



Educators' Perspectives on the Impact of the Closing of Schools and Early Childhood Settings during COVID-19 on the Wellbeing of Children Transitioning to Primary School

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

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Abstract

Promoting the wellbeing of children has become the underpinning of educators' practice in recent years. With its multi-dimensional definitions, wellbeing is a term that encompasses many meanings. The physical, psychological, social, and emotional aspects of a child's state of being all need to be considered when determining their current state of wellbeing.

Positively nurtured wellbeing in children does not mean that their life will be free from stressful situations and negative emotions, but more so that they are equipped with the inner strength to deal with these situations appropriately as they arise. One such situation in recent times which has certainly impacted on the wellbeing of children is the COVID-19 pandemic. This study endeavours to focus on the impact on of COVID-19 the wellbeing one group of children, those navigating their way through the transition to junior infants.

The transition to junior infants is often an exciting and wonderful prospect for children but can be daunting and overwhelming for others. The closing of schools and early childhood settings due to COVID-19 restrictions meant that children spent almost six months away from their everyday routine. The loss of opportunity for regular interactions with their peers and the encouragement of key figures in their lives such as early childhood educators meant that the preparation for '*big school*' this year was significantly different to any other.

The perspectives of early childhood and junior infant educators can provide an insight into how these children found their way through such a unique experience. First-hand accounts of those first few weeks after returning to school, will inform the researcher on how these children responded to such a unique and challenging set of circumstances. Gaining an understanding of how educators adapted to the current context, will allow for further reflection and planning for future situations where children's wellbeing may be impacted.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

Wellbeing in education has gained much attention in the mainstream media and in literature in recent years. Publications such as the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023, commissioned by the DES (2018), and the Aistear curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) highlight the place of wellbeing in all aspects of the child's life.

Wellbeing is said to be experienced at a personal level but is impacted by many factors in children's lives (DES, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic is one factor which has recently been recognised as having affected children's wellbeing (ESRI, 2020).

In the context of COVID-19, young children have experienced a complex blend of transitions. These have included school closures, a prolonged period at home, and for some, a change in their educational setting (Education Scotland, 2021). Prior to COVID-19, transitions have been recognised as a stressful and challenging time for children (Yeboah, 2002). The nurturing of children's wellbeing during these times has been encouraged (Bulkeley and Fabian, 2006).

This study intends to investigate how, from an educators' perspective, the closing of educational settings in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the well-being of children transitioning from their early childhood setting to junior infants.

Following the unprecedented closing educational settings, the researcher aims to analyse emerging literature which explores the impact of these closures on children's wellbeing. The researcher intends to gather the perspectives of junior infant and early

childhood educators on how they feel the children coped with the transition following such a long time away from any educational setting or routine.

Rationale

A study conducted by O’Kane (2016), emphasised the need for educators to keep in mind that transitions are a process. Transitions involve the time period from when children are beginning to get ready to start school until the time when they have adjusted to school life, as opposed to a single point in time such as the day or week they start school. The closures of schools, coupled with the added stressors of social distancing measures put in place during this time, meant that children’s routines were hugely impacted (Egan, Beatty and Hoyne, 2020). These closures resulted in limited opportunities for children to interact with their peers. Such interactions have previously been recognised as being crucial to aiding a successful transition between the early childhood setting and primary school (NCCA, 2021). The researcher believed that such a unique set of circumstances ought to be investigated to gain an insight, from educators themselves, into how they perceived children’s wellbeing to have been impacted. Such insights could potentially provide educators with a better idea of what steps could be taken to minimise any further negative impacts, should such a situation occur in the future.

Aims and Objectives of the Research Study

This study aims to:

- Identify factors which contribute to children’s wellbeing and the role of the adult in facilitating transitions.

- Review pertinent literature which has examined the key elements of providing a positive transition experience for children, their families and the educators involved.
- Gather the perspectives of junior infant and early childhood educators in relation to their understanding of wellbeing and the its role in successful transitions.
- Gather the perspectives of junior infant and early childhood educators in relation to the closing of educational settings and how this impacted on children's wellbeing.

Outline of the Research Study

Chapter one outlines the topic of wellbeing in education, and the impact of COVID-19 on the closing of schools and early childhood settings. The significance of this research study is outlined at this point also.

In chapter two, the literature relevant to the research topic will be reviewed. The concept of facilitating transitions, along with the challenges that present as part of this process, will be reviewed. Perspectives on wellbeing in education will be discussed with reference to relevant policy developments and research in the area. Following this, the links between wellbeing and transitions will be presented, along perspectives on how closures of schools and early childhood settings during COVID-19 has impacted wellbeing.

The methodological approach is discussed in chapter three. The research paradigm, research method, the sampling process and the data collection and analysis method will be clearly outlined. The ethical considerations and limitations of the study will also be discussed.

Findings and analysis of findings are discussed in Chapter four. The findings of the study will be analysed in the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two. Educators' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 and the closing of educational settings on wellbeing are analysed in this chapter.

Chapter five concludes the study. This chapter outlines the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the findings of the study. The presented findings inform the conclusions drawn by the researcher along with the recommendations made for further research in this area.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will review recent literature relevant to transitions and wellbeing in education, along with recent publications exploring the impact of COVID-19 on these elements of education. Firstly, theoretical perspectives on child development in relation to transitions will be examined. Research on the perspectives of educators on transitions will follow. This chapter will then review wellbeing in educational contexts, presenting educators' perspectives and research on the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing.

Theoretical Perspectives on Transitions

Transitions are a key part of children's lives, representing a significant milestone and signifying change (NCCA, 2015). An educational transition can be described as a process of movement from one setting to another, often involving changes in teacher, curriculum, and philosophy (Margetts, 1999). When considering elements necessary to facilitate transitions to primary school, a number of specific skills and dispositions are deemed important (NCCA, 2016). These include oral language and communication skills, and dispositions such as independence and resilience (NCCA, 2016). Such recommendations stem from a variety of theoretical perspectives (Vygotsky 1962, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) on child development, highlighted by O'Kane (2016). O'Kane (2016), outlines these perspectives, which provide educators with a deeper understanding of the needs of children during transitions. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992), bio-ecological systems model and Vygotsky's (1962, 1978), socio-cultural theory are outlined in a research report on transitions

commissioned by the NCCA (O’Kane, 2016). These theories underpin practice related to transitions.

Bronfenbrenner places the child at the centre of a concentric set of systems; the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. When placing this theory into the context of transitioning from the early childhood setting to primary school, O’Kane (2016) places the home, early childhood setting, and school at micro-level. At meso-level are the relational networks with others, for example, relationship between parents, and educational settings. The model depicts the child as one element of a process of interaction influencing their development. Vygotsky’s (1962), socio-cultural theory also values the child as an active agent in their learning. It is suggested that children internalise social interactions, and tools such as language and social rules contribute to the process of learning. Both theories, evidenced in research (Kienig and Margetts, K. 2013; O’Kane, 2016; DES, 2018), place an emphasis on the impact of parents and educators.

With the above theoretical perspectives in mind, it could be interpreted that the closing of schools and settings may have the potential to have impacted children’s holistic development. As children were preparing to transition, critical components such as communication and consistent relational networks between parents and educators may have been compromised. Such networks are said to be an integral part of nurturing children’s wellbeing through developing shared goals and educational methods (O’Kane and Hayes, 2007).

Educator’s Perspectives on Facilitating Transitions.

