

Marino Institute of Education

The Professional Identity of Junior Infant
Teachers in a sample of Vertical Primary
Schools

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requirements of the award of the degree of
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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work.

Wherever contributions from others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. This research was carried out under the guidance of Dr. Karin Bacon at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Ria Curtin

Date: 5th June 2018

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Abstract

Internationally Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) ranges from birth to six years of age. In Ireland, ECEC provision spans both preschool settings and Junior and Senior Infant classes within primary schools. This split system of ECEC provision (Moloney & Pope, 2015) would seem to suggest that the role of Junior Infant teachers, who educate children between four and six years of age during their first year of primary school, is to provide both ECEC and a formal primary school education. Therefore, the aim of this research was to enable Junior Infant teacher participants to voice their personal opinions and experiences regarding the factors that impact upon their role and identity within vertical primary schools.

The Bioecological Model of Human Development and the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), although originally concerned with child development, have been utilised as a framework to explore the personal, intrapersonal, environmental and time centred components that impact upon the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers. A case study research approach was adopted and qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten practicing Junior Infant teachers across a variety of vertical primary school settings in Ireland. The data was analysed in detail and the findings are presented within the PPCT model, mirroring the arrangement of the emerging themes within the literature review. Themes explored included: the profile of Junior Infant teachers, initial teacher education, relationships with significant others, the classroom environment and the split system of ECEC provision in Ireland.

Overall, the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers emerged as a highly complex issue that is influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors. This research

suggests Junior Infant teachers hold a unique position and face many challenges in their effort to establish and maintain a professional identity as they provide ECEC alongside a formal primary school education to Junior Infant children within vertical primary school settings. Furthermore, this research revealed while participants thoroughly enjoyed their role as Junior Infant teachers and viewed their work as crucial, their role is considered by them to be diminished by colleagues and society who fail to recognise the importance and value of the first year of primary school and those who teach this age group.

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Abbreviations

B. Ed	Bachelor of Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DYCA	Department of Youth and Child Affairs
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
FPSY	Free Preschool Year
GOI	Government of Ireland
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PPCT	Person-Process-Context-Time
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter presents the background to this research. The focus and objectives of the research are described as well as the content of the study.

Background to the Study

Internationally Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) ranges from birth to six years of age. In Ireland, a split system of ECEC provision exists as it spans both preschool settings and Junior and Senior Infant classes within primary schools (Moloney & Pope, 2015). This research examines both national and international literature to explore the professional identity of ECEC educators with a particular focus on those who educate children between the ages of four and six.

Teachers who educate children between four and six years of age during their first year of primary school in Ireland are known as Junior Infant teachers. It should be noted a variety of terms exist regarding the name attributed to the equivalent of Junior Infants internationally, as demonstrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Sample of Terms Used for the Equivalent of Junior Infants Internationally

Country	Equivalent of Junior Infants
England	Reception
Northern Ireland	Foundation Stage
USA/Canada	Kindergarten
Scotland	Primary One
Finland	ECEC (from birth to age five)
Germany/Sweden/Denmark	Kindergarten
New Zealand	Junior Classes
Australia	Pre-Primary
France	L'École Maternelle
Spain	Ciclo Infantil
Italy	Scuola Materna

This research focuses on teachers within vertical primary schools which cater for children between Junior Infants and Sixth Class. It was deemed necessary to exclude infant primary schools, which educate children from typically Junior Infants to Second Class, from this study as a difference between the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within infant schools and Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools might be anticipated. The relevant literature, as outlined in Chapter Two, has also determined these parameters as it suggests Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools have more non-infant teacher colleagues than those within infant schools and are perhaps more likely to garner less respect and gain fewer promotion opportunities than colleagues who teach the older classes (INTO, 1986; Moloney, 2010a).

Focus and Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools. There are a number of reasons for undertaking this research. Considerable national and international research emphasises the importance of ECEC and suggests the most suitable methodologies and environments which will enable children to flourish at this sensitive and crucial age (Hayes, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Although much national research condemns the split system of ECEC provision in Ireland and the harm it may cause for the development of the child (Hayes, 2010; O'Connor & Angus 2014), there is little research which identifies the repercussions for those who educate the youngest children within formal primary school settings aside from navigating unsuitable learning environments and the use of incompatible and inappropriate curricula and pedagogies (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Horgan, 1995).

Furthermore, while numerous international studies have investigated the professional identity of ECEC educators within preschool settings (Gibson, 2013; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Moloney 2015) and the professional identity of primary school teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006), a limited amount of national research exists regarding the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers specifically (Moloney, 2010a). As a primary school teacher who has been teaching Junior Infants for five consecutive years in a large, vertical primary school in Ireland, I considered it interesting to gather the perspectives of other Junior Infant teachers regarding their identity and role alongside how they believe their role is perceived and impacted by other relevant parties and wished to explore this from a theoretical viewpoint. I also endeavoured to identify whether the literature regarding this topic correlates with the data collected from the small sample of Junior Infant teacher participants within this study.

Therefore, the overall aim of this study is to give Junior Infant teacher participants the opportunity to voice their opinions, describe their personal experiences and to answer the research question: What are teachers' perspectives of their professional identity as Junior Infant teachers and what factors impact upon this identity within vertical Irish primary schools?

Content of the Study

There are five chapters within this dissertation. This chapter presents the background, the focus and objectives and an overall description of the content of the study. Chapter Two begins with a definition of teacher professional identity as well as a description of the theoretical framework which guides this research. Following on

from this, the personal, intrapersonal, contextual and time factors which impact upon the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers will be evaluated. Firstly, personal factors including initial teacher education, duties, profile and essential characteristics of Junior Infant teachers are explored. Next, significant relationships with others including children, colleagues and parents are studied. Then, the context in which Junior Infant teachers function will be examined, in this instance Junior Infant classes in vertical primary schools in Ireland and finally time in the form of longevity amongst infant teachers will be considered.

Chapter Three outlines the context of the study and the manner in which the case study research approach was employed to gather relevant data pertaining to the research question. The interpretive paradigm which was utilised is discussed as well as the rationale for the use of the chosen qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews. Research design elements including the design of the interview schedule, the pilot interview and the sample selection method are analysed. Research analysis methods including transcription and coding are also outlined. Finally, the ethical considerations and limitations of this research are presented.

Chapter Four outlines the findings and analysis arising from the data gathered. This data has been collated and organised and is presented in themes aligned with those discussed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Five concludes this dissertation by presenting the major findings accumulated during this research. The limitations of this research and proposals for possible future research opportunities are summarised and certain recommendations are made arising from this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of both national and international literature in order to establish a contextual and conceptual basis for this research. This study aims to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers in vertical primary schools in Ireland. Internationally the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to children from birth to six years of age. The mandatory age to commence primary school in Ireland is six years of age, however, as half of all four year olds and the majority of all five and six year olds are enrolled in Junior or Senior Infant classes in Irish primary schools, the international definition of ECEC applies to both preschool and primary school settings in Ireland (Moloney & Pope, 2015). This chapter presents a review of the relevant literature regarding the professional identity of those working within ECEC, with a particular focus on those who educate children between the ages of four and six. At times within this research it will be necessary to make a distinction between ECEC educators therefore, those who specifically educate children from birth to four years of age will be referred to as preschool educators while those who educate children between the ages of four and six within formal primary school settings will be referred to as Junior Infant teachers.

A thorough investigation of the relevant literature ascertains that while there have been numerous studies regarding the professional identity of teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004) there is limited research relating specifically to the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers. This review of relevant research will begin with a definition of teacher professional identity. The proposed theoretical framework is then examined and used as a model in order to present the possible factors that impact upon the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers according to both national and international literature.

Teacher Professional Identity

The professional identity of teachers is a topic that has intrigued researchers for decades and although a plurality of views exist, much research highlights a difficulty in establishing an exact definition (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Day et al. (2006) suggest the earliest writings posit identity or sense of self as constant throughout our lifetime and the context in which one develops and exists has little bearing on identity. Contrastingly, according to Erikson (1968), identity is an act of becoming rather than being and takes a lifetime to develop. Similarly, Kerby (1991) views the formation of identity as an “ongoing process that involved the interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences as one lives through them” (as cited in Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000, p. 750).

Much research regarding teacher identity formation draws attention to the influence of the individual themselves. Kelchtermans (1993) defines teacher identity as five highly personal, interconnected features which evolve over time including self-image, task perception, self-esteem, job-motivation and future perspective. In agreement with this definition, Forde, McMahon, McPhee and Patrick (2006) suggest teacher identity rests upon one’s own intimate feelings towards the work they do including self-esteem, motivation and job satisfaction. Sachs (2005) defines teacher professional identity as a personal frame by which teachers can “construct their own ideas of how to be, how to act and how to understand their work and their place in society” (p.15). While Murray (2013) suggests ‘the self’ plays a vital role in professional identity as it determines “what a person values in their role and informs their professional practice” (p.529).

Alternatively, considerable research maintains teacher professional identity is in fact constructed in social situations. Mead (1934) suggests we learn how to be and behave by observing those around us. Similarly, MacLure (1993) proposes identity is used by people to “explain, justify and make sense of themselves in relation to others, and to the world at large” (p. 311). Reynolds (1996) claims the context or “workplace landscape” (p.77) which teachers navigate greatly influences their identity due its restrictive nature and demand for conformity. Although Tucker (2004) acknowledges the influence of relationships and expectations of others upon the professional identity of teachers, he also suggests it is impacted by multiple discourses including initial teacher education, prevailing societal expectations and government policies. While Osgood (2010) describes teacher identity formation as a product of unification involving “the interconnections between the private and the public, the emotional and the rational, the individual and the collective to reach an understanding of professionalism as a culturally, socially and politically specific discursive construct” (p.122).

Although an exact definition of teacher professional identity continues to elude researchers, ultimately this research found resonance with the definition of teacher professional identity as a dynamic, lifelong process in which teachers negotiate both internal and external expectations in an attempt to make sense of both themselves and their work as educators (Beijaard et al., 2004; Moloney, 2010a; Osgood, 2010). This view of teacher professional identity as a combination of personal, intrapersonal, contextual and time-based components is in keeping with the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) which guides this research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws upon Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Within the model, development is defined as the "phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings" which "extends over the life course, across successive generations and through historical time, both past and future" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p.793).

Bronfenbrenner's original theory, known as the Ecological Theory of Development, presents an understanding of a child's development as transactional in nature and influenced by multiple, interconnected systems including the micro-system, meso-system, macro-system, exo-system and chrono-system (see Table 2.1; Figure 2.1).

Table 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development

Microsystem	The microsystem refers to the direct settings or contexts in which the individual lives, develops and interacts most frequently with others including their home, school and neighbourhood.
Mesosystem	The mesosystem describes the links and connections between the various settings in which the individual spends most of their time such as the link between home and school.
Exosystem	The exosystem refers to how environments outside the individual's immediate setting, those which they do not directly participate in, may impact upon their lives.
Macrosystem	The macrosystem refers to the impact of cultural influences upon the individual such as the particular societal or familial beliefs, traditions and practices.
Chronosystem	The chronosystem recognises the impact of time both within the individual's life such as their age or particular stage of development and sociohistorical circumstances such as the human rights afforded to women in the year in which the individual exists.

* Adapted from Santrock (2012)

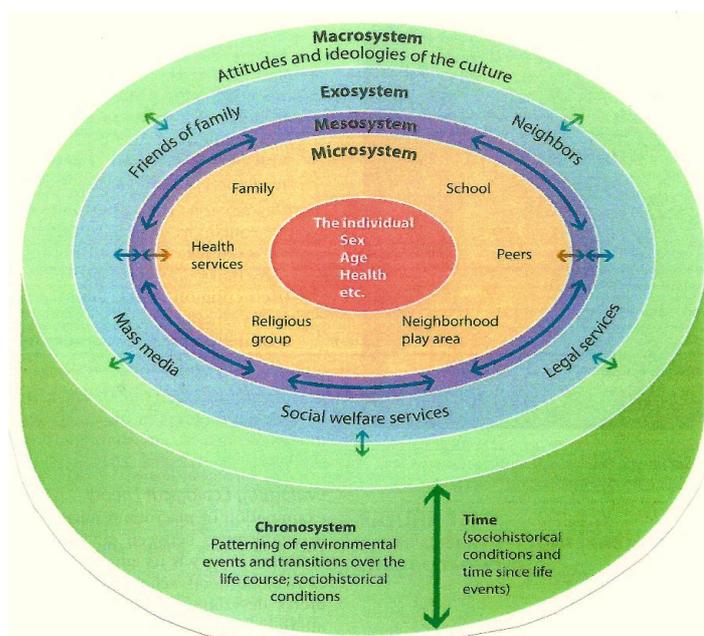


Figure 2.1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development (Santrock, 2012, p.29)

The most recent version of the model, known as the Bioecological Model of Human Development, published by Bronfenbrenner and Morris in 2006, frames child development and the five systems within the Person, Process, Context, Time (PPCT) model. Process, referred to as 'proximal processes' is a defining element within the Bioecological Model and involves repeated, reciprocal interactions between a person and others in their environment. Person refers to individual, defining characteristics which impact upon one's development and relationships with others. Context refers to the environment and society within which one develops whilst time refers to the individual's life and the historical period in which they live (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Professional Identity from a Bioecological Model Perspective

Although principally related to child development, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) refer to the Bioecological Model of Human Development as "an evolving theoretical system" (p. 793). Therefore I propose the use of this model be extended to

frame a comprehensive examination of the professional identity of the Junior Infant teacher. The Bioecological Model acts as a lens or ‘unifying structure’ (O’Toole, 2016) and facilitates a comprehensive and holistic examination of the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers. The PPCT model recognises the influence and interplay between the multiple internal and external components that influence, shape and determine teacher identity (Murray, 2013). Components to be explored within this research regarding the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers include personal contributors such as gender, skills and education, intrapersonal contributors including teacher’s relationships with the child, parents and colleagues, the impact of time upon teacher identity and the influence of both direct and indirect environments.

However, it is important to note, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) caution that “the four components of the bioecological model should be theoretically related to each other.... This means that the choice of variables to represent each of the defining properties should be based on explicit assumptions about their presumed interrelations” (p.825). Bearing this in mind the literature is presented using the PPCT framework whilst acknowledging some factors could be positioned across multiple sections of the frame.

Person

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), within the Bioecological Model, person refers to “biopsychological characteristics” (p.795), personal qualities that shape development including dispositions and resources such as “ability, experience, knowledge and skill” (p.796). Regarding teacher identity, Lightfoot and Frost (2015) propose the personal cannot be separated from the professional. Teacher identity is the sum of who one is as a unique individual rather than merely the work

one does as an educator. Therefore, the following section will refer to the manner in which the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers is influenced by personal components including their profile, characteristics, skills and education.

Duties of an Infant teacher. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) define a teacher as a person whose “professional activity involves the transmission of knowledge, attitude and skills that are stipulated to students enrolled in an educational programme” (p.26). The Teaching Council (2016) state the primary role of a teacher is to teach, with certain ethical values underpinning their teaching including respect, care, integrity and trust.

In 1983, Hurley suggested the role of a Junior Infant educator was often restricted to a "motherly soul who could count up to ten, wipe noses and tie shoelaces" (p.36). A description which the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) (1986) refuted declaring Junior Infant teachers have “the responsibility of developing the children's attitudes towards school and of laying solid foundations for their future educational progress in school” (INTO, 1986, p.14). Such views are historic and may no longer be accurate or relevant, nevertheless they are deserving of investigation within the current climate of Junior Infant education in Ireland.

