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Declaration

I, Daríona McClafferty hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of 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. The work was done under the guidance of Fintan McCutcheon at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Signed: Daríona McClafferty

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Abstract

Regulatory bodies such as the Department of Education and Skills (2011) and the National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (2016) outline the need for connections and consistency across philosophies in early years educational sectors for 3-7 year olds. However, in many cases the connections across philosophies are non-existent in reality. The philosophies of both preschool and primary education encompass a broad range of areas. This study focuses specifically on what is occurring in terms of the voice and agency of minority children. This qualitative study was designed under an interpretivist paradigm. Focus groups and interviews were the tools chosen for data collection. The data was collected and analysed from 10 early years educator participants, 5 preschool and 5 primary educators to investigate the perception of their role regarding voice and agency of minority children. The study found that there are distinct differences in policies implemented in the early years and primary education sectors in regards to the voice and agency of minority children. There were also differences between the single and multi-denominational settings in terms of policies of inclusion that have implications on the voice and agency of minority children. There were also indications that these teachers do perceive themselves as having a role in developing the voice and agency of minority children. However, they felt that this role is most effective when the intersecting structures in a child's life all work together. With reference to pertinent literature, recommendations for best practice are made.

Keywords: early year policies, voice and agency, minority children, qualitative, interpretivist

Contents

Glossary of Terms

ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder

CNS – Community National School

CPD – Continued Professional Development

DES – Department of Education and Skills

EAL – English as an Additional Language

EBD – Emotional Behavioural Disorder

ET – Educate Together

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

ICE – Intercultural Education

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

UNCROC – United Nations Convention of the Rights of a Child

Chapter 1

Introduction

As a primary teacher currently engaged in the education of children between the ages of 3-7 years, I am aware that the need for connections and consistency across philosophies in early years educational sectors have been set out by regulatory bodies such as the Department of Education and Skills (2011) and the National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (2016). However I have observed that, in actuality the connections across preschool and primary education are anything but consistent. Preschool and primary education, are considered in equal importance and each present a multitude of philosophies. For this research, I will narrow the focus to specifically on what is transpiring in terms of voice and agency, with specific reference to minority children from the perspective of both preschool and primary school educators from single and multi-denominational settings.

I have focused on the voice and agency of minority children because of my own passion for inclusion and diversity that I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. Ireland is now considered an ever-expanding heterogeneous population, as non-Irish national residents now comprise 12.7% of the total population making minority children a large proportion of our current student body (CSO, 2019). I am teaching in a junior school with a very diverse cohort of children. I am aware of the importance of consistency across educational sectors and how this is crucial for minority children in particular (Brooker, 2010). Closely examining and further reflecting upon my teaching experiences to date, I began to realise that there is a sense that some stakeholders in education do not recognize the need for cross-sectoral consistency (NCCA, 2016). There is an indication that some educators do not seem to prioritise voice and agency or share my positive sentiments towards diversity, often feeling they

are too different from the children they teach to relate to them (Samuels, 2018). I

started to ponder why that is the case and in doing so I acknowledged the power in the

role of a teacher (Lynch & Lodge, 2002), and wondered about implications this has

on the voice and agency of minority children in their classroom. There is a need for

teachers to acknowledge the right minority children should have to a consistent

inclusive educational experience implemented by those who recognise the need to

promote the voice and agency of children and the diverse cultures to which they

belong (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

My research question sets out to answer to what extent early childhood

educators; preschool, junior and senior infant teachers' perceive themselves as

playing a particular role in developing a child's voice and agency with specific regard

to minority children. The literature relevant to this research will be cited and analysed

in Chapter 2. This chapter will be comprised of literature from both a policy and

theoretical perspective. The policy section will focus on teacher education,

educational provisions, the homogeneous workforce and inclusion policies. The

theoretical section will focus on the concept of childhood, the influence of reciprocal

relationships and the presence of deficit ideology. Chapter 3 details the methodologies

employed, the methods of data collection, a description of the sample and the ethical

considerations of the research. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data organised

under four themes; Policy and Practice Issues, Teacher Issues, Teacher Education and

Training Issues and Home/School Issues followed by limitations and

recommendations. The final chapter concludes this research by reiterating the

research question and the main findings of the research.

Chapter 2 – Review Of Literature

Introduction

      This chapter will draw upon the literature relevant to the research question that focuses on the extent to which early years educators perceive themselves in having a role in developing the voice and agency of minority children aged 3-7 years old. This literature review will be split into two sections. Section 1 will be policy based. This literature will examine the policies across the early years educational sectors in terms of the voice and agency of minority children. This section will also present literature on the effects of the homogeneous Irish workforce on inclusion and an overview of the inclusion policies across single and multi-denominational schools that have implications on the voice and agency of minority children. This policy section will be organised under the subheadings of Teacher Education, Educational Provisions, The Homogeneous Workforce and Inclusion Policies. Section 2 will be based on the literature of the theoretical considerations for the voice and agency of minority children. This section will be organised under the subheadings of - The Concept of Childhood, The Influence of Reciprocal Relationships and The Presence of Deficit Ideology.

Section 1 – Policy on Voice and Agency

      Teacher Education. From a preschool perspective, early years educators require a minimum of a Level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Education, however many advance to the Level 8 degree that is 4 years in duration (Early Childhood Ireland, 2007). These educators complete training that underpins crucial areas of working with children aged 3-5 years including: child development, reciprocal relationships, play-based learning and imagination, diversity and child autonomy.

Many opt for Montessori training based on the ideology of Maria Montessori (1907). Montessori prioritised the voice and agency of children feeling they are autonomous capable beings and the teacher is a facilitator who guides the learning process (Diamond, 2010). Overall, it may be said that early childhood education by virtue of it's design should be rooted in the voice and agency of young children offering opportunities to maximize their own potential (Diamond, 2010), yet issues in training still remain well documented (NCCA, 2016).

From a primary education viewpoint, educators must hold a Bachelor of Education (Primary) Level 8 degree that lasts for a duration of 4 years followed by registration with the Teaching Council. Primary education encompasses the vast education of 5-12 year olds covering areas such as; professional studies, subject knowledge, foundation studies, curriculum studies and the practice of teaching (Teaching Council, 2012). While primary educators learn about early childhood education and inclusive education, one should not assume that primary education is designed in conjunction with early years education considerations. Perhaps the range of evident differences between the training of two sectors that should be closely linked, may have contributed to their independent, occasionally divergent, development. This may make it hard for one sector to understand the other without additional training to close the gap (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010). There is a chance perhaps that issues like the voice and agency and inclusion of minority children may not be at the core of both philosophies. Freire (2000) says that the role of an educator reflects a well-educated person who knows the rate at which knowledge is evolving therefore educational discourse must adapt. It may be necessary for both sectors to seek continued professional development (NCCA, 2016); in the areas perhaps not greatly prioritised during initial training.

Educational Provision. The transition process from one educational sector to another is a widely debated provision. The National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (2016) would say that lifelong learning is positively influenced by smooth transitions. Transitions are viewed as an effective provision when there is cohesion between both early years sectors and the voice of the child is prioritised (NCCA, 2016).

The Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 granted the National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) the role and responsibility for developing transition templates. These report templates were made available online in order to accommodate and support the essential transfer of student information from state funded ECCE settings to the next stage of the child's educational journey. This meant that all relevant educational sectors had the role and responsibility of ensuring these transition documents were written under a certain procedure with the inclusion of the voice of the child and equal input of all stakeholders involved (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.82), meaning both sectors have equal responsibility.

Children experience a variety of transitions at different intervals of their young lives, and it is thought that educational transitions are among the most influential (NCCA, 2016). Ackesjo (2013) states that transitions are of particular importance for minority children who rely on feeling a connection between an old environment and the new one in order to continue to thrive. An important point to consider here is that both environments need to recognise and relish in the diverse cultures of these children. The child's voice and subsequent agency becomes crucial for the transition

of minority children in particular who are likely to enter one setting with the learned

behaviour of another (Brooker, 2010). Therefore effective transitions play an intricate

role in the long-term affirming outcomes for minority children in both an educational,

social and emotional development (NCCA, 2016).

Although stipulations from both the Department of Education and Skills

(2011) and the National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (2016) state the

importance and guidelines for effective transition across sectors, difficulties still

remain at large. It may be deduced that cross-sectoral co-operation is not always

occurring. The gaps in knowledge of stakeholders in education regarding the early

childhood sector are significant. In many cases, teachers from both sectors are

reluctant to engage in joint continue professional development (CPD) feeling their

sector is the most valuable (NCCA, 2016).

It may also be said that consideration for the rights of the child is an important

provision in early childhood education. Ireland showed its support for The United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by creating the Aistear Framework.