There is a range of research which gathers educators’ perspectives on transitions (Bulkely and Fabian, 2006; O’Kane and Hayes, 2006). A study by Bulkely and Fabian (2006), found that social and emotional wellbeing is regarded as a significant factor in

transitions. Links between social and emotional competence and school readiness is intensely evidenced in the research (Webster-Strattan and Reid, 2004; Kagan, Moore and Bredekamp, 1995). More recently, a correlational study on primary school readiness and adaptation problems by Çökük and Kozikoğlu (2020), showed a negative significant relationship between the two. The role of family and educators is highlighted in this research, echoing the need for the clear channels of communication mentioned above. Prior to adaptation, comes the preparational period for the transition between the early childhood setting and primary school. Ramey and Ramey (1999), have criticised the concept of what constitutes successful transitions and school readiness, as it focuses on the competence of the child, rather than the role of the family and school. Such criticisms highlight the need for an increase in collaboration and preparation among educators.

There has been an increasing regard held for fostering transitions in early childhood in Ireland in recent years (NCCA, 2015). The first piece of comprehensive Irish research on transitioning primary school was a questionnaire on a nationwide sample of early childhood and primary school educators (O’Kane and Hayes, 2007). The results of research presented an agreement on the need for development of social skills, independence, language and communication. The ability to sit, listen and concentrate were also deemed essential when making a successful transition. Academic skills were not seen as highly essential. Skills and abilities were said to be likely to vary immensely among children. One may conclude that when facilitating a transition, it is essential that educators are aware of children’s abilities in these areas, strengthening the need for communication among the educators in the child’s life.

An additional key finding in the study by O’Kane and Hayes (2007), showed that 23% of early childhood educators had no communication with primary schools, while 74% felt that communication should take place. Although there is a growing body of research

which highlights a need for communication between educational settings, (NCCA, 2016; O’Kane, 2018; Panagiotis, 2018), there is little explicit guidance on what information should be transferred or how communication should take place. An executive summary of research commissioned by the NCCA (pp. 12, 2016), stated that the cross-sectoral co-operation among early childhood and primary school settings should result in the development of stronger relationships. However, it appears from more recent research, that adequate communication is still not taking place. Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020) highlight the need for a focus on resilience in children in the current climate, and call for a multisystem approach between children, families, and schools. Such collaboration is echoed in advice from Bernardos (2020), calling for continuity between schools and parents, and the fostering of children’s social and emotional wellbeing during transitions in a COVID-19 context.

COVID-19 as a Challenge to Facilitating Transitions.

There are many factors which are said to create challenges children when completing an educational transition (National Educational Psychological Service, 2020a) (NEPS). The concurrent psychosocial factors impinging on children’s lives have been responded to in publications by NEPS (2020b, 2020c). The possibility of adverse reactions from school age children to the pandemic, such as school refusal behaviour have been acknowledged. This behaviour occurs when a person refuses to attend school, presenting itself verbally, physically, or emotionally. Anxiety, low mood, and self-consciousness are noted as signs (NEPS, 2020b, 2020c).

NEPS (2020b) state that the closure of schools may have resulted in children having had little opportunity for social contact with educators or peers, leaving them feeling disconnected. Parents have been advised to understand this refusal is a result of anxiety

being felt by the child (NEPS, 2020b). A collaborative approach is encouraged between school and home in addressing the problem (NEPS, 2020c).

Currently, parents are prohibited from entering most schools. It is possible that as a result of this, feelings of unfamiliarity in the new school environment may be exacerbated for young children, without the support of a familiar adult. These negative feelings risk of adding to challenges faced by children when completing the transition to primary school (NEPS, 2020a).

Wellbeing in Educational Contexts

Wellbeing is a concept which has been defined and redefined over time. McNaught (2011) argues the difficulty of defining wellbeing as it possesses an inherent complexity. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines wellbeing as attributing physical wellbeing, resilience and feelings of connectedness. Also noted, is the necessity of nurturing its' development. The multidimensional nature of wellbeing is recognised within policy (WHO, 2001; DES, 2017), and its' promotion deemed essential in enabling children to reach their full potential in contributing to Irish society as they develop (DES, 2018).

The regard for wellbeing in educational contexts is evident in its inclusion in curriculum documents in Ireland (NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 1999). The educators' concern wellbeing and the facilitating of a supportive learning environment is said to contribute to children's happiness and motivation to learn (NCCA, 1999). Within an early childhood context, Aistear's theme '*Wellbeing*' aims to promote psychological strength, physical health, positive dispositions towards learning (NCCA, 2009). In addition to curricular developments, wellbeing programs are being implemented in Irish schools and early childhood settings.

Such developments may be recognised as supportive evidence of the growing regard for wellbeing in education.

Programmes such as The Incredible Years and PATHS are examples of programmes that promote wellbeing in education (DES; HSE, 2015). These programmes nurture resilience and social and emotional wellbeing in children, and support adults in specifically teaching skills which are said to enhance school readiness and support them in their transition. These skills include language, social, and emotional skills (The Incredible Years, 2013). Sandilos et al. (2020), examined the Incredible Years, PATHS and Tools of the Mind – Play in their association between stress and teacher-child interactions. The results showed that a negative association did not appear in the groups where the intervention was in place but did in the control group. The growing body of research emphasises a growing support for a universal approach to wellbeing.

Wellbeing Policy Developments in Education. There have been recent policy developments in Irish education relating to wellbeing. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023, commissioned by the DES (2018), aims to have wellbeing at the core of the ethos of schools and education settings in Ireland. The policy statement identifies protective factors of wellbeing in education, such as positive peer and teacher relationships and feelings of security. Risk factors to wellbeing were disengagement, absenteeism, and isolation. School transitions along with poor connection between family and schools were also listed (DES, 2018).

The concept of wellbeing in transitions in education has become increasingly topical in policy development in Ireland. Conclusions from a study by Bulkely and Fabian (2006), placed social and emotional wellbeing as a significant factor in the transition process in terms of the impact it has on children's learning. O'Kane (2016), reviews relevant literature and policy on a national and international level to guide the NCCA's work on facilitating positive

transitions. The report highlights the progressive movements made to prioritise the nurturing of transitions for preschool aged children. The NCCA's Strategic Plan 2015-2018, and Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020 are key progressive developments.

Wellbeing during Transitions. Bulkeley and Fabian (2006), present educators' perspectives on the topic of maintaining social and emotional wellbeing during transitions. The results of this study highlight the need for familiarisation with new environments, suggesting visits to the new school environment. A consistent and close working relationships between staff is also encouraged. Parental involvement was highlighted and inviting of parents to visit the environment was a recommended. Such facilitators have been seriously limited due to restrictions in place during COVID-19. As evidenced by Fabian and Dunlop (2002), the lack of reciprocal communication among stakeholders is already a common issue in this area. Such evidence may cause one to infer that these problems may have been exacerbated due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The role of the educator in fostering wellbeing is central to the Irish early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The educators' role involves helping children cope with changes, transitions, and stressful events. Through comforting children during times of separation anxiety, and engaging in conversations about life events, such as transitioning to primary school, the educator can model calm and positive attitudes. By ensuring the environment is reflective of their needs and interests, the educator can comfort children when adapting to unfamiliarity. Early childhood educators must also promote resilience, self-regulation, and self-help skills when preparing children for transitions (NCCA, 2009).

The Impact of COVID-19 on Wellbeing in Education.

Concerns among parents of school-age children regarding their social and emotional development during COVID-19 have recently emerged (Pascal, Bertam, Cullinan and Holt-White, 2020; Egan, Beatty and Hoyne, 2020). Yeboah (2002), highlights the interdependency between wellbeing and challenging circumstances in education, including transitional periods. It is stated that successful transitions can benefit future holistic development. However, Fabian (2002), highlights how even emotionally strong children may find transitions overwhelming, emphasising the need to nurture development in this area.