Einarsdóttir (2003) suggests the role of an ECEC educator is vast and with no defined limitations placed upon it. She describes their duties as ranging from basic care needs to the overall, holistic development of the child alongside managerial and organisational duties. Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin and Vanderlee (2013) describe the ECEC educators role as “mothering, providing, performing, producing, facilitating, observing, creating environments and opportunities, role-modelling, foundation building, and being an extended member of the child’s family and community” (p.9)

and one which “resists a prescriptive and narrow quantification” (p.11). Australian Kindergarten teachers within Ohi’s (2014) study state they are expected to maintain multiple demanding roles and responsibilities including teachers as educators, pastoral care providers, communicators, leaders and advocates for ECEC in the face of complex challenges such as a lack of time, support and insufficient resources. Furthermore, Saracho (1984) states Junior Infant teachers face the additional challenging role of diagnostician of children’s individual strengths and potential learning difficulties with Van Luit (2011) suggesting “it is important to signal and diagnose problems early, so that early intervention can take place. Over time, learning difficulties can become more and more serious” (p.94). However, much research cautions against labelling children with learning difficulties at a young age due to possible misclassification or even discrimination as a label or diagnosis can last a lifetime (Ho, 2004; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

Ultimately, Flores and Day (2006) argue every teacher, no matter the age-group they teach, is tasked with acting as an educator, a model, a guide and a friend yet Einarsdóttir (2003) refutes such a claim insisting although such duties may apply to other teachers far more responsibilities and demands are generally placed upon ECEC educators. Moreover, Vincent and Braun (2010) suggest ECEC may be “a vocation” (p.208) and propose ECEC educators require an altruistic nature as the rewards involved are that of self-worth rather than of monetary value.

Essential characteristics and skills. Colker (2008) suggests effective ECEC educators require specific and unique characteristics that may differ from those necessary for educators of other age groups including “passion, perseverance, patience, flexibility, respect for young children and their families, high-energy, a love of learning, a sense of humour, authenticity and creativity” (pp.3-4).

Additionally, Campbell-Barr (2017) proposes an array of skills are essential for an ECEC educator's repertoire including "motivation for keeping up to date with practices/policies, confidence in your work/approaches..., open dialogue with colleagues, rapport with families ..., meeting children's individual needs..., emotional connection with the children" (p.50). However, Devine, Fahie and McGillicuddy (2013) argue such skills are necessary for all teachers no matter the age group they teach.

Brooke (1994) proposes ECEC educators acquire the necessary characteristics and skills through experience and interactions with children yet, are heavily influenced by what others deem 'appropriate behaviour'. Similarly, participants within Flores and Day's (2006) study suggested they became better teachers with time and experience as "they became less strict in their relationship with students and more flexible in their classroom performance" (p.228). In contrast, participants within Penn's (2011) study suggest necessary characteristics and skills within ECEC may be natural and innate rather than acquired through pre-service education.

Infant teacher education. The United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2001) declare those who teach young children must have the highest "knowledge, skill and competence, for, choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses" (p.14). Nevertheless, despite teaching a similar age range, Moloney (2010a) argues the qualifications of ECEC educators across preschools and primary schools in Ireland differs greatly. As per the Childcare Regulations, published in 2006, the Department of Health and Children (DHC) state preschools must ensure that "a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults" work directly with the children (DHC, 2006, p.37). Moloney (2015) credits the Free Preschool Year

Scheme (FPSY), established in 2010, with introducing the first mandatory training requirement for preschool educators in Ireland. In comparison, the qualification of Junior Infant teachers is strictly regulated by the Teaching Council (www.teachingcouncil.ie). A Junior Infant teacher working within a primary school in Ireland holds a compulsory Bachelor of Education Degree (B.Ed), earned through a minimum of four years at undergraduate level in a college of education or a similar qualification such as a Higher Diploma or Primary Masters in Education. Upon completion the teacher may educate all children in primary school between Junior Infants and Sixth Class.

Similarly, the content of pre-service education offered to preschool and primary school educators contrasts vastly. Yarrow (2015) argues the initial education provided to Kindergarten teachers, the equivalent of Junior Infant teachers in America, focuses on abstract, formal and detached child development theory whereas preschool educators receive practical childcare skills in their initial vocational training. Likewise, Vincent and Braun (2011) propose the knowledge recognised as crucial for ECEC educators is “intuitive, contextualised and personalised” (p.778) and extends beyond the theoretical, abstract knowledge delivered in pre-service education. The INTO speculates, although “early childhood education comprises a component part” of initial teacher education courses in Ireland, “in comparison to many other European countries, they are limited in the time allocated to the topic (ECEC) and the scope for specialisation that they offer” (INTO, 2005, p.23). The White Paper (GOI, 1999) which establishes Government policy on early childhood education expands upon this further by stating,

The methodologies and skills required of early childhood educators differ from those required in formal primary education. Those in ECCE should have skills

and expertise in the areas of early development, learning through play as well as traditional education theory and ideally training should draw from the disciplines of care and welfare as well as education. This has been identified as a weakness in the current pre-service training of primary teachers and may be responsible for what is seen by some as an inappropriate rush to formal education in some infant classes (p.23).

Since the publication of the White Paper (GOI, 1999) multiple changes regarding infant education have occurred in Ireland. The publication of Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b) highlights the importance of play-based learning for young children and aims to create a link between the preschool and primary school curriculum. The Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999) and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (DES, 2016) acknowledge the importance of play and the need for a separate, developmentally appropriate curriculum for younger children within primary schools in Ireland. Furthermore, the introduction of the reconfigured four year undergraduate B. Ed programme in 2012 afforded an increase in time allocated by colleges of education in Ireland to infant education (Harford & O'Doherty, 2016). Yet, Dunphy (2000) argues further amendments in relation to the pre-service education of primary schools teachers are required and proposes the introduction of a degree subject known as "Early Childhood Studies" within the B. Ed programme would ensure teachers become "leading specialists" within infant education (p.30).

Profile of Infant teachers. Internationally, both ECEC and primary schools are female dominated settings (Jones, 2007). In Ireland, both historically and presently, female teachers far outnumber their male colleagues (DES, 2007) (see Figure 2.2). In 2015, 87% of primary school teachers in Ireland were female, an increase of 4.1%

since 2006 (INTO, 2017) however, the female-male teacher ratio within ECEC is much wider with Conroy (2012) specifying that only 1% of those working within ECEC are male.

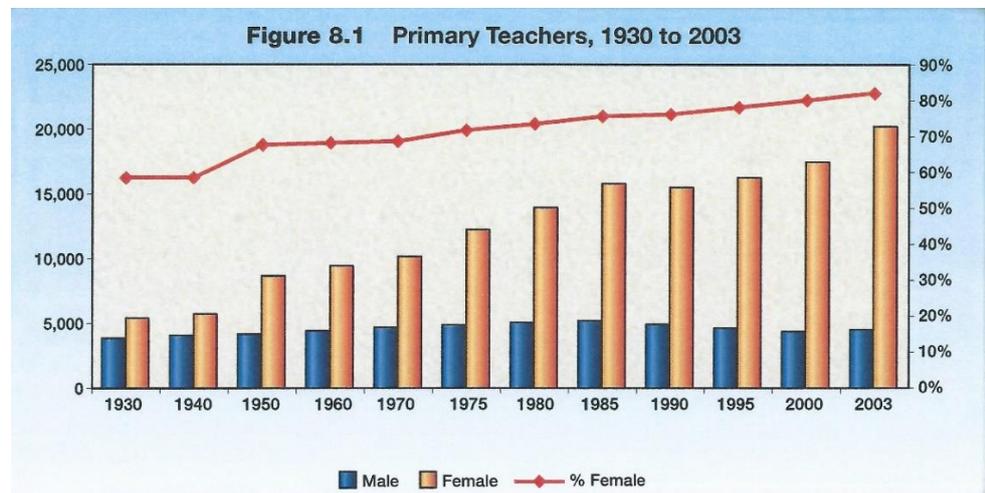


Figure 2.2. Gender of primary teachers from 1930 to 2003 (DES, 2007, p.138)

Brody (2015) suggests males working within early years education have made a brave career move as it requires them to “cross gender boundaries... and challenge societal norms as well as their masculine identity” (p.351). Similarly, Jones (2007) suggests males are deemed inappropriate ECEC educators and are far better suited to teaching older children as they lack both the interest and the caring disposition traditionally considered imperative for working with young children while Pruit (2014) proposes males are discouraged from working within ECEC due to suspicion as to why they wish to work with young children. However, others argue the crucial presence of male teachers within the ‘overly feminised’ environment of ECEC to act as positive role models for children, particularly boys (Brody, 2015; Wernersson, 2015; Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

Murray (2013) characterises ECEC educators as possessing “a long-held, persistent interest in working with young children which was motivated by a passion for children’s well-being and development” (p.534). However, the INTO (1986) estimate that approximately 70% of teachers are assigned to an infant class in their first year of teaching. Horgan (1995) proposes newly qualified teachers (NQT) rarely teach the infant classes by choice but are forced to do so as senior staff members actively avoid them, perceiving the younger classes as less desirable and prestigious than older classes. Horgan (1995) laments that what she perceives to be one of the most demanding and influential teaching positions is assigned to teachers with the least experience.

Process

Process, within the Bioecological Model of Human Development, refers to repeated interactions between a person and others in their immediate environment, the impact of which are bi-directional and is referred to as “the core” of the model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.795). Hard (2006) proposes relationships greatly impact upon teacher professional identity as “individuals interpret their professional identity through their engagements with others, both within and beyond their field” (p.47). I will now present literature regarding the most influential relationships encountered by Junior Infant teachers and the manner in which these relationships impact upon their professional identity. These include their relationships with the Junior Infant children, parents and colleagues.

Child-Infant teacher relationship. The relationship between the teacher and child has been researched and examined in great detail (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Jerome, Hamre & Pianta, 2009) with Kesner (2000) suggesting “perhaps there is no

other non-familial adult that is more significant in a child's life than his or her teacher'' (p. 134). Moyles (2017) describes a unique rapport, closeness and affiliation between the teacher and the young child due to children's unquestioning acceptance of the teacher's authority and their captivation with the teacher, a fascination that weakens as the child grows older. Aistear emphasises the importance of "a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child" as children "learn and develop through loving and nurturing relationships with adults and other children" (NCCA, 2009a, p.9). Similarly, Bergin and Bergin (2009) suggest the onus lies with Junior Infant teachers to create a positive bond with the children in their care in order to "raise achievement levels and improve socio-emotional wellbeing" (p.158). Reid and Miller (2014) state the creation of an emotional connection and true affection between the teacher and child is essential. Additionally, Birch and Ladd (1997) propose a positive link exists between teacher-child closeness during the first year of primary school and the child's later academic success, independence and enjoyment of school. While Bergin and Bergin (2009) speculate children form an *internal working model* based on their relationship with their teacher during their first year of school which informs their connections with all future teachers.

Hayes and Kernan (2008) suggest the ECEC educator must "actively nourish, rear, foster, train and educate the child" (p.135). Ailwood (2007) describes the traditional, close relationship between ECEC and maternalism and suggests that many female ECEC educators "take pride and pleasure in their work and identity as teacher/mother" (p.162). Although Sisson and Iverson (2014) permit ECEC educators "identified aspects of caregiving as essential to their professional work", nevertheless they "rejected a caregiver identity, which they associated with mothering and viewed as being low-status" (p.222). Participants within Reid and Miller's (2014) study with

children of their own, describe the experience as one which supports them in becoming better and more empathetic teachers. In contrast, Al-Adwan and Al-Khayat (2017) suggest Kindergarten teachers who are parents themselves struggle to balance their work and home life commitments far more than their childless counterparts. Moyles (2017) suggests the role of an infant teacher “rests paradoxically on something of an intimate relationship with children, yet on a recognition that these are someone else’s children” (p.82) while Osgood (2010) argues ECEC educators “struggle to reconcile the necessarily emotional and affective aspects of early childhood practice with demands for more widely accepted constructions of professionalism” (p.125). Brody (2015) maintains that physical attention and affection such as hugs and sitting a child on their knee are routine parenting behaviours commonly practiced by ECEC educators and positively contribute to children’s overall well-being. In contrast, ECEC educators within Sisson and Iverson’s study (2014) maintain they are strict with children and practice ‘tough love’ to encourage them to self-regulate and prepare them for the more formal aspects of primary school. Similarly, Campbell-Barr (2017) highlights the creation of physical and emotional boundaries by some ECEC educators towards children as protection against accusations of inappropriate contact.

Parent-Infant teacher relationship. Aistear (NCCA, 2009b) emphasises the importance of a reciprocal relationship not only between the teacher and the child but between the teacher and the child’s parents. Shields (2009) highlights that ECEC educators consider rapport with parents to be a critical aspect of their role. Knopf and Swick (2007) suggest strong, respectful and trusting parent-teacher relationships can be established by ensuring early interactions are positive, frequent and informal. They argue the emerging parent-teacher relationship, established in the Junior Infant year,

will affect the parent's future relationships with other teachers as their child progresses through school.

Hargreaves (2000) describes emotional intelligence as an integral skill within an ECEC educator's repertoire. Moyles (2017) describes the parent-teacher relationship in the early years as an emotive one as parent's emotions and reactions are often heightened due to the young age and separation from their child. At the risk of over generalising there seems to be enough evidence to propose that ECEC educators often develop highly tuned intrapersonal skills and a specific style of speaking with parents to communicate their intention of caring for their child in their absence and to make the language of early years education accessible to them (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vuorinen, 2011). However, Shields (2009) criticises certain obstacles to positive parent-teacher relationships including a less inviting primary school environment, a lack of daily updates from the Junior Infant teacher, a shift in focus on academic ability rather than the overall well-being of the child as they transition to the infant classroom and high student-teacher ratios in the infant classes in comparison to preschool settings. These factors may result in reduced parent-teacher contact time and cause parents to feel unwelcome, excluded in their child's new school environment and that their input is not as appreciated by Junior Infant teachers as it had been by preschool educators (Shields, 2009).

Lightfoot and Frost (2015) and Moyles (2017) imply ECEC educators may be viewed as 'substitute parents', whose main responsibility 'in loco parentis' is to establish a warm, close relationship with the children in their care in order to enable parents to return to work with peace of mind. Vuorinen (2010) states parents often attribute the label of "expert" to ECEC educators and seek their support and guidance regarding parenting decisions (p.71). Gibson (2015) describes a lack of understanding

demonstrated by some parents toward early childhood education results in the ECEC educator viewed “as a victim, who does important work in the early years—though this work is not understood, not valued, and perhaps, not even necessary” (p.152).

Consequently, many ECEC educators deem it necessary to advocate for their profession as more than a substitute parent and assert their identity as highly trained professionals with degrees (Ailwood, 2007; McGillivray, 2008). In contrast, Hargreaves and Hopper (2006) propose, owing to the informal, open-door policy associated with ECEC, ECEC educators are afforded a greater opportunity to demonstrate to parents the important work they undertake in comparison to colleagues who teach older children. However, Moloney (2010a) suggests the status of primary school teachers is becoming progressively more fragile. She perceives a downward shift in the respect afforded to teachers has perhaps occurred as “parents are more highly educated and articulate than ever before, with greater expectations for their children’s education. These factors preclude the closed world of school, where, traditionally, the teacher’s word was unchallenged” (Moloney, 2010a, p.174).

Colleague-Infant teacher relationship. Lightfoot and Frost (2015) describe a plethora of positive effects of constructive teacher-colleague interactions. *Communities of learners*, whereby teachers gather to discuss their practice, enables teachers to share their experiences, concerns and victories with each other and ultimately extend their practice. Flores and Day (2006) propose teachers employed in schools “in which there was supportive, informative and encouraging leadership and effective working relationships amongst staff were more likely to reveal positive attitudes toward teaching” (p.230).

