahead to ring the school doorbell. Even as teachers anticipated new arrivals and opened the doors, children would sometimes insist that they *close the door until I have rung the bell.* This suggested that from a child perspective, manipulating the props of everyday participation may have been viewed as even more important than the responses such actions elicited. In the action of doing, children negotiated an individual and also a group sense of participatory identity (Wenger 2008).

On a personal level, experienced pre-schoolers appeared conscious of a new status. Helen(e) described herself as *bigger now.* Robbie(e), on arrival at the main entrance informed Leona *I can go in by myself* conveying an expectation that the community would acknowledge his new status, as well as reflecting an interpersonal understanding that independent behaviour was valued in his pre-school (community/cultural). Experienced pre-schoolers proudly volunteered information. Mark(k) advised *You go down the slide feet first or you will bang your head*. Such contributions tended to be reinforced by the teachers, thus establishing the status of the experienced children as *knowing others* (Vygotsky 1978). A smiling Monica(e) enacted the role of participatory guide (Rogoff 1990). She confidently introduced her newly arrived friend Brenda(n) to teachers, peers and resources in the setting. Brenda(n) shyly clung to Monica's side and willingly took on the role of novice. In this situated context, the five experienced pre-schoolers were on learning trajectories, having visibly shifted from their legitimate peripheral participatory roles (in Phase 1) within the social world (pre-school) of their shared experiences. For experienced pre-schoolers, the timing of their first experiences of pre-school appeared to be supporting them in *crossing boundaries* (Brostrom 2002, 2007); which in this instance involved a daily shift from a home identity to a new post-liminal (Van Gennep 1960) pre-schooler identity.

7.3. Novice Children's Transitions – Strategies of Coping and Adaptation

The newly arrived children displayed various degrees of confidence or hesitation as they engaged with peers, adults and resources during the early morning transition. On day one, Chris(n) appropriated dual play roles of nurturer of the *babies* (dolls) and toy car expert. This appeared to be a reflection of his home habitus and the big brother role and familiar play interests this entailed (personal). Neil(n) was more tentative and feeling his way in the pre-school setting. I playfully resisted Neil's attempts to manipulate my adult role and acquire a small toy car from Chris(n). Neil commanded me *you tell him* and I smiled and shaking my head responded *No you tell him.* A back and forth *No you!* continued for a while until Neil collapsed giggling on the rug and joined in the toy car play with a smiling Chris. Neil's attempts to position me and manipulate my adult power in relation to himself may have been a reflection of his single child status and interactions in his home habitus. My persistence in maintaining a least adult role placed us on a more equal footing and Neil was thrown back on his own resources. Eventually his personal disposition allowed him to see humour in our verbal sparring, until he felt able to interact with Chris(n). On a community or cultural level, a general sense of eagerness to explore the new environment was palpable. Similarly to my interactions with Neil, Marian (also an only child) quickly learned adult names (to engage rapid responses) or grasped an adult hand to be guided towards play resources of interest that were out of her reach. Initially, both children ignored my attempts to adopt a least adult role; reading the *cultural text* (Sarup 1996) in my physical appearance that identified me as a powerful adult. Both children appropriated me as someone with the power to make the experiences they yearned for more accessible in the new habitus of pre-school (community/cultural). Both children appeared to be reading the social context and simultaneously drawing on previous experiences in order to navigate the transition to a new social context (Elder, 1998, Carr 2001, Hall and Chambers 2011).

Over the first days of the new term, I also become acquainted with Rory(n) and his ongoing fascination for action or superhero type play which usually encompassed weaponry (constructed by the players), special powers and play fighting. This theme was

regularly picked up on by (amongst other boys) John(n), Neil(n), Robbie(e), Liam (n) and Mark(k) who as a group I came to think of as *the Action Boys.* The interest appeared to have come from exposure to broader cultural influences targeting children (particularly boys in this case) and was reflected in media, games, and television experiences in the home habitus (Marsh 2005).

Vignette 7 - Guns and Roses
(September 2012)

Rory(n) and Sam(n) are making what appear to be guns with Mobilo (plastic click together pieces). They start to move around making low shooting sounds and point their weapons at each other. ***Lisa:*** *'I hope those are not guns, because you know that there are no guns allowed in pre-school'. Sam retreats to the Resting Loft with his Mobilo gun. Rory returns to the round table where I am making notes and adds new pieces to his construction.* ***Frances*** *what are you making? Rory looks at me, glances at Lisa (in the entrance hall) hesitates for a moment and then holds his construction upright.* ***Rory*** *'This is an axel...it is a flower axel, it's for you'. He hands it to me carefully as though it were a long stemmed rose.* ***Frances*** *'thanks Rory, what does your axel do?'* ***Rory*** *'it's magic...but it doesn't do anything'. He works rapidly on another smaller 'axel' before heading to join Sam in the Resting Loft. End of vignette.*

In pursuing this play theme, Rory and Sam went against the explicit rules of acceptable pre-school behaviour. This community/cultural policy reflected pedagogic discourse that equated play with weapons as potentially encouraging aggressive or harmful behaviour. This had in part been a response to some parents (over the years) concerns about the negative effects of media generated toys, games and technologies. Some parents specifically mentioned to me their dislike of popular media generated games such as *Ben Ten* and *Transformers* and their belief that they encouraged fighting and aggression. An image emerges of the child as a consumer of culture and target of media and advertising interests (Palmer 2006). There is also the image of Rousseau's child in nature in need of protection from the corrupting influences of the world at large. Rory's response posed a challenge to my attempt to access his cultural world in his positioning of me as a powerful

adult. He recognised my potential to validate or halt his play intentions. Rory creatively used language and gestures to transform the Mobilo gun into a *flower axel* designed to appeal to female sensibilities (community/cultural understanding) and distract from his real play intentions. Recent research attests to the powerful influence of media and other textual references in children's enactment of their play worlds (Marsh 2005).

Just as in Phase 1, the motive to enact these externally influenced play themes was strong and children in the study were (in varying degrees, mediated by parents/carers) targeted as consumers in their home habitus. However, as the above incident confirms, children are not simply passive reproducers of culture. Within the place, space and affordances of pre-school children creatively reproduce but also transform culture (Corsaro 1998, 2003). Over the year, the Action Boys continued to employ adaptive, creative, and/or subversive strategies in pursuit of their play interests. This required considerable self regulation (particularly indoors) in order to sustain their play fighting themes and avoid adult sanction (Brown and Vaughan 2009). Teachers tacitly and perhaps intuitively collaborated in this process by ignoring unsanctioned play that did not result in actual physical fighting or prove too *disruptive.* The teachers applied various strategies and calming measures if play seemed likely to become too physical (such as reading to children in the *Resting Loft*) however the negotiations, language/communication and various strategies the children themselves employed in order to sustain such play largely went unnoticed. The teachers also applied other strategies they had built up over the years to assist children and their families to adapt and cope during initial and ongoing transitions in Rainbow Road.

7.4. Adult Strategies – Transition, Coping and Adaptation

In the first days, Leona and Lisa greeted the parents during morning transitions and helped with the registering process. Sue (part-time teacher) and I stayed in the main room and engaged with the children, particularly those who seemed tentative or unsure. Leona mentioned that some of the children starting in pre-school had older siblings (some attended Rainbow Road last term). Several of these children were making their transition to primary school later in the week. On a community/cultural level, the timing of the introduction of the younger siblings to pre-school was explained as a means to support parents/carers. This fits with ideas of building continuities across communities or

constellations of practice (Wenger 2008). It is also an acknowledgement that transition is about more than individual children (Bernard Van Leer Foundation 2006, Dunlop and Fabian 2007). In this example, some families were simultaneously undergoing multiple social and economic transitions whilst adapting to meet different family members transitions to pre-school and primary school.

During early morning transitions, children choose from a range of play resources. I sat with them on the large rug seeking and responding to invitations to join in their play worlds. I was conscious of parents in the background and communicated through smiles, hellos and nods. In Phase 1, my rapport with the staff developed so that language/communication (sometimes just a look or gesture) alerted me to help out if needed. A nervous new child may have required help locating the toilets, or a welcoming smile from someone who remembered their name. However, in these first weeks, my connection with parents was still somewhat peripheral (LPP) and mediated through my interactions with the children and the teachers. During the initial transition of new arrivals in pre-school, an adult would sometimes tentatively make a child aware of their presence and brief hugs and goodbyes were exchanged. On the first morning, none of the children clung to their parents or cried. Some waved goodbye, quickly returning to whatever was capturing their play interest. My least adult position attempted to see and feel this world from child eye level. I gained a sense of children's general excitement, curiosity and willingness to embrace the new experiences of Rainbow Road.

Throughout the first weeks of term, teachers were explicit about their expectations as they eased children through the various morning transitions. After snack time Leona explained *outside time* and the need to remove slippers and get waterproofs on in the entrance hall. Allowances were made for the time and assistance needed for each child to get ready and adapt to their new surroundings (community/cultural). Circle Time (when children have arrived and prior to home time) was the main forum for group discussions. The practice established that children were expected to turn take at certain times as well as listen when the teacher or a peer was speaking. Often children used humour when communicating at these times. Andrew Pollard (1985 p. 84) in his seminal work on the cultural world of the

primary school suggests dual ways that children may use humour in group situations. 'It can be a strategy of opposition which challenges teacher control or it can be enjoyable as a form of collective relaxation'. Similarly, chanting as a humorous way to command adult attention emerged in Phase 1 of this study. This term Neil(n) spontaneously attempted to lead such a chant by picking up on a line from the story 'Don't call me hippo' that Lisa was reading at Circle Time. Neil jumped up from his chair, pointed at Lisa and started to chant 'call her a hippo, call her a hippo'. Children shared in laughter as they looked from a grinning Neil to a startled Lisa (interpersonal). Lisa calmly and firmly insisted 'it is time to listen now Neil'. However, She responded to the group identification with chanting and humour by introducing the *name game*. This teacher led game involved chanting of names, (*I have a name you have a name, what's your name?*) and rhythmic hand clapping which inevitably excited group interest, involvement and children's own creative adaptations (children sometimes adopted *funny names*). Lisa also responded to some children's reticence to join in and adapted this and other Circle Time games in order to afford children a type of LPP as onlookers (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Over the weeks, small micro-genetic transitional moments were observable (Vygotsky 1978) as peripheral participants gradually found ways to become more participative. On a community/cultural level, different types of participatory interaction (including Neil's name calling) were constrained, afforded or adapted. Within these routines and practices children's evolving identities of participation evidenced and the community itself displayed a form of *knowing* in practice (Wenger 2008). Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 29) tell us that 'mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community'. Even as the study participants developed learning trajectories across new communities of practice, traces of our participation in Rainbow Road would remain and continue to shape everyday practice.

7.5. 'Teacher Talk'

In the early days of this new term, my familiarity with my voluntary role and the welcoming attitude of the staff helped me navigate more confidently as a somewhat experienced community member. I connected to a shared sense of satisfaction as well as relief (amongst the teachers) that the initial transitions had gone well and children appeared

to be *settling in.* After all of the children left each morning, we (Leona, Lisa, Sue and I) continued (as in Phase 1) to reflect upon and share our personal experiences of the morning's events and also planned for the days ahead. In the first days, children underwent a type of *rite of passage* (Van Gennep 1960, Dunlop and Fabian 2007). Prior to this, and beginning with a preliminary visit to the pre-school, most children had been discussing and preparing for this transition for some time. This *priming* process (Corsaro and Molinari 2000) had ensured that in general children wanted to be in pre-school and felt a sense of well-being and belonging within their new pre-school roles. For the teachers and I, there was a shared understanding (interpersonal) that every group is unique and that every new group brings diverse challenges. In the first days, Marie(k) was conspicuous by her absence. A strategy of a delayed start (agreed with Marie's parents) reflected an understanding of the importance of timing in responding to individual as well group needs at key times of transition (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, Elder 1999). The intention of this strategy was to ease Marie's personal transition and also to support the group transition process.

7.6. Reconnecting with Marie

I was not present on the day when Marie(k) returned to pre-school, but was told that her transition was smooth and without tears. What was noticeable at the outset of the new pre-school term was Marie's increasing interest and involvement in the arts and crafts area where she regularly participated, typically with Helen (e), Monica (e), Brenda(n), Marian (n) and Eileen (n), who I started to think of as *the Crafty Girls.* Together, these children collaborated on their interests, including longed for skills, encompassing literacy practices and mark making, such as writing their names, to identify their cultural artefacts.

Vignette 8 - A Tale of Negotiated Meaning Making - Directed by Marie
(September 2011)

Marie picks up a pencil 'I doing my name' she says 'spell it with me'. I am a little puzzled as to what Marie means by this as I am not convinced that she knows letter names or letter sounds yet. I hesitate and Marie grips the pencil in one hand and grabs my hand (with her other hand) and places it over the hand holding the pencil. Now, I understand and move her hand to form the letters of her name. We finish and a smiling Marie picks up scissors

and says (to herself) 'now I cut out the shapes'. She starts to cut out the letter 'M'. She struggles with this task and puts the letter M and the scissors back on the table. Marie looks at what is left of her name and then catching my gaze says 'here this for you'. I thank Marie and place it in my pocket. End of vignette.

Marie usually conveyed a very clear vision of what she wanted to do. In the above vignette, Marie physically, as well as verbally, made meaning and expertly mediated our collaborative experiences (interpersonal). Marie may have lacked the exact vocabulary for her purpose, yet she creatively used language and sometimes combined this with action to effectively mediate her intentions. In a Vygotskian sense, Marie appropriated my adult expertise in order to scaffold herself to new levels of understanding (ZPD). This experience made us both (at different turns) either experts or novices (teachers or learners), thus affording a process of reciprocal meaning, described by Vygotsky as *obuchenie* (1978). The potential to develop such meaning making processes requires a flexibility within the adult role and a willingness to at times follow in order to be better able to lead (Rogoff 1990).

In Rainbow Road, teacher led and child led activities were quite clearly defined in the daily schedule (Appendix 5, p. 268), which divided the day into free play indoors and outdoors. These times were interspersed with more adult led group times, including circle times, structured arts/crafts activities, cooking and baking etc. Children's cultural worlds of meaning are argued as creatively interpreted and reproduced (Corsaro 1990; 2000) within the places and spaces of these primarily child or adult led interactions. However, sometimes children's culture emerged in what could be understood as in between spaces, when the focus of adult aims and goals may sometimes have run counter to, or parallel to child interests and found expression in child motives and intentions.

7.7. Locating Children's Cultural Worlds

One such time identified in this study involved weekly cooking/baking activities. On a personal level, most children in this setting showed an awareness of the implicit rule that baking required a degree of waiting and turn-taking. One morning, as Chris(n) awaited his turn (to stir a cake mixture) he spontaneously developed a 'catch me if you can' game. He

engaged the excited responses of Marian(n) and Brenda (n) as they attempted to grab his outstretched hands, which he then rapidly withdrew. Children individually paused in this improvised game to take turns at mixing or adding ingredients to the bowl. On a community/cultural level the teachers did not encourage or discourage these spontaneous play incidents but continued with their guided participatory roles, (in this case) of teaching the children how to bake, and within this process promoted levels of participation and persistence at the task in hand (Rogoff 1990).

Within their evolving participatory repertoires (Carr 2001) the children found means to pursue their own playful interests whilst continuing to respect the pedagogic discourse of turn taking. Such unplanned play was taken for granted, tacitly afforded, and not usually remarked upon (unless it interfered with or disrupted the intended tasks). In practice these improvisations by children helped maintain their interest and persistence towards adult aims and goals (promoting skills and task persistence). What was less noted or acknowledged as valuable by adults in the setting was the degree of shared inter-subjectivity, creativity and collaboration it takes to sustain such in between space play. Exploring the potentials within child and adult roles now continues as the progress of Mark and Marie is tracked through field notes and participant observations.

7.8. Reconnecting with Mark

On a personal level, Mark was becoming proud of his new levels of co-ordination, honed over the summer months, in his home habitus. He had conquered the various outdoor resources including the swing; garnering admiration from other children with requests (when on the swings) such as *push me up high like Mark.* On an interpersonal level Mark constructed a participatory role positioning me as documenter of his emergent skills, and requesting that I write in my notebook *Mark is becoming very good at Swingball* (for inclusion in the anticipated end of year book). Mark also asked if I was *the writing teacher.* I answered that *Yes I suppose I am.* Mark reflected an understanding of self as both *being and becoming* (Uprichard 2008) as he constructed an image of his changing status and identity based on past, present and future anticipated selves. However, in daily conversations after preschool (with teachers), concern was expressed about Mark's continued lack of verbal interaction during free play with other children. Both Lisa and

Leona expressed concern that in terms of *school readiness* (for primary school) that Mark 'takes longer than most other children to get ready' at times of transition such as the preparation to go outside. Mark also became easily frustrated if he appeared to feel rushed. Marie in contrast had become more participatory indoors, outdoors, in teacher led and child led activities where (in the latter case) she tended to assume and be accepted by other children in a leadership role (Vignette 14, p. 275).

By mid September, Leona, Lisa and Sue were expressing concern that during the transition from outdoors to indoors Mark regularly sulked and refused to come back inside. Several crisis moments erupted when Mark played football. As other children attempted to join in Mark would pick up the ball and run, pushing and shoving anyone who got in his way. During a quiet moment I questioned Mark about this practice. He explained ‘but Sam was going to get the ball and score all the goals'. On a personal level, Mark's understanding of the rules of this spontaneous game related primarily to gaining possession of the ball and keeping it (seemingly at all costs). This view lacked the shared inter-subjective and empathic understanding necessary to sustain group play relationships. During what I have termed *in between spaces* such as the informality of snack time, Mark cheerfully engaged both peers and adults in conversation and shared humour. On other occasions, Mark's perception of the rules of play continued to be quite rigid and inflexible resulting in moments of crisis. Children accepted Mark's expertise during teacher led times such as Circle Time and admired his artistic abilities in structured and free play activities, as well as his physical dexterity in outdoor play. Boys and girls appeared drawn to Mark and made repeated attempts to access entry into Mark's play spaces, but they were regularly rebuffed. During free play, Mark continued to engage with play props such as dinosaurs and the cast of imaginary characters inside his head. Mark's own attempts to connect with the Action Boys in play tended to be characterised by a lack of verbal interaction. The resultant play fighting often required adult intervention. In this, there was a lack of mutuality (Wenger 2008) which left Mark hovering at the edge of other children's cultural worlds of meaning, and other children unable to gain more than peripheral access to his cultural world.

7.9. Mark – Parent and Teacher Talk – What Matters?

Teachers discussed concerns about Mark's experience of transition with Claire (Mark's Mother). Subsequently Claire's talks with Mark (outside of pre-school) revealed that Mark was 'finding it difficult to adjust to the new situation this term' (only 4 children that he knew from last year) and he was frustrated about forgetting or not always understanding the rules. During informal times (in between spaces) Mark regularly spoke of the soccer teams and players he and his family (parents and older brother) followed on T.V. (home habitus). This term, Claire encouraged Mark's growing interest in soccer through his membership of a local football club outside of school hours. She also confided her hopes that this would help Mark's social skills. A strategy was furthermore agreed (with Mark's parents) and noted in Mark's observational schedule that teachers would help with reminders (priming) of what was coming next over the morning. Specific ways of supporting Mark's 'social integration' were also outlined:

> *If we see Mark withdrawing and sulking we ask him to talk about it then integrate him back by doing an activity with him. Usually other children come along to join in and eventually the teacher can step away (teacher observational schedule 18/09/11).*

Claire also initiated some play dates (one or two boys from pre-school at a time) to support Mark's social interactions outside of pre-school. Notably, moments of crisis tended to occur at times of transition such as the transition indoors or the transition from group Circle Time to home time. On a personal level, Mark's striving for mastery (such as his interest in dinosaurs and football) was supported in his home habitus and the funds of knowledge he acquired there. On a community/cultural level, both adults and children reinforced and validated Mark's identity as an *expert* through every day practices. This contrasted sharply with what was viewed by teachers as Mark's *immature* or *egocentric* behaviour in many of his peer interactions. What was less visible or acknowledged was that Mark's frustration levels were deepened because his identity of expertise did not translate into currency (Bourdieu 1997) in less predictable, fast moving or novel situations such as free play. As the term went by Mark started to concentrate his football efforts on up skilling myself and the other staff at soccer. He continued to pursue the role of expert, leader and director. This

applied whether Mark adopted the role of an emergent palaeontologist, premier league soccer player, soccer, coach, cook, artist, scientist etc.

In Mark's appropriation of a football coach role he began to find a way to see the world through the eyes of his students (usually teachers initially). This process required switching between expert understandings to empathy for what it may feel like to be a novice in this process. Through these participatory identities (Wenger 2008) Mark's dispositional interests and longed for skills of mastery as a footballer and coach were being met. As the term progressed Mark began to see and share humour, experiencing mutuality (with peers and adults) in situations, that could previously have lead to frustration (Vignette 11, p.189, Vignette 15, p. 275). He also showed signs of more patience with himself and others, and his communicative competence, well being and sense of belonging appeared to grow in social interactions with peers (Vignette 18, p. 276). Over time, Mark appeared to be following a learning trajectory, (Lave and Wenger 1991) where he identified himself and wished to be identified in ways (community/cultural) that required him to leave aspects of his old identity behind.

7.10. Marie - Parent and Teacher Talk - What Matters?

In the first few weeks, Marie appeared to be adapting, adjusting and transforming herself as she learned to cope with separation from her mother and started to build up her participatory repertoires in Rainbow Road. Marie often took on a leadership role amongst the Crafty Girls (Vignette. 14 p. 275). Marie(k) and these peers regularly appropriated adult help on various projects that they themselves initiated first thing in the morning (free play time). Marie gradually became more participatory in group Circle Time and also during in between spaces such as snack time. Overall, Marie began to flex her ability to influence and interact with the whole group.

In December, Marie missed a few days due to illness. The teachers alerted me to Marie's anxiety on her return to preschool. Julie (Marie's Mother) was encouraged to stay and help Marie settle in during the morning transition. At these times, Julie expertly guided and connected Marie to familiar objects and interests that supported her sense of identity and belonging in pre-school (interpersonal). Teachers in the setting were on hand to offer

additional support if/when needed (community/cultural). Despite these collaborative strategies there was a concern amongst the teachers and anxiousness on Julie's part that the apparent progress made in Marie's morning transitions was beginning to *regress*.