Recent research indicated that the effects of COVID-19 on children and teacher are multifaceted (ESRI, 2020). Areas such as education, social and emotional, and physical wellbeing have been highlighted as being impacted significantly (Pascal et. al, 2020; ESRI, 2020; CSO, 2020). A study by Burke and Dempsey (2020) shared concerns from teachers regarding the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. These included missing social aspects of school and concern for the wellbeing of disadvantaged pupils (Burke and Dempsey, 2020).

Egan, Beatty and Hoyne (2020) also shared concerns from parents about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on children. Findings indicated that 84% of parents stated that their children missed friends and playing, while 60% of children were reported to have missed attending childcare. Parents shared concerns about children needing additional support when returning to their early childhood setting and reported children being more emotionally demanding, with behaviours reverting to that of a younger child. One third of parents reported that their child had begun to project their awareness of the virus into their play, such as exploring death more in imaginary play (Egan, Beatty and Hoyne, 2020).

The ESRI (2020), conducted a study on the impact of Covid-19 on policy in Ireland in relation to young people, investigating relationships, learning, and wellbeing.

Recommendations included a focus on play-based pedagogies for young children returning to school, and addressing learning gaps which may have worsened among children during the closures. The study called for learning supports for children and on-going professional development for teachers adjusting to a post-Covid-19 world (ESRI, 2020).

Educators' Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on Wellbeing. Accounts of educators adjusting to COVID-19 have been documented on a national and international context. A report by Burke and Dempsey (2021), featured accounts from teachers regarding how they have adapted to a COVID-19 classroom. Teachers shared concerns about how children at infants' level had missed out on the hands-on and experiential nature of their curriculum due to the closing of educational settings. It was stated that educational experiences which build social skills, friendships and relationships cannot be achieved while learning remotely.

Pramling-Samuelsson et. al., (2020), gathered experiences of educators across three national contexts: Norway, Sweden and the United States. They shared their responses to the initial impact of restrictions on their early childhood settings and a retrospective account of initial measures put in place. Teachers accounts from all three countries identified the necessity of early childhood education for wellbeing and development. Participants expressed concerns of the possible impacts of the closures, with particular emphasis on the risks of negative impact on vulnerable children. The loss of contact with parents during the closures was also noted.

It can be concluded from these accounts that the impacts of the closing of educational settings have been recognised by researchers and educators. Reports show that many aspects of education have been impacted but highlight concerns about the impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

The literature presented (O'Kane and Hayes, 2007; O'Kane, 2016; Kienig and Margetts, 2013; NCCA, 2009) has shown an overwhelming emphasis on the role of the adult, the social and emotional competence of the child, and the importance of collaboration in transitions.

The implications of the closing of educational settings on children's wellbeing has been reviewed in this chapter. It can be interpreted from the literature that much of these impacting factors are likely to affect children during the vulnerable transitional period. The results of the research provide even further evidence for the need to provide support for educators, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The supports identified as being beneficial to wellbeing while transitioning were significantly limited due to closures, suggesting that the wellbeing of children transitioning during COVID-19 was negatively impacted.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will present the methodological approach employed for this study. The term methodology refers to the principles and values, which drive the overall desire to carry out research (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). The research methods and design will be outlined in this chapter, followed by the aims of the study. The process of data collection and analysis will be described followed by the sampling process. Finally, the ethical considerations limitations identified within the study will be outlined.

Research Paradigm

The paradigm within which this research project fits is the interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm concerns itself with the subjective world of human experience. The interpretive paradigm is characterised by a concern for the individual and understanding their experiences from within. This contrasts with the normative paradigm, which suggests that human behaviour is rule-governed (Cohen et al., 2007).

In this study, data was gathered using semi-structured interviews as the research instrument. This data informed the researcher on educators' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 measures on the wellbeing of children transitioning. Interpretive researchers set out to understand individual's interpretations of the world around them, with theory emerging from experience and understanding (Cohen et al., 2007). Recommendations and conclusions were drawn from these findings, regarding how children's wellbeing has been impacted.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach. This approach allows the researcher to assess the complexity and diversity of human interactions and interpretations of events, to achieve multiple understandings (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Qualitative research seeks to understand a variety of perspectives and represents voices and experiences of participants (Roberts-Holmes, 2014).

Qualitative research provides the opportunity for the researcher to engage in dialogue with participants about their perspectives and experiences in depth. A framework is established by selecting topics, from which the interview is guided. The researcher allows participants to respond with a considerable degree of latitude within the framework (Blaikie, 2009).

The research method employed aimed to:

- Gather perspectives and experiences of early childhood and junior infant educators using a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews.
- Collect data from a variety of perspectives, ensuring that the data obtained presented a range of perspectives and experiences from both cohorts of research participants: Early childhood and junior infant educators for the school year 2020-2021.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Benefits and Limitations

There are both benefits and limitations to using semi-structured interviews. In this study, the advantages included:

- Enabling the researcher to focus on experiences and perspectives of participants.
- Follow up on participant's ideas and interests.
- Clarify responses if needed.

- Investigate the motives and feelings of participants.

(Bell and Waters, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to consider participants' tone of voice and body language when answering questions. The researcher can direct follow up questions appropriately, and maintain a strong ethical standpoint during the interview, should a participant become uncomfortable for any reason. This would not be achievable using other methods, for example, a questionnaire (Bell and Waters, 2014).

As with every research instrument, there are limitations. It is time consuming to carry out and transcribe interviews on a one-to-one basis. It is sometimes difficult to analyse participants' responses (Bell and Waters, 2014). The researcher recognised these limitations and utilised thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013), to analyse responses effectively. The researcher was mindful of the importance of wording interview questions objectively (Bell and Waters, 2014). Due to the restrictions in place during COVID-19, to, the researcher was unable to carry out face-to-face interviews. This meant the researcher could not actively respond to expressions and body language during the interview. However, for the purpose of this study, the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages.

Sampling

The term 'sampling' refers to the process of obtaining data from a subset of the total population under study (Cohen et al., 2012). The sampling method used for this study was 'purposeful sampling' (Mukherki, 2014). This type of sampling occurs when the participants are purposely chosen by the researcher as they can provide information required to answer the research question (Mukherji, 2014).

Participants were selected from a variety of early childhood settings and primary schools. The participants were known to the researcher in a professional context. It is

arguable that this could be viewed as a limitation for the study, in terms of creating a danger of experimenter-effect bias (Laerd, 2012; Carroll, 2014). This occurs when the researcher wilfully or accidentally communicates the expectations for the outcome of the study to participants.. Experimenter-effect bias can cause participants to alter their behaviour and thoughts on topics related to the study to conform the researcher's expectations (Carroll, 2014). To counteract the danger of such bias, the researcher consciously avoided sharing the 'wants' of the study with participants (Carroll, 2014). The researcher did not discuss what they hoped the findings would suggest, or how they felt wellbeing had been impacted.

Another possible limitation to purposeful sampling is that participants may feel obliged to take part (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The researcher made efforts to ensure that participants took part wilfully, allowing them to choose a time and mode of communication suitable to their professional and personal commitments.

Sample. Eight participants were interviewed for this research project. Each participant was accessed through professional relationships which had previously been established by the researcher. Any identifiers of participants were omitted for confidentiality and child protection purposes. A profile of the interview participants can be seen in Appendix (A).