However, Moloney (2010a) suggests the “professional identity of infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings” (p.167) and implies the

existence of a hierarchy within vertical primary schools. She proposes a teacher's status and worth is dependent upon the age group they teach with Junior Infant teachers acquiring less respect than colleagues who teach older classes. Horgan (1995) believes few senior staff members willingly teach the Junior Infant classes as they are perceived as "less desirable" than older classes (p.255) while Moloney (2010a) proposes "moving up a class is like getting a promotion" (p.179). The general perception amongst non-infant teachers is that the infant classes are "similar to a waiting room for children before they move onto the higher classes, where their real learning occurs" (Moloney, 2010a, p.184.) Sisson and Iverson (2014) portray similar findings in their research suggesting teachers working with older children did not value the work of teachers in the early years as educational. ECEC educators describe frustration and annoyance with colleagues who *delegitimize* their profession by classifying their work as 'babysitting' and whole staff meetings and training generally focus on older classes who are deemed 'more important'. Likewise, the INTO (1986) state principals disregard the work of Junior Infant teachers by routinely calling upon them to supervise other classes during the final school hour which they propose...

is an indication of an imperfect perception of the infant programme and what it demands in terms of detailed and time consuming preparation. It also displays considerable ignorance of the energy teaching activities demand of the teacher of infants. Such impositions do not bolster the self-esteem of teachers of infants (p.14).

Mevawalla and Hadley (2012) suggest the inability of ECEC educators to defend themselves and their profession in the face of negative actions and comments by colleagues may be due to a lack of confidence in their professional identity (p.78). Ultimately, Osgood (2006) and Rodd (2013) insist the obligation lies with ECEC

educators to challenge the 'status quo', to advocate for their identity as professionals and to demand change regarding the respect afforded to both themselves and ECEC as a whole.

Context

Context, within the PPCT model, refers to the manner in which both direct and indirect environments may impact upon a person's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Flores and Day (2006) suggest the professional identity of teachers is greatly influenced by their school climate while Tucker (2004) suggests discourses such as government policies and curricular changes also play a key role. Bearing this in mind I will present literature regarding the manner in which the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers is affected by both the immediate and broader contexts in which they function. In this instance, ECEC provision in Junior Infant classrooms, within vertical primary schools in Ireland, governed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

ECEC provision. A split system of ECEC provision currently exists in Ireland with the Department of Youth and Child Affairs (DYCA) (www.dyca.ie) governing preschools while infant classes within Irish primary schools are governed by the DES (www.education.ie). Moloney and Pope (2015) stipulate "this dual system reflects and perpetuates a historical polarisation of the care and education sectors in Ireland where children's education commenced upon entry to primary school" (p.142). The segregated nature of ECEC in Ireland has resulted in a lack of communication between preschool and primary schools (O'Connor & Angus, 2014; O'Kane, 2007) yet, Pramling Samuelsson, Williams, Sheridan, and Hellman (2016) argue such segregation is naturally occurring as preschool education concentrates on the development of social

aspects of the child whereas academic skills development is the foremost concern of primary schools. However, change may be forthcoming. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2016) propose re-framing the Irish education system through the use of a three-stage model to amalgamate preschools and the infant classes within primary schools (see Figure 2.3). Although Moloney (2017) welcomes this re-structuring, she acknowledges the challenges teachers may face including a reframing of initial teacher education to include children from three to six years of age and uncertainty regarding primary teacher identity and career progression opportunities.

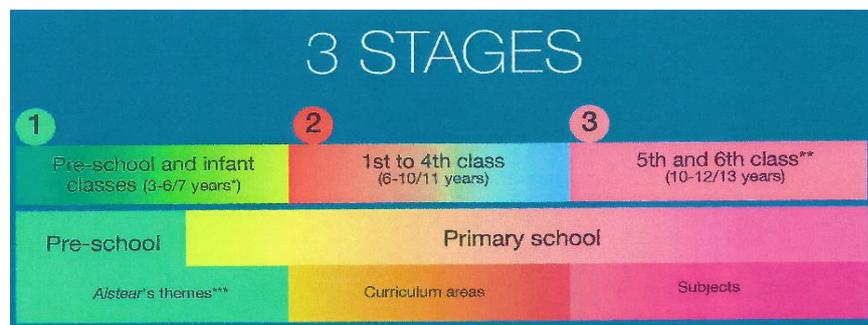


Figure 2.3. Three-stage model for a new primary curriculum (NCCA, 2016, p.22)

Numerous researchers posit the working conditions of primary teachers are far superior to preschool educators with primary teachers receiving better pay, longer holidays, a shorter working day, superior career advancement opportunities and clear terms and conditions of employment (Gibson, 2013; McGillivray 2008; Moloney, 2015; Moloney & Pope, 2015). Additionally, Moloney (2010a) highlights the definite, established professional identity of primary school teachers, who believe they have a strong role and status in comparison to their preschool colleagues as “teachers fit within the established social order, are seen as valuable contributors to society and are important, indeed critical, to children’s education and development” (p.172). In

comparison, preschool educators believe they are regarded as merely minding rather than educating young children (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015) and many aspire to re-train as primary school teachers (Moloney, 2015). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, many infant teachers question the respect afforded by parents, colleagues and society to Junior Infants and their work as Junior Infant teachers in comparison to colleagues who educate older children (Moloney, 2010a). Indeed, Lightfoot and Frost (2015) propose the validation and recognition of their work and expertise by society is of utmost importance for the self-worth of ECEC educators.

Junior Infant classroom environment. In 1995, Horgan questioned the suitability of Junior Infant classrooms and suggested they were “ill-equipped to meet the diverse and individual needs of children at this crucial developmental stage” (p.253). Similarly, the INTO (2005) deduce although the DES play a key role in the education of four to six year olds within Irish primary schools “little distinction is made between the requirements of younger children and those of their older counterparts”. They suggest aspects of the infant classes within primary schools including high student-teacher ratios, classroom layouts and equipment are wholly inappropriate and established with “formal primary schooling in mind as opposed to the specific needs and learning patterns of early learners” (INTO, 2005, p.17). Hodson and Keating (2007) argue that children within Reception classes in England, the equivalent of Junior Infants, “have the same needs” as those of their preschool peers” (p.78), yet a significant difference in class size exists the two settings (Moloney & Pope, 2015). The student-teacher ratio in preschool is a maximum of eleven to one and although class sizes vary within infant classes the average is twenty-five to one (Donnelly, 2016). It seems Irish primary schools are amongst the most overcrowded in Europe and many teachers cope with “supersize” classrooms of more than thirty

children (Donnelly, 2016, para. 1), a situation O'Connor and Angus (2014) argue the Irish Government must resolve immediately.

The average school entry age for the majority of European countries is six years of age, yet in Ireland and Britain alone the average is four years of age (O'Connor & Angus, 2014). O'Callaghan (2015) indicates that a child commencing Junior Infants will face many challenges as they transition to primary school including a longer school day, more formal, academic learning situations, assigned homework, a strict subject timetable and less teacher attention due to increased student-teacher ratios. Einarsdóttir (2010) in her work with children during their first year of primary school in Iceland, presents an image of the child as powerless, lacking agency over their learning and struggling with the formal change in both curriculum and atmosphere between the preschool and primary school setting. Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta and Cox (2000) suggest children struggle to adjust to Kindergarten, the equivalent of Junior Infants in America, as it is "a poor fit" for them at their current stage of development (p.163). They propose teachers hold unrealistic expectations of independence, the acquisition of academic skills and maintaining attention for sustained periods of time for children of this age. This belief is in contrast to the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999) which states the informal and play-rich environment of the infant classes is perfectly suited to the unique needs of the child at this stage of development. Yet, Gray and Ryan (2016) argue that in reality didactic teaching methodologies remain prominent in Junior Infant classrooms with play awarded "periphery" status (p.200). O'Connor and Angus (2014) propose raising the minimum age of entry to primary school to six years of age would mutually benefit both primary schools and preschools as it would enable young children to be receive care and education in a

learning environment perfectly suited to their current development and permit primary schools to focus solely on the education of older children.

Curricula and pedagogy. UNICEF (2016) claim within early childhood and primary schools “children acquire the foundational skills that allow them to develop problem-solving capabilities, flourish in secondary education and later succeed in employment markets” (p.46). According to Aistear, “early childhood marks the beginning of children’s lifelong learning journeys” (NCCA, 2009a, p.6) while ECEC educators within Sisson and Iverson’s (2014) study propose they ‘set the tone’ for the rest of the child’s academic schooling.

The PSC, published by the DES in 1999 for use in primary schools in Ireland, consists of twelve subjects within seven curricular areas, is presented in four bi-class groupings (see Figure 2.4). It outlines the specific teaching time allotted to each subject (see Table 2.2) yet encourages subject integration and “flexible use of the suggested time frame” within the short infant school day (DES, 1999, p.69). The PSC states its aims are to celebrate the uniqueness of the child, to enrich and nurture the child in all aspects of his/her life and to meet with confidence both current and future demands in their lives (DES, 1999).

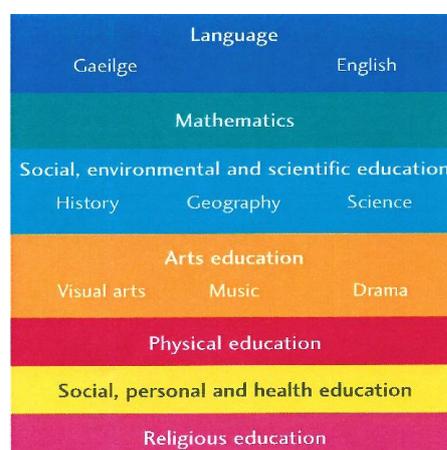


Figure 2.4. Structure of the curriculum (DES, 1999, p.40)

Table 2.2. Subject Time Allocations for the Short Infant Day

Curriculum Areas	Time: Hours and Minutes
Language 1	3 hours
Language 2	2 hours 30 minutes
Mathematics	2 hours 15 minutes
Social Environmental and Scientific Education	2 hours 15 minutes
Social Personal and Health Education	30 minutes
Physical Education	1 hour
Arts Education	2 hours 30 minutes
Discretionary Curriculum Time	1 hour
Total Secular instruction	15 hours
Religious Education	2 hours 30 minutes
Assembly Time	1 hour 40 minutes
Roll Call	50 minutes
Breaks	50 minutes
Recreation	2 hours 30 minutes
Total	23 hours 20 minutes

*Adapted from DES (1999, p.70)

The publication of Aistear by the NCCA in 2009, is evidence of the improved recognition of play as a pedagogy within the Irish ECEC context, however Aistear intends only to support the implementation of the PSC rather than replace it entirely (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Furthermore, Aistear is currently an optional aspect of infant education within Irish primary schools and no mandatory in-service training is provided for infant teachers by the DES (Moloney, 2010b).

As seen in Table 2.3, many similarities and differences exist between Aistear and the PSC (DES, 1999). As a result of these differences, much research suggests infant teachers are struggling to embrace the child-led, play-based learning approach endorsed by Aistear while simultaneously navigating and assessing the specific, mandated content and learning outcomes for young children as demanded by the PSC within a shortened school day (Gray & Ryan, 2016; O'Connor & Angus, 2014).

Table 2.3. Aistear versus the Primary School Curriculum

Aistear	Primary School Curriculum
Aimed for use with children from birth to six years	For use with children from approximately four to twelve years of age
Utilises a practice based approach	Utilises a theory orientated approach
Prioritises the development of children's knowledge, attitudes, skills and dispositions	Prioritises the development of children's knowledge, skills and attitudes
Emphasises the use of a holistic and integrated approach to children's learning	Outlines details of specific learning outcomes and objectives for children of four to six years of age. While encouraging integration, presents the intended learning of children through divided curricular subject areas, twelve in total. Allocates specific time for subject areas within the school week yet encourages flexibility
Emphasises the importance of play and activity based learning	States play is central to the learning of young children but limited attention is draw to play beyond the introduction
Does not mention the teaching of formal literacy and numeracy skills	Emphasises the importance of the development of literacy and numeracy skills
Philosophy "celebrates early childhood as a time of being rather than becoming" (NCCA, 2009a, p.6)	Places emphasis on the importance of laying foundations for the next phase of learning
Aistear values the process rather than the product of learning and encourages assessment to aid the progress of the child. Recommends the use of informal assessment methods such as samples of children's work or daily records to collect evidence of children's progress within Aistear's four themes	The PSC describes assessment as deserving a "central position" within the process of teaching and learning (DES, 1999, p.11). Recommends range of assessment methods including "informal tools such as teacher observation, classwork, homework and discussion with pupils to more formal tools such as diagnostic tests and standardised tests" (DES, 1999, p.18)
Role of the adult is to create a reciprocal relationship with the child	Role of the adult is described as a "dual role as carer and educator" in the infant classes (DES, 1999, p.30)
Influenced by socio-cultural theory as an emphasis is placed on the importance of the creation of a link between the child's home and school	The PSC is influenced by developmental theory such as Piaget's four stages of cognitive development evidenced by the use of separate, age-graded curricula

*Adapted from (DES, 1999; Gray & Ryan, 2016; NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b; O'Connor & Angus, 2014)

Multiple curricular changes and reforms have occurred within the last decade pertaining to Junior Infant classes in Irish primary schools. These include Aistear (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b) and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (DES, 2016). Moreover, at the time of this research the DES are in the process of preparing the introduction of a new Primary Mathematics Curriculum (NCCA, 2015). Much literature suggests prescribed government policies and curricula de-professionalise teachers and disregard teacher individuality, expertise and agency. The presence of prescribed curricula and policies result in teachers feeling undermined, disillusioned and lacking control of their daily practice (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Ohi, 2014; Zembylas, 2003). Nias (1989) argues teachers face a daily struggle to maintain equilibrium between the obligation to meet certain government determined standards whilst simultaneously nurturing, valuing and caring for each individual child. These duelling roles leave teachers feeling “under pressure, guilty, and inadequate” (Nias, 1989, p.193). Participants within a study conducted by Campbell, Evans, Neill and Packwood (1992) describe the workload demanded of Junior Infant teachers as “unreasonable” (p.153), “unmanageable” (p.154) and impacting negatively upon their personal lives and enthusiasm to teach. Supporting this view, much research proposes increased paperwork, documentation and ambitious academic expectations for young children has reduced opportunities for teachers to engage informally with children and pursue children’s individual interests and whims (Campbell et al., 1992; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Moyles, 2017). Ultimately, Hayes (2008) considers ECEC is most effective when highly trained educators deliver an *adaptive* curriculum which responds to the current needs and interests of the children rather than a focus on the implementation of an external, universal, government prescribed curriculum.

Time

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe the importance of recognising “social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived” (p.798). Day et al. (2006) suggest teachers’ professional identities can “at certain times or during certain life, career and organisational phases be discontinuous, fragmented, and subject to turbulence and change” (p.613). Therefore I will now examine the impact of time upon Junior Infant teachers’ professional identities.

Longevity amongst Junior Infant teachers. According to Beijaard et al. (2004) teacher identity is a fluid and adaptable process of becoming rather than fixed and constant over one’s teaching career. Similarly, Beijaard et al. (2000) propose “most teachers' current perceptions of their professional identity reportedly differ significantly from their prior perceptions of this identity during their period as beginning teachers” (p.749).

Many ECEC educators describe intrinsic motivators including passion and desire to make a difference in young children’s lives as the reason they enter and remain within early childhood education (Brock, 2013; Colker, 2008; Harwood et al., 2013; Moyles, 2017). Day (2008) maintains “teachers’ sense of positive professional identity is associated with well-being and job satisfaction and is a key factor in their effectiveness” (p.257). However, Al-Adwan and Al-Khayat (2017) propose female Kindergarten teachers in America, the equivalent of Junior Infant teachers, are the most susceptible to frustration, psychological and emotional burnout due to the pressure of teaching such an important developmental age group, the requirement to fulfil parental expectations and the high number of overlapping roles and duties expected of them

whilst simultaneously managing high student-teacher ratios. Similarly, Osgood (2010) refers to ECEC as demanding “considerable personal and collective investments that are made towards achieving a culture of care characterised by affectivity, altruism, self-sacrifice and conscientiousness” (p.126). Yet, Flores and Day (2006) argue that all teaching, no matter the age-group, “involves daily, intensive and extensive use of both emotional labour and emotional work ...too much investment of one’s emotional self may lead to personal vulnerability...and, in extreme cases, overwork and breakdown” (p.221).