The table depicts the evident overlap between the two:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:	Aistear Framework:
• Right to an identify, name and nationality in your country	• Children as citizens
• Right to give your opinion and have it heard and responded to	• The importance of communication and language
• Right to know who they are and where they come from	• The importance of relationships • The child's uniqueness
• Right to be provided with high standards in settings they engage in	• Holistic learning and development • The importance of the learning environment
• Right to have their culture, language and religion respected (UNCRC, Article 1-45 summarised, 1989).	• Equality and diversity (NCCA, 2009).

The play based learning framework of Aistear is planned with the voice and agency of the child in mind and is not rooted in the academic nature of other aspects of school but in the diverse cultures to which individuals belong. Children not only have the right to play but they are incredibly competent and enthusiastic learners and respond most positively to tasks they perceive as play (Whitebread, 2013). Therefore, play opens up an arena of imagination that can be quite significant for minority children in particular who can often feel the stress of an academic space motivated by the need to find one answer (Howard, 2010). The policy of the Aistear Framework remains an intricate part of preschool education often used as a play-based planning template to include the voice and agency of children and the diverse cultures to which they belong (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Although Aistear is considered best practice for infant education, it is rarely implemented in the primary setting. It is under regular scrutiny as the literature suggests it is much easier to practice in preschool settings than primary as they do not grapple with barriers like large ratios, small cramped classrooms, lack of resources and funding coupled with limited teacher knowledge in relation to play-based learning (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Samuelsson & Carlsson (2008) remind us that teachers by nature are creatures of habit and tend to move away from child-led activity. Additional CPD is not sure to adapt this mindset. O'Connor & Angus (2011) consider few barriers to Aistear stating it is not prescriptive in nature and provides a clear window for child-centred learning within any setting hoping to implement it. In reality Aistear promotes the voice and agency of minority children as they actively engage and relish in their diverse cultures (NCCA, 2009). Lynch & Lodge (2002) would say this is another example of agency and diversity not being an immediate priority to teachers.

Homogeneous Workforce. Woodhead (2006) states that the hiring of a teacher is based on a policy indicative of qualifications, competency and suitability to the job. However, there are certain stipulations in the Irish teaching requirements that only accommodate teachers who are predominantly white, Irish, and Roman Catholic. Despite decades of change, most notably the influx of diversity in the Irish classroom (Byrne, McGinnity, Smith & Darmody, 2010) there are still a much smaller percentage of multi-denominational schools (Byrne et al, 2010) and the Irish work force remains homogeneous.

Freire (2000) reminds us how change is necessary as it perpetuates our innate curiosity to acquire a variety of truths that exists in human beings and make sense of the world around us. Knowledge is constantly adapting and an education system needs to recognise that teachers are required to continue learning and actively inquiring about the diverse children in their classrooms (Waller, 2005). Diversity is defined as a variety of identities among a cohort of people that may include gender, race, religion, socioeconomic class, special educational needs and sexual orientation (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, Gurin, 2002). Devine (2005) would say that for the most part, Irish teachers do not realise how wide the range of diversity is as they themselves belong to the dominant, homogeneous, majority population.

Research often suggests that teachers disengage with issues pertaining to diversity feeling they are too different and subsequently too far removed from it (Samuels, 2018). This concept could be derived historically from the largely homogeneous teaching workforce that has existed in Ireland (Devine, 2005). Sleeter (2004) believes that the homogeneous teachers often approach their diverse classrooms as though they too were comprised entirely of white, Irish, Roman Catholic children. This ideology may run the risk of painting a 'no problem here'

picture with teachers opting to completely avoid the dissection of any issues pertaining to race, religion etc. with their class (Gaine, 1995).

It is possible to take into account the influence an homogeneous workforce may have on inclusion in schools given it may be difficult to expect an improvement in multicultural education without even a somewhat multicultural workforce (Martin, 1995). Sleeter (1992) elaborates further by explaining that this homogeneous work force means teachers come into their classroom with a framework on social class and cultural diversity based solely on their personal life experiences which remains rooted in their teaching methodologies and that there is nothing to challenge this. This could have repercussions for the children in the classroom as it may cause a cultural disconnect between teachers and their students (McKoy, MacLeod, Walter, & Nolker, 2017). Minority children often become accustomed to feeling disconnected, as they will seldom see teachers or lesson content that positively empowers them by representing their race, religion, sexual orientation etc. (Samuels, 2018).

The teaching force cannot miraculously become a diverse cohort of educators overnight therefore it becomes essential that teachers self-reflect to examine their own prejudices. Villegas and Lucas (2007) details how the creation of a culturally responsive learning environment conducive to promoting agency and equity may be achieved in the following steps: exploring how children construct their learning, acknowledging the value of childhood, being aware that socio-cultural diversity exists, promoting and celebrating diversity, drawing on a variety of strategies and striving for the success of all students. Our education system has an overloaded curriculum but Kumashiro (2000) expresses that teachers are not being told to add the voice and agency of diverse children to this load, but rather to be open to enhancing what we already have. An educator willing to create a climate of trust with pupils

(Samuels, 2018); may enable a minority child to access their voice and agency by removing their masks of assimilation (Kafele, 2013).

Inclusion Policies. Ireland is now considered an ever-expanding heterogeneous population (CSO, 2019). A mismatch between the single denominational schools and the diverse cohort of children that attend them remains evident in the literature (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018). The vast majority of Irish schools are of Roman Catholic denomination while a much smaller percentage of Educate Together and Community National Schools operate under a multi-denominational approach. However all schools irrespective of their denomination play a role in the inclusion of all pupils and should adhere to this on a policy level (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018).

In general, the literature suggests that religious diversity is the most prominent area of conflict and insufficiency across inclusion policies. The educational settings with a purely Catholic ethos attended by pupils of non-Catholic faith do not seem to have a prescriptive set of criteria for the promotion of inclusion (Smyth & Darmody, 2011), and the control church associates have in religious practices may make the celebration of diversity challenging for both pupils and teachers in the school (Devine, 2005). The Catholic single-denominational schools have a clear policy that states the pupils will say daily prayers, have daily religious education lessons on the Catholic faith and prepare for the sacraments (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018). However this lack of clarity on inclusion practices (Smyth & Darmody, 2011), means children outside this denomination often do not have an alternative option for their faith offered to them. They then find themselves excluded, their voices stifled and unsure of where they belong in their own school (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018).

The policy of inclusion in multi-denominational schools stipulates that diversity will

permeate throughout their Learn Together Framework that is designed with the equal

respect for all children in mind (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018). Children are not

excluded rather invited to share their beliefs with their class. Children learn about

ethics and world religions in equal measure along with open multicultural dialogue

being promoted.

Inclusion policies are often written with the best of intentions but not

implemented. This can allude to the idea that the management of diversity in

education is not an immediate priority to all stakeholders in the school (Lynch &

Lodge, 2002). Schools often have details in their policies about multicultural days in

which children and their families are invited to share food or a dance etc. from their

culture (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018). It could be deduced that this is a fairly

contrived attempt at inclusion from a single-denominational standpoint as this

celebration of diversity is treated in isolation from the rest of school culture. This is in

direct contrast to multi-denominational schools that's policy is diversity based. It may

be said that the policies of multi-denominational settings value minority children and

acknowledge the cognitive and linguistic advantages they bring to school (Hoffman,

2001). Diversity is not celebrated annually; it is embedded throughout the school day

and culture (Smyth & Darmody, 2011) and providing voice and agency opportunities

to minority children do not appear to be extra effort but a responsibility (Batra, 2005).

Section 2 – Theory on Voice and Agency

There are divergent opinions in the literature on what theory best encapsulates

the voice and agency of any child as the young mind is particularly complex (Wood

and Attfield, 2005). There is no such thing as a universal child and one approach to

working with young children in any capacity is not sufficient (Murray & Urban, 2012). With this hypothesis in mind, it became important to remember that the complexities of working with the young mind warrants an educator looking beyond standard pedagogy and methodology and focusing on the individual differences between children (Waller, 2005). The concept of childhood and the influence of reciprocal relationships highlight the importance of recognising the individual differences in children and the presence of deficit ideology sheds light on the impact ignoring difference can have on a child's ability to develop their voice and agency.

The Concept of Childhood. Waller (2005) states that childhood remains a widely debated and ever evolving concept. Rogers (2003) viewed childhood as a convoluted concept with features that cannot be physically seen or easily defined, rendering a child no more than a preliminary stage for physical development into an adult. James & James (1997) expands on this theory by thinking of childhood as a stepping-stone to adulthood as the end of one's stage of imperfection and dependency. Childhood was viewed as a scary place with a variety of risk factors and dangers perpetuating the notion that children must be protected at all avenues. Many considered children incapable of avoiding risk, feeling the lacked critical thinking (Pocock, 1995); and possessed significantly less skills of cognition and reasoning along with an inadequate level of social skills and emotional maturity (James & James, 2008).