Data collection

Prior to the data collection phase, the researcher sought written consent from the managers of the early childhood settings and the school principals (See Appendix B). All participants were issued with an information letter, explaining all aspects of the study (see

Appendix C) and a consent form (See Appendix D). Through obtaining informed consent, the researcher was ensured each participant was aware of the purpose of the study.

An interview schedule was drawn up, keeping in mind the needs and convenience of the participants. The interviews were scheduled over several weeks (See Appendix E). Due to COVID-19 restrictions and government guidelines, the interviews took place over the phone and were recorded on a personal recording device.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of integrating data with relevant literature in the area. (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews (Clark and Braun, 2013). Thematic analysis was deemed useful in this instance as it allows the researcher to analyse large amounts of data and group anecdotal accounts effectively (Clark and Braun, 2013). The researcher was able to code common experiences and perspectives among the participants and group these commonalities into themes. The purpose of qualitative research is to identify trends in opinions and thoughts of people (Cohen et al., 2007). The researcher recognised thematic analysis as being useful in identifying these trends in this instance.

The steps involved in thematic analysis are:

1. Transcribing data
2. Reading and familiarising the data
3. Complete Coding
4. Searching for themes
5. Reviewing themes
6. Defining and naming themes
7. Writing and familiarising the analysis

(Clark and Braun, 2013).

Transcribing the Data. Clarke and Braun (2013), note the process of transcription, though time-consuming, as an excellent way to familiarise yourself with data. The close attention needed to transcribe data is said to facilitate the close reading and interpretive skills needed to analyse data. Elements of the conversation such as punctuation, utterances and pauses can impact the meaning of data. Therefore, transcription is said to be practically suited to the purpose of analysis (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

The researcher stored the recordings of the interviews and transcriptions securely on a password protected device and used the transcribed data to generate thematic findings for the purpose of the research study.

Coding the Data. The researcher became familiar with the data by listening to each interview several times, and by reading and rereading the transcripts. The data was grouped by attaching codes to each piece of data. The codes were grouped into clusters, using different font colours to allow for organising of the clusters. This enabled the researcher was able to identify the common themes.

Clarke and Braun (2013), describe this process of coding. A code is defined as a word or brief phrase which captures why a piece of data is relevant. The data can be coded in large or small chunks and coded in as many ways as is necessary to answer the research question. These codes should be concise and systematic. For this study, the researcher manually coded the data, so that the codes could be moved freely between clusters and thematic headings.

The researcher coded both the junior infant and early childhood educators interviews using codes such as play, social and emotional development, anxiety, communicative

barriers, perspectives on wellbeing, establishing routines, revising key skills, sharing of information, impact of COVID on policies, pedagogies and practices, children's, parents' and educators' attitudes. These codes were grouped into clusters: Communication, increased awareness of nurturing wellbeing, social and emotional development, practices and pedagogies and importance of play. From these clusters, the researcher was able to identify three key themes to present the findings.

These themes were:

1. The role of communication in transitions.
2. The increased awareness of the need to nurture wellbeing during transitions.
3. The role of play in social and emotional development

Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure validity, the researcher utilised an appropriate research instrument, semi-structured interviews, when gathering data. This instrument allowed participants to share perspectives, in accordance with the research question. The researcher aimed to maintain consistency throughout the data collection process (Cohen et al., 2007), through asking questions under the same themes to both cohorts of participants: Transitions and Wellbeing, Children's Responses, and the Impact of COVID-19 on Practice.

The interview questions were informed by theoretical perspectives on transitions (O'Kane, 2016) and recent research on the impact of COVID-19 on children's wellbeing (ESRI, 2020; Pascal, Bertam, Cullinan and Holt-White, 2020; Egan, Beatty and Hoyne, 2020). Using both cohorts of participants, early childhood and junior infant educators,

allowed the researcher to get a sense of how children were prepared for transitions this year and how they presented throughout the transitional period.

Regarding reliability and trustworthiness, the researcher acknowledged their own positionality and formatted the questions in a non-biased and non-leading way. The interviews were recorded and transcribed accurately. The researcher also kept field notes in a learning journal for the entirety of the project (Golafhansi, 2003).

Reflexivity

It is essential to consider the one's own position within the study, to assess its possible implications. Positionality refers to the stance of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study. The position adopted by the researcher can affect every phase of the research project; the research question, data collection, and conclusions drawn from the findings (Coughlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The researcher in this case, has completed a BA in Early Childhood Education, and worked as an early childhood educator prior to beginning the Professional Masters in Primary Education. The researcher has a vested interest in wellbeing in education and has worked with children transitioning to primary school. The researcher recognised this study as an opportunity to gather educators' perspectives on the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on children's wellbeing.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to adhere to a code of ethics when conducting a research project. To ensure ethical research was carried out, all aspects of the study adhered to ethical guidelines set out by Marino Institute of Education. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was respected throughout, and participants engaged voluntarily, free from any

coercion (Silverman and Silverman, 2009). The right to refuse to part take or withdraw from the project was made clear to participants.

Following the issuing of informed consent letters, the researcher arranges interviews with agreeing participants at times which suited their professional and personal commitments. Prior to the interviews taking place, the participants were issued with a copy of the interview questions to review. The questions were based on literature relating to theoretical perspectives on wellbeing, transitions and the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on these elements (See Appendix F).

Beneficence. The costs and benefits ratio is a fundamental concept, expressing the primary ethical dilemma in social research (Cohen et al., pp. 52, 2007). Prior to beginning this project, the researcher considered the social benefits against the personal costs to participants. The researcher acknowledged that this study would require participants to reflect on their own practice, along with the policies and practices of their educational settings. The researcher was conscious of the fact that this may result in participants being dissatisfied with their practice, after having several months to become accustomed to educating in the context of COVID-19. The researcher also acknowledged this as a benefit of the study. Reflecting on past practices is likely to inform practice during future transitions and increase an awareness on the importance of nurturing wellbeing.

Anonymity. The data collected within this study was considered by the researcher as extremely sensitive content. The anonymity, confidentiality and respect for the participants was of paramount concern throughout the study. The participants were ensured that any recordings of interviews would be held in the strictest confidence and would be accessed only

by the researcher. Any identifiers which would allow readers of the study recognise any of the participants were omitted from the study. Recordings were securely deleted once transcribed. The participants were also informed of their entitlement to a copy of the study once completed.

Autonomy. The researcher made efforts to ensure the participants felt comfortable taking part in the study. The participants were issued with information letters, outlining the nature of the study, its rationale, and their rights as a participant: access to information, confidentiality, and anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time. The participants were informed about the nature of the study and who would have access to the findings.

Limitations

This was a small-scale research study, and the findings are not generalisable. The researcher chose to investigate a small sample, gathering in-depth perspectives on the phenomenon of the closing of educational settings. The researcher is conscious that given the heightened focus on wellbeing in education during COVID-19, educators' perceptions of what constitutes wellbeing may have been altered by external circumstances in their own lives.

The participants were known to the researcher in a professional context, therefore there is possible that they may have felt obliged to answer the interview questions in line with their perceived 'wants' of the study. The researcher tried to counteract this through formulating unbiased and non-leading questions.

Another possible limitation of the study is the fact that closures during COVID-19 was a once off occurrence, therefore it may not be possible to compare the findings of this study with another group in the future.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on outlining the methodology for the study. The process of sampling, the overall research design and the research instruments employed in the study were discussed, along with its benefits and limitations. The process of data collection and analysis was also discussed. Finally, the ethical considerations and limitations of this study were considered.