Day (2008) argues experience, rather than age affects a teacher’s identity, commitment and effectiveness within their role. He suggests as teachers gain experience they may begin to ponder the future progression of their career and *career stagnation* may occur whereby teachers’ motivation and commitment lessens significantly (Day, 2008). This interpretation differs from that of Jeon, Buettner and Hur (2016) who claim teachers with significant teaching experience are far happier and committed to their profession than those with less experience. Whilst the INTO (1986) confirms many primary teachers spend the majority of their careers educating the infant classes, they are concerned their “professional development may be restricted and career and promotion prospects reduced” (p. 15). Typically, males are promoted to positions of responsibility within individual school settings much faster than their female colleagues, the traditional infant teachers, even though females far outnumber their male teacher colleagues (Ailwood, 2007; Jones, 2007; INTO, 2017; Wernersson, 2015). Hard (2006) proposes conformity to pre-conceived notions of what it means to be an ECEC educator such as an expectation of ‘niceness’ may marginalise ECEC educators, constrain their aspirations to authority and leadership positions such as principal or deputy principal within primary schools and impact negatively upon their

professional sense of self. Nevertheless, in 2015 the INTO (2017) claims 59% of school management positions within primary schools in Ireland were held by women.

Summary

In conclusion, this review of the literature has highlighted the limited research related specifically to the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools in Ireland. This chapter has shown that the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers is a complex and multifaceted topic with the Bioecological Model of Human Development and the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) providing an ideal lens through which to examine it. As referred to throughout this chapter, Junior Infant teachers face a number of challenges in their role including navigating a split ECEC system with limited training, negotiating multiple complex and demanding relationships and managing a time of great change presently within the infant classes, all of which impact greatly upon their professional identity.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the methodology employed within this research in order to answer the research question: What are teachers' perspectives of their professional identity as Junior Infant teachers and what factors impact upon this identity within vertical Irish primary schools? This chapter describes the paradigm which underpins this research, the research method and design, the sample, the utilised approach for data analysis and the limitations and ethical considerations within this research.

Paradigms

A paradigm is a particular set of assumptions about the world and is used by the researcher to guide their research (Punch, 2009). Two common paradigms utilised within educational research are positivism and interpretivism (Denscombe, 2014). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) positivism “argues for an external and largely singular view of an objective reality that is susceptible to comparatively straightforward scientific discovery and laws” (p.16). Positivism relies on “facts and figures relating to the causes and consequences of phenomena in the social world” and is generally associated with “quantitative data and statistics” (Denscombe, 2014, p.2).

In contrast, the aim of an interpretivist paradigm is “to develop an insight into people’s lives and their lived experiences” (Denscombe, 2014, p.2). Cresswell (2007) argues interpretivism involves the release of “the hope of a universal theory” but instead describes “multifaceted images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts surrounding them” (p.21). An interpretivist paradigm relies “on the participants views of the situation” that “are negotiated socially and historically... they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interactions with others

and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2007, p.21). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development and the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (see page 9) underpins this research and adopts an interpretivist view of research (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, as an interpretivist paradigm involves gathering information regarding the personal experiences of participants, acknowledges the impact of their relationships, time and context in which they exist and aligns with the work of Bronfenbrenner and the PPCT model, this research adopted an interpretivist theory approach to explore the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers.

Research Design

Case study approach. Robson (2011) states case study research focuses on a particular group or situation and according to Cohen et al. (2018) provides "a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles" (p.376). Therefore a case study research approach was employed to examine in-depth the perspectives of a small number of Junior Infant teachers regarding their professional identity within vertical primary schools in Ireland. Furthermore, case studies consider the context of participants and their relationships with others to be of utmost importance (Cohen et al., 2018) which is in keeping with the Bioecological Model and the PPCT model utilised within this study. However, De Vaus (2001) cautions, although case studies may attain *internal validity* they often lack *external validity* as they provide "no basis for generalizing to a wider population beyond that case" (p.237). This research, whilst acknowledging this limitation of case study research, will nevertheless provide a comprehensive account of the research method and design

employed in order to support its aspiration of credibility, transferability and dependability (Guba, 1981).

Research leading to qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data involves the gathering and interpretation of participant's personal opinions and experiences by the researcher posing general questions which are then analysed and interpreted in an unbiased manner and presented through words or images (Cresswell, 2008; Denscombe, 2014). Qualitative data values the individual voices of participants, involves self-reflection on the part of the researcher, allows an openness to unexpected findings and extends beyond the current literature of the identified problem (Cresswell, 2007). Alternatively, quantitative data is typically associated with larger scale research, usually takes the form of numbers and statistics and identifies trends in a neutral, impartial manner (Cresswell, 2008).

Due to the previously mentioned limited scope of research regarding the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers in Ireland, qualitative data was chosen as the most suitable manner to address this gap in the field. Although it is acknowledged that quantitative data could have yielded data concerning teacher identity and facilitated the comparison of trends and patterns, it was ultimately determined it would not effectively capture a rich, comprehensive examination of the circumstances and unique perspectives of Junior Infant teachers regarding their professional identity as that of qualitative data (Cresswell, 2007). Additionally, qualitative data facilitates the holistic interpretation of the professional identity of the Junior Infant teachers, in keeping with the Bioecological Model of Human Development which guides this research.

Research Method

Interviews. Due to the highly personal and complex nature of this research, interviews provided the primary source of data. Interviews involve the researcher posing questions and receiving answers from those who are being interviewed in order to gather information regarding the topic being explored (Lichtman, 2010; Robson, 2011). According to Cohen et al. (2018) “interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” (p.506). The interview should be a positive experience which persuades participants of the importance of the topic being discussed and the value of their contribution to the research (Cohen et al., 2018). With this in mind, interviews were chosen as the method by which to gather rich data regarding the perspectives of Junior Infant teachers concerning their own professional identity, the manner in which they believe it is perceived by others and is impacted by factors including the context and time in which they function and exist.

Semi-structured interviews. Three types of interviews are commonly used to generate qualitative data including structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Robson, 2011). A semi-structured interview contains specific topics to be discussed yet it facilitates some measure of flexibility and fluidity by allowing the researcher to react instantly and adapt the interview to suit the participant and the flow of the interview for instance, by rearranging the order of the questions or seeking clarification and elaboration through unplanned questions (Drever, 1995; Robson, 2011). The combination of both my own personal knowledge and experience as a Junior Infant teacher and my comprehensive analysis of the literature regarding the research topic proved invaluable as it allowed me to pose appropriate follow-on questions to participants if further clarification was required. Possible drawbacks of the

less structured format of semi-structured interviews include reduced dependability and standardization of data generated in comparison to quantitative data. Despite these drawbacks, semi-structured interviews were utilised as they permit an in-depth, rich and detailed, rather than superficial account to be gathered (Bryman, 2012).

Role of the interviewer. Lichtman (2010) suggests the role of the interviewer is to interpret the reality of the participant being interviewed and act as “the filter through which the information is gathered, processed and organised” (p.140).

Denscombe (2014) remarks the interviewer’s main purpose is to gather the opinions and experiences of participants whilst remaining non-judgemental and detached. Yin (2009) expands upon this further by arguing certain skills are desirable amongst researchers including adaptability, flexibility and an unbiased attitude to avoid becoming trapped in their own “preconceptions” (p.69). Recommended tactics employed throughout each interview within this research included being attentive and sensitive to the needs of participants, ensuring they remained on track by reposing questions or through the use of prompts and enduring silences as necessary to allow participants time to gather their thoughts rather than interrupting and rushing the process (Denscombe, 2014).

Although, it proved challenging at times to remain detached and neutral throughout the interview process due to my interest in the topic being discussed, by doing so I ensured my own preconceptions and bias did not interfere with the data generated. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, my personal experience as a Junior Infant teacher was advantageous during the interview process as it enabled me, as Yin (2009) conveys, to utilise my “firm grasp of the issues being studied” (p.69) to ask relevant, probing questions and seek clarifications from participants as appropriate.

Interview schedule. The interviewer guides the semi-structured interview through the use of an interview schedule. An interview schedule “involves translating the research objectives into the actual questions that will make up the body of the schedule” (Cohen et al., 2018, p.512) while Dawson (2009) suggests an interview schedule helps to focus the researcher’s mind on the main purpose of their research.

Following Dawson’s (2009) advice, the interview schedule design process commenced with the creation of a brainstorm chart regarding Junior Infant teacher identity (see Appendix A). This chart took into account an in-depth analysis of the current national and international literature regarding the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers as seen in Chapter Two and my personal observations as a Junior Infant teacher. The chart was then carefully examined and all irrelevant themes were disregarded. Although choices were made regarding the themes deemed most appropriate, I remained open to the possibility of these themes being revisited or new themes emerging during the research process. The themes that remained were then ordered into a logical sequence. Specific questions regarding each theme were then formulated to assist in answering the research question (Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012) argues that interview questions must be easily comprehended and relevant to the participants being interviewed. Dawson (2009) recommends clear, concise questions while Cohen et al. (2018) endorses open-ended questions as they are flexible, enable the researcher to ask more probing questions if desired, “encourage cooperation...and rapport and allow the researcher to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes” (p.513).

Before the interview commenced a letter of information was given to the participant (see Appendix B) which informed the participant of the nature of the research and their role within it. Time was allowed for any questions the participant

may have regarding the research to be asked and answered. Following this, two letters of consent (see Appendix C) were signed by myself and the participant. One copy was given to the participant and the other was kept on record for the duration of the research and destroyed upon completion. According to Denscombe (2014) behaving in an open, honest and lawful manner is integral within research. The letter of consent outlined in clear terms exactly what the participant was agreeing to, their right to withdraw from the research at any time, their agreement to the interview being audio-recorded and contained relevant contact details should they have any further queries or concerns (Denscombe, 2014). General information about each participant was also noted before the interview commenced to create a profile of the participants within this study (see Appendix D) (Bryman, 2012).

The interview schedule (see Appendix E) commenced with a short introduction message welcoming the participant. Then followed a general question regarding their teaching experience to obtain background information and to place the participant at ease. Next followed the main questions relevant to the themes as discussed in Chapter Two. At the end of the interview, the participant was invited to share any final comments regarding the topic and finally they were thanked for participating in the interview (Denscombe, 2014). The same interview schedule was used during each interview to preserve continuity and consistency and by each participant answering the same questions it allowed comparisons between their replies to be made (Dawson, 2009).

Recordings. Although video recordings of each interview were considered, ultimately audio recordings were used to protect the anonymity of participants and to ensure they felt at ease during the interview process. Bell and Waters (2014) suggest recording interviews ensures the data collected is accurate while allowing the

interviewer to be present in the moment. Each interview was recorded using a dictation machine. A second dictation machine was also used in the case of a malfunction with the first. At the beginning of each interview participants were informed both verbally and in writing within the consent form that the interview would be audio recorded.

Pilot. Dawson (2009) encourages the researcher to pilot the interview with a participant as close as possible to the selected sample in order to become comfortable with the interview process. The pilot also proved a useful method of ensuring the suitability, sequence and phrasing of the questions.

The pilot interview was conducted with a Junior Infant teacher and followed the same structure as all other interviews within this research. An information letter (see Appendix B) was provided to the participant before the interview commenced, with time allowed for any questions they may have to be asked and answered. Two copies of the consent form were signed (see Appendix C) with one copy kept on file while the other was given to the participant. The pilot interview was audio recorded to allow the data generated to be analysed and interpreted and to determine its relevance to the research question.

Upon completion of the pilot interview, feedback was sought from the participant (Dawson, 2009) who stated being happy with the interview. The pilot interview confirmed to me that the interview schedule would produce rich data and only one minor alteration was made. Although initially questions eight and nine (see Appendix E) were combined it was determined it would be best to separate them to avoid confusion amongst participants.

Sampling

Dawson (2009) defines sampling as the process of choosing a suitable number of people to take part in the research. Two types of sampling exist, probability and purposive sampling. Probability sampling involves a random selection of participants within the general population (Dawson, 2009). Purposive sampling involves the researcher hand-picking interviewees “to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” rather than a representation of the wider population and allows comparisons between the participants to be made (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 218).

Owing to the use of the Bioecological Model of Human Development as a theoretical lens which emphasises the impact of the context in which one exists, the use of a case study research approach which seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular group of people and the specialised knowledge and experience required to participate successfully within this research (Cohen et al., 2018), purposive sampling was employed. Certain criteria guided this research in order to generate valuable data (Denscombe, 2014). The criteria stated each participant must be a primary school teacher, currently teaching an infant class, with a minimum of three years’ experience in infant education to ensure they possessed sufficient knowledge regarding the research topic.

The sample size of this study was ten Junior Infant teachers. General, relevant details of participants within this research are included in a sample profile (see Appendix D). Participants were a combination of male and female Junior Infant teachers from a variety of vertical primary schools in Ireland. Teachers with a diverse range of experience participated in this study including a teacher who had spent the

majority of their career in infant education and a teacher with experience as both a preschool and primary school teacher. An aim of this small scale research was to represent as many vertical primary schools as possible therefore participants included those teaching within schools of varying size, location and mixed gender and single sex settings. It should be noted that two participants received their initial teacher education in England which may lead to possible differences however it was deemed appropriate to include them in this research as they met all of the previously described necessary criteria.

Regrettably, only one male infant teacher with two years' experience within infant education agreed to participate within this research. Although unfortunate, the male participant represented 10% of the data collected which is more than the international average of males working within ECEC (see page 16). Ultimately, this female dominated research further highlights the gender imbalance amongst Junior Infant teachers in primary schools in Ireland as mentioned in Chapter Two.

Known interviewees were contacted face to face or via email whilst unfamiliar, potential interviewees were contacted via *gatekeepers*, such as my colleagues or school principals (Cohen et al., 2018). Once the gatekeeper confirmed the potential interviewees were willing to partake in the research, direct contact was then made with the interviewee via email to arrange a time and location for the interview to take place that ensured privacy, minimised disruption and suited the participant (Bell & Waters, 2014). Additional interviewees were contacted through *snowballing*, a non-probability sampling technique in which existing research participants recruited and suggested other suitable candidates that met the necessary criteria. Interviews generally took place on the schools grounds of the participant after the end of the school day and lasted between thirty and forty minutes depending on the responses of the participant.

Data Analysis

Transcription. Once completed, interviews were uploaded to my own password protected laptop to facilitate the transcription process whereby audio recordings are converted into text (Bell & Waters, 2014). Appendix F provides an anonymised excerpt of an interview transcript to demonstrate the layout utilised including a wide margin, large spacing to enable annotations to be made and each line was assigned a number to assist with identification during data analysis (Denscombe, 2014). The relevant transcription was shown to each participant to ensure they were happy it was an accurate account of the interview. This process, known as *respondent validation*, is a safety precaution which ensures the information gathered is correct (Denscombe, 2014).

Coding. The transcription process, although lengthy, enabled me to fully immerse myself in the data and gain an initial, in-depth understanding of it. Then followed a process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts in order to attribute codes to the data. Punch (2009) describes coding as the process of attributing labels to sections of data, whether single words, sentences or entire paragraphs. Meaning is attached to the data with basic coding employed initially followed by advanced coding later in the process. Advanced coding is a more complex system of coding whereby themes and patterns within the data emerge.