During informal discussions with Julie, (usually as she left in the mornings) I recalled Marie's intense excitement (personal) before Christmas at the thought of her relatives arriving home on the 'big aeroplane' and her regular enactment of a communal aeroplane flight game where she would take on the role of pilot (Vignette 16, p. 275). Julie seemed both pleased and surprised at this leadership aspect of her youngest child's personality. As the youngest member of her family, Marie had enjoyed a close bond with her mother whilst her older siblings attended primary school and her father worked outside the home. Her newly forming pre-school identity had meant a daily wrench from Marie's close bond with her mother. In Phase 1 of this study, Marie's sadness and anxiety associated with the morning transition sometimes lingered throughout the morning. Latterly, Marie's transition struggles to cope and adapt (Elder 1999) seemed confined to the morning goodbye; thereafter (throughout the morning), Marie engaged as a competent and confident student, emergent artist, director, architect, engineer, inventor and friend within the places and spaces of her secondary habitus. Similarly to Mark, Marie displayed a persistence at tasks and a desire for mastery. In Marie's case, this happened in adult led, but also child led contexts (Rogoff 1990, Dweck 1999). Marie regularly positioned myself (and other adults) in ZPD roles where adult expertise could help scaffold her to new levels she could not attain alone (Vygotsky 1978). Crisis moments for Marie manifested at the point of transition between home and school. There was an inference that Marie may have been struggling to reconcile her new sense of self with her more familiar home habitus, which may also have been undergoing change.

In January 2012, the arrival of some new children drew attention to the many taken for granted ways of being, seeing, and doing in Rainbow Road. The influence of experienced children on novice children and the difference between what was reified and everyday practice come in to sharp focus. Gender became an emergent and complex theme in these unfolding stories of transition.

7.11. New Arrivals – Making the Familiar Strange.

By the time the new term started in January 2012, the novice pre-schoolers themselves had acquired experiences and gradually appropriated pre-schooler identities which were made more visible by the arrival of a number of new children. The participation of these second wave novices (n2 children) brought challenges to the community regarding some of the now taken for granted ideas on what matters in pre-school. This gave rise to consideration of child and adult views of what it may mean to successfully navigate the pre-school world. The new arrivals attended about 3 mornings per week. Laura(n2) and Sarah(n2) quickly adapted to the morning routines and were conspicuous in their identification with the crafty girl's, evolving self-initiated projects such as the creation of families of 'spiders in envelopes' (to bring home) and Disney princess play. Owen(n2) seemed to stand back and observe everything (LPP). He was so quiet that children asked *can he talk?* When Owen(n2) went outside he transformed in to an excited adventurer (shrieked, laughed, climbed, jumped and ran with the Action Boys). In contrast, both Rosie(n2) and Sean(n2) tended to step over or in a sense trample on invisible and taken for granted boundaries in both child led and adult led activities. Sometimes children stretched out their arms to protect their play constructions, warning each other of Rosie or Sean's approach. Rosie(n2) and Sean(n2) tended to respond to this collective denial of play entry by grabbing, hitting or pushing. At other times, children seemed drawn to and entertained by these two newcomers potential to challenge the pedagogic discourse of what was sayable and doable in Rainbow Road. One morning Marie(k) grabbed my hand and drew my attention to the bathroom where a small crowd had gathered giggling and shrieking. On closer inspection, Sean(n2) was holding the palms of his hands under the (full flowing) water taps, spraying water all over himself, the bystanders and the bathroom floor. Such incidents elicited remarks (from teachers) on *how far* the rest of the children had come since September, as well as how taken for granted the implicit ways of navigating the pre-school rules, rituals and routines had become.

Teacher observations (including my own in my dual researcher/temporary teacher role) suggested hands on activities (water play, sand play and cleaning up) tended to hold Rosie's(n2) and Sean's (n2) participatory interest. Rosie appeared to be adopting an identity

of competence with regular offers of *I help?* (for example washing cups) and this interest was supported and sometimes encouraged in order to *distract* her from disrupting other children's play (part of Pre-school policy to support positive behaviour). Helen(e) also started to enact a *helpful* role. One busy morning (at home time) I lead interactive songs and read stories (in my teacher role) to the children in the main room (Circle Time). At the same time, Leona called children in to the entrance hall as their parents/carers started to arrive. Liam(n) and Robbie(e) were in the entrance hall and refusing to put on their shoes, claiming (falsely) they *don't know how.* Minutes later Helen emerged from the entrance hall and proudly announced that she had helped Robbie(e) and Liam(n) to put their shoes on. I thanked Helen but felt concern that this power struggle had a gendered quality that placed Helen in a subordinate role, dominated by the boys demands.

7.12. Helpfulness and Helplessness, What Matters?

Robbie(e) and Liam(n) constructed themselves as helpless in the above scenario and Helen's response potentially promoted a type of *learned helplessness '*(Dweck 1999). When Leona and I discussed this incident after pre-school she recalled that recently when Rosie(n2) was fighting with another child over a toy, Helen(e) remarked *I will get her a puzzle that you can do with her.* In this offer, Helen(e) artfully interpreted and reproduced (Corsaro 2002) her perception of the teacher role and coping strategies in particular situations. Helen(e) accurately reflected pre-school policy of supporting children's *social integration* through introduction of a shared activity. Leona reflected on her own tendency to acknowledge or praise Helen's 'general helpfulness' and concluded that this may have had unintended repercussions. Subsequently, Leona explained to Helen that it was not really being helpful if the boys did not actually need help. In practice Helen initially resisted relinquishing her newly acquired adult like role.

The next day Helen told Robbie 'You are just being lazy' adding 'we are in a hurry' whilst continuing to 'help' him put on his shoes. Adults in the setting (teachers and parent/carers) had never been heard to apply adjectives such as lazy to children but Helen accurately read the sense of hurry at times of transition. She reflected an understanding that busy adults sometimes *help* children. Her use of the term 'we' instead of I indicated that Helen identified with and wanted to emulate more powerful adult roles which she associated with

a participatory role she perceived as helpful. For a number of days, Robbie and Liam persisted in their helpless attitudes but Helen was persuaded to re-join Circle Time. Sometimes as busy mothers/carers arrived, they continued to help children in efforts to speed up the process of transition. Finally, Leona engaged Robbie's Grandmother's support and they both waited patiently until a reluctant and disgruntled Robbie(e) could 'remember' how to put on his shoes himself, Liam(n) followed suit. On a personal level, Helen(e) reflected back in these incidents a somewhat gendered perception of helpfulness which she appeared to associate with adult roles in pre-school and beyond. 'Teacher talk' allowed us to connect and share observations (interpersonal), making visible challenging aspects of practice (reification) and opening the possibility of change (cultural/community). The following brief vignette provides further indications of how deeply embedded ideas of gender can be within what is reified and everyday practice.

Vignette 9 - Plotting in the Bathroom - Constructing a 'Who Dunnit' Tale
(January 2012)

As I walk in to the bathroom, Helen(e) and Eileen (n) appear to be washing their hands. I notice that the water level is steadily rising in both sinks and the plug holes appear to be stuffed with paper towel. The taps keep flowing and the water level continues to rise. Eileen looks at Helen with a conspiratorial grin and remarks 'they will think the boys did this'. End of vignette.

My intervention in my teacher role in the above scenario meant the girls did not have the opportunity to test their theory. It could well be that simply imagining the *what if?* possibilities of flooding the bathroom was satisfying enough in itself to meet their intentions. Both children appeared to share (interpersonal) understandings that the intentions within their actions can be interpreted differently or potentially misread by adults (cultural/community).

7.13. The Plot Thickens - Making Gender Narratives Stutter?

After pre-school, I discussed this incident with the staff and found myself (along with the other teachers) coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that such behaviour might well be interpreted by each of us as *more likely* from the boys in the setting, and perhaps boys in

general. Lisa remarked how sometimes the girls got involved in 'unexpected behaviour' such as the day she found Brenda(n) switching all the name tags on the coat hangers in the entrance hall and when questioned as to why she did this said 'Monica told me to do it'. Monica(e) denied this though her embarrassed red face indicated to Lisa that she was involved if not the instigator of this action. There was a general consensus amongst the teachers (corroborated in my participant observations) that girls (in this setting) did not easily *give themselves away* when breaking rules and were also *less likely* (than boys in the setting) to vocalise a negative response to teacher requests, for example, to clean up.

My field notes over the next few weeks indicated that girls, in pairs or groups (including the Crafty Girls) in the setting, sometimes slipped in to the entrance hall to play during clean up time. Boys as a group (especially the Action Boys) eventually helped with teacher requests such as cleaning up, often grumbling loudly as they did so and unintentionally drawing attention away from girls actions. Paradoxically, boys' adoption of a quietness or other subversive strategies (Vignette 7, p. 154) tended to make them conspicuous and alerted adults to unsanctioned behaviours in this setting.

The images of female subversive power emerging from our talks contrasted with other discussions where Leona, Lisa and Sue commented on girls ability *to understand* and quickly engage with the routines, rituals and expectations of pre-school participation. A general *positive* or *calming* effect was attributed by the staff to girls influences on boys (in the past as well as in the current pre-school year). Given these understandings it may have explained the teacher's apprehension (at end of the last pre-school year) that for the first time since the school opened the girls attending would be outnumbered by boys. Some of the girls (some of the time) in the setting appeared to be reflecting embedded cultural discourses that expect and anticipate more compliant, *sensible,* or *calming* and *helpful* behaviour from girls. The above incidents suggest that girls in this setting at times adopted strategies that went against this discourse. Girls sometimes sought out and achieved aims that were at odds with adult expectations or culturally taken for granted *ways of being a girl* (Carr 2001). One such possibility exhibited in this setting was to pursue these aims quietly and exhibit all the outward signs that suggested compliance with adult expectations.

Wenger (2008) indicates a need to strive for balance between what is reified and everyday practice.

In early 2012 (whilst employed as a teacher), one reified practice namely *the princess song* began to excite the interest and involvement of the children as a group (novice and experienced, male and female) and posed challenges to my thinking within my various roles (teacher, least adult, researcher).

7.14. The 'Princess Song' – A Vehicle for Fluid Identities

The teacher learning aims and goals of this interactive song/game included development of children's ability to listen, turn take, participate in and follow a sequence of events. This also required interpersonal understandings of what the various play roles required (Princess, Prince, Trees, Fairy). Additional aims included the development of musical expression, co-ordination and co-operative skills. Embedded within the pedagogic discourse was an acknowledgement of children's motives for playfulness and fun. In more rule bound play such as the interactive princess song, children's different developmental levels become evident. During our daily talks/planning sessions, Leona and I discussed ways to avoid allowing this popular game to descend in to chaos. It takes a skilled or *knowing other* to direct and sustain the play. Turning points of potential crisis were identified such as some children's confusion, usually novice(2) children over how the roles could or in Mark's terms *should* unfold (community/cultural understandings). Leona proved adept in her quiet firm way at expressing the explicit rules of play whilst affording room for variation and negotiation and legitimate peripheral forms of participation (Vygotsky 1978, Lave and Wenger 1991). By February 2012 the game formed a popular and evolving part of regular practice in Rainbow Road and Lisa (on her return from leave of absence) responded to this interest.

7.15. Personal Habitus and the Pedagogic Discourse – What Matters?

Warming (2005, p.58) suggests the influences of personal habitus on practice in her observation that '...spoken and unspoken rules, norms and values, will change with the different pedagogues who are present ' in an early years setting. My reflections both in and on practice (Schön 1987) during my initial participation in the princess song activity

confronted me with my own personal bias. This manifested in my initial reluctance to respond with interest or enthusiasm to children's requests for the popular princess song. On careful reflection this reticence related to my dislike of what I perceived as a traditional gender role (personal interpretation) in the tale of a helpless female in need of rescuing. Placing this bias to one side (personal habitus) afforded me the opportunity to see how the community negotiated meaning, including what was open to challenge and what might have been validated or constrained. Additionally, my teacher role at this time required me to pay close attention to pedagogic aims and goals. My personal assumption of what was reified in the game (specifically a requirement for girls to take on powerless roles) was challenged in the evolving practice of the princess song. I observed with interest the willingness of boys including the Action Boys to regularly take on female roles such as the princess or the fairy. Less surprising was girls appropriation of the powerful male role (the prince) which had precedence in other (free play) scenarios. Actual practice was regularly negotiated and renegotiated and underwent several incarnations. There was an ongoing participatory learning process of coping, adaptation and transformation for adults and children alike.

Each member of the community brings their own biography, experience, and motives (habitus) to bear on the community practices. On Lisa's return to Rainbow Road, she lead the princess game and assigned specific roles to boys (gender neutral trees or gendered prince roles) and for girls (trees, or the gendered fairy or princess roles) rather than wait for them to choose. Interestingly, during a second rendition of the song Lisa responded to Rory(n) and Robbie's(e) requests to be princesses and the usual fluidity of gender apparent in this game was restored. In our daily conversations Lisa, Leona and Sue observed that some children were not interested in pursuing fluid gender identities (such as Mark(k) and Monica(e)). The interest of other boys such as Rory(n) and Robbie(e) in princess and fairy roles was deemed *surprising*. On further reflection a major prop influencing the space for the game to develop was the *tower* itself (usually described as the Resting Loft). From this iconic vantage point children could view the whole room (survey their *kingdom*) or if they chose to, remain hidden from view. Children's negotiation of the space within this powerful structural resource (re-named as *the big high tower)* may explain in some part

why both girls and boys appropriated the central *princess in the tower* role. Costumes were not used, which also meant less threat to masculine identities. It was interesting to see the children step beyond the taken for granted invisible boundaries of habitus and explore the possibilities within different roles. Even though children and adults reflected variations in their understandings on what was reified (how the game should or could proceed) the flexible framing of the game (pedagogic discourse) afforded room for negotiation.

I was challenged to confront my own bias in order to allow the game to proceed at all and/or to the extent that would respond to the children's interest level. More experienced participants influence novice players (Wenger 2008). Leona's expert guidance sustained children's interest and scaffolded unfolding participatory repertoires (including my own as guide and director and sometimes participant in the play). Children themselves initiated changes that shaped the play such as the addition of new props (*magic wands* brought from home, chairs to make the trees *stand taller*). Small variations by novice or experienced players could lead the play in exciting new directions. It was quite joyful to see that from an initial chaotic situation, rich new play and learning episodes emerged. The Princess song became a vehicle for negotiating meaning, fluidity of identity (in gender and other roles) and transformation of everyday practice. In some respects this game reflected the type of 'transitory play' activity proposed by Brostrom (2007). Children's play interests were scaffolded by adults' responsiveness to the creative input of the group (obuchenie). In this collaborative process, children's dispositional interests for learning (such as movement, song, leadership, creativity and trying on of new identities) were developed. These experiences could translate as currency in other less adult led contexts (Chapter 8) and were potentially of value in bridging the transition to more formal learning in primary school.

Lisa's return to the setting meant I was no longer directly involved in the daily meeting and greeting of parents/carers and children routines (morning and home time). Nonetheless, my volunteer role had evolved because now the parents/carers knew me on a first name basis (and vice-versa) and were more likely to approach me (or I them) and ask questions or convey information about the children and/or my research role in the setting. Lisa's return

also restored my extra pair of hands role and supported the process of time, timing and affordances (Elder 1999) for me to collaborate with the children on the production of the intended end of year book. From April to June my focus on tracking the transitions experiences of Mark and Marie also continued.

7.16. Transitions, Coping and Transformation

The new pre-school year continued to unfold and new players became part of the ongoing play of everyday events, including adult led play such as the princess game and children's adoption of self- initiated play roles during free play indoors and outdoors. The transitions, coping strategies and adaptation of more experienced players such as Marie and Mark emerged in subtle as well as more obvious ways. Relationships, with their emotional connections to learning and development were identified in this study as a key component of transition; linking home and school, adult and child language/communication (Trevarthan 2002, Laevers 2005, Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). By March 2012, Marie's difficult morning transitions were much less frequent and when they did occur were shorter in duration, less vocal and emotional, and reflective of a more assertive and directive Marie. In May, I agreed with Lisa's observation that Marie 'breezes in' to pre-school on the occasional mornings her father drops her off. Towards the end of the school year Marie became so engrossed in some play theme on one occasion, that her mother called her name several times before finally eliciting a cheerful goodbye. Teacher observations appeared to confirm Marie's empathy with other children and her evolving leadership qualities. My own participant observations of Marie suggested a certain fluidity of gender identity in play (adopted roles of *Dad, Mum, Pilot, Princess, X-factor Judge etc.*). Marie was both responsive and directive and also nurturing towards younger less *knowing* children with whom she displayed empathy and inclusiveness (Vignette 17, p. 276), Marie's competent, caring, well organised, identity of leader may have been a reflection of her home culture and identification with her mother's role (home habitus). Julie was surprised to hear of Marie's increasingly assertive and confident role in pre-school and though pleased, sought reassurance that she was not 'being bossy.' Could it be that Marie was not comfortable in emulating her evolving pre-school identity in front of her mother? The separation process had been difficult for mother and daughter. Over time prolonging the goodbye ritual and appearing 'sad' may have become more about Marie's

need to reassure her mother about the strength of their close bond (interpersonal) than about any real anxiety. What matters here? Both Marie's home and pre-school habitus had provided her with cultural tools to navigate the new roles required of her in pre-school (community/cultural). The melding of Marie's primary habitus and the secondary habitus of pre-school had been a challenging transition for Marie, her family and her teachers. Marie appeared to be forging a new sense of self in pre-school which may have required giving up, or negotiating old ways of being, seeing, and doing. The transitions that occurred were indicative of Marie's changing community/cultural, interpersonal and personal needs and wants.

My daily discussions/planning with the teachers, informal talks with her mother, and Marie's observational schedule in the latter part of the school year confirmed Marie's gradual transition from novice, reluctant pre-schooler and peripheral participatory involvement to competent, confident leader in pre-school. Marie participated and contributed during Circle Time where once she quietly observed. In structured activities, as well as self-initiated play, Marie displayed persistence and a disposition towards mastery (Rogoff 1990, Dweck 1999). During free play, both indoors and outdoors, Marie interpretively reproduced and creatively transformed culture, regularly leading the play and her companions in new directions (Corsaro 1990, 2000, Wenger 2008).

Mark, the other veteran of Rainbow Road, had also undergone somewhat of a rocky journey and a form of metamorphosis. Mark struggled and underwent many transitions in his journey from novice to experienced pre-schooler. He too shared a close loving bond with his mother and the rest of his family. The sense of self Mark derived from his home habitus was afforded room, and space for development in the culture of Rainbow Road. What appeared to have been difficult for Mark was coping with the transition to a new social situation. His mother confided that she had not expected the early part of his second year in pre-school to be 'so difficult'. She communicated a view that adjustment to a new group of children had made even the familiar setting and resources appear strange and unpredictable to Mark. Over time, and with support (guided participation) Mark continued to develop his own dispositional interest in mastery across a variety of teacher led and

child led activities. Mark's continued appropriation of roles of expertise afforded him new identities of participation (Wenger 2008). In outdoor soccer play, Mark's role of soccer coach evolved into a player role with peers, where he would volunteer to be the goalie. The responsibility attached to these roles engaged Mark's dispositional interest towards mastery (Rogoff 1990, Dweck 1999). Mark continued to display persistence and latterly good humour when met with challenges. Notably, the possibility of sometimes failing no longer seemed to overwhelm Mark. He displayed an increasing ability to empathise, recognise humour and be sensitive to the needs of others, as well as to the pedagogic requirements and explicit and implicit rules of pre-school navigation (Vignette 18, p. 276). Interestingly, Marie and Mark (who would soon make the transition to the same primary school) began to connect as friends (April 2012 onwards) and share jokes and improvisational games at in between spaces and times such as the transition outdoors.

In the last days of term, daily discussions (with teachers) ran to review of the year and speculation on how children might adjust to the next big transition to primary school. Lisa gave us all pause for thought when she asked 'can you imagine what it would have been like for Marie and Mark if they had gone directly to primary school from home?' Wenger (2008) observes that each community *negotiates its enterprise.* This socio-cultural understanding recognises negotiation of meaning as an evolving social process where what is reified culturally sets the scene or expectations around what can conceivably happen (Bourdieu 1997).

7.17. Conclusion

This Chapter continued to explore the Community of Practice of Rainbow Road and its evolving coping, adaptation and transformation practices over time (to meet community/cultural, personal and interpersonal needs). Specifically, this was addressed with the question: *How do children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school, and what roles do adults play in mediating this process?* This question was approached by tracking the progress of Marie(k), Mark(k) and their peers as they moved from LPP to take on roles and identities of increasing competence and mastery as experienced pre-schoolers. What was reified in the setting and everyday practice revealed day to day and moment to moment mediation and negotiation of meaning making (by all

participants) as an ongoing process. The pedagogic discourse underlying this process revealed a flexible framing where much of what took place was open to negotiation. Tensions arose at times between reification (what was validated socially and culturally) and individual agency (motives and intentions). Often this manifested where adult goals, aims and expectations were at odds with child motives and intentions. Adopting a fluid researcher identity meant positioning myself but also being positioned by children as I sought to access insights from their cultural worlds. For the most part, my bids for access as a novice participant (from LPP positions to more active participation) were met. This afforded glimpses into children's evolving perspectives on what it may have looked and felt like to be, see and do in this pre-school. Similarly my own journey from novice to experienced participation afforded increased insights into teacher and parent/carer perspectives and concerns. Many of the informal discussions (LPP) held during these periods of employment in the setting formed the basis for semi-structured interviews held with parents and staff in the final weeks of the school year. Key times for maintaining good team work and communications seemed to relate to transition practices throughout the day (home to pre-school, indoors to outdoors, pre-school to home).

Teachers in the setting also conveyed an understanding of the significance of time and timing in the negotiation (with parents/carers) of various strategies sensitive to children's individual and collective needs at times of transition. This included a delayed start to enable Marie's gradual return to pre-school when the majority of children were new arrivals and the community as a whole was undergoing a key point of transition. Similarly for Mark, links between home and school were strengthened through daily informal language/communications (discussions with his mother), teacher observation's (especially of Mark's peer play interactions) and specific strategies of mediation by teachers at times of transition.

Some children, including Mark(k) and Marie(k), struggled through various transitions to meet the structural demands and expectations of implicit and explicit rules required to navigate social and cultural aspects of pre-school. Marie(k) initially resisted the very expectation (community/cultural) that she should even be in pre-school. These structural

issues (reification) lead to questions on the purposes of pre-school (described by some parents as *playschool*) as well as the community/cultural views of children mediating their participation. For both children, their sense of well being and belonging was related to their participatory identities and dispositional interests as learners. For Mark his sense of competence and mastery in some of the more formal and teacher led aspects of pre-school did not always transfer as currency in other areas (such as peer play indoors and outdoors). Discussions between home and school identified Mark's interests, play intentions and concerns. Over time, Mark made an interpersonal connection (supported by teachers and parents) that enabled him to listen to, as well as responsively engage these interests and negotiate ways of sharing them with other children. In so doing Mark became more participatory with peers and increasingly reflected a shared sense of well-being and belonging (Brostrom 2002, 2007). Marie too underwent a change from reluctant or legitimate peripheral participant in pre-school to leader of various collaborative activities. Just as play and relationships matter in everyday practice, 'teacher talk' (between teachers and between parents and teachers, and between teachers and children) lead to various strategies supporting the children's dispositional play interests, initially developed in the home habitus. This language/communication helped both Mark and Marie to negotiate new participatory pre-schooler identities. This sometimes involved both children leaving some aspects of being, seeing and doing behind and in the process transforming both themselves and their learning community (Wenger 2008).