Chapter 4

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will present the qualitative findings derived from the semi-structured interviews that took place in this study. These findings will be analysed and discussed in the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two. This study aimed to gather educators' perspectives on how the closing of schools and early childhood settings due to COVID-19 impacted the wellbeing of children transitioning to primary school. From the findings, three key themes emerged:

- The role of communication in facilitating transitions.
- Educator's understanding and awareness of the need to nurture wellbeing, prosocial and emotional development during the transitional period.
- The benefits of play in promoting social and emotional development.

The impact of COVID-19 restrictions, and the closing of schools and early childhood settings, presented as a strong narrative throughout the findings. The researcher found that impacts of the COVID-19 closures on wellbeing were multi-faceted and had numerous effects on all aspects of the transition process. Findings of this study will be presented under the three key themes identified above, and the impact of Covid-19 will act as umbrella theme under which the findings are analysed.

The Role of Communication in Facilitating Transitions

Effective communication between the key adults in children's lives is reported as being paramount to nurturing wellbeing during the transition to primary school (Bulkely and Fabian, 2006). Both cohorts of educators, emphasised the importance of effective

communication throughout the transitional period. All participants credited regular communication in allowing educators and parents to respond to the needs of the child.

The Role of Communication with Parents. Communication and strong relationships between educators and parents were found to be significant elements of the transition process, according to the participants. These perspectives echo the ideas presented by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 1992), highlighting the interconnection of the systems in a child's life and their role in development.

Anna commented on how maintaining strong relational networks with parents supports children in their preparation to transition.

It's important...for them to see that adults in their lives have a good relationship and it's not chopping and changing. We liaise with the parents and see where they're at with the idea of transitioning and can be mindful of that...

Amy credited their relationship with parents in allowing the early childhood educators to respond more readily to the needs to of children pre-transition.

The parents had expressed that some children were a little bit anxious about it – so we kind of started a little bit earlier than other years...

It could be concluded that from these experiences, that communication pre-transition, allowed for continuity between home and setting where the discussion of new transitions are concerned. Bulkely and Fabian (2006), and Bernardos (2020), cite parental involvement in nurturing social and emotional wellbeing of children during transitions. In contrast to the experiences of the early childhood participants, the findings also showed that junior infant educators struggled to engage in effective communication with parents. This could be due to them not having the opportunity to meet in person, due to the COVID-19 regulations in place during the transitional period.

Annette shared how lack of communication with parents made it difficult to prepare for children's needs.

It would have been easier if I could have engaged with the parents more...you're not really aware of the child, their needs or their personality. That makes it a harder to build a relationship with them...

Ava shared an experience of not being properly informed about the needs of a child in their class and how they were unable to meet children and parents. They stated that this may have been a factor in them not receiving relevant information from parents.

There was very little collaboration between parents and the school. I think some parents are hesitant to disclose some information to the school before starting. In other years, you get to meet the children before September...so you can reassure them that you're there to help. I had one child who was attending speech and language therapy and I didn't find out until the parent-teacher meeting in November. That's three months where we could have been working with that child on strategies and so on..

The need for a collaborative approach between parents and educators in the current climate has been noted by NEPS (2020a). Particularly, such an approach is called for in addressing the challenges faced by children transitioning to primary school. The findings, in conjunction with the recommendations made by NEPS (2020a), suggest to the researcher that COVID-19 has impacted on communication pathways across the educational sector in Ireland.

The Role of Communication Between Educators. The role of communication between early childhood and junior infant educators was also a key element of the findings. Junior infant educators shared frustrations about the lack of information passed on from early childhood settings, particularly for children with special educational needs. To fully support children, the need for communication between educators in sharing educational goals is emphasised (O’Kane and Hayes, 2007).

Ava mentioned that the development of a policy around transitions may be beneficial in addressing future challenges relating to communication.

There was little communication between the preschools and our schools and there would have been more of that in other years. I think there should definitely be a policy that we follow so when things like this happen, we have something to work off.

Amira found the *Mo Scéal* reporting templates beneficial to their practice, but commented on the inconsistency of receiving them for only a small number of children.

I’ve never gotten those forms before, and they were brilliant. They would definitely be something that I would call for again...I only got them for about one third of the class so I really feel like having them for all of the children would have been a huge help.

The early childhood participants shared the frustrations of the junior infant participants regarding the sharing of information between educators. The early childhood participants recognised that, regrettably, some children were transitioning without their new schools having any contact from their setting. Due to the timing of the closures, some children did not return in June as their ECCE term had finished. Early childhood educators had no contact with some parents post-closure, and therefore were unable to pass on information such as the *Mo Scéal* reports or assessment information. Similar experiences

were reported by early childhood educators internationally in findings by Samuelsson, Wagner and Ødegaard (2020).

Abbie identified the timing of the school closures as being a contributing factor to the breakdown in communication.

There are some children who you really need to expand and give an insight...We would have started those forms usually around March but didn't get back to work until June. I felt quite rushed...Not every child even came back so not everyone got one to bring to school.

The researcher inferred from the above finding, that both cohorts of participants felt that they had little opportunity to engage in critical communication due to the closures. The experiences of participants regarding the breakdown in communication between early childhood and primary education settings echoes findings from O'Kane and Hayes (2007). Findings highlighted a need for greater guidance on achieving meaningful communication among early childhood and primary educators. Noted recently by Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020), and Bernardos (2020), are calls for a multisystem approach between families and educators during transitions in the context of COVID-19. The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that such an approach was not fully possible due to the restrictions in place during the transitional period.

Educators' Understanding and Awareness of the Need to Nurture Wellbeing, Prosocial and Emotional Development during the Transitional Period

A key finding which emerged in this study related to the high regard held by participants, for the social and emotional element of wellbeing in children. The participants identified happiness, feelings of security and confidence, as traits in children whose

wellbeing is well nurtured. Social and emotional development was found to be a priority among educators in their preparation for transitions.

Educators Perspectives on Wellbeing. The participants shared their perspectives on wellbeing its role in the transition process, describing how they nurture wellbeing in their educational setting.

Amy referred to programmes implemented in their early childhood educational setting, which explicitly focus on social and emotional aspects of wellbeing and prepares the children for transitions in their lives.

We would be big on emotional wellbeing and social development. We use the Incredible Years program which eases them into transitions, so they're more socially aware. Their wellbeing would be, to us, that they're able to communicate their feelings to adults and to each other...

When sharing their understanding of wellbeing, Anna also mentioned social and emotional development in children, and how this contributes to a successful transition.

...That they are mindful about their transition and feel emotionally able to go through it – I think a good sense of wellbeing would stop a child feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of moving on into the unknown...

The researcher concluded that the perspectives of these participants echoed findings from relevant research on transitions. Such research identifies links between social and emotional competence and school readiness in children (Webster-Strattan and Reid, 2004; Kagan, Moore and Bredekamp, 1995).

Junior infant participants also commented on how they planned to engage children in a much slower pace of academic learning.

Annette recalled prioritising the social and emotional wellbeing of the children in their class given the current situation.

...Being happy and safe was really all I could have hoped for in September...this year...put a focus on what's important for them when they're starting school.

Alex also recognised how responding to the social and emotional needs of the children has taken precedence over academic learning this year.

... If I look at the curriculum plan for the year, we really are still so far behind any other year that I would have taught infants...We just need to take it at the pace they're able for...

Junior infant educators presented as being extremely aware of preparing their curriculum to nurture the social and emotional wellbeing of children. As with the recommendations for CPD in recent publications (ESRI, 2020), in preparation for the return to school, two participants shared that they had engaged in CPD specifically relating to wellbeing. These participants were advised to focus on redeveloping self-help skills, communicative abilities and positive learning dispositions. The actions of these participants mirror the requirements set out by the Aistear curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009), which outlines the role of the educator as helping children cope with stressful times in their lives, such as transitions.