Manual coding rather than the use of computer based coding software was employed whereby the interview transcripts were read line by line and codes were attributed to the data based on the themes in the literature review in Chapter Two (Punch, 2009). The interview transcripts were then studied again to locate emerging themes which were not previously noted and required updates to be made to the

literature review. Then, a process of advanced coding took place whereby the interview transcriptions were analysed to code more complex themes and situate them within Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model. This process proved extremely challenging due to the interchangeable nature of the PPCT model. Many themes were repetitive and interrelated and could have been placed in numerous sections within the PPCT model (O'Toole, 2016). Finally, meaningful and significant statements made by participants during the interviews were extracted to support a detailed discussion of the relevant themes as seen in Chapter Four (Punch, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Denscombe (2014) insists the researcher must behave in an ethical manner throughout the research process with no harm encountered by the participants as a result of their involvement in the research. This research followed the ethical requirements as outlined by the Research Ethics Committee at Marino Institute of Education with ethical approval sought and granted by them before its commencement. Cohen et al. (2018) suggest certain factors play a vital role in ethical consideration when conducting interviews including anonymity, confidentiality and as previously discussed, informed consent.

Anonymity and confidentiality. Participants of sound mind, over eighteen years of age voluntarily agreed to take part in this research. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants was protected throughout this study. A letter of information and consent letter informed participants of the manner by which the data they provided would be stored, analysed and presented (see Appendices B and C). A pseudonym was assigned to each participant and used in the analysis and findings of this research to ensure they were unidentifiable within it. Identifiable information such

as school names or addresses was redacted from the interview transcripts further protecting the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of participants (Denscombe, 2014).

Limitations

Cohen et al. (2018) state to ensure the dependability and validity of research it must be free from bias, consistent and replicable “over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents” (p.268). Multiple ‘checks’ were employed to safeguard the validity and dependability of this research. Firstly, an in-depth analysis of the relevant national and international literature was undertaken as seen in Chapter Two. A detailed account of the research design and data collection process was described within this chapter to enable transferability, whereby this research may be replicated by others in the future while noting, as mentioned earlier, the somewhat problematic nature of case study research. Finally, to ensure “findings and interpretations derived from the data transparently” the reporting of a clear representation of the manner in which the main findings were reached is evidenced in Chapter Four and Five (Cohen et al., 2018, p.381).

However, there are some limitations within this research which resonate with criticisms of qualitative data. Denscombe (2014) refers to the ‘interviewer effect’ whereby the interviewer impacts upon the data generated. Bias within educational research may take the form of the personal attitude, expectations and beliefs of the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). A number of steps were taken to limit my impact upon this research. To reduce the likelihood of participants providing answers they believed I wished to hear, the participants were, as much as possible, unknown to me (Cohen et al., 2018). Furthermore, the risk of an imbalance of power between the interviewer and

interviewee was significantly reduced within this study as both held similar qualifications and expertise. In addition, I was very aware of the importance of remaining neutral during the interview process and therefore did not comment on the responses provided by participants, either in support or critique of such responses (Denscombe, 2014). Moreover, as previously mentioned, an in-depth analysis of the relevant national and international literature was carried out regarding the professional identity of ECEC educators as seen in Chapter Two and thus all interviews and the coding of the data generated were approached with an open mind.

Furthermore, Punch (2009) implores interviewers to maintain an awareness of the problematic nature of interview data and the validity of participant's responses due to "the accuracy of respondents' memories, dishonesty, self-deception and social desirability" (p.152). He insists interview data are never a true representation of "external reality but a reality constructed by both parties as they contrive to accomplish an interview and can be studied as such" (Punch, 2009, p.153). Nevertheless, from the data generated during the interview process and the subsequent coding of this data it is clear that Junior Infant teacher participants within this research have many similar and shared experiences in relation to their professional identity which is reflected in the discussion in Chapter Four.

Summary

This chapter examined the case study research approach located within an interpretivist paradigm which was employed during this study to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools in Ireland. The manner by which the qualitative data was generated including ethical considerations and limitations is considered and validated within this chapter. The

generated data is discussed and analysed in tandem with existing literature regarding the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Analysis

This purpose of this study was to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools in Ireland. This chapter presents the findings from the data which was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten practicing Junior Infant teachers with varying teaching experience in multiple vertical primary schools across Ireland (see Appendix D). The interviews produced rich data and the transcripts were analysed using four overarching themes, Person, Process, Context and Time (PPCT), based on the literature review in Chapter Two however, I remained open to new themes emerging. Throughout this chapter, the findings of this research are critically analysed with selected quotations included to illustrate these findings.

Person

Duties of an Infant teacher. Harwood et al. (2013) refer to the role of an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) educator as resistant to “a prescriptive and narrow quantification” (p.11), a view shared by the participants who took part in this research. Terms including mother (9/10), caregiver (7/10), nurse (3/10), psychologist (5/10), friend (5/10) and counsellor (6/10) were consistently referred to throughout the interviews to describe the multiple duties and roles expected of them as Junior Infant teachers. Rachel shared “sometimes you feel the teaching is coming second to all the other roles you have” (C, L110).

There was a general consensus amongst participants (9/10) that the role of a Junior Infant teacher was extremely different to that of teachers of older classes confirming the work of Einarsdóttir (2003). Resonating with Hurley (1983) who described the role of the Junior Infant teacher as unfairly diminished to that of a

“motherly soul who could...wipe noses and tie shoelaces” (p.36), the majority of participants described their overlapping care and teaching duties as overwhelming at times. Anna explained,

You never sit down. If you look at the older classes you see teachers sitting at their desks and the children are able to work and do things for themselves whereas if you have Junior Infants...you’re zipping up coats, putting on hats, tying shoes...blowing their nose, there’s a million things. You’re opening bottles, trying to make sure they get to eat lunch...then you’re also teaching them (G, L210-216).

It is noteworthy, only one participant believed that the role of a Junior Infant teacher was no different to that of teachers of older children, reiterating the work of Flores and Day (2006). They claimed their role was, “the same as every other teacher really. I mean your role is there to inspire children to learn, to bring them on and to motivate them” (F, L127-129).

Furthermore, a significant proportion (7/10) of this small sample expressed apprehension regarding the perceived responsibility to identify children who experience learning difficulties in the infant classes. Despite the concern of Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) vis-à-vis labelling young children with learning difficulties, many participants felt enormous pressure to do so as “when the child went into Senior Infants the parent was wondering why the Junior Infant teacher never told her these issues....why did a whole year have to go by without finding out about this?” (J, L267-271). Although Saracho (1984) refers to Junior Infant teachers as diagnosticians, participants felt unprepared and unqualified for this role as “we’re not OT’s....speech and language therapists or psychologists. We’re teachers. We can only do our best and

refer kids on but it's to make that decision of whether to refer kids on or not is the problem" (J, L271-275).

Essential characteristics and skills. Participants cited similar skills to Campbell-Barr (2017) which they viewed as necessary for a Junior Infant teacher to possess including good communication skills (2/10), a hardworking and resourceful attitude (2/10), flexibility (4/10) and good organisational skills (7/10). Flexibility was highly rated amongst participants as "you need to be able to do a million different things at once, if things go wrong in the middle of a lesson you need to be able to deal with that", (E, L103-105) and many referred to the need to be organised and well-prepared as "it's just one thing after another after another....if you're not organised chaos can break out" (H, L82-84).

In keeping with Colker (2008) participants named a number of essential characteristics for a Junior Infant teacher to possess including, "passion (2/10), perseverance (2/10), patience (6/10), flexibility (3/10), creativity (2/10), a sense of humour (3/10), respect for young children and their families (7/10) and high-energy (6/10)" (pp.3-4). As the figures show, a calm, caring, enthusiastic and patient disposition was highly valued by participants. Six participants stated an abundance of energy was an important factor as Karen highlighted "there's no sitting down at a desk and directing the class in Junior Infants. You're up and you're putting on a show trying to help the children learn" (D, L95-97).

Echoing Yarrow (2015), five participants mentioned the necessity of a sensitive, nurturing and caring nature for a Junior Infant teacher. As suggested by Penn (2011), some (4/10) pondered whether every qualified primary school teacher would make a suitable Junior Infant teacher as the necessary characteristics may be

instinctive. Lisa never envisioned herself as a Junior Infant teacher and admitted she was shocked to be assigned the role by her school principal, “I didn’t understand what she saw in me that said ‘infant teacher’” (E, L17-18). Jane claimed many staff members avoid Junior Infants as they feel they lack the necessary patience, energy and time management skills, yet, in keeping with Brooke (1994), she considered becoming an effective Junior Infant teacher “is a learning curve every day of the week” (A, L28). This viewpoint was significant amongst participants (6/10) who claimed their time spent as a Junior Infant teacher had influenced them both personally and professionally and will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Gender was addressed by all participants and almost unanimously (9/10) echoed Jones’ (2007) thinking regarding the stereotypical ECEC educator as female. Participants questioned whether the previously mentioned characteristics deemed essential for a Junior Infant teacher to possess may be concurrent with women. Jane claimed “it takes a certain type of man to manage thirty Junior Infants” (A, L44). Lisa stated “men in general don’t have the patience with young children, it’s not anything bad it’s just the way it is” (E, L84-85). Declan, the only male participant within this research, provided an invaluable insight into this issue and admitted that some children and parents had initial reservations that he would make a suitable Junior Infant teacher,

A lot of people would have been afraid of a male teacher who would have towered over them or maybe that I wouldn’t have been as...nurturing, maternal or paternal...the parents would have gotten a bit of a shock that it was a caring and nurturing environment. I’m not one for...military precision or... rule (H, L178-183).

Reflecting Devine et al. (2013), Abbie argued every teacher must have a kind, caring and nurturing disposition. She insisted these characteristics are not exclusive to females or Junior Infant teachers but are necessary for every teacher, no matter the age group they teach.

Infant teacher education. The pre-service teacher education afforded to participants within this research proved to be a passionate issue. There was an overall sense amongst participants (8/10) that following their initial teacher education they considered themselves wholly unprepared to teach the infant classes. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) (2005) considered ECEC within initial teacher education courses in Ireland as “limited in the time allocated to the topic and the scope for specialisation that they offer” (p.23), a view upheld by participants as many commented far more time and attention was devoted to the older classes. However, it is acknowledged that participants educated in Ireland within this research qualified prior to the reconfiguration of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme which may have afforded an increase in time allocated by colleges of education to infant education (Harford & O’Doherty, 2016). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this research to explore this notion further.

The White Paper (GOI, 1999) identified, almost twenty years ago, a lack of cohesion between “the disciplines of care and welfare as well as education...as a weakness in the current pre-service training of primary teachers” (p.23). It would seem this issue is still prevalent today as eight participants claimed although they felt prepared to teach the Junior Infant curriculum, their pre-service teacher education failed to prepare them for the practicalities associated with teaching young children. Resonating with Yarrow (2015) who denounces the narrow focus of pre-service teacher education on abstract child development theory in lieu of practical childcare skills,

Karen, who completed an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education before re-training as a primary school teacher, believed only as a result of this experience was she in any way prepared to educate Junior Infant children,

Colleagues that were in college with me said, ‘Oh my god what am I going to do with these little people...’, whereas I was happy enough because I had my experience already. I think the focus at teaching college...they tried to get in too much and then they just skimmed over everything rather than delving into the main aspects....if you were taught how to set up an infant room in college, how to challenge children appropriately and be involved in play with them it would be more beneficial than trying to do every single aspect and then get nothing done (D, L43-56).

In contrast, one participant stated that although she felt sufficiently prepared to teach Junior Infants following her initial teacher education, she avoided doing so for many years due to the ‘stigma’ associated with teaching Junior Infants, as it is often deemed less worthwhile than teaching the older classes. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

It is interesting to note, Rachel suggested the blame for the feeling of unpreparedness amongst Junior Infant teachers does not lie with colleges of education as she believed “infant teaching is very specific and quite different...first-hand experience is the only way of really learning it” (C, L29-32). Nevertheless, prior to the commencement of the school year and in order to prepare themselves for Junior Infants, three participants relied on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses while five others sought the advice and expertise of experienced Junior Infant teacher colleagues. Some participants envisaged a change to the support afforded to

Junior Infant teachers in Ireland following their initial teacher education would diminish their reservations. Carol proposed the following as a solution, “I think principals should be allowed to send their infant teachers off to specialised training once a term...get teachers together that are working in that area and properly show them what’s expected” (I, L270-273) while Abbie suggested the establishment of a mentoring programme, whereby experienced infant teachers could offer support and advice to newly-appointed Junior Infant teachers would be invaluable.

Profile of Infant teachers. In keeping with Jones (2007) and INTO (2017) statistics, all participants acknowledged, without hesitation, the role of a Junior Infant teacher is a female dominated one. Although Conroy (2012) claims 1% of those working within ECEC are male, seven participants admitted they had never encountered a male Junior Infant teacher. Resonating with Brody (2015) who argues males working within ECEC must “cross gender boundaries...and challenge societal norms as well as their masculine identity” (p.351), Declan believed men rarely teach the infant classes as,

There’s a real stigma around what Junior Infant teaching is all about. That it’s all playtime and cleaning noses and cleaning up after kids and I think that’s what maybe a lot of the male teachers are afraid of. That they won’t have the control over them and they won’t be able to deal with the tears and the stories (H, L90-94).

Pruit (2014) suggests male teachers may be discouraged from teaching within ECEC due to suspicion regarding their motives for working with young children and it may be more convenient to place a female in the role due to the child-care demands associated with it. This view was upheld by four participants within this research.

Rachel admitted “you have to look after cut knees, runny noses and toileting accidents...there’s possibly a connection between that and putting in a female rather than a male, which is silly...we’re all professionals” (C, L92-95). Wood and Brownhill (2018) argue the vital presence of positive male role models within the ‘overly feminised’ infant classes. Reiterating this point Declan explained,

Kids need a strong role model at a young age....there’s only two male teachers in the school, all at the older end... there’s nobody at the younger end...I felt that I would try and become a positive role model for those boys that were struggling and try and give them a good start to school instead of getting a hard time starting off and making it worse for themselves (H, L10-18).

Six participants referred to authority figures including Board of Managements and school principals as playing a key role in determining why female, rather than male teachers, were placed in the Junior Infant classroom. Lisa claimed “our principal, who is a female herself probably wouldn’t put a male in the role” (E, L76-77). In line with Jones (2007), Karen suggested “the infant class is seen as easier, not as challenging...maybe the men are saved for the older classes because they’re a bit more strict and keep the children in line” (D, L69-71). Others (4/10) indicated societal expectations dictate that a Junior Infant teacher must be female, in keeping with Brody (2015),

I know lots of men who have taught younger classes and they do just as good a job as anybody else. It’s just some parents, teachers, people think that ‘Well sure they’re like a mammy really so you need a mammy’.... I think that’s actually a flaw of just the way we look at things (F, L115-122).

Although there was a general consensus amongst participants regarding the typical gender of Junior Infant teachers, there was greater variance in terms of their general age and experience. Seven participants referred to the customary Junior Infant teacher as a young, newly qualified (NQT) female, “the infant teachers in my school are generally...fresh off the market as such” (E, L80-82). Others (3/10) referred to their age as ranging from NQTs to older teachers who had spent their entire career within infant education, “I think there can be a huge difference in age...I have known teachers close on retirement who stuck with Junior Infants and never moved... right down to people who are newly coming out” (C, L80-84). Reflecting Al-Adwan and Al-Khayat (2017), Jane believed, “you’re exhausted...maybe that’s why...the stereotypical infant teacher is a younger teacher who is not married and has no children at home or is an older person, someone who can go home and sleep in the evening” (A, L222-226).