The participant/observer role adopted enabled me to follow children's lead to participate as a novice in their evolving play themes. Children's own agency at such times often included appropriation of adult skills to scaffold their meaning making to a new level (ZPD). Such reciprocal meaning making (obuchenie*)* required a flexibility in the adult role. This approach made visible children's motives and dispositional interests as learners. Examples were also presented of more structured adult led activities such as cookery where children's own cultural worlds of meaning regularly emerged in instances of spontaneous play. During such in between spaces, children's intentions and aims sometimes appeared at odds with adult aims and goals. Children's self-initiated play at these times required transitions in thinking, creating coping mechanisms to deal with boredom, connect with peers and

sustain their collective play intentions in adult approved ways. Such play was usually only reflected upon by teachers if it became too boisterous or disruptive, and thus in need of adult intervention. However, children's creative, collective adaptation of, and manipulation of such in between spaces were tacitly afforded but largely unacknowledged as valuable in the setting.

In everyday practice, children also interpretively reproduced and reflected back various gendered ideas on what was sayable and doable in the pre-school context studied. Girls in this setting appeared more likely to quietly pursue their own play interests (including those that went against the rules) without drawing adult attention, and consequently without incurring sanctions. This ties with studies of gender (in Ireland and elsewhere) suggesting that boys command more teacher attention than girls (MacNaughton 1997, Cunneen 2001). Some fluidity in children's appropriation of, and exploration of gender play roles were observed in this setting. The type of play observed in the *Princess song* during circle times required children to self-regulate and afforded reciprocity between peers and adults. This enabled children to sustain the play, whilst allowing for creative embellishment within the following of a collectively agreed narrative of events. Such experiences were analogous to Brostrom's concept of *transitory play,* believed to support learning that can act as currency across learning contexts, including formal school. Some children, in this play enactment, were observed to expand their meaning making through the negotiation of fluid gender identities.

Such responses from the children challenged adults (including myself) to recognise the potential for flexibility and creative reproduction and interpretation of the play (Corsaro 1992, 1998). Adults occupy powerful roles in this regard (Warming 2005) and adult mediation of these (Circle time) activities was observed to vary from teacher to teacher (personal habitus), but was negotiated daily (interpersonal) and subject to changes and adaptations over time (community/cultural). Overall, children's interactions with peers and adults within a richly resourced environment indicated that this setting afforded considerable space for negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning and for children to shape as well as be shaped within everyday practice. Relationships between home and school,

teachers and children, children and peers as well as the many forms of language/communication this entailed were highlighted (including physical, verbal, non-verbal, artistic, humour and other creative means).

In the forthcoming Chapter, further narratives of meaning were sought. This time more direct access into children's cultural worlds was pursued by engaging their expertise on their play and learning worlds. This was approached through the lens of the end of year pre-school book using the same *portraiture* or *learning story* type documentation methods developed in Phase 1 (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997, Carr 2001). Additionally, this involved audio recordings of narratives from everyday practice. The findings were interspersed with the findings from the end of year semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents of the key informant children. The recurring themes of play, relationships and language/communication were woven together. This reflected adult and child experiences of transitions in Rainbow Road as both an individual and collective process of negotiation over time.

Chapter 8.

Painting by Artist Alison Ludlow (2014)



Imagination is more important than knowledge.
For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination
embraces the entire world, stimulating progress,
giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking,
a real factor in scientific research (Einstein 1931).

Chapter 8. Transitions – From Novice to Expert Identities of Participation

> *Knowing is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities and it is located in relations among practitioners, their practice, the artefacts of that practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice. (Lave and Wenger 1991, p.122)*

8.1. Introduction

Over the course of this Chapter, further insights are sought into meaning making processes interpreted and reflected through the evolving relationships among people, places and things in Rainbow Road. Specifically this Chapter asks the question: *How does the community cope, adapt and transform itself over time, to meet community/cultural, interpersonal and personal needs?* Throughout this Chapter, the process of crystallization shifts among child, parent and teacher perspectives. Interpretive analysis is made with reference to theoretical and policy literature, and empirical studies, including the findings from this study. The aim is to build an understanding of the community/cultural *Knowing* in practice (Wenger 2008) and transitions in thinking that occur over time. These are understood to occur within the local contexts of the *social organization* and *political economy* of Rainbow Road (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Research by Moss and Richter (2010, p. 173) theorises the effects of transition on first year students experiencing the transition to life in university halls:

> *Transition is a group as well as an individual process, particularly in the intense collective setting of halls.*

It is argued that the above statement could equally apply to the collective settings of pre-school communities and the places and spaces within them for transitions in thinking to occur. Through this lens, transition is viewed as a catalyst or tool for change and development. In Phase 2 (September 2011 to June 2012) of this study, I continued to draw

on ideas from the methodology of Aistear's portraiture study. From May onwards, the children's transition from novice to experienced pre-schoolers was made visible through a second collaborative pre-school book. Ongoing themes identified in Chapter I (play, relationships and language/communication) based on reification and everyday practice fed in to the end of year semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers. Questions arose in relation to pre-school participatory roles and identities, encompassing sub themes such as access (to pre-school), agency (of child and adult participants), gender (in terms of participatory identities) and views on child readiness for formal school. A discourse of the *natural* within the place, space (indoor and outdoor), and resources (including teacher training and development) of Rainbow Road was also explored.

8.2. Reification, Participation and Negotiation

The reasons parents interviewed provided for choosing Rainbow Road as their child's pre-school tended to emanate from the reputation of the pre-school within the locality. Parents spoke of word of mouth recommendations through social interactions within their local community networks. The pre-school was popular and had a waiting list. Prior to the introduction of the pre-school scheme, cost was a potential barrier, which in practice meant more middle class, middle income families (until commencement of the scheme) had registered their children in this fee paying setting. Families with older children, who had attended the pre-school, were given priority when younger siblings registered (part of school policy to support continuity for families). Consequently, even with the introduction of the free-pre-school scheme, families with a previous connection (child had attended) to the setting continued to be advantaged in terms of transitions capital over families who had not. However, regardless of income or social class, families who had just moved to the locality would have to go on a waiting list if they wished their children to attend Rainbow Road. All parents interviewed emphasised pre-school in terms of children's development of social interactions in preparation for formal school above academic or other skills. This was viewed as particularly important for children without siblings or children who were the youngest in their families.

The key purpose of pre-school identified by teachers in the setting also related to children's socialisation and development of *independent behaviours* in preparation for what Leona described as 'ultimately a smooth transition to primary school'. To this end, teachers, (as did parents) indicated children's development of independence in practical areas such as *opening a lunch box or getting a coat on* over academic skills. Pre-school was described by two parents and also Lisa (teacher) as a *natural progression* from the home environment and ultimately unto primary schooling. What was viewed as *natural* was particularly emphasised (by parents and teachers) in relation to the physical place as well as space for learning and development to occur in this setting. Leona (teacher/manager) and Sue (part-time teacher) emphasised the creation of a *homelike* environment, with cooking and gardening as part of the regular curriculum. Several parents (seven out of ten) made positive references to the place and affordances of the pre-school and/or specifically to the outdoor space in terms of aesthetic appeal and play opportunities.

> *What I liked about Rainbow Road is that it seems more natural (Pamela).*
>
> *...am very happy with it here, the fact that they have the wet gear, even for going out on the wet day (Una).*

The impact at local level of *the political economy* of the introduction of the free pre-school year was reflected in parents and teacher views of the significance of this scheme, including current government plans for extension of the scheme to two years. Most of the parents interviewed were experiencing reduced financial circumstances due to the economic down turn. Some were currently out of work, seeking employment or in the process of retraining. The uptake of this scheme countrywide has been high (95%). For the parents interviewed, the pre-school scheme influenced issues such as timing of pre-school start and or the numbers of days their children attended. Teachers confirmed that prior to the introduction of the scheme, children who might have attended for two to three days now attended for a full five mornings per week, building a sense of continuity for children and their families. Parents whose child had attended pre-school (before introduction of the scheme) at an earlier age (five of the children) would have welcomed any additional economic support to meet the high costs of childcare. Most parents felt two to three days

was ample time for the three to four age group to spend in pre-school. Those parents who had the resources to do so, expressed a preference for their children to be cared for at home or with relatives up to age three (or older). Two parents expressed dissatisfaction with having to place their children in crèche settings (while they worked), partially because of the high cost but also because of the less *natural* environments. Similar views were expressed by parents in recent G.U.I. findings (2014).

Throughout the study, teachers in the setting frequently remarked on the value of additional pre-schooling for children whose initial transition had been or appeared likely to be difficult. This understanding was based on their collective experiences over the years. In this, teachers included children with limited out of home social experiences, children with special needs, or children for whom English was their second language. Teachers were less concerned (than parents) about the number of days (for an earlier introduction to pre-school), provided the children attended for two or more consecutive days, to allow for *settling in* and *continuity* in the pre-school as well as other home or care arrangements. The importance of continuity, timing and strengthening links between home and out of home care and education were also highlighted in the literature on transitions (Chapter 4). However, even within this primarily middle class group variations arose in relation to family access to *transitions capital* (Brooker 2002). In daily conversations, some parents in the setting (including four of the parents interviewed) would regularly make reference to the suitability of the location of the pre-school, close to relatives who could support them (sometimes bringing children to and from pre-school while they worked). Some children, for a multitude of reasons take longer to adapt, adjust and navigate socially and emotionally as well as cognitively in pre-school. This became visible in children's participation and space to exert choice, including the time and space afforded for production of cultural artefacts of various kinds in pre-school.

8.2.1. How Children Negotiate the Place and Space of Rainbow Road

How we use time and space also carries power. The implicit and explicit rules of the pedagogic discourse (community/cultural) in Rainbow Road required children to collectively participate in specific group routines at specific times over the morning. However, children's sense of ownership of place and space became noticeable in the dynamics of the morning meeting and greeting routines. Experienced pre-schoolers conveyed a sense of belonging (Brostrom 2002, Wenger 2008) as they navigated the morning routines, and enacted pre-schooler identities of increasing competence and knowing. The entrance hall was the first point of contact each morning and the place where all must enter even for a few moments, as children separated from the home, meeting their *present needs* (Moss and Richter 2010, p.165) as they took on their pre-schooler identities. On arrival, parents/carers and children could see through the hallway into the spacious inner room where most of the morning activities took place. Parents (rushing to get to work or drop older children to primary school) rarely followed children into the main room; even the need to change from outdoor shoes to slippers acted as a subtle barrier. Rainbow Road with its child size furniture and sensorial play materials was a typically inviting early childhood space for children, yet also separate from the adult world of work to which parents and carers returned (Kernan 2006, Rogoff 2008). Tensions and moments of crisis sometimes arose, particularly during times of transition (such as the transition from home), posing challenges to the negotiation of everyday practice (Vignette 13, p. 204).

The hallway also served as an art gallery (community/cultural space) where children's artwork was displayed and acted as a forum for discussion by children with parents, teachers or peers. Other cultural artefacts were eagerly deposited in cubbyholes (personal space) to bring home later. Brenda held up two such treasured artefacts ('a lamp and a birthday cake with wings') to be photographed for the pre-school book, before carefully returning them to her cubbyhole. Marian(n) studied the feathered artefact with interest 'is it a bird?' she asked and Brenda explained the winged nature of her intended gift. On a personal level, Brenda(n) frequently referred to *past experiences* (Moss and Richter 2010) with her baby sister as the focus of, or as the intended recipient of her artwork (a lamp for her sister's bedroom and a cake to deliver a delightful birthday surprise). On an

interpersonal level, Brenda and the other Crafty Girls regularly elicited adult expertise (cutting, accessing materials, assembling etc.) to develop and expand their inventive collaborations (working in the ZPD or *obuchenie).* Their knowing in practice grew and second wave novice children (joining the pre-school in 2012) followed their lead and gained footholds in to these ever expanding repertoires of participation (Carr 2001). My participant observations with the children and ongoing discussions with the teachers revealed that girls (this year and also since the pre-school opened), had been *more likely* to produce artefacts or what Marie(k) described as 'presents' and Marian(n) referred to as 'important things to bring home'. In these thoughtfully produced and carefully stashed items children invested *future desires* (Moss and Richter 2010 p. 165), reflecting their group identification as gift makers and gift givers with collectively negotiated levels of mastery.

8.2.2. Gender, Place, Space and Identities of Participation

Children's interest in making cultural artefacts to bring home (particularly for girls in this setting) was confirmed by several parents interviewed. Kevin observed of Monica(e) 'She loves for me to bring stuff to work' (that she had made). He recounted how he recorded these gifts as screen savers on his computer. These items acted as an emotional link between himself and his daughter when work commitments resulted in his temporary absences from home. Julie discussed that for Marie and her siblings 'We have got a kitchen full of art, it is great ' and Claire (Mark's mother) referred to the family 'art wall' which she described, with a smile, as 'nothing classy, but great fun'. These interview answers reflected back children's pride in the realisation that their meaning making efforts were understood and valued within their close relationships (Trevarthan 2002). Validation of these artefacts in the home appeared to confirm children's sense of competence and increasing expertise in their pre-school roles and identities. Such a view fits with Wenger's (2008) understanding that our participatory identities can extend within and across communities of practice. Over time, this collective interest in making presents, lead by the Crafty Girls extended into various places and spaces such as the Home Corner.

Following my absence for a day, the teachers drew my attention to the Home Corner, where the Crafty Girls lead by Helen(e) and Marie(k) had decided to make decorations for

pretend Christmas/Halloween. The play theme quickly evolved to include making and wrapping presents. In this practice, the girls appeared to be re-creating experiences from home (personal), identifying themselves as carers and nurturers who decorated homes and bestowed or (in Marian's(n) case) received presents (interpersonal). Interestingly these dispositions applied whether they enacted male or female roles. At one point, Marian(n) was the 'Dad 'and guided me to be 'the child' giving her a present. The boys were only allowed peripheral subservient roles (as *dogs* or *puppies*) in this process. On a community/cultural level, children were reflecting historically mediated themes of the importance of rites, rituals, and some traditional celebratory festivals (Van Gennep 1960). The girls were also enacting roles (reflecting ideas about gender) embedded in their collective creative interpretation of culture (Corsaro 1992).

Empirical research by Hislam (2007) indicated the possibility of challenging children's gender dominance of play spaces by strategies such as re-naming the space or providing new props to generate new play roles and possibilities. Notably, the recurring theme of flight in this setting persistently attracted the attention of both girls and boys in the transformative space of the Home Corner. A reflexive look at my field notes and snapshot observations revealed that the prop of the re-cycled keyboard invariably acted as the trigger to convert the Home Corner in to an *aeroplane.* Novice players initial peripheral roles (usually as passengers) in these flights (personal) become more empowered over time. Children adopted roles of pilots, flight attendants or changed the play direction via fluid switches in roles and identities (Vignette 16, p. 275). In the end of year pre-school book, some of these snapshot flights of fancy were recalled. Special mention was given to one of the children who had left the pre-school and relocated with his family. Marian(n) piloted one imaginary flight, improvising a means for herself and her peers to play out the *longed for* (Vygotsky 1978) as she decided to' fly away' to visit their much loved and missed friend.

Within days the interest in transforming the Home Corner spilled upwards into the Resting Loft as the Crafty Girls continued to decorate and negotiate (rather than dominate) the use of this additional space. This process was effected by offering other children (boys and

girls) adornments (usually accepted) for their play houses. Interestingly, the confined space of the Resting Loft (smaller than the Home Corner) appeared to require collective transitions in thinking. This afforded a type of *mutuality* (Wenger 2008) to occur that enabled continuity of the various interacting play themes. In Phase 2, the Resting Loft space appeared to be shared equally by boys and girls. Contrastingly, in Phase 1 of this study boys and girls (in gender groups) tended to make bids for dominance of the Resting Loft and girls (similarly to this pre-school year) tended to dominate the Home Corner.

8.2.3. Negotiation within the Place and Space of the Resting Loft

The Resting Loft itself was quite a confined physical space (particularly for adults), suggesting that moving to this space required collective transitions in thinking in order to negotiate the individual and group interests of all participants. On a community/cultural level, the implicit understanding of the Resting Loft as a place for quiet restful play belied the hive of activity that regularly went on there. It was often the scene for making houses and mini shops of various kinds (for individuals, pairs or groups). These activities occurred in and around practices of adults (one at a time) reading, talking to, or assisting children's house building endeavours. Adults were appropriated here as part of the comfort that children (particularly the youngest) sought. Novice pre-schoolers snuggled up to be read to in this space and in the process appeared to be recreating familiar comforting routines from the home habitus (Moss and Richter 2010).

The number of children in the loft waxed and waned as children arrived, left, and conversed in pairs and groups, all the while making meaning as they navigated this place and space. Various play props (plastic food, dress up clothes, small cars and trucks, books etc.) were transported here, though books and soft mats were the only materials explicitly allowed. The latter practice was in keeping with the pedagogic discourse that assigned this as a place for reading and rest. On one occasion Rory(n) asked me to read to him in the Resting Loft, a practice approved by the implicit rules of participation in this place (community/cultural). This request contrasted with Rory’s typical appropriation of this place for action hero or gun play (Vignette 7. p. 154).

In order to sustain the play, Rory(n) had to adapt to and express sensitivity to personal agendas other than his own (Bruce 2004). My questions about Rory's new book took an unexpected turn as he eagerly identified himself as a *bookman* in which he shared an inter-personal understanding from previous play (in the Resting Loft) with Sam(n):

Vignette 10 - The Bookmen
(May 2012)

Rory:	*I know how to buy books now.*
Frances:	*You know how to buy books now, how do you buy books now?*
Rory*:*	*Well I am a bookman!*
Frances:	*You're a bookman?*
Sam*:*	*I am a bookman as well.*

Rory communicated a sense of identity and belonging (Brostrom 2002), striking a chord with the entrepreneurial Sam(n). Rory communicated the interpersonal understanding of *Bookmen* as buyers and sellers with associated expertise and knowledge of books. This mutual dispositional interest in and value in books expressed a type of *learning to learn* process (Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson 2004) reflecting the home habitus, the secondary habitus of preschool as well as hinting at the anticipation of future participatory identities. This and the forthcoming samples explore how transition to and participation in the place and space of the Resting Loft required all participants individually, and collectively, to negotiate the confines of its space.

Children regularly constructed pockets of different and overlapping play interests supported by their constructions of *houses* and *shops*. On another occasion, a smiling Mark(k) joined in the popular house making activity and snuggled himself into his own *house* constructed from mats. I seized the opportunity to ask about the house which appeared to be motivating Mark's interest.

Vignette 11 - Soccer Tales

(June 2012)

Frances:	*Do you want to tell me about your house?*
Mark:	*I don't know really.*
Frances:	N*ot really? No?((Mark shakes his head),Okay you don't have to if you don't want to.*
Mark:	*Well I know something.*
Frances:	*What do you know?*
Mark:	*Ah, this is actually something bad.*
Frances:	*Something bad?*
Mark:	*You know, you know the best player he is Messi and he is Barcelona.*
Frances:	*The best place for what?*
Mark:	*Barcelona is the best team, and Messi is the best player and he is with Barcelona.*
Frances:	*Oh, Barcelona is the best team, Barcelona yeah?(Mark nods)*
Mark:	*Barcelona, and they actually got knocked out by a different team.*
Frances:	*Were you disappointed?*
Mark:	*Knocked out (Mark's eyes widen),*
Frances:	*Yes*
Mark:	*They got knocked out by a different team*
Frances:	*Did they?*
Mark:	*Yes*
Frances:	*You really like soccer don't you Mark?*

My questioning (as often occurred during data production) did not elicit the anticipated response. On a personal level, Mark preferred to share his intense interest in premier league soccer. My genuinely novice understanding of soccer surfaced (I did not initially comprehend that *Messi* was an actual footballer). When I asked Mark if he was disappointed about his news he responded with a wide eyed repetition of his statement *knocked out* communicating the seriousness of the situation (interpersonal). In our ongoing conversation, Mark displayed uncharacteristic patience with my lack of knowledge whilst simultaneously guiding me to new understandings. He did this by communicating his personal expertise (Rogoff 1990) and sense of identity and belonging with a Community of Practice stretching beyond pre-school (fans of Premier League soccer). On a community/cultural level, Mark acknowledged my novice role and invited me to share in his enthusiastic interest and expert knowledge. In the past, Mark might have shown

frustration at others lack of understanding of his point of view. Mark's later mention of a *soccer book* (at home) suggested that his dispositional interest in soccer and acquisition of knowledge on this subject was supported in his home habitus. Mark had also found space to negotiate this interest in pre-school (secondary habitus). As the pre-school year drew to a close, the above participant observations suggested that breakdown in communications in the Resting Loft (noted in Phase 1) had become infrequent and no longer appeared to be gender related.

The theme of gender also arose in relation to adult participatory roles in pre-school. The traditionally female role and status of the early years professional in Ireland and elsewhere (Chapter 2) gave rise to questions on male participation and perceptions on the qualifications (including qualities) required to participate as an early years carer and educator.

8.3. Reification and the ECCE Professional - Gender and Other Matters

The question regarding male participation in ECCE was greeted with surprise and initial hesitation by most of the parents and to a lesser extent the teachers interviewed. Nine out of the ten parents responded that they had *never really thought about it* until questioned. On reflection, seven out of ten parents welcomed the idea of male pre-school teachers though the other interviewees felt most men would lack qualities such as *patience* or *understanding* they associated with such a role. The teachers in the setting reflected views that they would value having more men working as professionals in the early years, whilst acknowledging that parents for various reasons might not be so accepting. Lisa recalled having had a certain 'bias' in this regard and experiencing a transition in her thinking on working with a male colleague in a pre-school. She went on to reflect that in the pre-school role 'you have to be a bit of a Mammy.' Latterly Lisa had come to believe that such a nurturing role might develop from a natural pre-disposition but not one necessarily defined by ones gender. Such a view fits with the perspectives of Lave and Wenger (1991) that a natural predisposition can be enhanced or developed through participation in a Community of Practice.