These somewhat narrowed opinions on the concept of childhood alludes to the idea that a child's sense of individuality is being lost by merely perceiving children as going through the biological motions of becoming adults (Woodhead, 2013). While it is important to create a culture of trust that offers children a happy, safe and innocent

childhood (James, 2009), theories put forward by Devine (2002) highlights how the concept of childhood has greatly evolved over time, bringing a wave of significant change. Devine (2002) states that many of these changes have caused evident shifts in educational discourse that acknowledges the capabilities of children and the rights they have to be involved in phenomena that affects them. We now find ourselves in the age of the agentic child. The period in which the concept of childhood was adult led and based primarily on developmental factors has now been replaced by the social and cultural discourse relevant to the individual background in which a child belongs (Waller, 2005).

The modern shift towards a more socially and culturally relevant discourse promotes sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), suggesting that the experience a child has during childhood impacts their development. This development thrives on positive interactions a child has with those in their inner circles (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and is relevant to the culture to which they belong (Vygotsky, 1978). James and Prout (1997) believe children are influenced by social changes in society meaning their culture should be acknowledged as it attributes to their capabilities of being social agents involved in co-construction of their own childhoods. Dunne (2006) emphasises the abilities of children by viewing them as citizens with the skills and dispositions to activate their voice and engage in affairs relevant to their own lives. Dunne (2006) details how childhood may be presented in a series of stages; the developmental, therapeutic, protection and privilege stages. The developmental stage is the cognitive and physical developments a child biologically experiences. The therapeutic stage is the idea that children can be perceived as being vulnerable to certain cruel components of society. The protection stage examines how there is often an urgency to shield children from the harsh realities of life. Lastly, the priviledge

stage exhibits a child's capabilities in imagintive thought and imparting their valuable

knowledge. It highlights how children need to be seen as important components of

society with much to offer. A key point of this is the acknowledgement of the

differences between children especially the diverse cultures to which these children

belong. In essence, the complicated paradigm of childhood is neither universal nor

natural, rather a social and cultural process that varies between periods of history,

contexts, cultures and children (Brown, 1999; Jenks, 2004).

The Influence of Reciprocal Relationships. Bronnfenbrenner (1979) states how

children benefit greatly from strong relationships not just with those in their lives but

good partnerships between all stakeholders in these intersecting systems. This may be

very significant for minority children, as children interact with others in the way that

is modeled for them (Dockett & Perry, 2014). It becomes crucial therefore, that

teachers are not disregarding difference rather fostering a trust climate of mutual

respect for diversity (Blair & Bourne, 1998). Connolly (2011) reminds us that

children are aware at a young age of the differences between themselves and others

and how their teacher chooses to approach this can have a variety of impacts on the

child.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) intersecting systems underpins a very prominent factor

in how a child learns by example. This intersecting systematic approach shows how

the relationships a child has with various people in their life will ultimately impacts

their opinions and behaviours (Watling Neal & Neal, 2013).

Microsystems; relationships at home/school/ community

Mesosystems; relationships between home/school/ community

Exosystems; influences that act indirectly on the child such as after school care

Macrosystems and Chronosystem;
encompassing the influence of dominant beliefs and value have on
young children
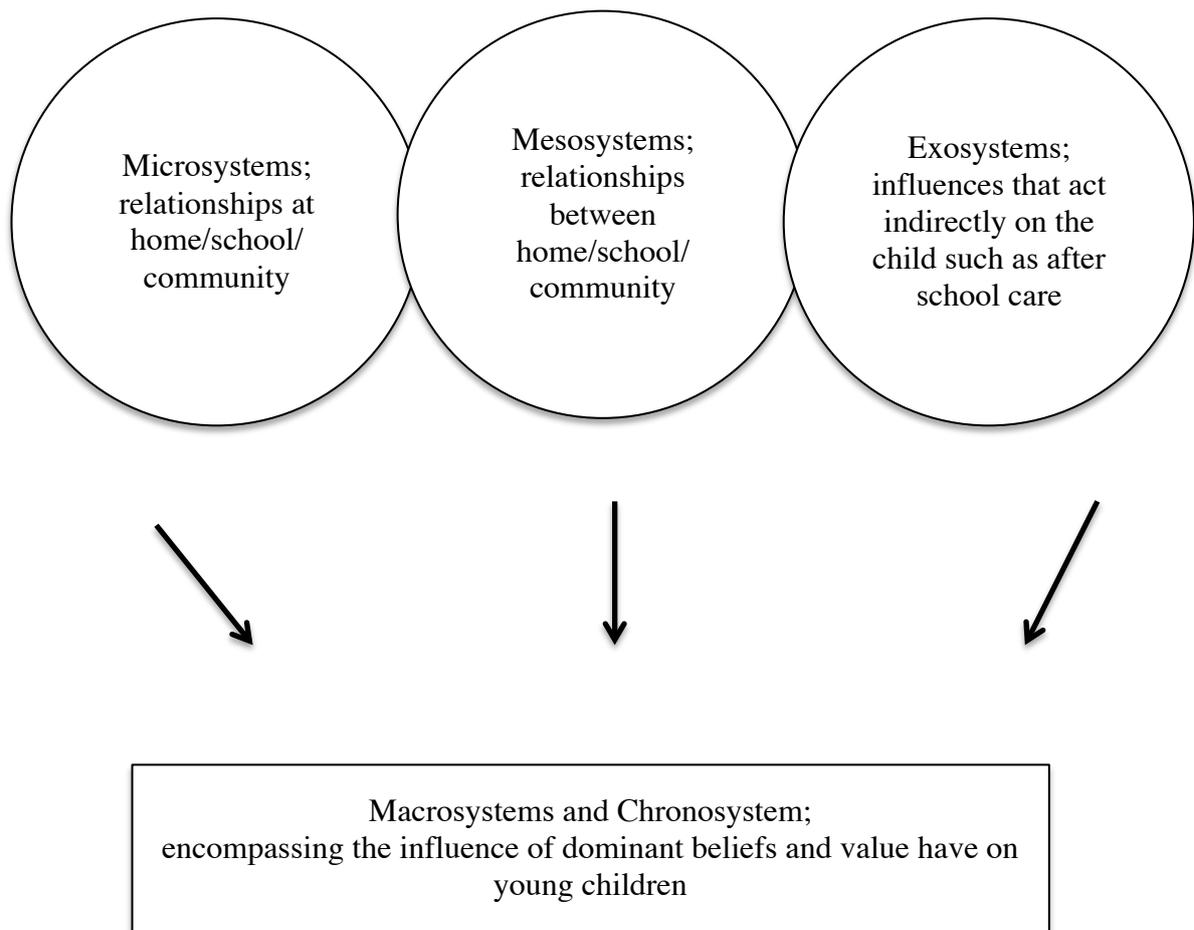
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory encompasses proximal processes involving school, the wider community, home etc. that may help create meaningful learning opportunities (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny, 2017). However, children may struggle to identify and subsequently engage in meaningful learning experiences without a stable attachment conducive to their socio-emotional wellbeing (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Research acknowledges that significant improvements can be made to children's development, through the creation of reciprocal relationships with caregivers in their inner circles, this including influential adults like their parents and teachers (Burchinal et al, 2000; Bowlby, 1969).

Partnerships between home and school become crucial components in a child's development. With respect to minority children they require a school

environment that does not differ so vastly from their home, and rather makes them feel at home (Dixie, 2011; Bergin & Bergin, 2009). A minority child may lose their voice and agency to a degree if their teacher does not acknowledge the culturally diverse backgrounds to which they belong (Choi, 2017). Lopez (2001) reminds us language often becomes a prominent factor of this as minority parents fear that without a strong grasp of the English language a cultural mismatch with ensue between themselves and their child's teacher.

The implementation of an environment that encourages respectful, reciprocal relationships provides children with an appreciation of diverse traditions (Cole, 1996), and a positive outlook on themselves and the world in which they interact (Dunn, 1998). This fear of a cultural mismatch becomes less severe for minority parents and children who can identify much easier with a setting that does not differ so vastly from their home (Dixie, 2011). This is an essential for all children, as many will not remember what they were once taught, but they will never forget how someone made them feel (Jackson, 1992). A child who possesses a positive disposition towards school will thrive in their school environment (Blair & Bourne, 1998).

The Presence of Deficit Ideology. Gorski (2008) concludes that there is a presence of deficit ideology in any education system that actively chooses to disregard difference. This arises when there are ideas alluding to the fact that difference can be mistaken for a deficit when people conform to accepting only their individual experiences relating to areas such as class, race, gender, sexual orientation etc (Murray & Urban, 2012; Gorski, 2008). Teachers possess the majority of the power in a classroom and although they are often under immeasurable pressure to improve their competency, implement a crowded curriculum etc. they have an equal

responsibility to all children (Gunter, 2001). An educator cannot opt to shy away from approaching that which is different to the norm yet many do, citing as the reasons, the limited training available and their inability to empathise with the oppression experienced by their pupils (Samuels, 2018).