Although based on a small sample size, this research mirrors exactly the findings of the INTO (1986) as 70% of the participants were placed in the Junior Infant classroom as an NQT or as a new member of staff. This finding is significant as it brings to light queries regarding whether the profile of Junior Infant teachers has altered in the last thirty years. Although four participants requested to become Junior Infant teachers and described a passion for the education of young children, similar to the work of Murray (2013), most (6/10) were assigned the role by their school principal. Anna shared her experience, “I defaulted into it...there were two teachers, the male was the principal. He had the senior classes so I ended up getting the younger ones” (G, L16-20). Lisa described her appointment to the role as, “that decision was made for me. I didn’t have any choice...I remember going into the room and waiting for her to tell me and going please don’t give me Junior Infants” (E, L13-23).

Similar to research conducted by Horgan (1995), two participants referred to an avoidance of Junior Infants by senior staff members resulted in the onus being placed on NQT's to educate them. They expressed regret that the infant classes are assigned to inexperienced teachers due to the challenging reality of managing a large number of Junior Infant children in their new primary school environment. Abbie commented,

You hear... 'Oh you have to be really young and vibrant to be a Junior Infant teacher'. I would say you have to have a bit of experience before you're able for it. I'm not sure if it's a good thing for somebody straight out of training to go straight into Junior Infants. I don't think you have the skills yet (F, L515-519).

Ultimately, Abbie believed it was a huge asset to a primary school to have an experienced infant teacher on their staff which may indicate a lack of longevity amongst infant teachers in vertical primary schools in Ireland and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Process

Child-Infant teacher relationship. In agreement with Bergin and Bergin (2009) and NCCA (2009a), all participants indicated it was of utmost importance to create a trusting and positive relationship with the Junior Infant children. Moyles (2017) believes a special bond exists between the child and their first primary school teacher and this was a common theme throughout each interview. Anna shared "you have to love children...care about them...if teaching is just your job Junior Infants will drive you bananas" (G, L244-245). Lisa remarked "you become the most important person in their lives and anything you say goes....the love and the affection that they have for their teacher is amazing" (E, L233-239). Pippa conveyed that the teacher-child relationship in Junior Infants differs to all others, "with the older kids you are very

much their teacher whereas with Junior Infants you're their mammy, their daddy, their teacher, their best friend. You're God. You're everything to a Junior Infant" (J, L69-71). Echoing Bergin and Bergin (2009), Nicole spoke of the lasting impression a Junior Infant teacher can have upon a child, "you are the first teacher the child is going to have in big school and you want every child to remember you and to be happy in school....I remember my first day and my first teacher vividly" (B, L51-53).

As suggested by Ailwood (2007) and Hayes and Kernan (2008) all participants described a nurturing, caregiving and mothering quality as necessary within their role in response to the age of the children. Rachel considered, "I think you are a mom to the children very much in Junior Infants. There's a lot of looking after them, if it's fixing the hair or nursing an invisible cut that they have. That's a huge part of the Junior Infant classroom" (C, L95-98). Echoing participants within the research of Reid and Miller (2014), Abbie and Nicole believed becoming mothers themselves enabled them to become more effective, caring and understanding Junior Infant teachers as they could relate to both the children and their parents on a personal level. However, similar to the research of Sisson and Iverson (2014) who suggested certain ECEC educators "rejected a caregiver identity....which they associated with being low-status" (p.222), Lisa described discomfort and annoyance that as a trained primary school teacher she was required to care for children rather than focus on the instruction of necessary academic skills.

In keeping with Bergin and Bergin (2009) there was a clear sense that participants maintained a friendly and warm relationship with the children by listening to their stories, playing alongside them and being less authoritative than teachers of older classes, "sure they call me mammy a lot of days...they just love telling you all their little stories. I just don't think the older ones will bother telling you as much as

the little ones will” (B, L101-104). Yet, as highlighted by Sisson and Iverson (2014), some shared they maintained a professional distance, avoiding affection commonly sought by the Junior Infant children such as hugs or sitting on their knee as a means of preparing the children for the older classes,

I think you need a good foundation in infants for going through the school... You need to strike a balance between a good level of classroom management and firmness with the children while also being able to play and be silly with them (C, L168-172).

Resonating with Moyles’ (2017) thinking surrounding the Junior Infant teacher’s role resting “paradoxically on something of an intimate relationship with children, yet on a recognition that they are someone else’s children” (p.82) and echoing Osgood ‘s (2010) claim that ECEC educators often struggle to maintain a professional persona due to the emotive nature of their work, two participants mentioned they maintain a professional distance from children as self-protection from accusations of inappropriate behaviour,

You need to be able to be professional and know what’s appropriate and what’s not. There are boundaries and limits... If the children are looking for more from you that is ethically right like hugs... you have to stand firm... You’re not their mother... you sometimes show signs of their mother but you’re not (I, L112-120).

It can be quite overwhelming because if a child comes to you and they’re upset... they want to sit on your lap and give you hugs and kisses.... that’s difficult as a teacher because at the end of the day for child protection reasons I can’t give this child the affection that they require. I’m not their parent... there

is a very fine line that you have to keep watching...you don't want to overstep the mark and then parents coming in to you or god forbid the Department making a complaint (E, L152-161).

Parent-Infant teacher relationship. Consistent with the literature (Knopf & Swick, 2007; NCCA, 2009b; Shields, 2009) there was a general consensus amongst participants that establishing open communication and maintaining a friendly relationship with parents of Junior Infant children was of utmost importance. Six participants felt an important aspect of their role was to support parents who were sending their child to primary school for the first time and acknowledged it could be an anxious experience for parents, reflecting the work of Moyles (2017). Declan elaborated,

These are still their babies... not that they would care any less as they get older but it's their first year of school and I do remember having a lot of parents at the door in the first few weeks wondering...was he settling in ok, was he nervous, following the rules, was he eating? (H, L189-193).

However, echoing Lightfoot and Frost (2015), four participants believed parents view their role as that of a substitute parent rather than an educator. Lisa expressed concern that parents have unrealistic expectations of Junior Infant teachers, "you have twenty five other children to look after not just their child and they almost want you to be holding their child's hand all day long and realistically you can't do that" (E, L250-252). Furthermore, reflecting Gibson (2015), Anna and Karen questioned the value some parents place on the Junior Infant school year, "they think 'It's grand if they miss a few days sure they're only playing in there'....they don't realise the academic work that we are doing" (D, L176-179).

Eight participants stated they had a close bond with parents as a result of daily, informal encounters as parents drop off and collect their children from the classroom. For most participants this was a positive experience as it allowed them to become familiar with each child's family and address minor issues informally yet effectively as they arose rather than through formal parent-teacher meetings. Nevertheless, Lisa admitted she found the parent-teacher relationship exhausting at times due to a pressure to present a positive and approachable persona, not only for the Junior Infant children but for their parents too. Furthermore, a small number of participants (2/10), albeit the minority, indicated that the informal, open door policy associated with the Junior Infant classroom had led to hostile encounters with parents, reflecting Moyles (2017). They suggested they are placed in a vulnerable position in comparison to their colleagues who teach older classes, "we are in the firing line all the time....I don't think teachers of older kids get as much abuse from parents as the infant teachers do" (J, L139-141). Similarly Declan highlighted,

There was definitely a lot more contact with parents as a Junior Infant teacher as opposed to a Fifth class teacher. I think at that stage they just kind of expect their kids to be getting on with it ...whereas I was contacted for, I wouldn't say silly things but minor incidents (H, L193-198).

Both Pippa and Lisa believed parents have become too overbearing and protective of their children, "the smallest thing can be an issue. ...They come in all guns blazing the next day and it just gets so frustrating at times" (E, L249-258). Lisa questioned whether the overly-defensive nature of some parents may be a consequence of guilt,

The majority of parents are working... I tend to see their children more than they do in a day because they go to crèche after school or an after school club...then the parents have this guilt and they over compensate with their child (E, L168-173).

In addition, Pippa voiced her concern that parents have no respect for teachers, “in no other career does someone walk in and tell someone how to do her job” (J, L160-161). This theory is supported by Moloney (2010a) who suggests the professional identity of primary school teachers is becoming progressively more fragile in recent times. Yet, resonating with Gibson (2015), Abbie, Declan and Rachel believed parents had a greater respect for Junior Infant teachers in comparison to preschool educators and regularly sought their advice regarding supporting their child’s learning in the home.

Colleague-Infant teacher relationship. The relationship between Junior Infant teachers and their colleagues within vertical primary schools proved to be a controversial issue and is congruent to the findings of Moloney (2010a) who stated “the professional identity of infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings” (p.167). Initially, five participants remarked they were highly esteemed by their colleagues who recognised Junior Infants as an extremely challenging class, requiring certain characteristics and skills they themselves did not possess. Pippa believed her colleagues “have the height of praise and respect for the two Junior Infant teachers in our school” (J, L171-172). However, as the interviews progressed, a significant proportion of participants (7/10) claimed their work was diminished and delegitimized by colleagues. Participants shared their colleagues considered Junior Infants “glorified babysitting” (H, L367), “an easy year” (B, L135) and even “the worst class to get” (C, L211). Carol conveyed her colleagues viewed her role as that of tiding children over until their ‘real’ education could begin. The lack of understanding

demonstrated by the majority of participants' colleagues regarding their role and work as Junior Infant teachers is reflective of the findings of Sisson and Iverson (2014).

Participants stated colleagues regularly voiced negative remarks regarding the shorter infant school day, daily planning hour, lack of corrections and lack of tangible evidence of learning within the infant classes. This was especially highlighted by Karen who shared her experience,

I have had comments before... 'How are you tired, sure you're only on a half day? Your kids are gone at half one', or 'Sure you're only playing down there'....They think Junior Infants aren't able to do as much as they are and we're down in Junior Infants having a great time instead of working hard....You don't just tell them what page to do and they start on their own. It's very busy and I think people don't appreciate that sometimes (D, L183-191).

Declan clarified although such comments were typically made "in jest" (H, L212), he believed they reflect his colleagues true feelings regarding Junior Infant teachers and infant education. Ultimately, Abbie believed colleagues with previous teaching experience with Junior Infants recognised what a demanding and important role it is, while those lacking in first-hand experience have a distorted and unfavourable view of it. As a possible solution to this issue, Abbie and Declan proposed every primary school teacher should teach Junior Infants at some stage in their career in order to alter negative perceptions regarding the infant classes.

Encouragingly, this research found that in contrast to the findings of the INTO (1986), teachers were enabled to use the final hour of the school day to file children's work, plan lessons, prepare resources and attend meetings with parents. Only two participants reported regular requests from their principal to supervise other classes

during this hour. This finding is noteworthy as it suggests a shift in the attitudes of principals regarding the workload of infant teachers.

Context

ECEC provision. Although Junior Infant teachers and preschool educators simultaneously deliver ECEC, nine participants within this research perceived their professional identity as distinct to that of preschool educators. This stance may be a consequence of the split system of ECEC provision in Ireland or the separate pre-service education afforded to preschool educators and Junior Infant teachers. Moloney (2010a) suggests, unlike preschool educators, “teachers fit within the established social order, are seen as valuable contributors to society and are important, indeed critical, to children’s education and development” (p.172). Echoing this viewpoint, Carol provided an insight into the cause of the differing professional identities of Junior Infant teachers and preschool educators,

I think preschool is still a bit messy...I don’t know if you even have to have a degree....You can’t really compare the two professionally because I think you have to jump through a lot more hoops to be an infant primary school teacher...preschool is so important and I don’t think that’s recognised because they don’t recognise preschool teachers professionally as much as primary school teachers (I, L166-176).

Nevertheless, all participants indicated their identity and role as Junior Infant teachers was often de-professionalised, diminished and deemed insignificant by parents, colleagues and society in general. Carol highlighted, “people, when I tell them I’m an infant teacher, have an expression on their face...like ‘aww...that’s so cute’ and I’m like ‘No. It’s a job’ (I, L222-224). This disclosure by participants is noteworthy as

Lightfoot and Frost (2015) and Vincent and Braun (2010) suggest recognition and acknowledgement of the vital work undertaken by ECEC educators is integral to their self-worth.

Seven participants regarded their role as Junior Infant teachers as separate to that of preschool educators, in keeping with Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016). Reflecting Moloney and Pope (2015), Anna believed “expectations aren’t as high for the children in playschool. There isn’t any departmental inspection for a playschool for achievement...but when you come into Junior Infants you have to meet certain levels” (G, L208-301). Lisa further described the huge disparities between preschools and Junior Infant classes, reflecting the findings of the Donnelly (2016), the INTO (2005) and O’Callaghan (2015),

In preschool...there’s shorter hours, there’s no homework. It’s a big, massive difference then coming into Junior Infants after going home at twelve with the preschool. You suddenly have this formal education where they have tasks and assessments to do. It’s just much more formal for them (E, L203-210).

Junior Infant classroom environment. A passionate issue for participants was the age at which children commence Junior Infants, and should be considered along with the work of O’Connor and Angus (2014). Rachel believed a child’s age has a huge impact on their ‘school-readiness’, as “it’s a huge benefit to children to be five starting school...they’re so much more able and so much more settled in themselves by being that little bit older” (C, L273-276). Although the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2016) propose the Free Preschool Year Scheme (FPSY) will lead to the eventual increase of the age at which children commence Junior Infants, Nicole considered more definitive action is needed,

I'd love if the Department of Education raised the starting school age to five and just made that legally binding. I feel they'd cope an awful lot better, maturity wise. While children can be academic... the emotional side of it is very important...they're going to be in school for a lot of years... I can't understand parents rushing children to school too young (B, L216-221).

Yet, in contrast to Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2000) who argue young children struggle to adjust to the formal primary school environment as it is "a poor fit" (p.163) for them at their current developmental stage, Abbie insisted the rise in the number of children attending preschool in recent years has resulted in a smoother transition for them to their new school environment.

Although the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) (2005) question the suitability of the formal layout of the Junior Infant classroom for young children, within this small scale research it did not prove to be a strong finding as only one participant mentioned the challenge it presented. Karen commented "there's not enough room for these children in the classroom. You are supposed to be creating interest areas, where are you supposed to put these?" (D, L262-265). Student-teacher ratios proved a much more passionate topic amongst participants. Most participants (8/10) stressed that the current ratios are inadequate and harmful for both the teacher and the children to function within, resonating with the work of Moloney and Pope (2015). Hodson and Keating (2007) propose the needs of children within their first year of primary school are identical to those of their preschool peers and reflecting this opinion Karen criticised the differences between preschool and the infant classes, "it's crazy the way you can have two things that are so different for children of the same age" (D, L208-210). The reality facing many Junior Infant teachers as they operate within "supersized" classrooms (Donnelly, 2016, para. 1), was highlighted by Carol,

I feel guilty not being able to really support children developmentally in my class and I think there's an air of 'sure that's ok, Sixth Class have thirty' but they are able to put on their coats and tie their own shoelaces, open their own lunchboxes, hold a pencil...I can't believe there is such comparison. It shouldn't be ok to have thirty infants in a room and expect them to develop.... it's not realistic (I, L155-162).

Alongside a reduction in the student-teacher ratio, six participants proposed a classroom assistant within the infant classes would mutually benefit the teacher and the children. They suggested a classroom assistant would reduce teacher stress by removing the necessity for teachers to perform both 'housekeeping' and teaching duties. Carol completed her Diploma within a Reception class in England and pondered the value the Department of Education and Skills (DES) place upon Junior Infants in comparison,

I had a teaching assistant and eighteen children...the day was longer, we had more resources and more adults... I don't think the Department really value infant teachers because if they truly valued that stage of education then they would say in Junior and Senior infants you can only have one infant teacher and twenty children and that's it (I, L187-196).

Overall there was a clear sense of frustration amongst participants due to a lack of support and understanding from the DES regarding the reality facing both teachers as they attempt to provide both care and education to young children within the Junior Infant classroom.