Six out of ten parents interviewed stressed suitability for the role of pre-school teacher in terms of personality. Orla expressed it as ‘personality is key'. Four (out of ten) parents emphasised theoretical and pedagogical aspects of the role:

> *Yes people can be fantastic with kids but they might not have the understanding of the educational aspect behind things, so that would be hugely important to me (Sarah).*

Two parents out of the ten interviewees challenged (but did not rule out) the need for paper qualifications:

> *I do think you need to have an understanding of children obviously... I think it helps if you have children of your own (Julie).*

For some parents, there was a suggestion that the teacher role may have been viewed as competing with or (for adults who have children) a natural extension of the parenting role and presumably the skills that such experience might generate. Two parents referenced the importance of qualifications to ensuring *safety* for children or what one parent referred to as a *vetting process* rather than attributing any significance in terms of pedagogic expertise. In this perspective, the image of the vulnerable child in need of protection was foregrounded.

All three of the teachers interviewed had been educated to third level and among them exhibited a wide range of life skills and experiences influencing children's range of participatory experiences in Rainbow Road. However, Start Strong (2013) advise that countrywide only 76 % of staff in ECCE in Ireland have attained the basic FETAC 5 qualification or a higher qualification. Start Strong (2012, p.6) state:

> *Both experiences in the home and early care and education outside the home are critical in shaping children's learning. Children's early years are in effect the first stage of the education system though in Ireland it’s by far the least resourced stage.*

In determining quality in ECCE new understandings acknowledge that all stakeholders including children and parents contribute to the process and have a right to be heard in any inclusive environment (Clark and Moss 2001, Carr 2001, Rinaldi 2004). Latterly, such understandings have shaped ideas about assessment linked to pedagogies of relationships (discussed in Chapter 2). However, the potential within such approaches has also been identified with structural issues (reification) such as time, including provision of paid non contact time for early years staff to plan, reflect, and experience continuous professional development to meet with the changing needs of their communities. The recurring theme of time and timing (Chapter 4) also emerged as significant in terms of the methodology applied in this study. It soon became apparent that the data gathering for the end of year pre-school book would not have been feasible in my adoption of a teacher role during two five week sessions (Phase 2) in the setting. In terms of quality, staff in ECCE in Ireland are currently constrained by a lack of resources including time to meet with the daily challenges of planning, recording of observations, discussion and reflective practice. Another crucial aspect of quality involves the time and resources to engage parents participation in order to link children's home and pre-school experiences. Such features of everyday practice and the time and resources (including ongoing professional development) required for their implementation are prerequisites for the full implementation of Aistear and Síolta.

Start Strong have also been critical of the lack of investment in rolling out the frameworks for early learning. At the time of the study, none of the teachers had received any specific training in either framework. It is perhaps not surprising then that Leona spoke of Aistear and Síolta in terms of *certain adjustments to deal with the requirements (of both frameworks).* In this, there is a sense of compliance rather than a relationship of valued and ongoing support to pedagogy and practice. Leona also stated that prior to the introduction of the pre-school scheme Rainbow Road already had 'a good system of policy and practices' based on previous experiences (her own and other teachers) gathered over the years. All three teachers were able to identify changes to practices (personal) based on what *wasn't working,* associated with times when children collectively lacked interest or involvement. The teachers appeared to share an interpersonal understanding that attributed

transitions in practice over the years to the ability of more recent groups of children to concentrate for longer periods of time rather than to the evolution of practices (sometimes in collaboration with the children) that facilitated this. When I reminded them of aspects of the group Circle Time practices where the children had brought about their own innovations (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7) Leona, Lisa and Sue narrated stories of pre-school interactions (especially Circle Time interactions) that became richer and more long lasting over time. The Froebelian based democratic practice of Circle Time carries an historically and culturally embedded understanding that such practice encourages cohesiveness within the community (Henniger 1999).

The following section focuses on children's eagerness to share their repertoires of music, song and related creative improvisations (for the pre-school book) during daily Circle Time routines in Rainbow Road. Documentation as a tool for assessment and quality improvement engaging the various stakeholders in ECCE, including children themselves, was discussed in Chapter 2. Pedagogical documentation can act as a means to support ongoing planning and evaluation of everyday practice and can also facilitate the process of parental engagement in ECCE settings (Katz and Chard 1996, Carr 2001, Rinaldi 2004). In Phase I and Phase II, production of the collaborative pre-school book was enabled by my volunteer extra pair of hands role.

8.4. Circle Time – Shaping and Being Shaped within Reified Routines

In Rainbow Road, Circle Time acted as the forum for various interactive songs, games and stories as well as the introduction of the daily structured activities which followed. It also acted as the space where newcomers and visitors to the setting were introduced, where children shared their news from home and where rites of passage such as birthdays, or the birth of a new sibling were discussed and acknowledged (Van Gennep 1960). Experienced pre-schoolers such as Mark(k) confidently lead participation. Mark often volunteered to sing. On a personal level Mark displayed confidence and mastery as he sang and remembered all of the words, tune and rhythm of pop songs that he listened to on the way to pre-school (his mother confirmed this). Eileen(n) expressed a similar confidence and competence by singing and recalling all of the letters of the alphabet song. John(e) overcome initial shyness to sing favourite songs such as 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' (but

declined my request to record his singing). Marie (k), Monica(e) and Helen(e) rarely volunteered to sing alone but joined in enthusiastically during group interactive songs and rhymes (LPP). Robbie(e) and Niall(n) tended to lead the child initiated practice of making up songs on themes that interested them such as agricultural machinery (Niall (n)) or in Robbie's(e) case dinosaur themes. Marian(n) initiated another type of song practice, that of adapting and changing the words and actions of songs already popular in pre-school. As well as absorbing and creatively reproducing these various modes of song interaction (Corsaro 1990), children learned to turn take during these daily adult led events (interpersonal).

On a personal level, I took my cue from children's requests to record or play back episodes (flexible participant observer role). In terms of agency and participatory identities, what appeared to matter was the opportunity for all children to participate (from novice to experienced levels). Teachers facilitated this process by affording children opportunities to bring ideas back and forth from the home habitus and into other communities of practice (*constellations*) such as soccer training, or neighbourhood play (Wenger 2008). Daily structured activities were also introduced during morning Circle Time. This took the form of guided participation (by teachers) within traditional expert to novice apprenticeship practices (Rogoff 1990). Children were expected to grow in confidence, competence and persistence (over time) at the finer details of these pre-planned tasks.

8.5. 'Guided Participation' and 'Apprenticeship' in Thinking

Leona was masterful (personal disposition) at engaging children's interest in daily structured activities, not least because of her regular introduction of an element of surprise. In one example, children commenced painting and in the process revealed the *surprise* consisting of spider webs (drawn in wax and not visible until painted) hinted at in Leona's introduction of the morning structured activity.

Interest and involvement level for structured activities varied from day to day and from child to child. Interest in the above activity was high as children discussed shared understandings about the web, its link to spiders or for the Crafty Girls, its connectedness and usefulness for their *pretend Halloween* play theme (interpersonal). The implicit rule

and expectation that children would participate in group structured times such as this allowed for different participatory levels (pedagogic discourse). The teachers shared an interpersonal understanding that required children to participate in group routines and activities at particular times. These daily routines encompassed listening, turn taking, following instructions and development of the type of fine motor skills associated with anticipated literacy practices in formal school. On a community/cultural level group interactions (circle times, structured arts and crafts and cookery activities) were viewed by the teachers as preparation or what elsewhere has been referred to as priming (Corsaro and Molinari 2000) for the more formal context of primary school. It was accepted by teachers that some of the more novice children would finish quickly, remove their aprons and return to some other choice of play. However, teachers expressed concern about *readiness for school* if or when children (particularly experienced pre-schoolers) lacked concentration or an ability to turn take, or resisted or displayed a lack of persistence in task completion. Children's interest and involvement levels varied from day to day and in accordance with individual dispositional interests. Many children showed signs of increasing mastery and persistence at completing tasks over time (Laevers 2004, Rogoff 1990). For a small number of children the anticipated increased participation and mastery during structured activities failed to occur or occurred sporadically yet interestingly could manifest in other circumstances.

Children in the setting, (particularly boys) also engaged in various shared construction enterprises (interpersonal) which unlike the arts and crafts materials were not so easily stored (in their evolving forms) to save and return to later. Neither were such constructions or the materials used to construct them usually available for use outside of the pre-school context. Play materials, including children's constructions of *beehives, factories, hotels, high rise car parks, farms,* to name but a few, were tidied away daily to create space for morning Circle Time or in preparation for the transition outdoors. On a personal level, I felt a tension between my teacher role and pleas from children such as *but I won't remember how to make it tomorrow.* This desire for continuity occurred in the contexts of children's *interpretive reproduction* of their peer culture:

> *The term also implies that children, by their very participation in society, are constrained by the existing social structure and by social reproduction (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, p. 17).*

Teacher led strategies (applying technologies) such as photographing children's treasured constructions to preserve a visual memory, went some way towards meeting children's desire for continuity at such times of transition. An adaptive strategy of experienced pre-schoolers was the placement of treasured constructions (made from Lego, Mobilo etc.) that they did not wish to dismantle (during transition to clean up times) on the radiator or window ledge of the office. Teachers responded positively and supported this practice. Latterly, children would ask me to photograph such artefacts for the pre-schoolbook. A delighted Robbie(e) remarked 'now my Mam will see my scorpion' (Personal).

8.5.1. Child Initiated Activities and Apprenticeship in Thinking

Robbie(e) was one of several children who frequently resisted participation or adopted avoidance strategies during structured activities. In Robbie's case there were indicators of what Dweck (2000) describes as *performance orientation* during structured activities, as Robbie appeared unsatisfied with his own efforts. Robbie also regularly insisted 'but I can't do it' appearing to tire easily with any structured activities requiring fine motor skills. In contrast, Robbie's self-initiated construction work during free play was characterised by his deep interest and involvement (Laevers 2004). Over time, Robbie attained increasing levels of mastery (Rogoff 1990) or what Dweck (2000) describes as a *learning* orientation incorporating (in this example) refinement of hand-eye co-ordination and strengthening of fine motor skills. Robbie also displayed an ability to imaginatively recreate cultural artefacts that engaged his interest and involvement and also generated collaborative meaning making with his peers.

When I began (with Robbie's permission) to document these artefacts for the pre-school book, his expert knowledge was conveyed in both his vocabulary and technical know how. It emerged from our discussions that much of this knowledge came from Robbie's television viewing (external cultural influences) of various children's programmes outside of school (confirmed in interview with his mother). Robbie's interest, involvement and

ability to concentrate in self-initiated construction work was not in doubt. However, what had largely gone unremarked upon by teachers (myself included) was the apprenticeship type activities (Rogoff 1990) emanating from Robbie's leadership of the Mobilo play. Data production for the pre-school book drew my attention (personal) to children's (mostly boys) re-creation of these artefacts ('Scorpions, Rhinos, armadillos') down to the last detail, without any direct instruction from Robbie. When I myself asked for instruction (to construct what Robbie described as 'a scorpion with pincers and a tail with a sting') he initially dismissed my request with the response 'just watch' (as the other apprentices appeared to have done). This LPP had developed over time as had the covert practice of scorpion and rhino battles (usually between the boys). Documentation (for the pre-school book) also drew attention to children's practice of preserving these artefacts on the office window ledge (noted earlier). On further reflection, it became clear that these artefacts were valued objects of shared interpersonal meaning.

Pretend fighting with various objects (Mobilo constructions, toy cars or trucks, plastic animals) was a regular occurrence amongst the boys which was usually tacitly ignored by the teachers. In order to sustain this type of play fighting and avoid adult sanction, the children involved needed to regulate their noise level and avoid causing actual physical hurt (Clerkin 2012). The more experienced children including Robbie(e), Mark(k) and the other Action Boys became particularly adept at exercising constraint within their various pretend battles. What matters about the participatory contrasts highlighted above is that competence and confidence and the ability to self- regulate in one area does not necessarily translate as currency in another.

Interestingly, parents interviewed (and during informal conversations with other parents) often remarked that children had little to say about their pre-school day, something I myself observed as a parent, eager to hear about my children's experiences in pre-school (community/cultural). However, children do not necessarily feel willing or able to share such experiences at the times or in ways (usually verbal) we adults may anticipate. This is a point I was regularly reminded of at this data production stage of research. My requests to take photographs were sometimes met with *no not yet*, *wait until I am ready.* My initial

eagerness to ask questions was kept in check as I was guided to participate in children's growing mastery in the production of various artefacts, or to listen to their narrative accounts of participation (Rogoff 1990). Sometimes there was a shift in power relations as my adult expertise of cutting, gluing or putting something *up high for later* was called upon. Data production of this type differs from the concept of data gathering in that it infers a level of reciprocity in meaning making and a willingness for all participants to share power in the process (Warming 2005, Wenger 2008). One moment of spontaneous reciprocal meaning making was captured when Danny(n) playfully called out my name and *recorded* my image on his Lego camcorder (designed and constructed by Danny). I responded in kind, capturing his image on my (shop bought) digital camera. Children such as Danny(n) in this study revealed the *longed for (*Vygotsky 1978) as they appropriated or adapted available resources in playful ways. Bananas and other fruit become impromptu mobile phones, a toy oven becomes a *ticket machine* and a keyboard served as the *flight controls for a jumbo jet*. Children had been known to sneak into the (implicitly adult) office space and play with the computer keyboard. Access to computer technology was not (at time of this research study) part of the pre-school curricular programme in Rainbow Road. However, recycled play props such as old mobile phones (donated by parents) regularly evidenced in children's own creative improvisations and transformative play identities. Given children's interest and appropriation of technology in their cultural worlds; parent and teacher views on the availability of computer technology in pre-school were sought through the interview data:

8.6. Computer Technology and Pre-school Practice – a Natural Progression?

Six of the ten parents expressed value in the idea of technology as part of the pre-school programme. The parents in favour all emphasised social and cultural expectations where computer literacy has become a norm of participating fully in western society. A majority of the parents also reflected an awareness of risk factors and added a cautionary proviso that children not have unlimited or indiscriminate access to computers: 'Yeah I am all for it, obviously a controlled one '(environment) (Claire). In this, there was an inference as well as confidence that teachers would be discriminating in guiding children’s computer access and usage in pre-school. For all of the parents interviewed their children had access to

computer technology (in varying degrees in the home). For the parents who did not feel computer technology had a place in pre-school the types of reasons given included:

> *Communication (face to face) is minimised by use of computers and I feel it would be a shame to bring it in to pre-school for that reason (Pamela).*

> *I would think pre-school is a little young, but that is just my take...but I just like them to be out messing with sand digging holes you know and happy (Una).*

The sense that computer technology may exploit children (as consumers of culture) and isolate children from social engagement was conveyed. A discourse of the *natural* emerged. Sometimes this was associated with parents own childhood memories of more physical and outdoor play and learning spaces. Another parent reflected on his own transition in thinking in relation to his child's access to computer technology, following a discussion with an old friend:

> *...he said 'you communicated by telephone, your parents communicated by letter, that's what these kids are communicating with, its electronics or they will be, and if you deprive them of that, that is just communication' (Joe).*

There is a suggestion here that what is viewed as natural (reified) and necessary for good communication may be subject to change cross generationally but also through every day discussions. Leona (teacher/manager) suggested that whether children need access to computer technology in pre-school was *debatable* and based on her own theoretical background and experiences (at the time of the study) she would not have been in favour. Sue (teacher) was strongly opposed to computer technology in pre-school which she viewed as 'limiting children's imaginations'. Lisa (teacher) who in Prensky's terms (2001) was the only teacher young enough to qualify as a *digital native* (has grown up with computer technology) was a little less certain:

> *I don't think there is a need for it at the moment, I think they are getting enough stimulation ... but I suppose you have to adapt to changing times as well.*

In Chapter 6, I observed Lisa's strategy of taking a short recording on her IPhone to reassure a parent that a child who was upset at her mother's departure was now engrossed in construction play. This response by Lisa was indicative of the ease with which technology formed part of her own participatory repertoire (Carr 2001) in pre-school. Interestingly, though six out of ten parents expressed a value in children interacting with computer technology in pre-school, the lack of access in Rainbow Road did not deter them from sending their children here. This may be related to the fact that all of these children (in varying degrees) had access to computer technology at home (transitions capital). However, within and across communities of pre-school practice, children's access to computer technology varies as does adult expertise informing their participation. The theoretical approach in production of the pre-school book infers a whole range of methods and technologies (photography, audio recordings etc.) can be applied to access children's cultural worlds of meaning.

During documentation for the pre-school book, one recurring theme motivating children's individual and collective interests was that of flight (for boys and girls). This theme has been a fascination of mankind for millennia and formed a common thread of interest across the children's self-initiated play choices in this setting. The following section tracks some of the transitions in thinking that occurred as children collectively developed this theme within their relationships (with peers and adults) in the production of related cultural artefacts.

8.7. Flights of Fancy – Transcending Time, Space and Gender Boundaries

As children arrived or left Rainbow Road daily, they regularly encountered construction workers, their machinery and sometimes farm workers with tractors or combine harvesters. These images of adult working life (community/cultural) frequently recurred and were creatively and interpretively reproduced (Corsaro 1992, 2008) in children's play themes and cultural artefacts. For Sam(n), his Lego house (personal) appeared to combine the secure base of his home relationships within the playful possibility to 'fly where you like and dig your own swimming pool.' In this, Sam(n) shared with his peers an imaginative interpersonal understanding of the transformative potential of flight.

Helen's(e) personal interest in making 'a kite to fly outside ' became a theme of evolving collaborative interest, crossing gender boundaries, and continuing to engage children's participation to the very end of the pre-school year. John(n) was the first of the boys to follow Helen's(e) lead in making a Kite. John was also as eager as Helen to explore the kite's properties outdoors and seek solutions to the problems of broken strings, or materials too fragile to sustain flight. As a novice child, John apprenticed himself to Helen's experienced pre-school role (Rogoff 1990). However, in the process of LPP John(n) brought his own innovative approach to progress and enrich the collaborative kite making process (Lave and Wenger 1991). As interest in mastery of the kite making process grew (May to June 2012), other children (novice and experienced) joined in and diamond and other shapes with frames (teacher suggestion) of various materials and strengths were experimented with. Children's collaborative creative reproductions spilled over from the arts and crafts table into other play interests indoors and outdoors. After my one day absence Sue (teacher) drew my attention to children's production of 'A handle to stop the kite string blowing away.' This creative embellishment (Corsaro 1998) became a ubiquitous part of various child produced artefacts (interpersonal meaning making). Even greeting cards to bring home were usefully held (handbag style) by a woollen handle. These community/cultural practices appeared rapidly, and were soon so taken for granted it was difficult (if not actually present or directly involved) to locate the thoughts or problems that negotiated these creative improvisations. Wenger (2008) relates this *knowing* in practice to various forms of expert/novice apprenticeship. In this type of learning, LPP results in novice participants acquiring mastery (over time) through increasing levels of participation with the more experienced members of their communities.

Similarly to Lave and Wenger's research findings (1991), this process of community/cultural *knowing* in and through practice occurred without necessarily involving many or indeed any formal instructions. Through increasing participation in everyday practices, participants formed an intuitive understanding of what looked and felt right. Children in this study responded to each other's creative innovations and intuitions such as John's awareness that a shorter string would assist the kite to fly. Teachers enabled

this process by providing the materials, time and levels of expertise at particular points, where children encountered difficulties beyond their present abilities (working in the ZPD).

Examples of transitions in thinking and challenges to the reified within the structural confines of the various places and spaces of the pre-school have been identified. It is proposed that the daily transition outdoors similarly acted as a catalyst or tool for transitions in thinking as children and adults experienced the less confining space (physically, vocally and emotionally) of the outdoors. Eileen(n) observed, 'when we scream outside it is because we are happy, we are just happy.' In Rainbow Road, children's access to the place and space of the outdoors was subject to adult routines and timetables (reification) and the requirement that outdoor wellingtons and waterproofs be worn when necessary. The latter requirement ensured that children rarely experienced a morning without outdoor play experiences. From May onwards the teachers responded to children's interest and involvement in outdoor play, as well as specific requests (usually negotiated by experienced pre-schoolers) to remain outdoors for longer periods of time.

8.8. The Transition Outdoors and Fluid Identities of Participation

Spring and themes of growth and renewal evidenced in Circle Time stories, and songs and became particularly exciting for the children in the context of the garden. On one occasion Robbie(e) drew the attention of an excited crowd of children as he shrieked 'Look the baby plants are being born' in response to the sighting of new green shoots. Throughout the year, planting, digging and raking tools were available (including child sized versions). Teachers modelled and encouraged children's engagement in sowing, planting and weeding activities outdoors (community/cultural). Links between the indoors and outdoors were enhanced when vegetables and fruit from the garden were used in cooking activities, or sunflowers were cut, gathered and placed in a vase indoors (guided participation, apprenticeship). In the final term the theme of *buried treasure* (a collective play theme in Phase 1) recurred and began to excite new play possibilities for the children. On one occasion Marie invited me to join her to *dig for treasure*.

Vignette 12 - Buried Treasure
(June 2012)

Marie: *We will return it (the treasure) to a pirate called, called Jake.*
Frances: *Oh Jake, yeah, is he a good pirate?*
Marie: *Yes.*
Frances: *Good.*
Marie: *He is very good he returns stuff.*
Frances: *He returns stuff does he?*
Marie: *Mm hmm, and buries it for people.*
Frances: *And he buries it for people?*
Marie: *They find it returned.*
Frances: *That sounds fun.*
Marie**:** *It's cos he wants to make it fun for people.*
Frances: *That's a good idea.*

Marie's narrative evokes a treasure rich in symbolic value (personal). For Marie(k) *treasure* is located in the process of creating *fun* rather than the product itself. Relationships matter to Marie and in this short dialogue she communicated the heart connection she both sought and generated in this outdoor play (interpersonal). On a community/cultural level teachers picked up on the recurring theme of *buried treasure* from children's play and play narratives. Children collectively responded to the challenge of the teacher directed *find the treasure* game (involved searching for a small plastic treasure chest). Significantly the treasure chest did not contain any material *treasure*. Nonetheless children's interest and search for fun continued to engage their collaborative and exuberant physical and vocal responses to the outdoor space. During this data production stage (for the pre-school book - May to June 2012), I became aware of another emergent play theme of *outer Space.* In this collaborative play theme the climbing frame and slide acted as a kind of conduit between the earth and the children's *space ship* which had just flown in from outer space.

Vignette 13 - Space the Final Frontier...

(June 2012)

It is *outside time*, I stand by Liam(n), Valerie(n), Robbie(e), Sean (n2), Rory(n) who are playing on the wooden platform that leads to the slide.