Educators' Perspectives on the Impact COVID-19 on Wellbeing during Transitions.

The findings from this study gathered the perspectives of participants in relation to how they felt the closures of educational settings impacted on the wellbeing of children during the transitional period. Before transitioning, early childhood educators recognised the need to engage meaningfully with children when discussing transitions. There were mixed responses from participants regarding how they were supported in their setting in nurturing social and emotional wellbeing of children transitioning in the current context.

All early childhood participants recognised the need to explicitly teach social and emotional coping skills. Amy referenced the implementation of the Incredible Years Programme, and how they used this programme over Zoom to prepare children for their return to the setting.

We were doing The Incredible Years over Zoom, working on their breathing and things like that... We didn't want to be starting from square one, so we tried to keep up those emotional regulation skills...

The efficacy of these programmes in enhancing teacher-child interactions during stressful periods is notable in this instance (Sandilos et al., 2020), as this participant presented an awareness of the needs of the children in their setting in the current context.

In contrast, Anna shared experiences of feeling unsupported in terms of nurturing social and emotional wellbeing, due to the focus on COVID-19 compliance.

We were given nothing. (guidance on nurturing social and emotional wellbeing) I think it became very much "let's keep everyone safe", staff included. I think children's needs then got pushed aside... hand washing and cleaning and filling in forms took up so much of the day. I know that is how it needed to be, but it took up a lot of our time...

Abbie and Angela shared similar accounts of an overwhelming focus on complying with policies and procedures relating to COVID-19 safety.

Early childhood educators saw the return to their setting as its own transition for children. They focused on re-establishing relationships among practitioners and children and redeveloping key skills. They encouraged independence and communication among children, rather than any focus on academic learning or school-like routines. The skills mentioned above, prioritised by the early childhood educators, are recognised as being significant factors in fostering transitions in a COVID-19 context. (Bernardos, 2020; Masten and Motti-Stefanidi, 2020).

Angela reported having an unstructured routine upon return to the early childhood setting. This participant recalls providing opportunities for free play, as opposed to spending time developing skills which might be typically associated with school readiness, such as the ability to sit, listen and attend (O’Kane and Hayes, 2007).

I didn’t really have a strict routine set out. We had summer camp and they were only getting used to being back. There wasn’t much routine or time to focus on school. They had missed so much time interacting, they just wanted to play.

Junior infant educators also shared experiences of fostering wellbeing during the transitional period through encouraging interactions and playful methodologies. As with the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009), and the primary school curriculum (NCCA, 1999), it was found that facilitating children’s wellbeing and learning, stems from meaningful relationships and the creating of a supportive environment.

When discussing how they felt about the state of children’s wellbeing during the transitional period, junior infant participants shared experiences of children struggling with separation anxiety and emotional issues, but also recognised that they could potentially be

hyper-sensitised to analysing wellbeing states, due to the focus placed on wellbeing in the lead up to September.

Ava recounted their experiences of dealing with separation anxiety among children in the class.

I had a few who cried every morning after being separated with their parents. Even though they were happy in the classroom they still found the act of being separated hard.

Amira recalled noticing a higher incidence rate of children whose social and emotional wellbeing had been impacted by the transition, but also recognised how there was an increased focus on the social and emotional states of children this year.

Maybe, I was so aware of it because of COVID. I'm wondering, is the greater focus on wellbeing showing things that I would have just been getting on with in other years. I think we were all a bit hypersensitive to how they were settling...Maybe that's not a bad thing.

The impact of the prolonged time away from an educational setting on social and emotional wellbeing was noted by all junior infant educators. Participants stated that they noticed significant differences in learning dispositions and social skills in children who attended preschool during the summer and those who did not.

When recalling how some children who had not been back to preschool responded to their new educational setting, Alex noted how some children struggled to interact appropriately.

I had some children who seemed like they had just started any type of educational setting. They were lost. They walked around the classroom during free play because they just didn't know how to engage with other children.

The early childhood participants also shared their concerns for children who did not return to the setting following the closures. These children are most likely more at risk of struggling with the return to educational settings, as they have been subjected to the risk factors outlined by DES (2018). These include disengagement, absenteeism, and isolation, and can result in school refusal behaviour (NEPS, 2020b). This behaviour can present itself in emotional outbursts, similar to those described by the research participants in this study.

A notable finding in this study regarding social skills arose among junior infant educators, who shared concerns about children's interactions. Teachers recalled feeling the need to teach the children how to play with one another again, and continuously reinforcing expectations around playing safely outdoors. Similar concerns among parents were documented by Egan, Beatty and Hoyne (2020), regarding how children's social and emotional development was impacted during the closures. Parents in this study noted a regression in social and emotional maturity in children's behaviour. Similar accounts were shared by the participants in this study. The findings suggest that the time away from the educational setting may have been the cause, as participants in this study stated that children did progress socially over time, with guidance and modelling from educators.

The Benefits of Play in Promoting Social and Emotional Development

The benefits of play in promoting prosocial and emotional development during the transitional period was a significant element of the findings in this study. Both groups of educators regarded play as an integral part of promoting social and emotional development in children during the transitional period.

Amy shared how their early childhood curriculum was play-based, focusing on social and emotional development,

Our curriculum is totally based on their interests through play... We wouldn't focus on academic curriculum, but mainly social interactions. Our ethos is based on the Incredible Years which is focused on social and emotional development. I don't think academics are important at this stage.

The Benefits of Play in Facilitating Emotional Development. Early childhood educators recalled how they utilised play to elicit feelings and responses from the children about the prospect of transitioning. They would later engage the children in discussion and learning experiences on this topic. The Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009) encourages the use of playful learning to enhance wellbeing in children, aiming to allow expression through play.

Anna credited play as a means to approach uncertain topics such as transitions.

...It would all be through their play and circle time. We have storybooks on 'Big School' and have uniforms in their dress-up corner. It is a nice way to get them to start talking about it naturally...

Participants cited how they saw the return to the early childhood setting as a transition in itself and recognised the benefits of play of re-establishing relationships in this instance. They allowed the children to engage in unstructured play, free from routine, rather than preparation for primary school.

Angela recalled responding to the needs to the children and facilitating free play.

They just wanted to play.... in their own company and be with friends without any limitations. They had missed so much and that is what they needed.

Such findings support criticisms by Ramey and Ramey (1999), on the term 'school readiness'. The criticisms outlined, highlight previous concepts of 'school readiness' and

argue that there is a responsibility among the key figures in children's lives to ensure that the schools are competent in meeting the needs of the child rather than vice versa (Ramey and Ramey, 1999).

The Benefits of Play in Facilitating Prosocial Development. Junior infant participants utilised playful learning during the first few weeks of the school year to ease children's anxieties, build relationships and develop key skills such as oral language and positive interactions. Such findings are in line with recommendations by ESRI (2020), which called for the use of playful learning methodologies with young children upon their return to the learning environment. The junior infant participants recalled relying on play during the transitional period to encourage prosocial interactions among children. Vygotsky (1962), recognised how internalised social interactions are the basis for children's learning. These learning tools, language and social rules, were provided by participants in this study in the form of games with rules and sociodramatic play in the classroom. Educators cited these as the main modes of learning throughout the transitional period.

Amira shared how having an SNA in the classroom during the transitional period assisted with their nurturing of prosocial development through play.