Curricula and pedagogy. The majority of participants (7/10) highlighted a key responsibility of the Junior Infant teacher is to facilitate the child's smooth transition into the primary school environment and ensure their first year of school is a happy, positive experience. Carol believed her role is "to bring on holistic development for children. It's not just learning or reading and writing.... They need emotional support and support making friends" (I, L89-93). Yet in contrast, others (7/10) alluded to an expectation the Junior Infant teacher provide a strong academic foundation for children, in line with Sisson and Iverson (2014) and UNICEF (2016). Pippa stated "Junior Infants is such an important year in school...I think if you have a bad first year it's just going to go downhill from there" (J, L93-96). Similarly Anna shared,

You work hard with your Junior Infants and if they reach a good level it sets the tone for the rest of their life.....To get out of those two classrooms without having a fair grasp of reading and writing, it starts to slip from then on because work gets harder (G, L239-240; 334-338).

A controversial topic amongst participants was the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES, 1999). Nicole shared her disbelief regarding the volume of content within the PSC, "I could genuinely stay here with infants until five o'clock in the evening and still feel like I'm not getting work covered" (B, L161-163). Similarly, Declan added the PSC is overly ambitious within the shortened infant school day,

I think they put a lot of pressure onto Junior Infant teachers.... there's a wide range of subjects that are expected to be taught Your school day starts at twenty past nine and finishes at two o'clock including forty-five minutes of

lunch times. That leaves you very little time to cover all the aspects of English, Irish, Maths, SESE subjects and fit in Aistear too (H, L278-284).

Reflecting Nias (1989) who refers to teachers as feeling “under pressure, guilty and inadequate” (p.193) due to the struggle to maintain equilibrium between the obligation to meet certain government prescribed standards whilst simultaneously nurturing and caring for children, Nicole revealed “I feel like a bit of a clown most days in here, constantly juggling” (B, L82). Jane believed supporting children’s transition to the new primary school environment alongside the implementation of a demanding PSC impacted negatively upon both the children and the teacher,

You’re trying to get so many things done according to a timetable and that can be challenging at times....especially in the earlier months when the children are starting school. Sometimes a child can be very upset or stressed or worried and that can take time too so your whole day routine then is disrupted (A, L83-88).

Furthermore, Carol argued the combination of large student-teacher ratios alongside an overloaded curriculum resulted in a stressful teaching environment,

Having so many children in my care and trying to do it all....I just feel stretched and a bit stressed and not being able to do things properly because it always takes so long and I’m always pushing them to try and get things done.... I’d love to have a smaller class size and be able to do things properly (I, L205-209).

Five participants described envy regarding the freedom afforded to preschool educators to pursue the interests of the children in their care rather than teaching pre-determined learning outcomes as stipulated by the PSC (DES, 1999). Declan revealed that the majority of his day revolves around “things that aren’t on the curriculum... It

isn't just all Maths, English and Irish" (H, L145-146, 161-163). Anna and Pippa referred to the "peripheral and incidental" (G, L169) yet meaningful work that takes place within their Junior Infant classrooms, "you try your best to get through the curriculum ... while trying to teach them to be nice and behave....how to put on and off their coats and jumpers, open and close their school bags" (J, L107-112). Reflecting Hayes (2008), Declan believed the content of the PSC should be reduced dramatically and a focus applied to the instruction of basic skills and dispositions required by young children including independence, fine motor and social skills. Although the PSC encourages subject integration in the infant classes, Abbie and Pippa referred to thematic planning as a possible solution to this issue.

As mentioned previously, numerous curricular and pedagogical changes have occurred within the infant classes during the last decade including Aistear (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b) and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (DES, 2016), with more changes forthcoming such as the Primary Mathematics Curriculum (NCCA, 2015). The strain between the requirement to manage the teaching of academic skills and objectives as outlined by the PSC (DES, 1999) and PLC (DES, 2016) alongside the play-based approach endorsed by Aistear (NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2009b) is prominent in the literature and was evident throughout the interviews. In line with Zembylas (2003), there was a general consensus that these multiple curricular changes are disorganised, ill-advised and impossible to implement single-handedly with Jane referring to them as "curriculum overload" (A, L83). Nicole stated "any new curriculum ideas that come on board, it's the infant teachers that get them first....we get the workload thrown at us first" (B, L154-158). Pippa referred to the PLC as "baffling" (J, L230), Abbie suggested it is "badly thought out" (F, L403) while Carol,

reflecting Campbell et al. (1992), questioned the in-service training provided to teachers,

In theory it's lovely but one day training is only showing you how to write paperwork. So is that what they want from us, better paperwork? Or are they actually interested in changing teaching because it's going to take more than that for teacher's beliefs to change (I, L248-252).

Lisa doubted the Department of Education and Skills' (DES) comprehension of the reality facing Junior Infant teachers,

I think they are very much far removed from the actual infant classroom because they have all these great ideas...play based learning and the new oral language curriculum are great but when you have to teach all the other curricular areas as well...I wonder sometimes how they think we have the time to do these things (E, L222-226).

Interestingly, Karen was the sole participant to welcome the introduction of the PLC as she believed it will remove ambiguity surrounding play as an appropriate methodology within the infant classes. Echoing Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2000) and Gray and Ryan (2016), Karen argued that appropriate practice and play methodologies are more common in preschools in comparison to the infant classes, "high quality preschools are... using sustained shared thinking, creating relationships, using the children's interests...whereas you could go into a school...and the children are sitting on their own, doing workbooks, quiet work and no collaboration" (D, L224-230). Although participants (9/10) believed Aistear was worthwhile, in reality they considered it unfeasible for a Junior Infant teacher to successfully employ this framework without

increased support and a change in the requirement to simultaneously implement the conflicting PSC.

Three participants, echoing Moloney (2010b), mentioned regret at the lack of mandatory, regular and practical in-school training and support for infant teachers regarding the implementation of Aistear. Karen believed the compulsory two day in-service training provided by the DES to all primary school teachers for the PLC (DES, 2016) highlights the lack of respect the DES has for infant teachers and play as a methodology. Abbie proposed the following as a possible solution,

There needs to be actual people coming in and doing workshops, not in teacher training or education centres.... It needs to be in classrooms with real children...this is how you do it with one person, this is me giving the experiences to all of these children at the same time. That's real and that's what doesn't happen. They'll show you a wonderful thing that is happening with a group of six children and the other twenty six children are just playing (F, L413-420).

Nevertheless, despite much evidence of stress and confusion amongst Junior Infant teachers, many believed it to be worthwhile as Pippa highlighted,

I always say every September I'm never teaching Junior Infants again and then when I'm asked at this time of the year I always end up doing it again....They come in and they can't do much for themselves...and now they're reading and writing and they're so independent...seeing how much they progress, it's just amazing and you don't see it with any other class group (J, L245-253).

Time

Longevity amongst Junior Infant teachers. Beijaard et al. (2004) describe teacher identity as a fluid and adaptable process. Reflecting this viewpoint, as previously mentioned, six participants considered teaching Junior Infants had altered their teaching demeanour. They described themselves as more “patient” (E, L268), “softer” (C, L323) and having “a sunnier disposition” (I, L232), in keeping with Flores and Day (2006). This was especially highlighted by Declan who shared “when I started teaching I was a very strict teacher... silence in the classroom, perfect work, sit up straight....being in Junior Infants...I’ve had to take a step back from what I was” (H, L332-334). Furthermore, two participants stated they could not envision themselves as Sixth Class teachers, as illustrated by Carol who believed the role required her to become “quite strict and controlled....I feel with me around Sixth class that’s the way I have to be and I don’t want to be like that” (I, L233-235).

The notion of ECEC educators requiring passion, commitment and perseverance is evident amongst the literature (Brock, 2013; Colker, 2008; Harwood et al., 2013; Moyles, 2017). There was a wealth of evidence provided by participants to demonstrate the satisfaction they gain from their role as Junior Infant teachers, especially in their interactions with children. Three participants within this research, Nicole, Rachel and Karen, envisioned themselves remaining in infant education for the entirety of their careers, yet it should be noted these participants are still within the relatively early phases of their teaching careers (see Appendix D). However, a significant proportion of participants (6/10) questioned the suitability of remaining a Junior Infant teacher for a prolonged period of time. Consistent with research conducted by Al-Adwan and Al-Khayat (2017) and Osgood (2010), many participants (6/10) described the role of a Junior Infant teacher as exhausting and impossible to

sustain indefinitely. Lisa stated “I’m wrecked at the end of every school day” (E, L242) while Declan highlighted “It’s probably one of the most stressful, physically, mentally and emotionally demanding jobs out there...I just feel absolutely drained. There are days when I go home and I don’t want to talk to anybody” (H, L380-385).

Supporting the work of Day (2008), half of the participants were pondering the future progression of their careers. These participants aspired to teach an older class in the near future to support their professional development and reignite their motivation to teach. This was particularly highlighted by Abbie who shared “I think I’ve probably done enough...I don’t feel it would do me good to stay.... It’s a role I feel like I’ve already learned as much from as I can...You need to keep challenging yourself (L493-497). In contrast to the findings of Dunphy (2000), Abbie believed a benefit of the lack of specialised infant education amongst infant teachers in Ireland afforded them the freedom to teach older class levels, “It’s brilliant to be in a profession where you do get to change” (F, L501). However, she admitted the avoidance of Junior Infants by her colleagues had prevented her on numerous occasions from moving to another class level, confirming the research of Horgan (1995). Similarly Anna, who is reaching retirement age and has taught Junior Infants for the entirety of her career, shared her resignation that although she would enjoy the challenge of teaching a new class level, it is unlikely she will be afforded this opportunity due to the reluctance of her colleagues to teach Junior Infants.

An issue of great concern amongst participants (6/10) within this research was whether career permanency within Junior Infants would diminish their professional identity and the manner in which they are perceived by society. The notion of society viewing Junior Infant teachers as ‘inferior’ was highlighted by two participants who were highly offended that experienced Junior Infant teachers are rumoured to be

exempt from partaking in jury duty. Furthermore, Hard (2006) proposes the 'nice' demeanour associated with Junior Infant teachers may affect the trajectory of their career. Reflecting Moloney (2010a), Pippa shared she was concerned by the prejudices of colleagues and parents regarding longevity amongst Junior Infant teachers,

You get branded as the Junior Infant teacher, people might think 'Oh sure she's been teaching Junior Infants for years, she'd never be able to teach an older class' and if I stay in Junior Infants for much longer I might start thinking that of myself as well....I don't want to get the image of being stupid or not being capable to teach anything other than five year olds (J, L298-304).

Additionally, the INTO (1986) claim Junior Infant teachers' "professional development may be restricted and career and promotion prospects reduced" (p. 15). Wernersson (2015) maintains men are promoted to positions of authority much faster than their female colleagues, the stereotypical Junior Infant teachers, yet, according to the INTO (2017) in 2015, 59% of principals were female. Nevertheless, Lisa admitted,

I don't think I know any principal that got a principal post that had been an infant teacher beforehand. It just seems to be that teachers who are in the older classes are seen to be... more mature and capable of handling principal duties (E, L281-284).

Anna, a teaching principal, was awarded the role as a Junior Infant teacher however, she acknowledged receiving comments from others declaring the irregularity of being both a principal and a Junior Infant teacher.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the data gathered from the interviews within this case study research and presented an in-depth analysis, using the themes within the PPCT model as a framework, of the multiple factors which these Junior Infant teacher participants perceived to impact upon their role and identity within vertical primary schools in Ireland including personal, intrapersonal, contextual and time components. The following concluding chapter will summarise the major findings emerging from this study, outline the limitations associated with it and make recommendations for further research opportunities.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

This research set out to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools in Ireland. The research question which guided this study was: What are teachers' perspectives of their professional identity as Junior Infant teachers and what factors impact upon this identity within vertical Irish primary schools? This research presented the relevant national and international literature regarding the professional identity of those who work within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) then subsequently adopted a case study research approach acquiring qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews to compare the relevant literature to the experiences of ten Junior Infant teachers. The Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) acted as the theoretical framework for this research and facilitated a holistic and in-depth examination of the multiple, interrelated factors which influence Junior Infant teachers' professional identities including their personal characteristics, significant relationships and school environment.

This study recognises the relatively small sample size used and acknowledges that its findings may not be generalizable. This chapter presents the major findings from this study, offers suggestions for future research opportunities and recommendations based on these findings.

Major Findings

In keeping with the work of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) who define 'proximal processes' as "the most potent force influencing the developmental outcome" (p.800), this research concluded the relationships Junior Infant teachers encountered on a regular basis had a powerful impact upon their professional identity,

particularly those with the Junior Infant children and their colleagues. Participants believed in order to be effective in their role and to meet the needs of the young children in their care, they were required to take on multiple roles which differed to those expected of older class teachers including being a caregiver, nurse, friend and psychologist. Participants were united in their belief that a nurturing, caring relationship existed between themselves and the Junior Infant children. They considered themselves entrusted with the vital task of initiating children into the primary school environment and were mindful of the lasting effects of ‘a poor start’ to school for children. However, they noted this interpretation is often not shared by parents and colleagues who did not perceive their role to be comparable to that of primary school teachers who teach the older classes and deemed their work to be the equivalent of babysitting and lacking in academic value. Participants acknowledged the damaging impact negative perceptions of their role, especially those of colleagues, had on their professional identity, self-esteem and self-worth.

Echoing Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), who position proximal processes as “the core” of the Bioecological Model (p.795), the personal characteristics of Junior Infant teachers, such as their profile and education, played a secondary but nevertheless impactful role upon their professional identity. Participants considered their role as a nurturing, caregiving, mother-figure as one that could not be filled by every primary school teacher and required certain characteristics and skills including passion, patience and energy which may be innate. It is evident from the profile of participants (see Appendix D) and the challenge encountered sourcing male Junior Infant teachers to participate within this study that the stereotypical image of the Junior Infant teacher as a young female is still prevalent in vertical primary schools in Ireland today. Both the literature and participants offered a number of hypotheses as to why this may be the

case. Social preconceptions of females as more maternal, the avoidance of the infant classes by senior and male staff members and the influence of authority figures including Board of Managements and school principals were named as playing key roles in determining the position of a Junior Infant teacher is typically filled by a newly-qualified, female teacher. This research gives rise to questions regarding the value placed upon the employment of diverse and experienced staff members within the infant classes in vertical primary schools.

A feeling of unpreparedness for the reality of the Junior Infant classroom following initial teacher education was prevalent throughout these interviews and participants referred to a fear and anxiety amongst many qualified primary school teachers resulting in their complete avoidance of the infant classes. Although participants acknowledged they felt adequately prepared to teach the curriculum following their initial teacher education, they believed they lacked the basic childcare skills required for the role. In order to remedy their deficit knowledge and to prepare themselves for the infant classes, participants differed in their approach. Some relied on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses while others relied on the guidance of experienced colleagues. However, it is interesting to note, others commented on the inability of colleges of education to truly prepare Junior Infant teachers for their role, believing instead ongoing experience was the only medium through which to become an effective Junior Infant teacher.

The context within which Junior Infant teachers function, in this instance Junior Infant classrooms within vertical primary schools, emerged as the third defining element of their professional identity, in line with the work of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). Although according to the international definition Junior Infant teachers support the provision of ECEC, participants within this research did not refer to

themselves as ECEC educators. Their professional identity was resolutely that of primary school teachers and they perceived their role and identity as entirely separate to that of preschool educators which may be attributed to the split system of ECEC provision in Ireland alongside the pre-service education primary teachers receive.