Overall, teachers tend to reduce all diversity into a single 'other' group and simply conclude they are not adequately equipped to approach issues pertaining to diversity (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Within the Irish context one could argue that teachers are merely cogs in the educational machine often viewed as conducting themselves under a contradictory system (Devine & Kenny, 2002). It bluntly shows what it values, having published a minimal amount of research on issues pertaining to ethnicity and schooling (Devine, Kenny & MacNeela, 2004). Devine (2005) agrees with the notion that the Irish system shows in no uncertain terms what it values. Thus alluding to the idea that the education system is merely a mirror of society reflecting the issues of the time in question. The cultural recognition of minority ethnic groups coupled with their economic positioning and overall placement in the hierarchy of society cannot be ignored (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). If we consider this in terms of the Irish education system, the low positioning of minority groups could very well be connected to the lack of urgency in the Irish education system to alter initial teacher training or provide more adequate continued professional development (CPD) in diversity for teachers. Generally CPD seems to be based mainly in areas that are considered most valuable in education, primarily numeracy and literacy (Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013).

Leading theorist Bandura details his 'self-efficacy theory' (1997) that almost perpetuates deficit ideology by expressing how children may begin to value their own success based solely on their competency in what society values, causing impact on a

child's academic attainment and attitude toward school (Minton, 2012). Therefore it

is important that educators disregard deficit hegemony (Kelly, 2009); and re-direct

their focus towards implementing a more inclusive classroom (Edwards, 2005;

(Okagaki, 2001).

It may be said that the influx of diversity gave rise to both a welcomed

acceptance of difference and what one may consider a hostile display of deficit

thinking (Fanning, 2002). Teachers must recognise the power they have in their

classrooms and actively disengage from deficit thinking (Gorski, 2010). A power

discourse can ensue between 'us' and 'them' (Devine, 2003), unless children and

teachers participate respectfully together (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Policy and

curriculum is advised by a social-cultural process and one wonders if a teacher's own

viewpoints impinge on their implementation (MacNaughton, 2005).

Conclusion

The literature seems to indicate that it is important to consider both policy and

theoretical elements in terms of this particular area. There appears to be clear

differences present between the type of education and training early childhood and

primary educators receive despite regulatory bodies stating clear connections must be

made across sectors (NCCA, 2016). The sectors could be developing independently

from each other as there are clear disparities in the policies across sectors particularly

with regards to the educational provisions of transitions and Aistear as a play based

framework. The literature would suggest that there are issues with the effectiveness of

both provisions across sectors. It may be said that it is difficult for one sector to

understand the other without additional training to close the knowledge gap (O'Kane

and Hayes, 2010), alluding to the idea that it is challenging to have issues like the voice and agency of young children at the forefront of both sectors philosophies.

The discussion of inclusion becomes a prominent feature in a study involving minority children. It may be hard to expect more progressive inclusion policies in schools that are not remotely multicultural (Martin, 1995) and remain dominated by a homogeneous workforce (Sleeter, 1992). The management of diversity may not be viewed as a priority to educational stakeholders who perceive themselves as culturally disconnected from their minority pupils (Sleeter, 2004). Inclusion policies are designed with the greatest will in the world but often not implemented (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018). The literature seems to acknowledge that the vast majority of Irish schools are of a single Roman Catholic denomination despite the influx of diversity into our classrooms. These schools could grapple with issues pertaining to diversity, particularly from a religious perspective, as they do not seem to have a prescriptive set of criteria for the promotion of inclusion and often exclude children not of Catholic faith (Smyth & Darmody, 2011). This was in direct contrast to the inclusion policies of multi-denominational schools in which diversity is thought to be embedded throughout their Learn Together Framework and is designed with the equal respect for all children in mind (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018).

Despite the many changes in education, it still remains difficult to determine what specifically underpins childhood (Waller, 2005). However, the substantial shifts in education have given rise to the age of the agentic child. It is now suggested that childhood cannot be defined, as it is not universal rather a social and cultural process (Brown, 1999). This shifts means many now view children as capable beings (Dunne, 2006), with the right to opportunities to exercise their voice and agency in the affairs

that pertains to their own lives and the diverse cultures to which they belong (Devine, 2002).

Affirming relationships with a child's intersecting social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), are thought to positively attribute to their opinions and behaviours (Watling Neal & Neal, 2013). Children learn by example in the environments presented to them. As such all pupils require a school environment that makes them feel at home (Dixie, 2011). However, research often suggests that the school environment is very different from their cultural backgrounds and teachers disengage with issues pertaining to diversity with their pupils (Samuels, 2018). This may affect relationships between home and school as minority parents also feel a strong sense of a cultural mismatch (Lopez, 2001).

One could argue that teachers are cogs in the educational machine (Devine & Kenny, 2002). In many cases, teachers are of the viewpoint that the Irish system shows what it values, placing little significance on diversity overall (Devine, Kenny & MacNeela, 2004). The low positioning of minority groups in society could be linked to the lack of continued professional development (CPD) in diversity for teachers. Although deficit ideology is permeating throughout many aspects of educational discourse, a teacher should not ignore the powerful role they have in deciding how to design, plan and participate with the minority pupils in their own classroom (Samuels, 2018).

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will outline the research question and the research design. There will be an account of the methodologies adopted and a presentation of the sample and participants. This is followed by a summary of the ethical considerations and possible limitations associated with this research. This chapter will conclude with a description of the researchers positionality, the data analysis process and an overall timeline of the research.

Research Question

This research is rooted in both preschool and primary education. The literature reminds us that although stipulated by regulatory bodies, the connections across philosophies of preschool and primary education are not satisfactory in reality. The philosophies of preschool and primary education are vast therefore this study focuses specifically on what is occurring in terms of the voice and agency of minority children and asks the question "to what extent early childhood educators; preschool, junior and senior infant teachers' perceive themselves as playing a particular role in developing a child's voice and agency with specific regard to minority children?" This research question does not set out to comparatively investigate cross-sectoral educators or systems. This question highlights the personal belief that both sectors and the perspectives of their educators should be considered in equal importance with respect to the development of voice and agency in minority children.

Research Design

Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods were considered as possible choices for the methodology of this study. After further research, I concluded a qualitative approach would be most suitable. Qualitative research is based on a tradition that knowledge evolves from the interactions of individuals and the multiple meanings one may conclude from said interactions (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2014). Qualitative research overlaps with the principles of the interpretivist paradigm. I was of the viewpoint therefore that both a qualitative design and an interpretivist paradigm would help extract multiple interpretations from the data in order to develop a deeper meaning from the phenomena presented (Creswell, 2007).

Interpretivist Paradigm. Interpretive researchers state that there is no universal truth and knowledge is open to multiple interpretations (Willis, 1995). The interpretivist paradigm is rooted in observation and interpretation of experiences an individual has had in a certain area of interest to a researcher. This paradigm lends itself ideally to qualitative research as interviews and focus groups are excellent ways of gathering an array of experiences from individuals (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). The interpretivist paradigm is a process that derives deeper meaning from both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication (Willis, 1995). This informed my field notes as I made clear reference to examples of both that I felt implied meaning beyond what was explicitly stated (see appendix 6). Overall, the interpretivist paradigm encourages rich data collection and allows for multiple interpretations to emerge. It effectively influences the researchers ability in handling the data adequately to ensure the most valuable data is presented in the analysis chapter (Creswell, 1998).

As this type of research question investigates the perspective of early years educators, a broad range of opinions is desired to ensure the collection of rich data. A qualitative approach recommends focus groups and interviews as possible data collection tools in the successful gathering of detailed data from a variety of different viewpoints applicable to the research question (Schratz, 1993). Furthermore it facilitates a transparency process to occur between the researcher and the sample. The transparency process is of paramount importance for myself as the researcher, affording me a way of working in conjunction with my sample in order to allow for the collection and subsequent interpretation of a wide array of experience and opinions (Hoong Sin, 2007).

Research Methodology

I adopted both a qualitative design and an interpretivist paradigm using both focus groups and interviews as my chosen methods of data collection.

Focus Groups. I decided upon focus groups with a sample of early childhood, junior infant and senior infant teachers because qualitative data can be gathered from many people simultaneously (Robson, 2011). The sample varied greatly in teaching experience and I felt the data collection in a group scenario would be an effective method of fostering a range of different ideas among professionals who are used to sharing dialogue and problem solving as a staff unit, reducing the need for researcher intervention (Bell, 2010). Focus groups would also allow me to extract richer data from the group as a whole by asking for further elaboration on the points mentioned (Bell, 2010). I also felt that as focus groups involve more than one participant, it would provide me with a varied frame of references on the different experiences of diversity. I opted to use field notes (see appendix 6) based on Chiseri-Strater and

Sunstein (1997) to keep detailed accounts of these ranges of experiences. I felt this would aid my approach towards one-to-one interviews by supplementing my own funds of knowledge before a significantly more structured form of data collection. There are disadvantages of using focus groups, most notably the risk that some questions or discussion points raised may be more meaningful to others and the fear that one participant will dominate the discussion (Bell, 2010). Therefore, I made a point of taking note of possible phrases I could employ to try to rephrase certain questions or redirect attention onto another participant if necessary.