Frances:	*So you were in space Liam?*
Liam:	*yep*
Sean:	*and I am*
Frances:	*and you are too Sean*
Valerie:	*and I was*
Frances:	*and you were Valerie (Sean and Valerie descend the slide)*
Liam:	*We are landed in Earth, let's go down to the aliens*
Frances:	*You are going down to the aliens?*
Liam:	*This is called the aliens, the space star slide, when you're landing at space and landing at...(the rest not heard as Liam launches himself down the slide).*
Frances:	*Right, Robbie are you going down to earth?*
Robbie:	*Ah...I got spider powers*
Frances:	*You've got spider powers?*
Sean:	*(calls from bottom of the slide)*
	We are maybe in a swimming pool space.
Rory:	*(also calls from bottom of slide)*
	You try and kill him (points at Robbie).

On a personal level, Liam(n) directed much of the play. He also helpfully leaned towards my microphone to communicate what was happening before being overtaken by the excitement and action of participation. On an interpersonal level, Sean (n2),Valerie (n) and Robbie(e) appeared to share Liam's expanded view of the play space. Robbie(e) wove in the recurring play theme of superpowers (interpersonal understanding) and later on dangled upside down spider like from the bar on the side of the *spaceship*. Sean(n2) tentatively tried to introduce the idea of a 'swimming pool space' while Rory(n) attempted to revive interest in the more well-known (particularly amongst the boys) play-fighting theme of ridding the play world of 'baddies'. On a community/cultural level, this type of play may have been viewed by teachers as *risky* or problematic earlier in the year. Latterly, more experienced children lead the play adopting strategies that deflected adult intervention (less effective indoors) by reminding us that fighting, shooting etc. was *just pretend*. Less experienced children were becoming more adept at self-regulation and learning the implicit rules of participation including how to potentially influence the

direction of the play. For my own part, my novice participatory role was afforded by the children as I suspended disbelief and responded to their in the moment narratives. Collectively the children negotiated meaning, affording different levels of participation (novice to expert) that enabled and sustained their various play themes.

The joy, exuberance and general lack of constraint children experienced and valued in their outdoor play was echoed in the recent nationwide study on what matters to children about their early years experiences (Start Strong 2011). Data analysis highlights the opportunities for children to develop and hone their participatory repertoires outdoors. Even the more expansive physical experience of the outdoor spaces requires levels of self-regulation in order to sustain and extend play. The explicit rules of group games which teachers introduced and participated in (many recalled and reproduced from our own childhoods) helped novice children gain in confidence as they clung to an adult hand in *hide and seek* and various chase games. The physical location of the pre-school close to a busy town centre (shops, restaurants, banks, post office, churches, schools, parks and playgrounds) yet simultaneously close to surrounding countryside and farming locations made for an interesting flow of traffic. This was reflected in children's evolving play themes and cultural artefacts (indoors and outdoors).

As the pre-school year drew to a close, the parents and teachers interviewed were all anticipating and sharing in the children's excitement about the next big transition to primary school. As well as expressing reasons why children were ready and prepared for this transition, some themes of concern about children's readiness recurred.

8.9. Transition to 'School Child' – Anticipating New Identities

Parents interviewed were asked if they had noticed any differences over the year (or longer in some cases, for more experienced pre-schoolers) over what mattered or seemed important to their children about pre-school. Seven out of the ten parents noticed specific things. An emergent theme from these responses was social interactions, including children's burgeoning friendships. Friendship influences on children's play interactions were also mentioned, children themselves had begun to question which friends would be going with them to their new schools. After school talks between parents and children

sometimes related to children's emotional responses to what they viewed as fair or unfair in their daily pre-school interactions. Claire recounted that earlier in the year her child struggled to cope with the transition from novice to experienced pre-schooler and in his own words 'everyone expects me to know all the rules cos I am a bigger boy'. Claire recognised transitions in her son's coping strategies in moments of crisis 'Whereas, now he will still storm off at times but the 'sorry' will come and the acknowledgement that 'yeah I was too rough'. These interpersonal interactions in the home habitus supplemented by communication with the pre-school appeared to help children form coping strategies within their pre-school (and out of pre-school) identities of participation. One child was described by a parent as:

> *I feel he is ready he is definitely, am, he is mentally and emotionally ready' … I think he could be a little overawed and everything with the size of older kids in and out you know (Joe).*

Joe voiced an understanding of the new status children would experience (physically and emotionally) in moving from a position of older experienced child in *play school* to younger novice members as they *cross boundaries* (Brostrom 2002) into the primary school classroom. Another parent who viewed age five as a good age to start school also expressed concern about the physical space of primary school particularly the outdoors. Una stated 'there's a lot of new faces, strange faces, the playground area is where some children could find that transition more hard'. While other parents interviewed did not express this concern, research by O'Kane (2007) indicates that the school yard can be an area of considerable stress for young children in Ireland during their transition and ongoing experiences in primary school. This she relates to the comparative size of the school yards (in relation to most pre-school outdoor play areas) as well as difficulties in supervising larger numbers of children of different ages. Most parents emphasised that children were ready for and were already expressing interest (through play at home including computer games) in new academic challenges. This feeling that the children were ready for new challenges or in danger of becoming bored at the end of the pre-school year was expressed by several parents and also by Leona at the end of Phase 1 (Chapter 6) of the study. Leona

spoke in terms of children having gotten 'what they need ' from pre-school suggesting they had developed social and emotional competencies and were ready to take on new roles and experiences. Four of the five parents of children with older siblings spoke of their children's interest in doing *homework*. In each case the parents had responded to this interest by manufacturing playful ways to include these children in homework sessions with older siblings. Parents also reported children's exposure to and interest in television programmes and computer technology incorporating literacy, numeracy and fine motor skills. Studies by Corsaro and Molinari (2000) and Dockett and Perry (2002) appear to confirm children's interest and desire to rehearse and enact new skills associated with or anticipated in their new school child roles.

However, a concern for most parents interviewed related to the expectations about their child being one of many in a classroom with a pupil teacher ratio of as much as 1:30. Some parents specifically expressed concern about the anticipated need for children to have to sit for long periods of time at desks. Such images run counter to the view of the active playful child promoted in Aistear and Síolta and also the Primary School Curriculum (Chapter 2). Sarah, who viewed her child as an independent thinker and confident and competent learner said 'I just wonder how she will find sitting down in the seat, at the desk, I have a funny feeling that she might be one of the ones getting up a lot'. Sarah's response reflected an intuition that understandings of children's competence and independence in one location might be interpreted differently in another context, a view that transitions literature in Ireland and elsewhere seems to confirm (Dunlop 2003a, Hendy and Whitbread 2000, O'Kane 2007). Parents in this largely middle class, group appeared to value and prioritise their children's education with most having sufficient transitions capital (supplemented by the pre-school scheme) to delay their children's start in school until age 4 ½ years or older (most chose to do so). Despite understandings of pre-school as a preparation for or *natural progression* unto formal school, both parents and teachers in the setting acknowledged some concerns about children's *readiness* to adapt and cope with the new demands of school child.

8.10. Conclusion

The question posed at the beginning of this Chapter asks *How does the community cope, adapt and transform itself over time, to meet community/cultural, interpersonal and personal needs?* In the interview data parents and teachers reflected a view of pre-school as a *natural progression* (from home) that prepares children for formal school, though traditionally this was not the case in Ireland. Arguably pre-school at a structural level in society has evolved as a protected spaced separate from the adult world of work (Kernan and Devine 2010). None of the parents interviewed had themselves attended pre-school (Most in their late twenties or early thirties). In the context of the free pre-school scheme issues of access, resources (such as support of relatives) or what Brooker (2007) describes as 'transitions capital' arose. The empirical findings of this study comply with the policy literature (Chapter 2) that in practice the younger the child the more is the societal expectation in Ireland that ECCE is a parental responsibility. The lack of public investment in ECCE in Ireland (less than 0.2% GDP at pre-school level) is evident in the high costs to parents/carers. Parents and teachers in the study welcomed the continuity for children and economic support provided by the free pre-school scheme. Teachers (more than parents in this study) expressed a value in the government proposed extension of the scheme (to two years), The literature on transitions supports the value of additional supports for children from low socio-economic backgrounds, children with special needs and children for whom English is not their first language (Rous and Hallam 2011; Bernard Van Leer Foundation 2006). Notably, while access to transitions capital varied amongst the parents interviewed, most of these families did not recognise or suggest particular advantages in the provision of a second pre-school year for their own or other families. However, the teachers over the years, had observed how a lack of resources and supports can impact negatively on families differing needs at times of transitions and recognised a value in extending universal services such as the free pre-school year.

The level of ease or difficulty of children's adaptation to the role of pre-school child manifested daily in transition routines, particularly the morning separation from home to pre-school. Several parents mentioned the 'structure' and importance of the morning routine such as 'hanging up a coat' and 'putting up a photograph' on arrival as a useful means to

help children settle in and become more 'independent'. Parents interviewed also acknowledged a value in the daily informal communications with staff and twice yearly parent/teacher meetings. Teachers also valued these communications, viewed as a means to exchange information and deal with any difficulties as they arose. Two parents specifically expressed a value in the pre-school practice of creating observational schedules with assessments (Appendix 9, p. 273) for each child.

In production of data for the pre-school book, examples of collective gendered identification with certain play choices emerged such as the 'making presents' themes (by the Crafty Girls*)* and the construction of Mobilo animals for play-fighting (by the Action Boys). The interview data revealed examples of parents' validation of the cultural artefacts children brought home. Children's interest in the pre-school book was partially influenced by a desire to preserve images of the artefacts parents did not normally get to see. This fits with Wenger's (2008) understanding that development of participatory identities require practices affording continuity across communities of practice (such as home and pre-school).

Data interpretation and analysis revealed a challenge for everyday practices in Rainbow Road was the tendency for gender domination of particular places. The enabling potential of the introduction of props or re-naming of play spaces to address this issue and generate new play roles and possibilities was recognised (through my participant observations) and correlated with research by Hislam (2004). However, the introduction of play props such as the keyboard which alternated as *flight controls* in the children's play was quite arbitrary. This suggests a relatively untapped source of potential collaborative meaning making for development and expansion in this setting.

Interestingly, children's appropriation of the place and space of the Resting Loft (in Phase 2) no longer revealed the type of group gender domination observed in Phase 1 of this study. Children busily appropriated this space and negotiated overlapping play themes (house building and decorating etc.) within and beyond the pedagogic discourse assigning this area as a space for *restful play*. These changes in usage over time may have been

influenced by the *mutuality* (Wenger 2008) promoted in children's adoption of fluid identities and creative embellishments within the teacher led *Princess Game* (Chapter 7). This play practice contained hints of the type of collaborative *transitory play* promoted by Brostrom (2007) said to enable learning in one context to transfer to another. There were also suggestions in these changing participatory practices that what was reified had been challenged and gradually undergone change. This was registered in a transformation of the conceptual use of the space of the Resting Loft on a community/cultural level as well as an interpersonal and personal level. The issue of gender also emerged as an interview topic in the context of the early years professional and the traditionally gendered nature of this role in Ireland and elsewhere. Questioning the lack of male participation in ECCE roles was met with surprise and may have been related to deeply culturally embedded and taken for granted views of women as societies altruistic carers and nurturers. Historically such reification of the female role in society is argued as contributing to the low status and pay in the ECCE sector in Ireland (discussed in Chapter 2).

The related issue of qualifications, conditions and status of ECCE professionals has become a topical one in Ireland, not least because of the airing of the Primetime programme discussed in Chapter 2 (several months after these interviews took place). This programme highlighted poor practices of unqualified and unsupported staff in some Irish ECCE settings. The parental responses from this study almost universally acknowledged that qualifications matter in ECCE. However, attitudes as to how they matter or what constitutes as qualifications is reflected back as more complex and nuanced. The low pay and status of adult roles in ECCE means many (particularly those educated to degree level) will ultimately leave the sector. A key consequence is that the high turnover of staff reduces the possibility of continuity in children's early years relationships. Such continuity has been identified in the literature (Chapter 4) as crucial for young children, particularly during key times of transition. Discontinuities were highlighted in the policy literature in relation to training and development such as the lack of roll out of Aistear and Síolta (Start Strong 2012; 2013). The teachers and some parents (four out of ten) interviewed reflected societal views (Kernan 2006; Kernan and Devine 2010) that argue for a balance between current societal demands for health and safety and children’s need to experience freedom

and a level of risk. Teacher narratives of pre-school practice and my own experience (in the role of teacher in the setting) suggest a constant balance between provision of rich or what latterly would have been viewed as natural everyday community/cultural experiences against regulatory requirements, such as stringent demands for health and safety. A majority of those interviewed (parents and teachers) also expressed levels of concern reflecting wider societal concerns about the judicial use of media and technology in children's lives (Marsh 2005). This has implications that suggest the need for ongoing discussion, training and development to inform decisions on resources and practice in ECCE.

As the pre-school year drew to a close, parents (eight out of ten) highlighted the effects of friendship influences on children's well-being and sense of belonging in pre-school. In the final term, children themselves (within and outside of pre-school) had begun to question which friends would be going with them to their new schools. Parents' after school talks with children sometimes related to children's emotional responses to what they viewed as fair or unfair in their daily interactions with peers, alongside an increasing understanding that friendships require negotiation. The literature on transitions reviewed in Chapter 4 also attests to the significance of friendships in promoting children's well-being and sense of belonging at key times of transition. In the participant observations children's transitions in thinking showed evidence of ongoing negotiations with peers, in order to sustain their play intentions (in various places and spaces) and share the type of empathic understandings that sustain friendships and group identities of participation (Vignette 13, p. 204, Vignette 14, p. 275).

Parents (all ten) interviewed expressed a view that many children were *ready* to take on the new challenges of primary school (including more academic learning). Three parents suggested their children were in danger of becoming bored within the contexts of pre-school. The possibility of children becoming bored with a curriculum (in primary school) where their choices could be limited and their opportunities to move freely might be less flexible was not mentioned. At the end of Phase 1 Leona expressed a view that most children were ready for new challenges. Some concerns (expressed by parents) related to

expectations that children would be one of many in a classroom where they would have to sit for long periods and conform within more formal routines and practices. Further concerns related to children's abilities to navigate the larger more intimidating context of the schoolyard (with older children). O'Kane's (2007) study on transitions to primary school in Ireland (Chapter 4) appear to confirm the cultural expectations and practice that children are expected to sit at desks during much of their primary school day. Transitions literature (Chapter 4) also indicates that language to describe children's actions in pre-school may have different connotations for the children's behaviour in primary school. (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, Dunlop 2002, 2003a, Hendy and Whitbread 2000, Dockett and Perry, 2004,).

Teachers expressed concerns about children's school readiness (particularly more experienced pre-schoolers) who lacked interest, involvement or persistence to task in the more guided participatory activities of Rainbow Road. Contrastingly, the ability of some of these (experienced) pre-schoolers to guide participation of more novice members in self-initiated play projects largely went unnoticed, but became visible through documentation (for the pre-school book). Participant observations also revealed examples of children's creative strategies to subvert the pedagogic discourse in pursuit of their own cultural worlds of meaning. My own adoption of a fluid identity (novice to expert as required) enabled a type of mutuality affording insights into children's play motives and intentions. It is arguable that a flexible expert/novice collaborative approach (*obuchenie*) affords access into children's own emergent interests and can act as a starting point to bridge gaps between play based and more formal learning. In this regard, some parents (the five whose children had older siblings) found themselves accommodating children's burgeoning interests. These manifested in their child's anticipated school child role as they developed their participatory repertoires in the home environment (such as *homework* with older siblings). Action research by Corsaro and Molinari (2000) and Brostrom (2007) has specifically looked at processes rather than product aimed ways of nurturing such dispositional interests in pre-school. If, as these studies indicate, most or even some children are *ready, willing and able* (Carr 2001) for new challenges as they approach the transition to primary school a question arises; Could we or should we be seeking new ways

to accommodate these interests in pre-schools? Might there be something to be learned from the playful ways of 'learning to learn' (Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson 2004) some parents adopt almost intuitively at home in response to children's anticipation of the new role of school child? However, a crucial inference in such priming processes is that schools must be ready to accommodate children's needs for active play based learning to meet with their dispositional interests as learners.

The interview findings and data production for the pre-school book made visible some taken for granted aspects of everyday practice. These included the evolution of collaborative group meaning making processes in Rainbow Road over time (Circle Time, changes in usage of place and space, negotiation of participatory identities). Within this Community of Practice the teachers had clearly grown in confidence in their curricular approach and practices over the years but may have underestimated both their own as well as children's and parents shifting participatory roles and potential to contribute to this transformative practice. In the final concluding Chapter, the enabling and constraining aspects of reification and participation in a pre-school Community of Practice within and beyond the contexts of this study are discussed.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

> 'Learning involves participation in a Community of Practice…And that participation refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger 2008, p. 4).

9.1. Introduction

ECCE in Ireland has been identified in this study at both policy and practice level as a world undergoing rapid and challenging transitions. This has many implications for children, their families and the early years professionals entrusted with their care and education. In this study, learning and development were acknowledged as processes of individual as well as group identity formation through participation within community contexts such as pre-school. Pre-school matters for young children, in Ireland, because participation therein has become a norm for most children growing up in this country. Identity formation in this context encompasses the participation of children and their families within and across communities of practice. The study findings suggest that in Ireland today pre-school matters as a structural feature in society, but also within local pre-school community contexts. Throughout, this study has asked what matters in the everyday practice of pre-school participation? This question is of concern to all stakeholders in ECCE especially children themselves. The process of participation in any Community of Practice is characterised by change. Such change (described as transition in this study) has been understood as a potential tool for learning and development. My participant observer role in the COP of Rainbow Road took me on a journey from novice to experienced membership, from onlooker, observer and 'extra pair of hands' to a variety of evolving roles including researcher, teacher and 'least adult' in pursuit of multiple perspectives.

My flexible participant observer research role immersed me in the pre-school practices of a particular pre-school community in Ireland over a year and a half. The timing coincided with implementation of the universal free pre-school year, marking a major transition in ECCE policy in Ireland from an historic practice of targeted investment to a universal more

rights based approach. This shift in policy impacts on the local experiences for the study participants but also for participants in other constellations of pre-school communities countrywide.

The findings of this study matter because they are based on children's actual lived experiences, documented over a significant amount of time in an Irish pre-school social and cultural context. Qualitative, participant observer type studies are rare in Ireland. The findings capture and reflect unique glimpses as well as insights into children's lived experiences within the roles, rules, relationships and identities negotiated in their evolving Community of Practice. This study has looked at how and why pre-school matters in children's lives. It has explored the space of pre-school as the source of historically mediated, often competing or contrasting purposes and aims. A sense of the situated social and cultural world of Rainbow Road has been conveyed and the associated narratives of experience are now linked to theoretical, policy, and empirical studies (including those of this thesis) for interpretive analysis. The overarching question encompasses the main research questions outlined in Chapter 1 and restated below. This is followed by some implications, limitations and potential for policy, practice and ongoing research. Finally, there follows a discussion of the personal socio-cultural journey, with further reflective analysis on the broader implications of the research.

9.2. Revisiting the Research Questions

Transition in this study was conceptualised with the uncertainty as well as potential and possibilities that come with change. It has furthermore been argued that transitions in thinking may be required, in order to cope, adapt and transform to meet new social and cultural challenges to successfully navigate transitions in pre-school and beyond**.** These pre-school matters are now revisited and interpreted and analysed from multiple socio-cultural perspectives:

1. What views of the child and the role of the adult are implicit or explicit in the policy and practices of early childhood care and education in Ireland?

2. What are the indicators of positive experiences of transitions in ECCE?

3. How do children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school and what roles do adults play in mediating this process?

4. How does the community cope, adapt and transform itself over time, (Elder 1999) to meet community/cultural, interpersonal and personal needs?

9.2.1. Key Literature Findings and Links to Empirical Data of this Study

Question 1: ***Views of the Child and the Role of the Adult in ECCE:***

The free pre-school year marks an historic transition in Ireland from targeted intervention in ECCE for children and families viewed as *at risk* to a more rights based approach and image of all children as *citizens* in their own right. This significant change in policy also suggests that increasingly care and education of young children in Ireland is being viewed as a societal rather than a parental role and responsibility. This view appears to be confirmed by the high uptake of the scheme in Ireland (95%). The literature also revealed that the dominance of historical views of ECCE as a parental responsibility in Ireland has meant low government investment into early year's services and supports and the ad hoc development of the sector. However, the continuing lack of investment for children in the birth to age three ranges indicates that a maturational view of the child may still dominate in Ireland, alongside investment policies linked to school readiness and preparation of children for future adult roles. In this, the idea of a universal child is still foregrounded, alongside a future oriented image of the child as a citizen in the making as opposed to a citizen with rights in the here and now.

The theme of gender roles in ECCE arose in the study in terms of participatory affordances for adults and also in terms of the social construction of gender and its effects on every day practice. The literature reveals the cultural embeddedness of ECCE as a gendered role in

Ireland and elsewhere. The reification of such roles was evidenced in the traditional roles assigned to women in our Constitution (Chapter 2). There is also in this an inference of a traditional male bread winner role within a family structure which is no longer consistent in reflecting the diversity of modern family life. A discourse of the 'natural 'permeated the interview findings including the somewhat gendered perspective of the adult role. This is evidenced in the response of the majority of parents and one teacher that they had' never really thought about' the lack of men involved in early years education in Ireland. Such responses infer a deeply culturally imbedded, taken for granted understanding of the ECCE role as a female role. However, simply voicing the question did appear to give the interviewees pause for thought. On further reflection, three parents (one male) expressed views that women were 'naturally' more suited to the role. However, 7 out of the 10 interviewees (including one male) felt that more gender balance in pre-school roles would be valuable, this, they related to the potential of providing positive male role models for children. Teachers also acknowledged a similar value in having male colleagues in pre-school but anticipated parents might not be as accepting. Lisa (teacher) admitted that her own bias in favour of female staff in early year's contexts had been challenged and underwent change when she first worked with a male pre-school teacher. These transitions in thinking, through discussion, and/or experience reflect the recurring argument (throughout this study) that 'talk matters' (Goouch 2010). Even within the short space of time of the interview process parents and teachers reflections on the concept of male pre-school teachers showed evidence of transitions in thinking, and a new appreciation of the potential positive benefits emerged.