I focused on making everything play-based. I was so glad of the extra help for the month of September. I got to do a lot of small group games, sharing and turn taking to help their interactions. I needed that help.

The primary school infant curriculum (NCCA, 1999), accounts for the variety of social factors, in this case COVID-19, which may impact on children performing at their full potential upon transitioning. The centrality of play and informal learning experiences are said to suit to needs of children at this stage of development.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Play. The positive impact of play on children's emotional development also presented in the participant's accounts of the recent focus on outdoor play. Due to COVID-19 guidelines, educators shared how they were encouraged facilitate outdoor play and learning as much as possible. Participants found it helped with self-regulation and behavioural issues being experienced in the classroom.

Amira shared how they feel the integration of the Aistear framework with this requirement has benefitted children's self-regulation abilities.

The focus on outdoor activity has helped hugely with regulation... Outdoor Aistear has really calmed children down when they come in because they've gotten their energy out early in the morning... This has had huge benefits...

Alex also commented positively on the integration of outdoor playful learning.

Getting out was something we were encouraged to do to... I will definitely keep it up... They love it and when they come back in then they feel like they've gotten a break from school...

The educators commented on how they adapted new methodologies such as outdoor learning, as they enhanced children's self-regulatory abilities. In line with the DES (2018) wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice, educators' engagement in reflective practice is central to achieving positive wellbeing in children. At infant level, these participants are meeting recommendations by the NCCA (2018) in the Aistear framework, which states that it is the educators' role to ensure that the learning environment is reflective of their needs and interests.

Conclusion

Through analysing these findings, the researcher concludes that the participants of this study understand wellbeing to encapsulate many elements of a child's state of being. They recognise positively nurtured wellbeing in children as a key element of a successful transition. Participants deem social and emotional development as an important factor in preparing children for the transitions. It can be concluded that there is an awareness of the need to nurture this development through play, communication and by adapting planning and methodologies. The researcher can conclude from the findings, that participants adapted methodologies to the abilities and needs of the children. The participants recognised the challenges they faced due to the closing of educational settings during COVID-19. Challenges included limited opportunities for communication, restricted opportunities to implement desired practices, and a need to re-establish key skills and concepts. For early childhood educators, the findings present some experiences of limited guidance on how best to nurture children's wellbeing, due to an overwhelming focus on COVID-19 compliance. For junior infant educators, the findings present an experience among participants of needing to adapt to the current context, and respond to the challenges which have occurred; such as a breakdown in communication, an increased need for development of key skills and a slower pace of academic learning.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the findings in chapter five. Recommendations in relation to further research in this area will also be made. This study aimed to gather educators' perspectives on the impact of the closing of schools and early childhood settings during COVID-19 on the wellbeing of children transitioning to primary school. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, over a two-month period. These perspectives provided the researcher a more in-depth understanding of how the closing of schools impacted on the day-to-day lives of children, as they navigated their way through the transition. Furthermore, the study investigated what educators perceive wellbeing in education to be, along with what factors they understand to have had an impact on wellbeing during the transitional period.

Conclusions Drawn from the Study

The most prominent conclusion drawn from this study is the universal call among both cohorts of participants, for the need for an increase in effective communication between educational settings and home settings throughout the transition process. A review of the findings indicates that the closing of schools and childhood settings, resulted in a breakdown in communication pathways between:

1. Early childhood educators and parents
2. Early childhood and junior infants' educators

3. Junior infants' educators and parents

This in turn impacted on the wellbeing of the children, because educators in junior infants perceived themselves to have missed out on key information which could have helped them to better prepare for the needs and abilities of children joining their class. This was particularly significant for children with special education needs.

The researcher can conclude that participants' perspectives on wellbeing fall in line with what constitutes wellbeing in the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999). Their perspectives on the educators' role in facilitating play and appropriate learning methodologies mirror the expectations for educators set out in the Aistear curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009).

Findings from the study also demonstrate that the closing of educational settings and the impact of COVID-19 on society has highlighted an awareness among educators of their role to nurture and prioritise the social and emotional wellbeing of children. This may be interpreted as a positive outcome of the COVID-19 restrictions on the future wellbeing of children. With reference to children transitioning, it is likely that the critical reflection of participants on practice will inform future practice in this area.

It is evident from the findings that there is a huge value placed on play to facilitate social interactions among children and a recognition as to how it enhances overall development. Although participants shared accounts of some children struggling with transitioning, findings show that children who had attended preschool present as better able to communicate, interact, self-regulate, and engage with their surroundings appropriately.

The findings emphasise a growing need for guidance and CPD for early childhood educators regarding the social and emotional development of children. All but one early childhood educator recalled feeling there was a lack of guidance provided prior to returning to

the setting on how to nurture children's social and emotional wellbeing. These participants commented on the focus on compliance with policies and paperwork relating to COVID-19.

The findings show that primary schools attempted to prepare for challenges in the transitional period by offering support for junior infant educators such as the assistance of SNAs, creating lower teacher-child ratios. Educators expressed how this enhanced their ability to nurture wellbeing during the transitional period, allowing for small group work and developing key skills. It is possible that this was achievable due to the extra weeks that primary schools had to prepare, while early childhood settings reopened in June with little notice.

Recommendations

Recommendations Regarding Wellbeing and Transitions. Before all else, if communicative pathways between parents and educators are to be strengthened during the transitional period, a more structured approach is needed. The findings from this study call for transitional documents such as the Aistear "*Mo Scéal Reporting Templates*", to become a mandatory requirement within the ECCE program. This may call for more non-contact time to be provided, which may be difficult to negotiate in privately run settings due to financial constraints. In addition, it is recommended that parents and educators, both early childhood and junior infant, meet or communicate to discuss the child's development and wellbeing during the transitional process.

Another recommendation from this study would be to encourage all teachers to engage in CPD and training, specifically relating to wellbeing in children. The participants in the study who took part in CPD prior to the return to school, reported it as an extremely beneficial experience. On the contrary, participants who did not partake, recalled feeling somewhat ill-prepared. This was the case for both early childhood and junior infant educators.

The researcher acknowledges the mitigating circumstances in which the closing of educational settings occurred. It is also necessary to acknowledge that actions taken by educators and the DES were carried out in a reactive manner, as opposed to a proactive manner (Burke and Dempsey, 2021). The researcher recommends the development of a comprehensive, universal policy in educational settings with a specific focus on the nurturing of wellbeing in children transitioning. This may also prepare educators to facilitate transitions following prolonged closures in future, should the situation arise.

Recommendations Regarding Further Study on this Research Topic. Based on the research carried out, the following recommendations for further research in the area are:

- To use participant observations as a means of collecting data, as the retrospective perspectives of participants may have resulted in them inaccurately answering questions. Their perspectives may have changed or be impacted by external factors.
- To use a quantitative research method to support findings, such as questionnaires, to increase the ability to generalise the findings relating to this research topic.
- Further study involving participants who have facilitated transitions with other age groups during the COVID-19 closures, for example, junior to senior school, sixth class to secondary school. This would provide the researcher with a broader range of perspectives on the impact on wellbeing.
- It may be beneficial to gather perspectives of teachers working in special schools, to get a sense of how the closures specifically impacted children with additional needs.

Concluding Summary

This study aimed to gather educators' perspectives on the impact of the COVID-19 closures on the wellbeing of children transitioning to primary school. The study endeavoured to gather educators' perspectives on wellbeing, and how it is impacted during transitions, along with the challenges experienced during transitions this year.