Interviews. I opted to conduct one-to-one interviews after the focus group in the hope that these varied experiences would inform my approach to a more structured data collection process. However, when I had advanced to the one-to-one interview phase of my data collection, the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus led to the closure of all schools across Ireland from March 2020. This meant that I no longer had face-to-face access to my sample and would have to conduct my one-to-one interviews over the phone. There is no evidence that data obtained through phone interviews is inferior to that obtained in face-to-face interviews (Smith, 2005). However, the use of phone interviews meant there were further ethical considerations that had to be adhered to. To ensure ethical standing, I provided the participants with an altered version of the letter of information (see appendix 4) and consent form (see appendix 5) via email detailing the change in the situation and offering the opportunity to opt out if they so wished. This email also asked for their consent to be submitted via email if they decided to continue on with the interview. Unfortunately, the use of phone interviews omits non-verbal communication that can be so crucial to the data analysis process and there is a risk of technical issues occurring (Glogowska, Young & Lockyer, 2010). However, further reading informed me that the use of field

notes (see appendix 6) during phone interviews before, during and after the phone interviews, may help the researcher in their data analysis process later on. I decided to adopt this aid. As the time for a phone interview may be more time sensitive than that of a face-to-face interview (Smith, 2005), I planned to be well prepared with a clear set of relevant objectives and the careful recording of the interviews on more than one variety of media.

Research Sample

Creswell (2007) considers a research sample as a careful choice of a cohort of people essential to the success of ones project. The research sample for this project consisted of a total of 10 participants. This sample consists of 5 early years educators, 3 junior infants teachers and 2 senior infant teachers. The selection of this sample was based around the method of convenience sampling but this sampling operated under a strict set of criteria (Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). It was important that I not only selected a sample I had access to, but also a sample that met the criteria necessary to adequately research my question which were as follows:

- Participants currently working in early childhood settings
- Participants currently working in either junior or senior infants settings
- Participants that had a class with minority children
- Participants with more than 2 years teaching experience
- Participants from single religious denominational ethos
- Participants from multi-denominational ethos
- Participants who have worked in a variety of educational settings
- Participants from both formal preschool and Montessori training

I ensured my sample had met these criteria and ensured fairness by taking a sample of early childhood and primary school educators in equal measure to emphasise the value I feel both sectors have. It was essential to include participants from single and multi-denominational schools to gauge the wider view of the opinions on minority children. There are many advantages to convenience sampling that I felt would suit my research. As this particular research project is time sensitive, this method of sampling is simplistic in nature, helping generate small ideas and allowing for the birth of multidimensional interpretations in a short timeframe (Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

Research Participants

There are a total of 10 research participants for this project, comprising of 5 early years educators, 3 junior infants teachers and 2 senior infant teachers.

Participant: Setting/Class Level Duration Teaching:	Experience in Education:	Diversity Present in the Current Setting:
Teacher 1 Single Denomination Preschool/Primary School/Montessori/Junior & Senior Infants 26 years	Initially trained as a Nursery Nurse and worked in a crèche for over 10 years. Re-trained in management and worked for over 10 years in a Montessori setting. Undertook further training and now works as an SNA	A wide range of children with Special Educational Needs e.g. ASD, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. The children come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. There are many children coming from religiously diverse

	in a Junior and Senior Infant Classroom.	cohorts. There are many children with whom English is an additional language.
Teacher 2 Montessori 7 years	Early Years Educator and Room Leader in a Montessori before undertaking a Manager position.	There are a wide range of children from different religious and cultural backgrounds. There are a number of children with whom English is among one of the many languages they can speak.
Teacher 3 Montessori 9 years	Room Leader in a Montessori before undertaking a Manager position in this Montessori.	There are a wide range of children from different religious and cultural backgrounds. There are a number of children with whom English is among one of the many languages they can speak.
Teacher 4 Montessori 15 years	Owner and Early Years Educator in a Montessori. Also an Inclusion Co-ordinator for the local area.	There are a wide range of children from different religious and cultural backgrounds. There are a number of children with

		whom English is among one of the many languages they can speak.
Teacher 5 Single Denomination Primary School/Senior Infants 20 years	Initially worked in a Gaelscoil for 8 years, then moved to a DEIS Band 1 school for 8 years. Spent 2 years in a Special Educational Needs setting before moving to a Junior Primary School for these past 2 years.	A wide range of children with Special Educational Needs e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Down's Syndrome, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and a range of language and sensory processing disorders. The children come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. There are many children coming from religiously diverse cohorts along with a range of different family structures including foster families, nuclear and blended families.
Teacher 6	Working in a Junior	A wide range of children

Single Denomination Primary School/Junior Infants 3 years	Primary School. Worked as a Senior Infant, Learning Support and Junior Infant Teacher.	with Special Educational Needs e.g. ASD, ADHD and Emotional Behavioral Disorder (EBD). Children with medical needs. There are children coming from ethnically diverse backgrounds, many children with whom English is an additional language. There are also a variety of different family structures e.g. single parent families and children with adoptive parents.
Teacher 7 Single Denomination Primary School/Senior Infants 15 years	Spent 2 years as a Preschool Teacher. Currently trained to Masters level. Taught predominantly in the Junior end of the Primary School setting for over 13+ years.	There are children coming from ethnically diverse cultural backgrounds, many children with whom English is an additional language. There are children with ASD.
Teacher 8	Teacher at Masters level.	There are children coming

Single Denomination Primary School/Junior Infants 5 years	Taught 5th & 2nd class pupils for a total of 3 years. Teacher of Junior Infant pupils for a duration of 2 years.	from ethnically diverse backgrounds, many children with whom English is an additional language. The children come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. English is an additional language. There are also a variety of different family structures e.g. single parent families, nuclear families, blended families and children with adoptive parents.
Teacher 9 Multi Denomination Primary School/Junior Infants 4 years	Initially worked as a substitute teacher in a variety of schools then moved to a Muslim National School for 2 years. Spent 1 year as a Resource Teacher before having Senior Infants for 1 year. Now teaches Junior Infants in an Educate	There are only a small group of children who do not have English as an additional language. This small group of children belong to some form of the Christian religion. The majority of the class are from diverse cultural backgrounds and diverse

	Together.	family structures. A pupil has a hearing impairment. One pupil has ASD.
Teacher 10 Multi Denomination Preschool 10+ years	Initially a Room Leader in a Preschool before advancing to the position of manager. Also an Inclusion Co-ordinator for the local area.	There are nine different ethnicities attending the preschool. The children come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. There are many children with whom English is an additional language. There are many children coming from religiously diverse backgrounds.

Ethical Considerations

With respect to ethical considerations, it is essential to follow the guidelines designated to avoid the integrity of your research being compromised (Zeni, 2000). I ensured I passed the appropriate regulations specified by the Ethical Committee of Marino Institute of Education and Trinity College Dublin before progressing any further with my research.

Participant Consent. I secured permission from both the principal and board of management in my school to begin my data collection. I then

provided my participants with the necessary letters of information (see

appendix 2) and consent forms (see appendix 3). The letter of information

detailed the title of my research question, the rationale behind the question and

an explanation of the procedure of the focus group or interview. In the consent

forms, I highlighted to the participants that they had the autonomy to opt out

of the research at any point without the need for a reason (Shier, 2001).

        Confidentiality and Anonymity. The participants were provided with

an information letter (see appendix 2) consent forms (see appendix 3) that

presented the measures I would be taking to ensure their confidentiality and

anonymity throughout the research process. Each participant in both the focus

groups and interviews would not be identified. Each participant was merely

called 'teacher' and given a random corresponding number. Only I as the

researcher was aware of which number corresponded to which participant

(Sapsford & Abbot, 1996). The consent forms expressed that I would

guarantee the participants data protection by keeping their audio recordings on

an encrypted device under lock and key until they may be destroyed as per the

awarding bodies' instructions. I also assured the participants that their audio

recordings would not be played for anyone apart from myself, the thesis

supervisor and a college examiner, if, and only if necessary.

Limitations

As with all research, there are many limitations to this project. It is of

paramount importance to mention that I did not set out to compare one educational

sector to another nor did I aim to compare a single-denominational school with a

multi-denominational one. I am aware that if I had planned to complete a comparative

piece, a different research design and a variety of other approaches would need to be employed. This research is a small-scale qualitative study conducted over a period of ten months. As this study is on a less substantial scale, the research question under investigation may only be partially answered in the allotted time. It is difficult to suggest that one could draw definitive points or indicate conclusive evidence from this specific study. The sample of 10 participants is small making the scope of information limited by comparison to other large-scale research projects of a similar nature.