Through the ongoing participant observations of this study, children (in their play) were shown to creatively reproduce and at times transform some of the deeply embedded social and cultural messages adults in the setting (including myself) conveyed about gender. When Eileen and Helen played at blocking the bathroom sinks (Chapter 7), the anticipated response of teachers to a flooded bathroom was gleefully expressed in Eileen's comment 'They will think the boys did this'. On another occasion Helen conveyed her understanding of 'helpfulness' as a gendered role which she aspired to attain, even if it meant supporting helplessness in male peers (Chapter 7). These and other participant

observations reflected literature findings that boys tend to command more adult attention than girls but also that children do not simply passively absorb and imitate the gender roles they observe in everyday life. Daily discussions, reflections and documentation of these ongoing participant observations in Rainbow Road lead to shared reflections with the teachers in the setting, where some of our taken for granted ideas on gender were challenged and lead to changes in practice. A tendency for boys in the setting to be louder than girls was also observed alongside an understanding that some boys in the setting sometimes, collectively became more silent when engaged in play themes (such as play fighting and superhero play) that might engage adult sanction. However, sanctions could still result because teachers were intuitively aware that silence from boys might suggest a need for adult concern or intervention. Contrastingly, the tendency for some girls in the setting to collectively become quiet and move out of adult sight to avoid adult intervention in their play themes (usually at points of transition, such as clean up times) tended to go unnoticed and only became visible through participant observations and the reflective discussions (with teachers) that followed. Gender in terms of adult roles in pre-school including the traditionally gendered practices (mostly female staff) in Irish early years contexts (and elsewhere) has been identified in the literature and within these findings as a challenge for policy and everyday practice.

The discourse of the 'natural' permeating the study findings also extended to the issue of children's access to information and communications technology and the associated adult mediating role. While ICT was available in this setting children's direct access to ICT was somewhat limited. Children certainly played with, interpretively reproduced and reflected back an understanding of various technologies (from photography to play with re-cycled mobile phones). All children in the setting appeared to have access (in greater or lesser degrees) to technology in their home environments. Parents differed in their views of the importance of access to ICT in pre-school. Teachers also expressed differing views based on their own theoretical understandings and experience. Interestingly a discourse of what was considered 'natural' in preschool practices emanated from two different perspectives. For several parents and teachers, Rainbow Road was associated with 'natural' experiences, including the aesthetic appeal of the outdoor space, and the natural wood and other

resources in the indoor space. For these adults, there was a preference for children to have lots of active play based learning and the need for computer literacy was not considered significant, partially because of children's access to such technology at home (transitions capital). For other parents digital literacy and opportunities to explore such skills were viewed as a 'natural' part of 21st century life. Such experiences were encouraged at home and would have been welcome had they been available in pre-school. Significantly, a lack of access to technology for children in the setting did not deter parents from registering their children with Rainbow Road, because children already had access to such resources at home. All parents interviewed, at some point expressed an understanding of the need to exert caution when exposing children to ICT. However, no mention was made of any need for teachers to have access to training to inform their practice and understanding of how best to support children through ICT. It is argued that such opportunities to develop the teacher role in the use of ICT may be particularly important for children with special educational needs. In some Nordic countries such as Sweden children's rights are foregrounded at policy and practice level and the right for children to access ICT in early year's contexts is written in to their early years frameworks.

The aforementioned discourse of the 'natural' extended to a desire for children to experience a 'natural' or 'homelike' environment in pre-school. This perspective was conveyed by the teachers and some parents (four out of ten) interviewed. Some of the literature on transitions argues for children to experience a balance between current societal demands for health and safety and an understanding that children need to experience opportunities for freedom which also infer a level of risk. My experiences as a participant observer in Rainbow Road reflected teacher perspectives of a constant balance between provision of rich or what previous generations viewed as natural everyday community/cultural experiences against strict regulatory requirements for health and safety. Consequently, teachers in the study felt their pedagogical role was undervalued. The teachers also expressed frustration with the low pay and status of the early year's professional in Ireland, despite the high level of responsibility associated with this work.

The majority of parents interviewed were also vocal in their satisfaction with the quality of care and education provided in Rainbow Road but few made a link between the quality of service and the high qualifications and experiences levels of the staff in this context. Two parents even suggested that qualifications were not particularly important or necessary, with one parent suggesting 'personality is key', while another parent saw qualifications as important in terms of a 'vetting process'. The Primetime programme (Chapter 2) took place several months after the interviews undertaken for this study. Primetime was to highlight issues of inexperienced, under qualified, unsupported, and poorly paid staff in charge of some of the youngest and most vulnerable children. Had the interviews taken place after the Primetime programme it seems likely that the interview questions might have elicited different responses including awareness of the value of entrusting the care and education of young children to suitably trained and qualified staff. Parents who daily entrust the care and education of their children to early year's services in Ireland have had that trust challenged. The nation was shocked by the unprofessional and at times abusive treatment of young children as broadcast in this programme. Another aspect was that the high cost of these for profit services did not ensure high quality practice. At the time of the interviews two parents spoke about having to leave their children in crèches (prior to starting in Rainbow Road) due to work commitments. Neither of these parents wanted to do so but did not (at the time) have access to other supports for their childcare needs. However when parents were asked if they supported the idea of Government investment in a second free pre-school year few recognised a value in it. It seemed to be a taken for granted idea that the younger the child the more parents themselves viewed their care and education as a personal rather than a societal responsibility. However, the teachers in this study, based on their experiences over the years, recognised a value in extending the pre-school year to increase continuity for any families who wished to avail of it. Teachers also recognised the wider context of this issue and the value for families with children with special or additional needs or children for whom English was not their first language.

However, many parents in the setting had access to support from relatives or local child-minders and chose the setting with this in mind, and preferred to avail of such supports until the year prior to a formal school start. None of these parents expressed any

expectation that there should be government funding of such supports (as is the case in the Nordic countries). Some parents in the study (including the parents of the two key informants) had not initially anticipated that their children might require a longer period of time before making the transition to formal school. Having consulted with the teachers in Rainbow Road, these parents took on the extra burden of costs of extending their children's time in pre-school. These decisions to delay their children's transition to formal school were informed within the trusting relationships they built over time with the highly qualified and experienced staff of Rainbow Road. Both the parents and the teachers in the study agreed that for these children to have started formal school at an earlier stage, could have been unnecessarily traumatic and resulted in long term negative effects on their learning and development. My own findings from tracking these children's experiences in Rainbow Road would tend to corroborate these views.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 3 elaborated a COP model. This theoretical framing indicates that identities are negotiated within the everyday routines, rites and rituals of community participation. These everyday practices in Rainbow Road also emerged (in parent and teacher interviews and participant observations) as providing continuity between home and pre-school as children gained practice and mastery of their new pre-schooler roles. In this setting, the main roles for teachers (based on their pedagogical understandings), were found to be guided participation and expert/novice dyads of apprenticeship (Rogoff 1990). Also evident but less acknowledged and somewhat taken for granted (to teachers themselves) were the times when they engaged in collaborative meaning making (such as Circle Time, and/or supporting children's self-initiated and evolving play themes).

Question 2: ***Indicators of Positive Experiences of Transitions in ECCE:***

This question was addressed in the literature (Chapter 4) and also within the empirical Chapters of this study (parent and teacher perspectives and participant observations, Chapters 6,7, 8). The literature review revealed that transitions in ECCE studies in Ireland and elsewhere have largely focused on the vertical transition from pre-school to formal school. This study has usefully focused on an earlier stage of transition, to and within pre-

school. Tracking children's transitions such as the formation of an identity of *pre-school child* within a COP is argued as a powerful means to inform the complex processes of transition within but also across COPs. In the literature, positive experiences of transitions were associated with creation of strong links between the home habitus and the secondary habitus (in this case pre-school). Another aspect, related to opportunities to participate to a level of expertise or mastery (within communities) as indicators of a positive space for transition to occur. Positive experiences of transition were furthermore associated with a heightened sense of well-being and belonging. This understanding has been a key aspect of frameworks and approaches to early learning aimed at engaging the participation of all stakeholders especially children themselves. The thematic approach of Aistear in Ireland specifically applies the theme of 'well-being' and' belonging' as a means to assess children's learning and development in ECCE.

Transitions literature has also highlighted that the wider the gap between children's home and school experiences, the greater is the risk of a difficult experience of transition. There is an inference that building stronger home/school links can help avoid the cumulative effects of difficult transitions (within and across COPs) and also promotes generative effects of positive experiences. Historical structuring of pre-school as a separate space (separate from the adult world of work) infers a somewhat peripheral role for parents in out of home settings such as pre-school. The literature reviewed provided indicators that both the place and conceptual space of pre-school require ongoing discussion and reflection to enable professionals to develop children's play, relationships and language and communication.

Both parents and teachers in this study welcomed the introduction of the free pre-school scheme and appreciated the continuity it brought in children's transitions to pre-school. For parents, it also alleviated some of the high cost of childcare in Ireland and influenced timing (usually, year prior to child's start in formal school), as well as time spent in pre-school for children in the study (most parents increased number of days children attended). Because Rainbow Road was fee paying outside of the free pre-school scheme, it had (until introduction of the scheme) attracted more middle income/middle class families. Such

families had (in various degrees) access to economic and other forms of transitions capital (social networks, proximity to pre-school, relatives to support after school care etc.). The transitions capital these families had was generative. As an example, some of these families had additional advantages as the waiting list prioritised siblings of children who had already attended Rainbow Road (in the interests of continuity for families). However, families who relocated to the locality lacked this particular form of transitions capital (regardless of access to other forms of transitions capital). Families (from diverse backgrounds) newly arrived in the locality also lacked transitions capital in the form of established networks of support from relatives and friends. The economic and caring support of relatives (particularly Grandparents) was highlighted in the G.U.I. Study as an important aspect of ECCE in Ireland, largely unacknowledged at policy level. Parents in the study frequently referred to the location of the pre-school (close to relatives) as an important aspect of their choice of pre-school setting and supportive of continuity in various transitions (home to aftercare and on to formal schooling). There is an inference that all families with young children can benefit from and require strategies to increase family transition capital such as universal access to ECCE services from birth onwards. In the study setting, several strategies to support children's positive experience of transitions within the setting, and in anticipation of further transitions (such as the transition to formal school), were identified and are outlined below:

Pre- school Policy: Rainbow Road started its pre-school term each year at an earlier date to the primary schools' start in order to support families undergoing multiple experiences of transitions (such as transition of older siblings to primary school).

Strategies: Specific practices were developed in consultation with parents for children from the previous school year who had experienced transition difficulties. Marie (k) had experienced recurring instances of separation anxiety during the morning transitions. This was addressed by the strategy of introducing Marie back in to pre-school a few days in to term and a gradual shortening of the time her mother spent with her as a settling in process. This strategy was supportive of individual and group transition processes. Over time, Marie's evolving leadership role as an experienced participant in pre-school supported younger more novice children's coping and adaptation to pre-school. Another example was

Mark(k)'s deep interest and involvement in art and other activities which made it difficult for him to adjust to switches to new routines. Teachers responded by affording Mark more time (when required) to complete such activities during transitions.

Participation Strategies: Sharing of information was encouraged and practised in informal ways during morning transitions to and from school. At the pre-liminal stage (registering of children prior to starting), parents completed forms where they could add any special information about their children which could usefully inform teaching practice. For example, one family wrote of their child's anxiety about being 'smaller than other children' and this enabled staff to be sensitive and responsive to this child's concerns. All children registered in the setting were invited to visit, accompanied by a parent/carer. In this way children were able to participate over a morning (for a short time) prior to their official start. Younger siblings of older children frequently accompanied their families in morning transitions, or to special events such as the end of year graduation party. This afforded children LPP opportunities to become familiar with the roles and expectations of their future pre-school.

Parents interviewed valued these informal and more formal links between home and pre-school. However, parents interviewed, and other parents in the setting, also expressed a longing for more direct access to children's experiences as children were not always interested in discussing their pre-school day. Children's own cultural artefacts and documentation such as the pre-school book and the teacher observational schedules (used in this setting) went some way towards communicating children's cultural worlds in pre-school to their parents. A disadvantage of documentation of this type is the time it requires. All of the above strategies were developed by Rainbow Road in collaboration with parents and in response to child and family changing needs over time. These strategies though not explicitly described as 'transitions policy', were continuously negotiated and appeared in the school policy document which was updated yearly.

Question 3. : ***Children's Identity Formation and Adaptation to New Roles in Pre-school, and Adult Mediating Roles:***

In Chapter 3 the recurring themes of play, relationships and language/communication (identified in Chapter 1) were traced to the Vygotskian socio-cultural roots of this study and elaborated through the post Vygotskian Community of Practice model. Within this model, pre-school (as a COP) and specifically Rainbow Road, was visualized as a form of stage or field of play for a story to emerge. The narrative of unfolding events encompassed shifting participatory identities for all participants and was defined in this study as a story of transitions. These transitions over time and space, incorporated the negotiation of individual and collective transitions in thinking over time. The COP model provided key concepts such as reification and negotiation of meaning through participation in the daily practices of a community. These tools for thinking included the concept of mutuality in shared meaning making processes. These methodological tools (Chapter 5) acted as a means to track the evolving participatory experiences of the various participants (including myself) in our transitions to and within Rainbow Road. As everyday events played out in this setting, stories would emerge of being and becoming, and movement from novice to mastery. This framing also afforded opportunities to document multiple and overlapping narratives of meaning. This could incorporate challenges to the reified within the participatory identities negotiated for the various players in the context studied.

Reification and Participation in Phase I: My participant observations over time identified some reified aspects of everyday practice in Rainbow Road alongside some challenges to participation for the various players (Chapter 6). Children's active agency in their cultural worlds were identified within the *in between spaces* at the interstices of adult control and particularly during children's self-initiated play actions. Gender appeared as an emergent theme embedded in historically negotiated macro and micro cultural influences (Chapter 2). Social construction of gender was evident in children's dress up choices (such as Disney costumes, often donated by parents) or collective appropriation of particular play spaces (such as a tendency for girls to dominate the Home Corner). Boys and girls (in their gendered groups) frequently appropriated the Resting Loft for play, and attempted to exclude members of the opposite gender. Creative adaptations in children's gender play

also emerged in Phase I. My adoption of a novice participant/observer role in the production of a collaborative pre-school book gave voice to children's creative interpretation and reproduction of the place, space and communicative language of their play. An example of this was the *Superhero* themed play. The children had collectively reconstructed this game (discussed and planned by them daily during snack time) as *the princess game* (a form of chase game) and subsequently moved it outdoors in order to sustain this play theme and successfully avoid adult sanctions. Children's motives and interests in these collaborative and action based play themes were made visible along with their creative and adaptive coping strategies to sustain such interests. In these actions, children challenged what was reified and negotiated change.

Reification and Participation in Phase II: Children's transitions from novice to experienced participation were tracked in this study with the lens turned on key informants including Marie(k) and Mark (k)) and their interactions with peers and adults in the setting (Chapter 7). For both Marie(k) and Mark(k) participant observations reflected understandings from the literature that their sense of well-being and belonging was related to their participatory identities and dispositional interests as learners. Participant observations indicated that both children (in different ways) experienced transition as a difficult process. Marie, initially, resisted the very idea of being in pre-school in her longing to sustain her close home bond with her Mother. Mark in contrast wanted to be in pre-school but found difficulty in navigating transitions throughout the day, particularly in peer interactions where the rules of play were less explicit or predictable than more structured, adult led contexts. The pre-school practice of daily informal and occasional formal opportunities for discussion helped teachers identify children's interests, play intentions and concerns. Building on these supportive links, teachers developed strategies to support children's differing needs at times of transition. Both children underwent transitions in their thinking and actions over time.

Flexibility within the participant/observer role of this study enabled me to follow the children's lead and respond to opportunities for reciprocal meaning making (obuchenie). This approach afforded me access into Marie(k) and Mark(k)s dispositional interests as

learners and emergent roles as leaders within their COP. This is evidenced in Marie's guiding of my participation in her leadership of various play interests with the Crafty Girls. At times, Marie also appropriated my adult expertise to scaffold these play interests (for herself and the group) to new levels; at other times, Marie's empathy for peers emerged as she adapted her new status as experienced pre-school child to lead novice and more experienced players participation in various play themes. Over time, Mark's dispositional interests and expertise in various contexts began (with adult support) to act as currency in less structured times and within various peer interactions. A playful pedagogic approach during outdoor play (by myself and the other teachers) afforded Mark the opportunity to develop his disposition for mastery (in his play identity of soccer *coach,* or *goalie*). Gradually, Mark developed and transformed these play roles to experience greater mutuality with peers. Accordingly, Mark started to navigate the roles and responsibilities associated with his evolving participatory identity.

Interestingly, the theme of friendship, identified in the literature as an aspect children themselves associate with positive experiences of transitions, emerged for Marie and Mark. In the final pre-school term, both children became friends and started to develop spontaneous play actions during morning transitions (such as snack time or the transition outdoors). The significance of friendship (Chapter 4) can also be connected to the coded language of humour in which Marie, Mark, and more experienced pre-schoolers engaged, which was displayed in increasing competence levels within their self-initiated play and learning over time.

Phase II (Chapter 7 and Chapter 8) also provided many examples of more structured adult led activities (guided participation) such as cookery, where children waited to turn take, and sometimes appeared bored or restless. At such times, sudden instances occurred of children's spontaneous games and creative language and gestures to communicate meaning and sustain play themes. During such in between space times, teachers tended to ignore such responses (unless they proved disruptive to adult aims). The tacit affordance of such rich inter-subjective meaning making largely went unnoticed or unacknowledged by adults. Children's spontaneous play responses (usually lead by experienced pre-schoolers)

reflected transitions in thinking, coping and adaptation over time. The complexity and inherent mutuality (between children) within this process was revealed. This took the form of children's ability to address their own desires for active engagement with peers whilst simultaneously meeting adult goals and aims.

In Phase II, the theme of gender continued to permeate the participant observations of this study. The tendency for boys to acquire more adult attention than girls has been noted within this study and elsewhere (Chapter 3). In my participant observer role, some of my own *fish out of water* moments afforded insights into children's interpretive reproduction of adult constructions of gender. Subsequent conversations (daily) with staff and ongoing participatory observations revealed instances of children's manipulation of adult gender expectations. In tracking the transitions experiences of the key child participants, the findings suggested considerable space for children to shape as well as be shaped within their everyday participation in Rainbow Road. The findings also reflected literature findings indicating that affordances within the setting varied in accordance with different adult's interpretation of what was sayable and doable. However, daily discussions and shared reflections (after pre-school) enabled greater mutuality and responsiveness to children's agency in the ongoing negotiation of participatory identities in everyday practice.

Question 4: ***Community Coping, Adaptation and Transformation over Time***

The view of the child as a citizen with a voice to be heard and also as an active playful and collaborative meaning maker has latterly emerged at a policy level. This was identified in Chapter 2 in Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC (1992) and is also reflected in National (Aistear and Síolta) and International (Te-Whariki) frameworks for early learning. However, this sea-change that recognises children as active agentic beings with whom adults can usefully learn from as well as teach, appears to be somewhat constrained at practice level, particularly in the reified context of formal schooling. The literature (Chapter 4) provided examples of practices which have been adopted to help children develop the dispositional motives for learning that cross boundaries into new contexts such as formal school. However, such practice also infers a constraint, in the understanding that

‘school ready’ children require ‘child ready’ schools.

In this study, documentation through the pre-school book made visible the somewhat taken for granted or less acknowledged potential for children themselves to exhibit expertise and mastery, as well as guided participatory roles, in less adult structured times. Some of these children’s lack of interest and involvement or persistence at tasks during more structured adult led activities gave rise to teacher concerns about their school readiness. Both parents and teachers interviewed emphasised the significance of children's development of social and playful interactions over skills or academic learning in pre-school. However, interview answers and findings from the literature (Chapter 4) reflected a perspective that parents and pre-school teachers recognised that formal school places very different demands on children as learners. A further complication (in the literature and empirical findings) suggested that the language of *independence* and *play* or play based learning appear to have different connotations across pre-school and formal school contexts. Parents and teachers interviewed reflected concerns (identified in the literature on transitions) for children to conform to group norms, where the child is 'one of many' in formal school. Parents in this study also reflected a sense that links between home and school would be weaker and less accessible in primary school. This was reflective of views from the literature of a primarily one way transfer of knowledge from schools to parents.

Both parents and teachers in the study setting aspired to the creation of a’ natural’ environment for the child participants, though there was considerable variation of understanding on what this might entail. As an example, the aforementioned differing views on whether computer technology should be afforded in pre-school emerged from the interview data. Children themselves throughout this study displayed abilities to interpretively reproduce and transform or at times subvert culture rather than passively take it in. Such findings highlight the significance of making observations and providing daily time for talk and reflection to inform responsive adult practice in ECCE. The significance of time and timing also emerged in the participant observer role. A constraint of the teacher role (adopted over two five week periods in Phase II) was the lack of time available to produce the collaborative pre-school book data. This aspect of the research

process only became feasible on return to my voluntary supporting role during the final weeks of the fieldwork.

Another area of key importance in the study findings was the significance of the teacher role, in engaging children in expressing, developing and assessing their dispositional interests as learners. Children's own apprenticeship in thinking and potential to move from roles of inexperience to mastery through their self-initiated play themes (such as the kite making and animal construction play in chapter 8) were made visible through documentation in the pre-school book. The participant observations also provided a running record of group learning stories and the transitions that took place over time. Teachers mediation of the circle time routines, interactive songs, and opportunities for children to experience flexibility (in gender and other aspects of their play participatory roles) were supported and extended in this setting by teachers own flexible approach and responsiveness to children's adaptations and creative embellishment in these collective play themes. The teacher led Princess Song (interactive play) appeared to act as a conduit for a form of *transitory play* extending in to and changing children's group interactions and ability to negotiate and share various play spaces. One such space, 'the resting loft' was imaginatively recreated as 'the big high tower' during the Princess Song. During children's self- initiated play this space continued to be a place where gender boundaries were transcended, girls and boys came to share the space where formerly they had competed in their gender groups. However, the rich learning and potential for children to assess their own progress and identify goals of shared interest was less visible or recognised in the setting. Assessment of children's learning and development in the setting tended to focus on top down demands for readiness for the skills and attitudes (such as persistence in teacher led tasks) perceived as important for transition to formal school. For the most part children in the setting (most of the time) appeared to value and show various levels of interest and involvement in such activities. Parents interviewed acknowledged their children's interest in their self-initiated cultural artefacts, and/or photographs/documentation of their play constructions.

Overall, the findings from the literature and the empirical studies highlighted discourses of 'readiness' and associated issues of quality in ECCE in Ireland.

9.3. The 'Readiness' Debate and Quality Matters

Parental and teacher concerns in this study (community/cultural) indicated that differing ideas about school readiness co-existed. Teacher and parent concerns about the transition to formal school suggested a dominance of the influence of traditional ideas of readiness (demands for a *school ready* child) reified within the structural demands of formal school. In Ireland and elsewhere, the top down demands for a school ready child over a more expansive understanding of readiness (incorporating the child ready school) still appears to dominate. In Rainbow Road, such influences appeared to create a powerful impact on pre-school practice. Consequently, the empirical findings suggest that the potential within children's own apprenticeship in thinking, and guided participatory repertoires, were overall less visible, valued or developed in the setting, than were more adult directed guided participation. Both parents and teachers reflected views of children as beings with initiative and dispositions for learning in the here and now. However, such agentic images appeared to compete with reified (socially and culturally) demands for school readiness.