The study can conclude that participants regard wellbeing as having a primarily social and emotional focus and use playful learning as means to promote their development during the transitional period. The study found that participants value the significant role of communication in nurturing wellbeing during transitions, and that the closing of educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their ability to engage in effective communication.

The researcher concludes from the findings that the wellbeing of children transitioning to primary school in 2020 has been impacted, but that educators are engaging in reflective practice and adapting their practice to nurture the wellbeing of children in these challenging times.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to School Principals and Manager of Early Childhood Settings

Dear _____

I am writing to you as a final year student at Marino Institute of Education. I am currently completing a professional masters in primary education. As part of my final year requirements, I must carry out a research dissertation. With your consent, I would like to carry out research within your educational setting.

For my research project, I have chosen to investigate the impact of the closing of educational settings on the wellbeing of children transitioning from their early childhood setting to primary school. I aim to gather the perspectives of both early childhood educators and junior infant teachers their understanding of wellbeing. I will also gather their perspectives on how they feel COVID-19 has impacted the transition process.

To gather my research, I would like to carry out semi-structured interviews with an educator from your setting. There will be fifteen questions in total and I have attached a copy of the questions for you to review. The data gathered will be stored securely. The confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of all participants will remain paramount throughout the study. If you would like to consent to your setting taking part in the research, please return a copy the form at the bottom of this attachment with your signature in the space provided below.

If you have any concerns or queries regarding this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me at this email address. I would be delighted to provide you with further information about the project. I will attach my email below.

Thank you for your time a co-operation,
Sarah Kearney

I consent to research to take place in my education setting.

Yes / No

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Information Letter to Participants

Dear Educator,

I am writing to ask you to partake in a small-scale qualitative study. The study intends to investigate the impact of school closures during the 2019/2020 Covid-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of children transitioning from their early childhood education setting to primary school. The research project involves learning more about the impact of restrictions and social distancing on children's wellbeing. I hope that the findings of the study will inform both early childhood and primary school educators about the importance of fostering children's wellbeing during the transition and their role in providing children with the opportunity to feel secure and supported when making this journey.

Data for this study will be collected through a semi-structured interview which will take approximately twenty-five minutes and will be recorded using a personal recording device. During this interview, I will ask you questions about the children when they returned to your classroom after the re-opening of schools and early childhood settings. I will ask if you noticed any changes in their independence and self-help skills or a change in their communicative ability. I will ask you about the practices you engaged in to nurture children's social and emotional wellbeing and how you assisted them in settling back in to school life.

You are under no obligation to complete the interview or to answer all questions asked. If you come to a question that you do not wish to answer, you can simply request that we skip it. I hope you will be willing to participate because your responses will be a valued part of the study. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so. The risks of participation in the study are very low and of a social or reputational nature.

The audio recording and interview transcripts will be kept in a secure location or on an encrypted device without your name attached to it. The audio recording will be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the recording and transcripts will be destroyed on the basis of the schedule outlined in the Institute's data retention schedule.

If you would like more information on how long the data will be retained for, please don't hesitate to contact me directly. There are no risks or direct benefits in participating in the interview. You will be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in the study. If you agree to participate, please contact me in one of the following ways:

Email: skearneypme19@momail.mie.ie **Phone:** 0877464358.

If you are willing to participate, it would be beneficial to my work schedule to know this as soon as is convenient for you, so that your participation can begin as soon as possible. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research.

Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact me at this email address:
Skearneypme19@momail.mie.ie

You may also contact my advisor for the project, _____. This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact MERC@mie.ie

Yours faithfully,

Appendix C: Statement of Consent

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you would be willing to participate in the study as described.

1. Do you consent to participate in the study by completing the interview described above?

Yes / No

2. Do you consent to be interviewed answers and to have the interview audiotaped?

Yes / No

3. May I make a physical transcript of the interview questions and answers and add short quotations from the interview to support the findings of my research?

Yes / No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Early Childhood Educators

1. Do you have a sense of how children were feeling about the transition to primary school, prior to Covid-19?
2. What can you tell me about your understanding of children's wellbeing in relation to transitioning to primary school?
3. Do you have specific policies or practices in place in relation to transitions? If so, can you tell me about them?
4. Can you tell me, in your opinion, what impact did Covid-19 have on the implementation of your policies and practices in relation to transitions this year?
5. Did you have any concerns regarding the children's return to the early childhood setting post-closure?
6. Was there anything specific that you did to reintroduce the children to their learning environment?
7. How did the children respond, in your opinion, to (a) mixing with their peers (b) being separated from parents?
8. Can you say a piece about children's interactions with you and with others upon returning to the early childhood setting?
9. What would you say about the children's self-help skills upon return to the early childhood setting?
10. What would you say about the children's self-regulation upon return to the early childhood setting?
11. What would you say about the children's language and communication skills upon return to the early childhood setting?

12. What would you say about the children's self-regulatory abilities upon return?
13. Did you receive any specific training or guidance in relation to nurturing children's wellbeing upon return to the early childhood setting?
14. Can you tell me about your experience regarding communication with primary schools and parents during the transitional period this year?
15. Overall, how do you feel about the facilitation of the transitional process this year?

Appendix E: Interview Questions of Junior Infant Educators

1. What can you tell me about your understanding of children's wellbeing in relation to transitioning to primary school?
2. Does your school have any specific policies or practices in place in relation to transitions? If so, can you tell me about them?
3. In your opinion, what impact did COVID-19 have on the implementation of these policies and practices this year?
4. Was the topic of children's wellbeing brought to your attention prior to returning to school?
5. Was there any particular strategies or pedagogies you adapted to enhance the wellbeing of the children joining your class during the transitional period?
6. Can you tell me how the children presented during the transitional period, in your opinion, in relation to: (a) mixing with peers (b) being separated with their parents
7. What would you say about the children's self-help skills during the transitional period?
8. What would you say about the children's language and communication skills during the transitional period?
9. What would you say about the children's self-regulatory abilities during the transitional period?
10. Did you receive any specific training or guidance in relation to nurturing children's wellbeing during the transitional period?
11. Can you tell me about your experience regarding communication with early childhood settings and parents during the transitional period this year?
12. Overall, how do you feel about the facilitation of the transitional process this year?

Appendix F: Profile of the Interview Participants

For the purpose of anonymity, the participants names have been omitted and replaced with pseudonyms.

Participant	Job Title and Qualification	Number of Years Experience	School / Setting Background
Ava	Primary School Teacher	6 years' teaching experience	Catholic Ethos / Non-Deis
Ava	Primary School Teacher	8 years' teaching experience	Catholic Ethos / Non-Deis
Amira	Primary School Teacher	8 years' teaching experience	Catholic Ethos / Deis
Anette	Primary School Teacher	3 years' teaching experience	Catholic Ethos / Deis
Alex	ECCE Room Leader Level 8 ECE	4 years' teaching experience	Private Setting
Abbie	ECCE Room Leader Level 6 ECE	6 years' teaching experience	Private Setting
Anna	ECCE Room Leader Level 8 ECE	4 years' teaching experience	Tusla Funded Setting
Angela	ECE Room Leader Level 6 ECE	7 years' teaching experience	Private Setting

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Participant	Scheduled Interview Date	Interview Method
Ava	15 th February, 20:00	Phone Interview
Amira	17 th February, 16:30	Phone Interview
Annette	24 th February, 19:00	Phone Interview
Alex	25 th February, 16:00	Phone Interview
Abbie	10 th December, 15:30	Phone Interview
Anna	9 th December, 20:00	Phone Interview
Amy	9 th December, 20:00	Phone Interview
Angela	12 th December, 19:30	Phone Interview