Positionality

I am very passionate about the topic of inclusive education. My interest in this area is derived initially firstly from my own positive childhood experiences. I am a very proud member of a family with both Irish and Italian ancestry. It was always instilled in me to not only celebrate difference in my own cultural values, traditions and languages, but also to respect and relish in the shared celebration of the diversity in others. 'Difference' is an overarching term that also includes the necessity in respecting diversity of opinions, likes/dislikes and personalities along with culture, religion etc. To me, difference is a thing of beauty.

From a young age, I wanted to be a change maker. I wanted to have a voice that mattered. I wanted to be a teacher. The early years are often viewed as the formative years encompassing cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. I feel that it is important for children, particularly in these formative years, to have culturally responsive teachers with the adequate funds of knowledge who are willing to challenge their own prejudices, embrace multiculturalism, self- reflect and attempt to create a learning environment conducive to reaching the variety all varieties of

pupils in their class. Furthermore, a teacher should not be afraid to let go every now and again and embrace, within reason, a more free-flowing and explorative classroom. Children have the right to education and the right to voice their own opinions and feelings about how they perceive their learning experience is going and, often, how it may be enhanced.

Regrettably however, I quickly began to observe that my positive childhood experiences and my own viewpoints in the paramount importance of the celebration of diversity were not similar to the opinions of those around me. Although we now live in an ever-evolving world with well-educated people often in inordinate proportions, many continue to feed into a cycle of deficit ideology. Such deficit hegemony renders those of 'difference' to be seen as more of a deficit to our society rather than a thing of beauty. It concerns me that a potentially damaging outlook like this can be held by people in high positions of power and may be directly affecting the educational equity of the students in our classrooms. Similarly, many teachers grapple with curriculum overload and behaviour management, among other issues, when approaching a more facilitative role in the classroom. Teacher disillusion could thus silence and over power the child's agency.

My main personal motivation in choosing this topic is to be a voice for those who do not have one and to lobby change in the mindset of those who do. I want to explore how my powerful role as a teacher can help others to realise their obligation to all children of all genders, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic statuses' etc. Throughout such a prominent feature in a child's life, I cannot ignore the responsibility I have to not only their academic attainment, but also the promotion and maintenance of the right they have to assume their own agency.

Mode of Analysis

Gibbs (2012) discusses the process of qualitative data analysis under a few guiding principles, firstly stating that data is not to be presented in order to prove a hypothesis. It is expected that the data will provide conclusions derived from knowing one's question and carrying out investigations appropriate to collecting rich data. It is essential that a researcher is omitting any prior preconceptions and approaches the data gathered from the methodological framework with a specific theory. The methodological framework is qualitative and is embedded in the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Creswell (1998) notes that qualitative research is interpretive as it is based on the interpretations of one's viewpoints on something specific. Therefore grounded theory may be seen as a research strategy used to derive further meaning from said interpretations, allowing a variety of theories to arise from the data collected (Charmaz, 2014). Based on this methodological framework and theory, the following steps were taken:

Step 1: Preparation and Familiarity of the Data. In this first phase of data handling before beginning my transcriptions, I decided upon a unique identity number for each transcription and noted down the relevant pieces of information for each one including the date, time and duration of the interview along with an anonymity key for each participant e.g. T1 = Teacher 1. Both focus groups were recorded on two separate audio recording devices and the phone interviews were recorded on one audio recording device. All interviews were transcribed with double spacing and a wide margin to facilitate the addition of further observations. Extra field notes (see appendix 6) were also written down after both focus groups and interviews for further reflection and to help avoid superficial coding i.e. omitting key aspects such as:

setting, context, body language and overall atmosphere throughout the interview which can be lost in the written word (Kvale, 1996).

In the second phase, I listened to the four audio recordings again this time noting any codes I observed. By the third phase of data handling, I was quite content with the codes I had identified, having decided to denote a specific colour for a specific code and assigning a colour to nearly every line of each transcription on the word document. By the fourth phase, I felt having both the four transcriptions and four audio recordings in front of me strengthened my encoding process as they supported each other. It made the meaning of a sample of responses much clearer and in many cases suggested different interpretations to what I had initially thought. I then adjusted my colour-coding where appropriate, reducing it from every line to specific paragraphs or phrases. By the time I completed the fourth phase of data analysis, I had identified forty-six recurring codes that I then summarised into twenty-three colour coded categories e.g. yellow denoted teacher issues. From these categories I created my main themes. Thematic analysis was then the chosen method as it identifies recurrent themes within a set of data and can present data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

Step 2: Verification of the Data. Regardless of what methodological framework or theory embedded in the collected data, it is crucial that the researcher justify the strategies used to qualify the validity of their data (Creswell, 1998). From the perspective of the qualitative methodological framework, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability all play essential roles in the verification of the data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). All four components have been accounted for in this research. Triangulation becomes a vital element in ensuring the credibility of the data present in the use of both interviews and field

notes (see appendix 6) in this research. The process of encoding is also a strategy of

triangulation in a qualitative framework (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) and

adopted during this project by means of colour-coding providing codes and

subsequent categories and themes. Shenton (2004) highlights how the mentoring of a

supervisor and the examination of similar research projects can also strengthen and

secure the credibility.

   Shenton (2004) states that transferability looks at to what degree one's study

may be applicable to other situations. It becomes of paramount importance therefore

that detailed information on the sample is a prominent feature of the research. In this

research, I presented an in depth look into the sample in terms of class level, duration

in the teaching profession, experience in other and current areas of education and the

specific examples of diversity present in their current settings. Dependability refers to

the means by which a study may be repeated in another setting (Shenton, 2004).

However, it is crucial to remember every study has its own range of limitations and

belongs to an ever-evolving field. The dependability of this research is accomplished

through the addition of prescriptive steps and the inclusion of specific information

vital to the successful design and implementation of the project. Koch (2006) states

that it is essential that methods of establishing confirmability are evident in qualitative

research. Heopfl (1997) notes that confirmability may be achieved through the use of

an audit trail (see appendix 7) as it underpins the trustworthiness of a researcher who

willingly discloses the events attributing to their research. This depicts the care the

researcher took during the process (Rice and Ezzy, 2000), and facilitates another

researcher reaching a similar or contradictory conclusion based on their interpretation

(Sandelowski, 1986).

Step 3: Representation of the Data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) explains that a paradigm is a shared belief system involved in the pursuit of knowledge. Three of the main paradigms in a qualitative approach to research are positivism, interpretivism and critical theory, all with equal merit (Kuhn, 1970). I opted to gather my data with focus groups and interviews. As the research topic was pertaining to education and equally relevant to all participants involved, I felt an interpretivist paradigm was the most suitable lens. It was of my viewpoint that although all participants were teachers with diverse classrooms, their range of experience in education alone meant that multiple interpretations was automatically a feature of this data. Multiple interpretations lends itself ideally to an interpretivist paradigm as this perspective thrives on developing a deeper meaning of a phenomena rather than making a broad generalisation and assuming it is applicable to all (Creswell, 2007).

From the careful handling of my four transciptions, I felt overall that my data was closest to the interpretivist perspective. This is because the data collected forced me to abandon the preconceptions I entered the research with and allowed me to adopt more diverse ways of looking at something. Hammersley (2013) emphasises this point further by stating that a huge advantage of the interpretivist paradigm is its ability to diversify researchers outlooks on humans, events and social contexts. Tuli (2010) explains how a researcher can conduct this type of research in a setting natural to the participants, a key feature in grounded theory. This means a researcher is afforded the opportunity to observe and probe a participant's thoughts, values and perspectives (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). This was a key feature in my research as the valuable data I gained from the focus groups massively influenced the

questions and approaches I used in my one to one interviews at a later stage of the

data collection.

Timeline

The general timeline for the investigation of this research is as follows:

Event:	Date/Time:	Notes:
Lectures	30/8/2019 - 6pm-9pm 31/8/2019 – 2pm-5pm 13/9/2019 - 6pm-9pm 14/9/2019– 2pm-5pm 27/9/2019 - 6pm-9pm 28/9/2019 – 2pm-5pm	Lectures based on Research Methods to provide assistance in the commencement period, stages following this and the subsequent submission of the thesis.
Individual One Hour Meeting	2/10/2019 – 4pm-5pm	Dr. Jen O'Sullivan helped me to pinpoint a specific area of personal interest that provided me with the tools I needed to refine certain elements of my original ideas and progress towards the proposal stage.
Research Proposal Submission	11/11/2019 – 5pm	Proposal and ethics forms submitted for further approval and amendments.