The following recommendations are based on the literature reviewed and the empirical findings of my study. They address current needs in ECCE in Ireland with the overall aim of improving the quality of children's early year's experiences. What constitutes 'quality' has been argued in the policy literature (Chapter 2) as subject to ongoing negotiation to meet with changing societal needs.

9.3.1. Recommendations for Practice

Bridging Transitions Across Communities of Practice:

At both practice and policy level; the gendered nature of the early year's professional needs to be challenged, debated, and brought in to the public arena. This study has highlighted the taken for grantedness of this role, in terms of the low pay and status, the traditional understanding of the early years care and education role as an extension of the mothering role rather than as a trained, reflective, and well informed professional. Start Strong (2014) has been lobbying the Government to invest in a Graduate lead early year's

sector. Valuing all early years' educators requires acknowledgement of qualifications in terms of remuneration and also opportunities for continuous professional development.

Another key finding of my study with further implications for development of ongoing professional practice, is that children's expertise and mastery in one area does not necessarily translate as currency in another area. This can pose problems during transitions. The onus is on adults to recognise and find ways to mediate children's dispositional interests as learners. The literature and findings from this study indicate that transitions practices could usefully engage children's dispositional interests in friendship and humour, rhyme, song and reciprocal meaning making. The type of transitory play identified in teacher led interactive games appeared to help children explore space, place and transcend gender boundaries when the context of the play changed and became more child initiated.. Another example from the literature supportive of child participatory identities across different contexts is the creation of buddy systems (with the assistance older more experienced primary school children). Such systems help create continuity and supportive links as younger children cross boundaries in to primary school.

Both the literature and the findings of this study highlighted the potential for collaborative meaning making within flexible adult roles (obuchenie) and playful pedagogy. In this study, the process involved the adoption of a novice playful pedagogic role to initially access children's perspectives on their cultural worlds of play and learning. The potential to follow children's expertise in their own creative and playful reproduction of culture emerged. Ongoing participant observations, daily discussions with teachers and collaborative data production for the pre-school book captured cumulative understandings of children's individual and collective dispositional interests. The emergent play themes of everyday participation (such as *flight* in this study) could usefully be developed to feed into pre-school plans, to better utilise time, space and resources. This could include the making of props and textual materials to develop and negotiate children's burgeoning interests along diverse developmental pathways.

Various approaches to promote adult/child reciprocal meaning processes were highlighted in the literature (Chapter 3). The socio-cultural perspective of this study infers a role where teachers can switch between expert and novice positions, and acknowledge that children have expertise in their own lives. Such practice infers a theoretical understanding that learning is a life-long process, requiring us to continuously switch between teaching and learning perspectives in order to gain insights that inform and develop our practice. It follows that the multiple perspectives of socio-cultural theory could and arguably should be applied in initial and ongoing teacher training and development.

Furthermore, the importance of 'talk' and opportunities for continuous reflective practice and opportunities to share insights of daily practice were particularly evident in this study in relation to the theme of gender, and also in the development of school policy in collaboration with parents. The participant observer role and observational data made visible aspects of practice including deeply embedded social and cultural taken for granted understandings of gender which posed challenges to the reified and opened the possibility of change and transformation. However, as previously noted (Chapter 8) enabling such responsive and reflective practice infers having time, including time for paid non-contact hours for early years staff to plan, reflect and experience continuous professional development.

The development of policy and strategies to promote positive transitions for children and their families was identified in this study. This took the form of continuous formal and informal negotiations between home and school and the write up of associated strategies (influencing everyday practice) in the School Policy Document (which underwent yearly review) .The inferences from these findings (and findings from the literature) is that it is vitally important that teachers (at training level) be made aware of the value of building and negotiating collaborative home-school links. Such practice emerged from this study as a powerful means to forge links within and across communities of practice and enable more positive experiences of transition for children and their families.

9.3.2. Recommendations for Policy

Developing the Place and Space of Pre-school: Based on the literature reviewed and the views of children, parents, teachers and the participant observational data of this study, I recommend that more attention be paid to the planning, architectural design and location (within broader communities of practice) of early years environments for young children. This process would benefit from consultation with young children in relation to the place and space of pre-school. Portraiture type methods were successfully applied in this study (and elsewhere) to garner children's perspectives and gain insights on their indoor and outdoor play and learning interests to usefully inform practice. However, as observed in this study, documentation of this type requires informed reflective practitioners with the time, resources and knowledge to use such information to build links within and across Communities of Practice. This is an issue of quality and as noted earlier quality in ECCE is a process that requires continuous negotiation that acknowledges all stakeholders including children themselves.

Early years professionals perform key roles as they mediate links between home, pre-school and beyond as a child crosses new thresholds in the transition to formal school. The potential and power within such pedagogies of relationships pose challenges for traditional reified structures in ECCE. In Ireland, an historical lack of investment outside of targeted investments in early year's contexts requires expansion. Early years professionals require supports to inform and develop their everyday practice. This necessitates increasing Government investment in a funding model incorporating paid non-contact time for staff in ECCE to experience continuous professional development. Such changes at policy level have been identified in this study as necessary pre-requisites for the full implementation of Aistear and Siolta.

Furthermore, keeping or attracting highly qualified staff was acknowledged as a difficulty (in Rainbow Road and elsewhere). Recently discontinuities in ECCE in Ireland (such as high turnover of staff, and poorly qualified or trained staff) have been highlighted, particularly for pre-verbal younger children in day care and crèches. Consequently,

continued and increasing investment in ECCE is recommended in ensuring universal access to ECCE for children and their families from birth to age 6. The roll out of Aistear and Siolta is viewed as a crucial aspect of this process. The emphasis in these frameworks on children from birth to age six has the potential to forge links at key times of transition and build continuity across constellations of communities of practice, including home to pre-school and pre-school to primary school. Ongoing training and development in Aistear and Síolta (for all early years' professionals, carers, and parents) is recommended to keep pace with the changing needs of families and children.

The long term cost benefits to society of increased investment in ECCE was highlighted in the literature (Chapter 2). Such investment along with professionalization of Staff, incorporating increased remuneration (related to experience and qualifications) is a crucial component. Increased investment in ECCE would alleviate the high cost of child care to parents, and also discourage highly qualified and experienced ECCE Staff from leaving the sector. This investment would enable continuity in care and education for young children and their families. This also increases the possibility of recruiting males to the sector and creating a greater gender balance in children's experiences of ECCE. The findings of this study indicate that, at both a policy and practice levels the gendered nature of the early year's professional needs to be challenged debated, and brought in to the public arena. This study has highlighted the taken for grantedness of this role, in terms of the low pay and status, the traditional understanding of the early years care and education role as an extension of the mothering role rather than as a trained, reflective, and well informed professional (whether female or male). The literature and findings of this study indicate the value in increasing Government investment to support a graduate lead early year's sector. Valuing the role of early year's educators requires acknowledgement of qualifications in terms of remuneration and also opportunities for continuous professional development.

A useful aspect of initial teacher training could also include placement practice in pre-school (for primary school teachers) as well as (the more common practice) of placement of pre-school teachers in primary school. This could be supported by mentors (pre-school managers, and class teachers of junior cycle classes in primary school. Similar practice has

proved useful in bridging understandings of these two cultural communities (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2007). This also complies with the type of LPP recommended by Lave and Wenger (1991) in supporting movement from novice participatory roles to increasing levels of expertise and mastery.

At policy and practice level it is crucial that recognition be given to children's dispositional interests as learners, too heavy a focus on skills development without engaging the motives and interests of the learner can result in loss of interest, and/or learnt helplessness. The importance of allowing children creative input to develop projects and interests linking their home and school habitus is acknowledged in the literature, yet top down demands for school readiness continue to place pressure on early years settings to focus on skills acquisition over development of dispositions for early learning.
Pre-school policy documents need to explicitly state their transitions policy (updated yearly to reflect adaptations over time). Such practice (as identified in this study) narrows the gap between home and school cultures and promotes positive experiences of transitions. An additional aspect of professional development could involve an online forum to discuss, share and develop transitions practices and policies within and across communities of practices (such as pre-school unto primary schools).

9.3.3. Recommendations for Further Research

An acknowledged limitation of this study is that it does not track children's ongoing transitions to and within primary school. This would have required several researchers as the children were moving to three or more primary schools in the locality. However new studies could look at developing transition practices between pre-school and primary schools and evaluating the perspectives of the participants at different stages of the study. The documentary type data developed in this study could usefully garner children's perspectives on the process and provide talking points for focus group discussions (with adults and children).

My study suggests the potential for collaborative action research engaging the expertise of different stakeholders in ECCE especially children themselves. In this context an area worthy of further study is children's use of computer technology in pre-school, and its

potential for increasing the participatory opportunities for children with special or additional needs, and also for children for whom English is not their first language. In my empirical study, parents and teachers were divided on whether computer technology should be accessible to children in pre-school suggesting a need for more discussion and/or access to training and development to inform such decisions. Given that not all children have the transitions capital to access ICT in their home circumstances and the importance of digital literacy in modern life, there is a compelling argument that ICT resources be made available in all early years contexts. However the need for ongoing professional development to inform this rapidly changing and evolving technological age should not be underestimated.

The regulatory process with its primary focus on health and safety and low emphasis on children's learning and developmental needs has also come in to question within and beyond this study. It is argued that we need early year's professionals with the training and continuous professional development to carry out more than a custodial role of care. We also need inspectorate teams sufficiently qualified to focus on the health, welfare and also on the learning and development of young children. It is imperative in this time of transition in ECCE that we learn from the mistakes of the past and look to international best practice (Chapter 2). As Lave and Wenger point out, not all transitions are positive but transition can and arguably should be viewed as a potential catalyst for positive change and development.

While much of the research literature focused on major transitions such as the transition to primary school, further research is also needed on earlier transitions in Ireland. These include the range and variety of horizontal transitions (on a day to day basis) experienced by young children. Such experiences include the transition from home to carers, crèche or pre-school services unto after-care with relations, carers or other ECCE services. More qualitative case study type research could usefully provide insights into the experiences of children in danger of experiencing difficulty in transition, with an emphasis on the types of transitions capital supportive of positive experiences. Findings from such studies could usefully feed in to longitudinal studies such as G.U.I.

Another broader aspect of transition noted in this study is that an increasing number of early year's graduates (degree level) are leaving the informal ECCE environments and entering the formal school sector via initial training and development and work experiences in ECCE. This involves transition within and across communities of practice. The transitions in thinking argued as necessary to cope and adapt to such changes seem worthy of further research. Questions arise as to how teachers with experience of both settings (pre-school and primary school) view and respond, cope and adapt to the needs of children and their families as they themselves cross boundaries to primary school teaching and learning contexts.

9.4. Reflections on the Research Journey and Final Word

Engaging in this study was itself a socio-cultural journey which had its roots in my own early years experiences (Chapter I). In the ongoing writing and re-writing of this thesis, I found myself metaphorically re-entering the doorways of Rainbow Road pre-school. This felt somewhat like a spectator approaching and applying different camera angles. In this, there was no loss of the sense of identity or identities of participation of the researcher roles but rather an opportunity to momentarily step out of the habitus or *fish in water* sense of everyday participation. This reflective process sometimes meant a certain gasping for air as I was challenged to see this world in new light and question any taken for granted assumptions. The themes of play, relationships and language/communication discussed in Chapter I were ever present as each Chapter took shape. There was a particular enjoyment in the final trawling through participant observations, audio recordings, and photographic data of the empirical Chapters. As the play unfolded unto paper, I once again felt connected to relationships and communications of everyday practice in Rainbow Road pre-school.

My bids to access children's cultural worlds as a novice player were sometimes viewed with suspicion by children (anticipating adult sanctions of themes such as play fighting). However, over time and particularly in the context of the outdoors my participatory opportunities to experience mutuality in these situations grew. This shared emotional connection allowed me to tap in to the children's excitement and curiosity and my own spirits soared along with the children's play themes of flight. Importantly, I observed that

such experiences were not confined to my own participant observer role. Teachers were observed to playfully suspend disbelief and engage in the collective hiding, running, and treasure hunt games of childhood. Parents also recounted tales of being instructed in songs and games at home. Children themselves spoke of such extension of their pre-pre-schooler roles, with one child explaining how she and her Dad had experimented with cling film, and tin foil to make her paper umbrella (created in pre-school) 'waterproof'. On reflection it would appear that adult recognition of remembered playful selves (perception of an unlimited self) in our own early childhood imaginings enabled us to engage in these mutually engaging play and learning experiences in authentic ways. It has been argued that such playful intuitive pedagogy is in danger of being trivialised and back grounded in favour of more expert /novice traditional teaching approaches in early year's settings, particularly in the primary school. My study findings and personal participatory roles in this study indicate a value in adopting playful pedagogic roles in attempting to access children's cultural words. Such roles infer a fluidity of identity moving from expert to novice in respectful collaborative shared meaning making processes with children. There is also much to be learned from observing the fluidity of identity and mutuality children themselves share in play and the shifting perspectives this affords them as they creatively strive to preserve and sustain their collectively negotiated play themes.

Throughout this study, my research role and links to an academic community of learners was facilitated in various ways. I availed of modular and other supports from U.C.C. including competing and participating in the annual Doctoral Showcase. The Showcase provides Ph.D. researchers (across disciplines) opportunities to present their studies and engage the interest of non-specialist audiences. Similarly, the Boolean on-line Journal (U.C.C.) affords dissemination of Ph.D. study findings and I participated in workshops leading to publication of a paper related to my thesis in this journal (Boolean on line Journal 2014). Latterly, I have enjoyed the experience of engaging in peer reviews of papers submitted for publication in the Boolean. This challenged me to a mutuality that allowed me to both separate from and (paradoxically) draw on my own areas of study in order to connect with and explore the perspectives of other Ph.D. students presenting findings from other disciplines. I have also enjoyed connecting with the community of

early years participants (practitioners, teachers/lecturers, policy makers, academic writers) through the annual OMEP Ireland conference along with experience of presentation and publication of papers based on my Masters and Ph.D. studies.

Leaving the fieldwork site, meant moving on to a deeper stage of reflection and interpretive analysis, a somewhat lonely process compared to participation within the roles and relationships of the vibrant and evolving early learning community of Rainbow Road. However, initial feelings of disconnectedness on leaving the field of study were alleviated as I availed of the modular support (available throughout my thesis) provided by U.C.C. This support connected me to other researchers within and outside of my field of study. My connectedness to the broader community of ECCE continues to be supported through my membership of ground up and ground breaking organisations such as OMEP Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland and Start Strong. The literature on transitions highlights the significance of building continuities at key times of transition. It has furthermore emphasised that the narrower the gap between the home habitus and the secondary habitus the better the chance of a smooth transition. Positive transitions have been identified where children experience a sense of well-being and belonging and feeling able to contribute to and participate in their communities. In the context of the particular pre-school community of this study, there were many indicators of transitions capital within the community including good architectural design, and resources, and experienced staff educated to degree level. Children's access to resources in the home habitus (including books, technology, memberships of clubs etc.) also afforded them the possibility of positive experiences of transition.

Even in such circumstances, discontinuities occurred and some children struggled to cope, adapt to and feel a sense of well-being and belonging in pre-school. Some implications for the adult mediating role in this process arose including the importance of opportunities to observe, share, discuss and document children's play and learning. 'Talk matters' (Goouch 2010) and children, parents, teachers and researchers throughout this study exhibited moments of transitional thinking as we negotiated our participatory identities in Rainbow Road. Not all transition is necessarily positive, and not all negotiations end in agreement

but if what is reified (taken for granted) fails to be questioned at policy or practice level, then a community and related communities of practice can stagnate and find themselves stuck in ways that no longer meet with the changing needs of their participants. Challenging what is reified, questions the taken for granted and opens the possibility of change and transformation. Barbara Rogoff and her colleagues (2001, p. 3) recommend practice whereby:

> *learning activities are planned by children as well as adults, and where parents and teachers not only foster childcare's learning but also learn from their own involvement with children.*

The participatory affordances of such approaches require that adults relinquish the desire to always be the experts, or the tendency to view adulthood as the pinnacle of development. On a personal level, this perspective has proved both challenging but also freeing and enlightening within and outside of my professional roles. Recognising life in terms of participatory affordances within and across the communities of practices we inhabit and negotiate means constantly shifting perspectives. The transitions in thinking this requires is not always comfortable but it does open potential to play with possibilities and collaboratively negotiate creative solutions to problems. At this key time of transition in Irish ECCE the traditional understanding of early years care and education as a parental rather than a societal responsibility, has been challenged and found wanting. Quality in ECCE has been understood in this study as a process of continuous negotiation to meet with shifting social and cultural needs. Quality matters in pre-school and other early years contexts prior to pre-school and beyond. Quality comes at a cost. The need for increasing Government investment in terms of time, resources and opportunities for early years practitioners to access continuous professional development have been established, the cost of not doing so is simply too high. Affording children, parents and teachers greater participatory opportunities in pre-school and other early years contexts opens the possibility of developing identities (for all participants) that bridge new social and cultural settings. In this way, transition experiences can act as a tool or catalyst for change along diverse developmental paths extending across the life cycle and unto future generations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter of Consent for Parents of Child Participants

Date: 26th September 2011

To: *Parents of Rainbow Road Pre-school*

Address: Researcher

Dear Parent/s,

My name is Frances Clerkin. I am currently in the second year of a research Ph.D. (Education) with University College Cork. Since March of this year I have been working on a voluntary basis for two mornings per week in your child's pre-school. I am now seeking your permission to conduct research here for my degree.

My initial early years training and work experience was in the Montessori method of education, St. Nicholas Montessori College, Dun Laoghaire (1986). I have a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies, from University College Cork (2007). In 2009 I was awarded a European Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care, Dublin Institute of Technology. In recent years I have worked on a part-time basis in primary school resource education and as a tutor to adults seeking vocational (FETAC) qualifications in childcare.

My research interest centres around the transition from home to pre-school and its significance as an important new stage in many children's lives. My interest has been influenced by recent early years educational initiatives in Ireland including the introduction of a universal free pre-school year and the launch of 'Aistear' a National Early Years Framework supported by 'Síolta' a National Quality Framework. My research asks what matters at the personal level in the every day world of children's lived experiences? How do children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school? The intention is to gain insights from everyday practice as to what matters to and for children in pre-school. Ultimately the aim is to raise awareness of the vital importance of children's early education whilst emphasising children's own perspectives and expertise in their day to day lived experiences.

During the past few months I have become familiar with the everyday rhythm and routines of the pre-school. In getting to know the children I expressed an interest in their 'stories', what interests them individually and collectively and why. I would like with your permission to record data on these everyday interactions with the children. This would involve written observational notes, some sample photographs of artwork etc. that the children may wish to share, and also some audio recordings during large or small group times. It will be necessary for me to refer to this data in my thesis. I also request permission to use some of this data for any related presentations/articles for the duration of my study. The identities of the children, the teachers and the school will be changed to preserve anonymity.

I hereby request your permission to allow your child to participate in my early years research. I will also be seeking children's informed consent by explaining the purpose of my note taking etc. in simple terms for them to understand. If at any point children seem uncomfortable and/or express discomfort about participation, they will be reassured that this is acceptable and entirely their own choice to withdraw or to participate again at other times if they so wish.

It has been a privilege and pleasure to be involved in the everyday practices of 'Rainbow Road' pre-school (name changed). I would greatly appreciate your support in the participation of your children in my study. Should you have any queries in this regard please feel free to speak to me (Mondays and Fridays at pre-school) or contact me at my student email address

(email address)

Yours sincerely,

_____

Frances Clerkin
Ph.D. Student (Education)
University College Cork

Permission Form for participation of pre-school children in Ph.D. Research of Frances Clerkin

Permission for your child to participate in this early years research

Yes/No _____

Signature /s _____

_____

I would be grateful if you would please sign and return this page to myself or a member of staff at your earliest convenience.

_____
Frances Clerkin
Ph.D. Student, (Education)
University College Cork

Appendix 2: Letter of Consent for Parent Interviews

Date:

Researcher Address

Dear Parent,

I am conducting Doctoral research under the supervision of Professor Kathy Hall and Dr. Anna Ridgway, University College Cork. The study is concerned with young children's transitions from home to pre-school and their experiences of membership of a pre-school community over a full school year. In this regard I hope to conduct interviews with parents of children who have had a long term experience of attending this pre-school. I would greatly appreciate hearing your views about this transition process. The interview (if consented to) will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes and will take place in the office of the pre-school at an agreed early morning time.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. Attached herewith is a consent form which I invite you to look at. Should you decide to participate in this interview you will be required to sign the attached form. I would like to assure you that the identity of all participants in the study will be protected in any reports of the study. This means that real names will not be used, any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous. Please note that you have the option of withdrawing before the interview commences (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinuing after data collection has started, in which case data collected would be destroyed. The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. This study has been reviewed by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

If you need any further information in relation to the study and interview process and wish to contact me outside of school hours please contact me at (telephone number provided)or at my email address which is (student email address provided)

If you agree to take part in the interview, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Yours faithfully,

Frances Clerkin
PhD Student
University College Cork

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in Frances Clerkin's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Frances Clerkin to be audio-recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)
I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I give permission to be contacted if a follow-up interview (via telephone) is requested at a later date.

Yes..... No.....

Signed……. Date…….

Appendix 3: Letter of Consent for Teacher Interviews

Date

Researcher address

Dear Teacher,

As part of the requirements for a PhD Degree at University College Cork I have to carry out a research study. The study is concerned with young children's transitions from home to pre-school and their experiences of membership of a pre-school community over a full school year. The study will involve interviews with members of staff. Questions will be drawn from my fieldwork observational data and some of the informal discussions we have engaged in regarding children's experiences of everyday practices in the pre-school. The interview (if consented to) will take approximately an hour and will take place in the office at an agreed suitable time. You have been asked to take part because of your valuable experience as a member of staff of this pre-school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Attached herewith is a consent form for your perusal. Should you decide to participate in this study you will be required to sign this form.. Please note that you have the option of withdrawing from the study (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinuing after data collection has started, in which case data collected would be destroyed. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous. The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisors, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal. I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

Yours faithfully

Frances Clerkin
PhD Student
University College Cork

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in Frances Clerkin's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Frances Clerkin to be audio-recorded

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)
I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I give permission to be contacted if a follow-up interview is requested at a later date
Yes..... No.....