Furthermore, it is evident from the data gathered that Junior Infant teachers navigate ECEC in a highly stressful and demanding formal school environment. Participants emphasised their disbelief regarding the differences between preschool settings and Junior Infant classes bearing in mind they teach a similar age-range. The literature review highlighted the existence of multiple, conflicting curricula and this was reflected in the evidence presented by the participants who expressed frustration at the requirement to teach high numbers of children a prescribed curriculum alongside a contrasting play-based framework with no mandatory training, additional funding or support available. There were constant references to the stress Junior Infant teachers felt as they attempted to manage their extended duties including caregiving duties, the early identification of learning difficulties and communicating with parents alongside their teaching duties. Participants described the expectations placed upon them from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) as unachievable and unrealistic within a short school day.

Finally, time emerged as the fourth and somewhat least significant component of this research, echoing the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Participants acknowledged their personal and professional identity had been altered by their experience as Junior Infant teachers and most believed it had made them more empathetic and caring teachers. Although they made reference to the enjoyment and satisfaction they gained from their time as Junior Infant teachers, many participants were mindful of the stigma associated with remaining a Junior Infant teacher for a

prolonged period of time. A lack of longevity amongst Junior Infant teachers was attributed by participants to a fear that they would be labelled incompetent and diminished primary school teachers and negatively affect their career trajectory such as the reduced possibility of acquiring future leadership positions within their schools.

Limitations

As acknowledged previously, the first limitation of this research is its small scale. This study involved semi-structured interviews with ten Junior Infant teachers in ten vertical primary schools in Ireland. Secondly, I experienced difficulty sourcing male teachers with the relevant experience, a minimum of three years' in a Junior Infant classroom, to participate within this research as seen in Chapter Three. The male participant had only two years' experience in a Junior Infant classroom however it was deemed appropriate to include him within the sample as ultimately he provided an invaluable perspective on the research topic. Although the lack of male participants within this study was unfortunate it highlights the scarcity of experienced male teachers within Junior Infant classrooms in Ireland today as previously mentioned in the literature in Chapter Two.

Finally, as seen in Chapter Three, resonating with Punch (2009), the validity of some of the participants' responses regarding their colleagues' perceptions of their role and status as Junior Infant teachers may be questioned. Certain participants' responses regarding their relationship with colleagues were initially overwhelming positive yet, as the interviews progressed it became clear they had in fact experienced negative comments from colleagues regarding their role and value.

Due to the small scale of this case study research, there are a number of possible future research opportunities to further explore the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers including:

- A longitudinal study involving a more significant number of Junior Infant teacher participants.
- A national quantitative study to provide up to date statistics regarding the profile of Junior Infant teachers in vertical primary schools in Ireland to ascertain their age, gender, teaching experience, longevity and number of Junior Infant teacher principals.
- A comparative study involving Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools and infant schools to determine whether a difference between their professional identities exists.
- A comparative study involving Junior Infant and older class teachers in vertical primary schools in Ireland to examine their perception of their identity, role and value.
- A comparative study involving Junior Infant teachers and preschool educators working with children between the ages of four and five to examine their professional identities.
- An international comparative study to ascertain whether the role of diagnostician, referred to as a concern amongst participants, similarly exists in countries in which the age of entry for children to primary school is older.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations to improve the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers within vertical primary schools in Ireland:

- Colleges of education should offer a blended approach to infant education combining the practical childcare advice afforded to ECEC educators with the child development theory imparted to primary school teachers. By providing more practical advice to pre-service primary school teachers, such as how to support children's socio-emotional development and how to communicate effectively with parents, they may then feel more confident and prepared to take on the role of a Junior Infant teacher.
- Additional, regular in-service training should be provided by the DES to Junior Infant teachers regarding new methodologies to support best practice in the infant classes.
- Board of Managements and Principals within vertical primary schools should encourage more diversity amongst Junior Infant teachers rather than the role being typically assigned to a newly qualified female teacher. This may reduce fear and avoidance of the infant classes amongst non-infant teachers and increase respect for ECEC.
- The provision of a classroom assistant, preferably with ECEC training, within each Junior Infant classroom in all vertical primary schools in Ireland would support Junior Infant teachers in their attempt to provide both care and education to children.
- Additional support should be offered to newly-appointed Junior Infant teachers through the establishment of regular mentor programmes in local education centres whereby experienced Junior Infant teachers could share their expertise with them.

- Communities of learners should be established within local areas whereby Junior Infant teachers and preschool educators could gather together to discuss best practice, seek advice and share expertise.

In Conclusion

This research sought to explore the professional identity of those who educate the youngest children within vertical primary schools in Ireland. The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provided an ideal lens through which to examine the complex nature of the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers. This research found although Junior Infant teacher participants viewed their work as crucial and their professional identity was resolutely that of primary school teachers, this viewpoint was often not shared by others including parents, colleagues and society who they believed diminished their role by referring to it as babysitting. Ultimately, this research suggests Junior Infant teachers hold a unique position and their professional identity resides within a chasm between ECEC educator and primary school teacher.

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Appendix A

Brainstorm Chart

Person	Process	Context	Time
Personal characteristics of the Junior Infant teacher	Junior Infant teacher and child relationship	The Junior Infant School Year-curriculum, policy, student-teacher ratios, age of the children	Time in the teacher's own personal life and career affecting professional identity
Role, duties and expectations of Junior Infant teachers	Junior Infant teacher and parent relationship	Importance of the first year of primary school	Time of change in ECEC in Ireland-FPSY scheme
Profile of Junior Infant teachers in Ireland-age, gender, experience	Junior Infant teacher and colleagues/principal relationship	Transition from preschool to primary school	Time of change in infant classes within primary school-new curricula, frameworks, pedagogies, expectations regarding teacher's duties
Public image and media portrayal of Junior Infant teachers	Junior Infant teacher and preschool educators relationship	Differences between preschool and primary school including student-teacher ratio, curriculum, classroom layout	Time in the child's life-transition to primary school, age at which they start Junior Infants
Motivation of teachers to teach infant classes		Difference between Junior Infant school year and first year of school internationally	Obstacles to Junior Infant teacher longevity
Job Satisfaction amongst Junior Infant teachers		Specialised teacher education in other countries for teacher of children during their first year of school versus B.Ed degree in Ireland	Teacher identity throughout centuries-has teacher identity evolved/alterd through the ages?
Aspirations for the future of their career			

Appendix B

Participants Letter of Information

My name is Ria Curtin and I am a postgraduate student of Marino Institute of Education. I am currently undertaking a Masters in Early Childhood Education. You are invited to take part in this research which I am conducting as part of my degree. This project aims to examine the professional identity of Junior Infant teachers in vertical primary schools in Ireland. This project will explore the manner in which Junior Infant teachers view their role, how others view their role and the factors that impact upon their role as Junior Infant teachers. If you choose to participate in this research you are asked to take part in an interview. The interview will take place at a location and time that is convenient for you. The interview should last no longer than 30 minutes and will be audio recorded.

All information you provide will be confidential. Anonymity and confidentiality will be assured through the use of pseudonyms and the redaction of identifiable information within the research. The information you provide will be analysed and written up in my dissertation however you will not be identifiable within the research. You may be sent a copy of the dissertation if you wish upon request.

Your participation within this project is completely voluntary and you reserve the right to withdraw from the research at any time. If you are willing to take part in the research please complete and sign the consent form. If you have any questions or queries regarding the research, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher or the researcher's supervisor via the following email address:

Student Researcher: Ria Curtin rcurtinmece16@momail.mie.ie

Supervisor: Dr. Karin Bacon Karin.Bacon@mie.ie

Appendix C

Consent Form

The Professional Identity of Junior Infant Teachers

The purpose of this study is to uncover the perspectives of teachers in relation to their role and identity as Junior Infant teachers within vertical Irish primary schools. You are requested to participate in a semi-structured interview to share your personal opinions and experiences in relation to the above topic.

- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about this research project. I am satisfied that they have been answered and I understand what is involved.
- I am aware that I may contact Dr. Karin Bacon (supervisor) if I have any further queries, concerns or complaints via the following email address:
Karin.Bacon@mie.ie
- I freely agree to participate in this research project and I understand that my participation will involve being interviewed.
- I consent to my voice being recorded while being interviewed as part of this research project.
- All information I give will be coded and confidential, stored on a password protected device and viewed only by the researcher and her supervisor.
Anonymity will be ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the redaction of identifiable information in the research project such as school names or addresses.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this research project at any time without reason or prejudice.

If any further questions or concerns arise please contact the researcher, Ria Curtin at the following email address: rcurtinmece16@momail.mie.ie.

Signed: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Profile of Sample

Data Set Name	Years Teaching	College of education attended	Previous Class Levels Taught	Current School	Class Currently Teaching	Years Teaching Junior Infants
A Jane	14 years	St. Patricks College, Drumcondra (undergraduate)	2 nd -5 th Class	Large, urban, mixed school	Junior/Senior Infants	9 years
B Nicole	15 years	St. Patricks College, Drumcondra (undergraduate)	Resource Teacher	Small, mixed country school	Junior/Senior Infants	14 years
C Rachel	9 years	Hibernia College (postgraduate)	3 rd Class, 5 th Class, Learning Support Teacher	Mixed Gaelscoil in an urban area	Junior Infants	5 years
D Karen	8 years	Completed an Early Childhood Education Degree at undergraduate level. Completed a postgraduate B. Ed degree at Maynooth University, Froebel Department of Primary Education	Senior Infants, 2 nd , 3 rd , 5 th Class Learning Support Teacher	Mixed, urban, DEIS school	Junior Infants	4 years

E Lisa	8 years	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (undergraduate)	4 th Class Resource Teacher	Large DEIS, mixed, inner city school	Junior Infants	3 years
F Abbie	27 years	Marino Institute of Education (undergraduate)	1 st , 2 nd -6 th Class SEN Teacher Support Teacher	Large, mixed urban school	Junior Infants	12 years
G Anna	37 years	St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra (postgraduate)	Junior Infants, Senior Infants	Principal of a small, mixed country school	Junior Infants	37 years
H Declan	5 years	University of Cumbria, England (postgraduate)	1 st , 3 rd , 4 th & 5 th Class	Medium sized, all boys school	Junior Infants	2 years
I Carol	8 years	St. Mary's University, Twickenham, England (postgraduate)	ASD Unit Resource	Medium sized, mixed school	Junior/Senior Infants	5 years
J Pippa	9 years	St. Patricks College, Drumcondra (undergraduate)	Senior Infants, 1 st , 3 rd , 4 th Class	Medium sized, urban, mixed school	Junior Infants	7 years

Appendix E

Interview Schedule

Introduction- I would like to welcome you and thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview for my dissertation. This interview should last no longer than 30 minutes and will be audio recorded.

1. To begin, could you tell me a little about yourself such as how long you have been teaching and how long you have been teaching Junior Infants?
2. Why did you decide to become a Junior Infant teacher?
3. Could you describe how much of your initial teacher training in teacher training college was focused on infant education?
4. Following your initial teacher training did you feel sufficiently prepared to teach a Junior Infant class?
5. Could you describe a typical Junior Infant teacher in Ireland?
6. Why do you think so few men teach the infant classes?
7. How would you define the role of a Junior Infant teacher?
8. What skills do you believe are essential for a Junior Infant teacher?
9. What characteristics do you think are necessary for a Junior Infant teacher?
10. Can you describe your duties on a typical day in your Junior Infant classroom?
11. How would you describe your relationship with the Junior Infant children that you teach?
12. Do you think the relationship you have with the parents of the Junior Infants you teach differs to that of the parent-teacher relationship with an older class teacher?
13. In your opinion, how do your colleagues and school principal regard Junior Infants and Junior Infant teachers?

14. In Ireland, preschool educators and Junior Infant teachers teach a similar age range, do you think there are any similarities or differences between them?
15. How do you think the Department of Education and Skills regards Junior Infants and Junior Infant teachers?
16. What is your favourite aspect of being a Junior Infant teacher?
17. What is your least favourite aspect of being a Junior Infant teacher?
18. Has your personal image of yourself as a teacher changed since you started teaching Junior Infants?
19. Do you see yourself remaining a Junior Infant teacher in the future?
20. Is there anything else you would like to add on the topic of Junior Infant teachers?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Appendix F

Exert from an Interview Transcript

92 **RC: How would you define the role of a Junior Infant teacher?**

93 P: Oh. How would I define the role of a Junior Infant teacher? The role of
94 the Junior Infant teacher is to teach them obviously but it's also, teach them
95 all the academic stuff but it's also to teach them independence and to teach
96 them how to play, how to act socially all that stuff. And also just to be there
97 for them. Junior Infants is such an important year in school, it gets them
98 into school, it gets them into learning, it gets them to like school because I
99 think if you have a bad first year in school it's just going to go downhill
100 from there. So I think the role of the teacher is to do all the basics, all the
101 academic stuff but also all of the social skills and the most important thing
102 for the Junior Infant teacher is to make the Junior Infants happy and make
103 them like school.

104 **RC: What skills do you believe are essential for a Junior Infant**
105 **teacher?**

106 P: Definitely organisational skills are so important. You need to be so
107 prepared and so organised for the Junior Infants because they will walk all
108 over you if you're not. Then as well just skills of having a personality and
109 just being nice and friendly and caring and all of that. I just think it's so
110 important.

111 **RC: Ok. Can you describe your duties on a typical day in your Junior**
112 **Infant classroom?**

113 P: Get them into the classroom safely without any parents, keep them safe
114 for the day and then after that try your best to get through the curriculum
115 and get through everything that needs to be done while trying to, you know
116 teach them how to be nice, to behave, teach them their manners. Even the
117 simple things, especially in September like how to put on and off their
118 coats, put on and off their jumpers, open and close their school bags.
119 Simple, simple things. Eating, toilet rules all of those things. At this time of
120 the year I nearly forget all of the little duties and all of the little things the
121 Junior Infant teacher has to do in September. Now they're kind of all
122 settled in and stuff but the basics of the basics needs to be covered in
123 September with them.

124 **RC: Ok, great. How would you describe your relationship with the**
125 **Junior Infant children that you teach?**

126 P: Well I hope (laughing) that I have a really close relationship with the
127 Junior Infants. I am strict with them and stuff and I do have good discipline
128 but at the same time we have a lot of fun and I listen to their stories and
129 every morning they come in telling me something or showing me
130 something new. I think all of that is so important. Kids need to be able to
131 trust you and confide in you and all my, well the majority of them do
132 anyway and even still I have, which I love, every Friday the kids in Second
133 Class and they've been doing it since they were in Junior Infants with me
134 and there's a couple of girls that are now in Second Class and they come
135 over every Friday and they give me these little pieces of card, they make
136 these little cards during their golden time and they've done that every
137 Friday bar a couple since they were in Junior Infants and they're still at it.

138 So you know that sort of relationship is nice, you know just that kind of
139 close relationship. I think Junior Infant teachers are always remembered.

140 **RC: That's fabulous. Do you think the relationship you have with the**
141 **parents of the Junior Infants you teach differs to that of the parent-**
142 **teacher relationship with an older class teacher?**

143 P: Yes, this is where my rant is going to start. I was only asked last week if
144 I wanted to teach Junior Infants next year. Now as of today I have officially
145 said I am going to do it but my biggest, biggest, biggest issue, I love
146 teaching Junior Infants but my biggest issue is with the parents of Junior
147 Infants because I do think we are in the firing line all the time whereas by
148 the time they get up and become older I don't think the older kids, I don't
149 think their teachers get as much abuse from parents as the infant teachers
150 do. Like everything, especially with my class this year, everything is my
151 fault. We have to be speech and language therapists, we have to be
152 psychologists, we have to be occupational therapists. We have to make all
153 these decisions and if we don't make them parents are wondering the
154 following year why were they not told anything this year. So I just think
155 that, it's just such a different relationship that the infant teachers have with
156 parents than the older kids teachers do. I don't know if it's the same in all
157 schools with infant parents or just my school but I do feel that parents have
158 gotten an awful lot worse with Junior Infants. I just do feel like we are in
159 the firing line with them all the time.