Feedback on Research Proposal	15/11/2019	Permission granted to progress to the next stage.
1st Supervisor Meeting	25/11/2019 – 4pm-5pm	Fintan McCutcheon helped me massively in further refining my ideas and provided me with the necessary assistance in the phrasing of my research question and the key considerations and components that will be vital as my research progresses. This allowed me to frame my literature review. Fintan also gave me academic readings and recommendations for further reading in my chosen area.
Literature Review Submission	10/1/2020	Literature Review submitted for further approval and amendments.
2nd Supervisor Meeting	13/1/2020	Fintan granted permission to progress to the next stage and indicated a few

		amendments to make to certain sections. He also aided me in the formatting of the Methodology chapter and key points of consideration necessary for each of the sections in this chapter. Fintan also helped me with possible questions I could ask my sample when I proceed to the focus group data collection process.
Data Collection	10/2/2020 – 3pm-4pm 26/2/2020 – 3pm-4pm	Over the duration of two weeks, I completed two focus groups, first with 4 preschool teachers followed then by 4 primary school educators.
Methodology Submission	26/2/2020	Methodology chapter submitted for further approval and amendments.
School Closures	13/3/2020	Schools across Ireland closed indefinitely due to the break out of the Covid-

		19 virus. This had an impact on the timeline.
Phone Interviews	23/3/2020 26/3/2020	I contacted my two face-to-face interview participants and explained the situation. Once the necessary ethical considerations were met, I conducted the two over the phone interviews.
Data Analysis Seminar	29/3/2020	I engaged in an online lecture with Dr. Rory McDaid. This lecture was based around data analysis, reading recommendations and an update on the timeline for the remainder of the thesis process after the outbreak of Covid-19
Data Analysis & Submission	30/3/2020-23/4/2020	I began handling my data through transcription, and coding. I then created themes based on re

		emerging patterns in the codes. These themes formed the basis for my data findings. I submitted this to Fintan for feedback.
3rd Supervisor Meeting	1/5/2020	Fintan and I spoke on the phone and I got feedback on my data analysis along with points for the concluding elements remaining for the thesis.
Write Up, Editing & Submission to Supervisor	22/5/2020	Zoom meeting to get Fintan's feedback on the whole thesis and make necessary changes. Given to a friend to proof read.
Thesis Submission	2/6/2020	Submitted online to Marino Institute of Education.

Conclusion

This research is rooted in grounded theory through an interpretive lens using qualitative based data collection and analysis. Focus groups and phone interviews were selected as the methods of data collection. The data sample is consists of 5 early

years and 5 primary educators respectively. The selection of this sample was based on

a specific set of criteria in convenience sampling. In order to ensure issues such as

confidentiality and equal participation by all are not problematic during the data

collection process, certain ethical considerations were be implemented. Similarly

careful considerations were enacted to ensure the validity of this research.

Chapter 4 - Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the analysis of the focus groups and phone interviews that took place during the data collection period described in the previous chapter. Following an in depth process of data handling, the findings have now been categorised into four themes in order to answer the research question of to what extent early childhood and primary teachers perceive themselves in having a role in developing the voice and agency of minority children. Thematic analysis was the chosen method as it identifies recurring themes within a set of data and can present this data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

Theme 1 is entitled 'Policy and Practice Issues.' This theme will present the findings on the policy and practice issues in terms of preschool to primary schools transitions, the place of Aistear in early childhood education and the subsequent implications of this for the voice and agency of minority children. Theme 2 is entitled 'Teacher Issues.' This theme will examine three particular subthemes in the form of; the knowledge, the role and the approaches of cross-sectoral teachers regarding the voice and agency of minority children. Theme 3 is entitled 'Teacher Education and Training Issues.' This theme will paint a picture of the links between initial teacher education and training as elements impacting the role of cross-sectoral teachers and their competencies in engaging with the voice and agency of minority children. Theme 4 is entitled 'Home/School Issues.' This final theme will discuss the extent to which cross-sectoral teachers consider the inclusion of a child's cultural background as a necessary development tool with respect to the voice and agency of minority children.

Theme 1: Policy and Practice Issues

Although this research project was not designed to make a comparison between educational sectors, the findings from the data illustrated that there are two specific examples of policy and practice issues across the early childhood and primary education sectors. The issues of ineffective transitions and the place of the Aistear Framework have significant implications for minority children.

1.1 Transitions. Following the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020, the National Curriculum for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) took responsibility for developing report templates. These templates were made available online to positively contribute to the transfer of information about students from state-funded ECCE settings to primary schools. This required all settings to provide standard written transition documents, with the voice of the child included, to the settings in which new student's have been enrolled (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.82). Although (NCCA, 2016) exhibits international and national research, and the Department of Education and Skills provides instructions prioritising the importance of smooth transitions for a child, both early years and primary educators would still argue the current measures are ineffective.

> "There is massive disparity in either side's awareness of what children should leave preschool with and what new learning they will do in junior infants because nobody is told. Even in sending my own child in, I got schools pinpointed. One preschool promoted Aistear and play the other promised she'd be able to read and write by the time she goes to school (Teacher 7)".

This teacher touched on a very thought provoking element of the inefficacy of transitions from preschool to primary school. She has identified both the absence of transition documents and a clear lack of knowledge on both parties. Firstly on how little a preschool teacher knows about primary education and secondly on how little a

primary teacher knows about preschool education. Perhaps the reason for such a large

gap in the knowledge between sectors is the differences evident between the training

of the two. These two sectors although clearly having significant ties to each other,

may actually be developing independently from each other (O'Kane and Hayes,

2010). As it is highly unrealistic to ask both sets of educators to train as a preschool

and primary teacher, a more achievable means of closing a gap in this knowledge

must be implemented. Ensuring smooth transitions is a shared responsibility by all

stakeholders, they must recognise the equal role they have in attributing to a child's

lifelong learning (NCCA, 2016), instead of seeing inadequacies in the other sector.

The 'blame game' began to permeate through this data. Similarly, there were

other examples highlighting the lack of knowledge one educator had on the other

sector. There were also references of educators in one sector questioning the integrity

of an educator in another.

> "Years and years ago I had a primary teacher coming to me and saying 'can
> you stop teaching them their phonics and their numbers 'cus they come to me
> in school with poor English already and I have to reteach them.' I said 'well
> maybe you should have been a Montessori teacher, then, because things are so
> extendible, I have expertise too' but yeah I was actually asked that as a fellow
> educator (Teacher 1)".

This particular teacher recounts an example of when she felt belittled by a

primary school teacher who felt they were the educator with more expertise and

higher levels of training despite both educators possessing degrees respectfully. Once

again, this shows the lack of knowledge that exists between sectors. If gaps in the

knowledge between these two educational sectors continue to expand, it is the voice

of the child that will be stifled. It is fair to say that a willingness of both educators to

make an effort in joint continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities,

would be a chance for professionals from both sectors to share their skills and

experiences could greatly help close this knowledge gap. Both educators could begin

to see the distinct, yet equally valuable influences of both periods of education and how they work best in cohesion.

Thus far the teachers spoke mainly about their frustrations with the absence of transition documents from one setting to the other and the expanding gap in knowledge across sectors. As both the researcher and as a teacher, it struck me that the teachers seem to feel as though these discrepancies across the two educational sectors were hardest on them as opposed to the children. There were also references made to barriers hindering the transition process that are not actually barriers in reality.

> "Where minority groups are concerned they do have extra elements to bear in mind and they come from preschool with no passport, information we can't get it because of GDPR and that means we are going back to square one with kids they've had for two years and know inside out and can tell us what works, what makes them tick. If they'll need an assessment of need. All that (Teacher 8)".

As previously presented above, clear policies on the practices of providing transition documentation for all children are readily available. Although, this teacher has made clear reference to the extra considerations a teacher must keep in mind for minority children, she also said that General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines have impinged on her access to these transition documents. As this is not a barrier that exists in reality, my further dissection of the data on transitions cemented my initial observation of 'the blame game.' Both sets of educators were critical of the other sector, but neither seems willing to accept the fault in their own.

I started to consider how detrimental this could be for all children but I considered this a particular disadvantage for minority children who are already viewed at a disadvantage by many. Although the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have clear policies on the practices of the child's voice being included in the transition

documentation, neither the early years nor the primary educators made reference to the voice of the child with respect to effective transitions. The child's voice and subsequent agency becomes crucial for the transition of minority children in particular who are likely to enter one setting with the learned behaviour of another (Brooker, 2010). This can be as a consequence of their teacher's decision to move away from the acknowledgement of something they consider different from the norm, often leading to children's assimilation into any background they find themselves in (Samuels, 2018).