Signed……. Date……

Appendix 4: Letter of Ethical Approval from University College Cork

ucc
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

Oifig an Leas - Uachtaráin Taighde agus Nuálaíochta
Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation

Urlár 4, Bloc E,
Áras na hEolaíochta Bia,
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh,
Bóthar an Choláiste,
Corcaigh, Éire.

4th Floor, Block E,
Food Science Building,
University College Cork,
College Road, Cork, Ireland.

T +353 (0)21 4903500
E vpresearch@ucc.ie
www.ucc.ie

Frances Clerkin,
Dept of Education

18th May 2012

Dear Frances,

Thank you for submitting your research (project entitled Pre-school matters and what matters in pre-school practices? Young children's transitions from 'novice' to 'experienced' members of an Irish pre-school community #127) to SREC for ethical perusal. I am pleased to say that we see no ethical impediment to your research as proposed and we are happy to grant approval.

We wish you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

S Hammond

Sean Hammond
Chair of Social Research Ethics Committee

Professor Anita R. Maguire BSc PhD CChem MRSC
Vice President for Research and Innovation

Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh
National University of Ireland, Cork

Appendix 5: Schedule of Typical Daily Routines in Rainbow Road

Morning transitions – Meeting and greeting routines, 8.30 a.m. To 9.00 a.m.
Leader Teacher greets children and parents, and notes attendance on register.
Self-registration: photographs placed on child eye-level wall chart. Children place name tag on coat hook. Change to slippers for indoors, lunch boxes given to teacher for storage. Children say goodbyes to parents/carers and choose from a wide range of activities and resources indoors. Part-time teacher and volunteers often engaged by children into various play activities such as 'hide and seek'.

Morning 'Ring' – 9.00 a.m – 9.30 a.m.
Children's chairs are placed in a circle with their names and symbols. Late arrivals have their chairs awaiting them in the circle..Teachers guide the children in singing the 'good morning' and 'what's the weather' introductory songs followed by the 'Show and tell' routine where each child can show and/or speak about an item they bring from home. Children are encouraged but not obliged to participate (apart from listening and turn-taking) during this process. At about 9.15 a.m. (this can vary) a teacher will introduce the morning structured activity (arts, crafts, cookery).

The Structured Activity – 9.30 – 10.00 a.m.
Chairs are moved to the arts and crafts area and seated around tables. All children encouraged to participate and complete the activity, guidance or scaffolding is provided particularly if children appear reluctant to participate. On completion of the structured activity children leave the tables and seek out free- play activities**.**

'**Free-Play' – 10.00 - 10.30 a.m.**
Children choose from a range of play choices and resources. Teachers regularly mediate the participation of more novice participants in group activities such as making play-dough, water-play or board games with rules. Older more experienced children may also choose to participate in these play choices or request adult help to stage a particular play theme (building houses/dens etc.). Younger and older children regularly recruit adults to read to them in the 'Resting Loft'.

Clean-up and bathroom routines- 10.30 – 10.45 a.m.
'Clean up' is announced by the shaking of a tambourine (Children take turns at this coveted task). There follows visits to the toilets and hand washing**.**

Snacktime and the transition outdoors - 10.45 a.m. - 11.00 a.m.
Children and adults have a snack and converse together. As children finish they put their lunchboxes away and change into waterproof clothes and boots for outdoors, with teacher assistance (if and when required). Each day leaders are appointed and two lines are formed at the back door (one for boys and one for girls).

Outdoor play – 11.00 a.m. – 11.30 a.m. (approximately) Time extended during hot weather and tables moved outdoor s for snacktime. Children have a choice of outdoor activities, from digging and planting to sandplay, football, their own socio-dramatic play themes or playing on swings and a slide. The latter has specific rules of engagement including turn-taking and being conscious of their own and other children's safety

Transition indoors – 11.30 a.m. - 12.00 Inside time is announced by a teacher and the children come back inside, remove waterproofs and wellies, wash hands and participate in Circle Time interactive songs, (The 'Goodbye song') games and stories until home time/after school care transition.

Teacher 'Talk time' - review of the day, 12.00 – 12.30 approximately
The teachers clean up, and informally discuss the day's events as well as make plans for the day or week ahead and adopt strategies to address particular issues of concern.

Appendix 6: Interview Protocols – Teacher Interviews

Semi – Structured interview schedule with Teachers

Mid June 2012
Teachers will be provided with transcripts of observational data and field notes recorded related to informal discussions that took place in the setting over the course of the fieldwork. An initial group discussion will take place where they are invited to ask any questions, clarify or change details or add new observations to the data.
End of June 2012 or early July
Approximately 35 minutes(time to be arranged) with each Teacher. Questions relate to transition practices, and adults perspectives on their roles, including their theoretical and folk pedagogical understandings of the purposes aims and goals of pre-school practices. Questions are based on literature review and other questions arising from informal conversations with staff in relation to everyday practices.

Theme – Relationship matters (linking teachers primary and secondary habitus)
Reflecting the multiple perspectives (social cultural and historical) influences of individuals influencing how they negotiate practice in pre-school.

Could you tell me how you initially became interested in working with young children?
Could you tell me about your educational qualifications and how long you have worked in the field?
How long have you worked in this setting?
What do you think are the main purposes of pre-school?
How would you describe your role in pre-school?
How important do you think is the school's relationship with parents to children's success in pre-school?
What do you enjoy most about your role and why?
What are the most challenging aspects of your role and why?

Theme 'Play matters' – Pre-school as field of play and play and learning
These questions seek insights in to the explicit and explicit rules of play at work in the setting (pedagogic discourse).

Is there a waiting list? How do you prioritise which children get a place in pre-school?
What is the dominant social class of the families in this setting?
How would you describe the curricular approach adopted here?
Do children have much say in how the curriculum is developed?
How do you identify themes/make plans?
Do you notice any gender differences in children's choices of play/activities in pre-school?
If so where do you think these differences come from?
How do you know if a child is adapting well to pre-school?
What might give you cause for concern? How would you address this?
How do you assess the progress of the group as a whole?
How is the child's initial transition to pre-school supported?
How are children prepared or are there any special practices for the transition to primary school?

Theme – Communication matters – macro and micro influences on what is sayable and doable in pre-school (reification and practice)

Some topical current issues with regard to early years policy and practices in Ireland are included in the following questions. These questions seek information on the expectations, hopes and values teachers invest in children's pre-school education.

Can you think of any ways that children have shaped or changed practices in the setting?
There are talks of introducing a second free pre-school year in Ireland how do you feel about this?
There are very few men working in the early years sector in Ireland I include the junior and senior infant classes in primary school, would you like to see this change? Why? (to whatever answer given) do you think computer technology has a place in pre-school, I mean in relation to children's participation?
How are children with special needs, additional needs or languages other than English as their first language supported in the pre-school?
If you could wave a magic wand what would you change about pre-school policy and practices in Ireland?

Appendix 7: Interview Protocols - Parent Interviews

20 – 30 minutes interviews with parents of 10 key informant children to be held late May/early June 2012 at agreed morning times in the office of the school. My questions are based on literature review and also questions arising from daily practices and previous informal discussions with children, parents and staff of the pre-school.

T**heme – Relationship matters (linking primary and secondary habitus)**
The following questions are aimed at accessing information about the primary habitus of the child.

What would a typical day for (child's name) have been like prior to starting pre-school?
What do you feel are the main purposes of pre-school?
How did you decide to send your child to this pre-school?
Did the introduction of the universal free pre-school year have any influence on your decision to send your child to pre-school?
How did you prepare (child's name) or did you do anything special to prepare him/her for pre-school?
How does (child's name) spend the rest of the day when pre-school finishes?
Can you recall your own first day/s in pre-school or school?

Theme - *Play matters* – Pre-school as field of play and play and learning
The following questions seek illumination on how the children experience, form identities and adapt to new roles in pre-school. It is also intended to elicit information on the types of home/school links available and the types of practices that may support transitions in this pre-school.

Can you recall the first few in pre-school days and what the initial transition was like for (child's name)?
What helped (child's name) settle in?
If they have an older sibling/s who attended this pre-school/another pre-school
How was the experience similar or different?
How does he/she speak to you about things he/she brings home from pre-school?
Over the year have you noticed changes in what matters or seems important to (name) about pre-school?
Has (name) spoken to you about going to primary school?
How do you feel about this next transition for (name)?

Theme – *Communication matters* – macro and micro influences on what is sayable and doable in pre-school (reification and practice)
Some topical current issues with regard to early years policy and practices in Ireland are included in the following questions. These questions seek information on the expectations, hopes and values parents invest in their children's pre-school education.

There are talks of extending the universal free pre-school year to two years, do you think this is a good idea?
How important do you think staff qualifications are when it comes to implementing good practices in pre-school?
There are very few men working in early years education? How do you feel about that?
Does (child's name) show an interest in computer technology at home?
How do you feel about computer technology as part of pre-school learning?
What are your hopes for (child's name) as an adult? Do you imagine him/her in a particular type of career?

Appendix 8: Extracts from Rainbow Road Pre-School Policy and Procedures

Mission Statement -

'Rainbow Road Childcare centre is committed to providing high quality childcare and after school care in (names location). As a community based project we strive for:
- social integration.
- equality, irrespective of gender, race, religion or disability.
- A safe, developmentally appropriate environment which respects, supports and celebrates children's individual needs.
- An environment which encourages children to express themselves freely and spontaneously and promotes an enthusiasm for learning'.

Supporting positive behaviour:

(extract)

'Staff role model considerate and appropriate behaviour at all times. We try to pre-empt a child's negative behaviour with diversion, offering an alternative path. We try to foster empathy for the injured part, be it another child or piece of play school property. This may be done through a loving gesture, for example hugging the 'injured' doll, or a story.'

'**Parental involvement, responsibility and time keeping**'

'You are encouraged to visit us during a normal play school day before your child begins. When the school term begins we ask you to come into the entrance foyer and encourage your child to hand up their coat, stick up their name, picture and put on their slippers. Thereafter you should say goodbye. Children are very sensitive to hesitation. They are also sensitive to other children's mums or dads staying in play school while theirs leaves. Of course we will make exceptions where a child is struggling to settle in'.

'**Communication**'
'Please keep communication open with staff about your child's fears or experiences of play school. Sometimes a few words in a staff member's ear is all that's needed but if you feel that you'd like to discuss your child in more detail please contact the leader after the normal play school hours.'

Appendix 9: Extracts from Teacher Observation Schedules

Phase 1 (February to June 2011)- Samples of teacher observational and assessment data extracted from Pre-school Observational Schedules of Mark and Marie.

Key development indicators from Aistear Curriculum Framework learning aims and goals were applied as assessment tools by the teachers in Rainbow Roa
Sample analysis tools extracted from Pre-school observation schedules
(Note: LG refers to learning goal)

Social development
(Identity and belonging Aim 1, 2, 3.)
Taking care of ones own needs (Well Being Aim 4 LG2, 3, Aim 2 LG1, 2, 4)
Expressing feelings in words (communicating Aim2 LG1, 4, Aim 4 LG1)
Building relationships with children and adults (Well being Aim 1LG1, 5)
Creating and experiencing collaborative play (Well being Aim 1 LG6 Aim 3 LG2)
Dealing with social conflict (Well being Aim 1 LG 2, 3, 6)
Participating in group routines (Identity and belonging Aim2 LG1)
Being sensitive to the feelings, interests and needs of others (Identity and Belonging Aim 1 LG3)
Take turns (communicating Aim 1 LG 2, 3)
Negotiate with others (communicating Aim 1 LG 2, 3)

Cognitive development
Mathematics (communicating Aim 3 LG6 (Exploring and Thinking) Aim 1 LG5, 6 Aim 3 LG5, Aim 4LG5)
Comparing attributes (longer/shorter, bigger/smaller
Arranging several things one after another in a series or pattern
Fitting one ordered set of objects to another through trial and error (small cup +saucer), medium cup and medium saucer, large cup and large saucer.
Comparing the number of things in two sets to determine 'more, fewer, the same number'.
Arranging two sets of objects in one-to one correspondence
Counting objects
Puts puzzle together.

Mark 1/9/10 - (social)

7/09/10

Mark sat at the play dough table for a long time listening to the conversation between between Sarah and Kate. He didn't join the conversation much, except to say occasionally, 'Look what I made'.

8/09/10 Language Development

'Mark joins Aideen at the table to do a puzzle. Aideen says 'No that's mine'. Mark says 'I have an idea, we could share, I'll do the dinosaur one and you do that one'.

09/10/2011

'Mark is happy to play by himself with the dinosaurs. The boys are building a castle close by but Mark shows no interest in joining in. He chats to himself while he plays.'

In terms of physical/motor development the observational data recorded was all taken indoors, but several photographs were displayed of Mark enthusiastically climbing, running or playing swingball outside. All of the indicators of physical motor development were ticked.

Sample Extracts from Marie's Observational Schedule
31st of January 2011 (Language)

Today was Marie's first day and she had great fun playing with playdough. She chatted while she played. 'Look at what me doing?', 'I'm not wearing shoes today', 'Look I made an ice-cream', 'roll roll roll it out (smiling while she rolls it out), 'now look at my sheep'. Sings 'Roll roll, rolly, roll roll.

7th February 2011 (Language)

Marie was playing with the playdough today and she chatted (to teacher) while she made 'tookies'. 'It was my Dad's birthday yesterday!, he opened my present, we had toffee 'take' (cake). I'm making tookies (cookies).

21/03/11 (Social development)

The morning was much better. Her Mum stayed a short while, she cried briefly but Sue got her settled within five minutes. This is a great improvement on last week. She played puzzles with Frances (Researcher) and Joey at play time.

Appendix 10: Sample Vignettes

Vignette 14 - The Crafty Girls - Spiders in Envelopes

(October 2011)

A black clump of wool that 'looks like a spider' (personal understanding) inspires Marie(k) to make a spider. 'Marie decides she needs 'a circle' for the body and wool for the legs. The girls (Helen (e), Monica (e) Brenda (n) Marian (n) and Eileen (n) pick up on this theme deciding to make spiders and 'ladybirds'. Helen seeks my help to make 'an envelope' for her ladybird. Marie cuts bits of black string for her 'spider's legs' and attaches another string to the body (to 'hang from the ceiling at home'). The girls follow Marie's lead (interpersonal). The activity becomes frenetic as the children descend on me seeking help with cutting circles and 'folding' envelopes.

Vignette 15 - Thinking about Thinking

(October 2011)

At home time all of the children have been picked up except Mark(k) whose Mum has been delayed. Mark is looking a little sad and asks 'am I the last today?' (On a personal level Mark seems to be feeling isolated or lonely). ***Frances*** *(smiling) 'No Leona and I are'.* ***Mark*** *'well this is your work not your home, teachers are always the last.' (inferring this is an interpersonal understanding that should not require stating). I agree with Mark and ask 'do you think some children think that we live in the school?' Mark ponders over this for a moment and then smiling recalls 'when I was three and a half I thought that the teachers lived here, then I started to think where are the beds?' (cultural/community understanding that there is a world beyond pre-school). I laugh and say 'that was clever, we would have needed beds'.*

Vignette 16 - Flying to Disneyland

(December 2011)

Marie (n)sits in the Home Corner at a desk with a keyboard and glancing up remarks 'this is my aeroplane'. ***Frances*** *'are you the pilot today?(The aeroplane theme has been building for a few weeks).* ***Marie:*** *'Yes', where are the tickets?'. I tear several small sheets from my pocket notebook (just as I have done in previous play episodes) following Marie's instruction to 'write my name'.* ***Sam (n)*** *'all aboard'. Sam 'processes' my ticket by running it under the keyboard and out the other side. The same actions (writing and processing of tickets) are repeated as Neil(n) and Valerie(n) climb on board. Marie 'fasten your seatbelts please'.* ***Marie*** *'Sam, you can help drive the plane' Marie sits next to Sam and announces 'we are going to Disneyland'.*

Vignette 17 - X Factor

(May 2012)

Curiosity overcomes me as I hear Marie(k) issuing orders and directing some kind of game, I peek around the entrance hall door and ask 'can I watch?' Valerie(n) Marie(k) and Marian (n) chorus 'yes'. Marie sits on a wooden bench Valerie(n) and Marian (n) stand in front of her and begin to sing, after a few seconds Marie makes what I recognise as a buzzer sound associated with T.V. Game shows. 'Not good' she says 'next', This time Valerie and Marian execute some dance steps and Marie again makes the negative buzzer sound. 'now sing' she commands and the girls burst in to song again, ***Marie*** *'when I press this leg (pats left leg) it means good and when I press this leg (pats right leg)it mean bad'. Rosie(n2) who has been sitting next to Marie says 'me now'. Marie agrees 'Okay your turn' and Valerie and Marian sit down on a bench. Rosie stands (directly in front of Marie). She begins to sing a song which she appears to be making up as she goes along,* ***Marie*** *'ok, now dance' if Rosie hears this command she does not acknowledge it, Marie presses her right leg 'buzzer' and says 'that is very good', We all applaud (lead by Marie). Rosie smiles sweetly before sitting down to allow Valerie and Marian to continue.*

Vignette 18 - The Gruffalo

(May 2012)

Mark and Neill appropriate me to play 'hide and seek' Neil 'You count Frances and we will hide'. As I finish counting to 20 a nod from Leona alerts me that I am positioned close to a hidden child. I wander close to the hiding spot and notice the fur trim on Mark's hood, and the 'dinosaur teeth' markings on his wellie boots. I am reminded of the infamous 'Gruffalo' (popular storybook in the setting). Mark has managed to find just enough space between the shed and the garden wall to secrete himself. Several children shriek 'she found us' as I peek through the shed window. Finally only Mark remains uncaptured. Neil yells 'where are you Mark?' leading a search party looking in bins, behind shrubs, underneath the swing without finding Mark. Frances 'Oh no, I think I see something furry with sharp teeth hiding behind the shed'. The children shriek in mock fear, and Mark chuckles as he finally reveals himself.

Appendix 11: Summary of Types of ECCE Available in the Republic of Ireland.

The Report of the National Forum on Early childhood Education, (1998, p.80) states: 'Accessing data on the range of services available outside of the primary sector is complex'. However the annual surveys by Pobal for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs go to practically every early care and education service in the Republic of Ireland. The high response rate (72% in 2012 Survey) means it provides the most comprehensive data currently available. Within the mix of different types of service, the terms that services use to describe themselves sometimes overlap. 54% of services describe themselves as a 'playgroup or pre-school', 32% describe themselves as providing a 'crèche or nursery', and 40% describe themselves as 'Montessori' (Pobal 2013).

Junior and senior infant classes of Primary School:
The compulsory age for the state funded primary school start is 6. In practice almost 40% of 4-year-olds and virtually all 5-year-olds currently attend the infant classes of the primary school (Department of Education and Skills 2013). The state is responsible for the curriculum, inspection and regulation of National schools. Primary schools follow a standardised subject based curriculum (NCCA 2013) catering for children between the ages of 4 and 12. Primary school teachers have degree level qualifications as well as opportunities for ongoing professional training and development.

Early Start Pre-school Programme
The Department of Education funds and oversees the Early Start intervention Programme (initiated in 1994) which currently operates in 40 primary schools countrywide in designated areas of urban disadvantage. This one year intervention scheme caters for children aged 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months deemed at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The stated aims of the programme are 'to enhance overall development, help prevent school failure and offset the effects of social disadvantage' (Department of Education and Skills 2013). Parental involvement is identified as central to the programmes effectiveness. Recognition is given of the parent/guardians as children's prime educators and also so as to encourage parent/guardian ongoing involvement in their children's education.

Pre-schools/Playgroups

Pre-schools (sometimes referred to as playgroups) delivering sessional care and education to 3 – 5 year olds are the most widespread form of ECCE outside of formal schooling in the Republic of Ireland. A majority of these are privately owned with the remainder being community based. As well as structural funding, and funding for the free-pre-school year for eligible children; the Government provide funding for participating community/not for profit childcare services to support parents on low incomes to avail of reduced childcare costs. As at 10 September 2013, 4259 services were contracted to the ECCE programme (free pre-school year). Of those 1100 services are community services and 3159 are private services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2013).

Naíonraí
These Irish speaking or bilingual playgroups evolved from the work of the IPPA (currently ECI). They too provide play based (Irish medium) sessional services for 3-5 year olds. They are co-ordinated by an *Forbairt Naíonraí Teo* (*FNT*) an all-Ireland voluntary organisation founded in 2003 as the successor of *An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teo.* and financially supported by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Their most recent figures for the 2012/2013 pre-school year indicate 182 naíonraí groups have registered membership of FNT in the 26 counties and outside of the Gaeltacht (FNT 2013).

Montessori
Approximately 450 Montessori Schools/pre-schools exist in Ireland (IMEB 2013). They provide services for children aged three to six years (usually sessional) through the Montessori method. Generally these are fee-paying private services. However many services (it is not known how many) have Montessori trained and accredited staff and may describe themselves as *Montessori'* settings but may not have a Montessori accredited service. Practitioners of the Montessori method receive training through the AMI (Association Montessori International or the St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland. The Irish Montessori Education Board was established in 1997 and has established standards for accreditation of Montessori schools in Ireland (IMEB 2013). Accredited Montessori settings provide a specially prepared aesthetically appealing environments, where each child moves at her/his own pace. Children are encouraged to exert choice as they explore self correcting materials and sensorial materials which include a 'control of error' in their design. The adult occupies a central role within the specially prepared environment and through close observation of children can support them to move towards increasing levels of self regulation and independence (Lillard 2005).

Full Day Care:
Nurseries/Crèches

Nursery schools /crèches offer full-time as well as part-time services for children from birth to age six. These settings are usually private fee-paying and aimed at catering for the needs of working parents. The type of curriculum provided varies and may include any of the afore-mentioned play based approaches. For those services administering the free pre-school year higher capitation rates are available for more highly qualified staff. Latterly many pre-schools operate with a full-day care system often providing the wraparound services of afterschool care.

Childminders/Family Daycare
Under the Childcare Act 1991 a person providing child minding services for more than three pre-school children from different families has an obligation to notify the HSE of this service. The benefits of registration for all childminders are promoted as are the supports available in terms of funding and training under the National guidelines for childminders (National Childcare Strategy 2006/2010). In practice many children are cared for through informal and unregistered arrangements between relatives, neighbours or friends. In 2006 the INTO estimated that 14% of all mothers with children aged four or under avail of child minding suggesting approximately 40,000. Start Strong (2013) advise that there are now 50,000 young children in Ireland being cared for by paid childminders working in their own homes.

Approximately 20% of Childminders in Ireland are Registered Members of *Childminding Ireland***,** implementing the Síolta Quality Standards (Childminding Ireland 2013).

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