These findings highlight that issues of gaps in knowledge and inconsistency across sectors has led to ineffective transitions and the subsequent diminution of the child's voice. These seem to be among many factors impacting an educator's role in developing the voice and agency of all children, but particularly minority children. A teacher has made specific reference to the extra measures minority children may need during the transition process and yet the actual management of diversity and the voice of the child in education are not discussed by either sector (Lynch & Lodge, 2002), in equal measure to the issues in the opposing sectors.

1.2 The Aistear Framework. The topic of Aistear is also a topical issue across sectors and has often been considered an area of significant frustration for teachers. Gray & Ryan (2016) presents many of the barriers of the implementation of Aistear in the primary classroom by arguing that there are many issues such as lack of training, limited time, large pupil ratio, curriculum overload and lack of resources coming into play. Many would argue that these issues are not as prevalent in the early years sector as it is designed with learning through play at the forefront. Overall, the early years educators endorse the Aistear Framework and feel all children but

particularly minority pupils, respond very positively to it.

> "The Aistear Curriculum is all to do with the voice of the child. A child I feel, particularly a minority child learns far better when they feel comfortable and happy in their own surroundings. All our plans, daily routines, everything.. is planned with the voice of the child, so it's not just the adult sitting doing plans and setting out the routine, the child's voice is of the utmost importance in everything we do. The voice of the child is what does our plans (Teacher 10)".

As discussed previously, the voice of the child being forgotten in the transition process across educational sectors has particular consequences for minority children whom many often already consider disadvantaged in the education system. However, this early years educator has not only pinpointed the importance of a minority child feeling at home in school but the necessity of the child's voice permeating throughout daily plans and routines. This educator feels the policy of the Aistear Framework in which the child's voice is at the core, affords her the chance to implement child led practices. The play ideology of the Aistear Framework highlights the right a child has to play. It not only focuses on the child's voice but encourages play as a crucial component of a child's development instead of merely prioritising academic attainment. Children tend to be more comfortable and perform much better when they view their learning activity as play (Whitebread, 2013). Play opportunities therefore become of paramount importance for minority children in particular who can often feel under more pressure in a purely academic space (Howard, 2010). The Aistear Framework policy was carefully formulated (NCCA, 2009) and mirrors the principles of The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. It details a child's right to be actively engaged in an education that encourages the celebration of the unique backgrounds to which they belong (NCCA, 2009; UNCRC, 1989).

Policy and practice disparities across sectors also exist in relation to the Aistear Framework. The primary educators still remain firm that there are many barriers impinging on the adequate implementation of Aistear in the primary

classroom.

> "Aistear is a lot to do with training. I've had trouble getting training for it even now, and I've tried to do so. Everything is college based but sure it's like anything, you need updated training. If you are going to do something, you need to do it right. So alot of junior and senior infant teachers now have not been specifically trained in it. We just don't have time to implement it (Teacher 7)".

This educator speaks with clear conviction about the very real issues pertaining to the practice of Aistear in the primary classroom. There are also many other teachers who would attest to factors such as lack of training, limited time, large pupil ratio, curriculum overload and lack of resources as significant barriers (Gray & Ryan, 2016). However, it must be said that primary teachers often have a reluctance to move away from didactic methods in favour of child-led practices like Aistear and although offered as justification, more training is not guaranteed to alter their personal perceptions (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). One could argue considering Aistear as separate to the curriculum and too time consuming to deliver as a great disservice to children considering Aistear as a flexible framework (O'Connor & Angus, 2011), that can help teachers provide culturally relevant opportunities for voice and agency.

While the early years sector does not to the same degree grapple with issues like curriculum overload or large ratios, primary educators disengaging with Aistear are choosing to do so. Teachers are merely being asked to integrate Aistear into their current curriculum not create a new one (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Directly disengaging with such a child-led framework deprives children of the right to be active agents in their own learning through play, a method that benefits all, not just minority, children. This is a particular disadvantage for minority children as by virtue of its design, the Aistear Framework provides children with the freedom to relish in the diverse cultures to which they belong, free from the academic expectations (NCCA, 2009; Howard, 2010).

Theme 2: Teacher Issues

The findings from the data will examine three particular subthemes in the form of; the knowledge, the role and the approaches of cross-sectoral teachers regarding the voice and agency of minority children.

2.1 Knowledge of the Teacher. Although a broad term, diversity is much more than 'visible' difference (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, Gurin, 2002). The findings of this data determined that most educators had limited knowledge of how many areas diversity encompasses.

> "Different cultures and things. I think language is a huge thing with people who don't have English as their first language, so like when we have non-nationals that would come in (Teacher 2)".

This educator clearly identified the 'visible' difference in her classroom by making reference to children from ethnically diverse backgrounds and those for whom English is an additional language (EAL). This is often the extent of a teacher's knowledge on diversity as the 'visible' presence of difference is more prominent to most than the distinctions that also exist in terms of gender identity, religious affiliation, socioeconomic class or sexual orientation (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, Gurin, 2002). One reason for a limit in the knowledge of diversity is the cultural disconnect present between a white, Irish, Roman Catholic teacher in a single-denominational school and the extremely diverse minority children in their classroom. Minority children therefore are often not afforded equal opportunities to exercise their voice and agency as teachers struggle to relate to children from backgrounds that have no similarities to their own (Samuels, 2018).

As a researcher I found the spectrum of knowledge on diversity between one educator and another astounding. One teacher exhibited a particularly narrowed

knowledge of diversity, while another was incredibly specific. There was not the

same sense of a cultural disconnect arising from this description.

> "I suppose I think of it as in I've more of an idea of what a majority child
> looks like so eh.. a white, settled, able bodied, eh child whose first language is
> English.. who has ya know heterosexual parents, who oh and like even if there
> not say Christian or Catholic, they probably have a background in Christianity
> or Catholicism (Teacher 9)".

This teacher presented that they had knowledge of diversity beyond 'visible'

difference. They covered language, gender, race, religion, socioeconomic class,

special educational needs and sexual orientation (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, Gurin, 2002)

as a variety of elements in a diverse cohort of people. On close examination of the

spectrum of knowledge between two primary educators, I determined that this

difference might be rooted in the schools to which they teach. One educator operates

under a system with a single-denominational ethos. A large proportion of schools in

Ireland operate under a Roman Catholic ethos with a prescriptive curriculum adhering

to the celebration of one faith. The control church associates have in religious

practices may make the celebration of diversity challenging for both pupils and

teachers in the school (Devine, 2005). The other primary educator operates under a

multi-denominational ethos that adopts the Learn Together Curriculum. This teacher

also white, Irish, Roman Catholic, explained that they are accustomed to diversity

being organically threaded into their daily school policy, planning and practice. They

do not consider themselves too far removed from their pupils to relate to them

(Samuels, 2018), or to encourage the voice and agency of minority children or, to

consider open dialogues on issues pertaining to a wide variety of faiths, cultures etc.

as regular topics of discussion.

    2.2 The Role of the Teacher. Teachers have a vast and intricate role in the

educational context in the development of the voice and agency of children. A

teacher's decision to shy away from approaching issues pertaining to diversity feeling

the children are too young to understand and that teachers are too far removed from

said issues triggers a cultural disconnect between teachers and their minority pupils

(Samuels, 2018). This statement ignites interest in why a teacher in a role of such

importance, is so unable to connect in this way with their pupils.

> "Religiously as well in the past and now, I would be careful. They are younger
> and I think a lot goes past them but if the child is excluded, he excludes
> himself out of religion. But at times with the kids he has said "I don't believe
> this, I don't believe that" I would very much try and buffer it more so than
> have a direct approach and say we all believe in different things and it's okay
> once we are all happy. But I wouldn't full on go in on
> [completely/unreservedly address] the topic, because I think the different
> religion is beyond the class comprehension. I wouldn't want to open a big can
> of worms (Teacher 7)".

This teacher truthfully describes an instance of a cultural disconnect that

ensued between herself and a pupil by stating she was afraid of initiating an open

dialogue on religious diversity for fear of the conflict it would cause. There is a notion

here suggesting that even in this modern day, the Irish education system is comprised

of a homogeneous workforce. This homogeneous Irish workforce often approaches

their diverse classrooms, as though they too were predominantly white, Irish, and

Roman Catholic. It stands to reason that a homogeneous teacher will grapple with

issues of diversity that they view as outside of themselves (Sleeter, 2004). This

ideology can paint a 'no problem here' picture with teachers opting to completely

avoid the dissection of any issues pertaining to race, religion etc. with their class

(Gaine, 1995)

Truthfully, inclusion policies must be considered here also. It may become

difficult to expect more progressive approaches to inclusive education when the

workforce is not remotely multicultural (Martin, 2005). The fact still remains that by

being so different to the pupils they teach, policies of inclusion may not be an

immediate priority to all stakeholders in a school (Faas, Smith & Darmody, 2018).

Teachers are not empathising with their pupils and frame their policy and practice

around social and cultural discourse most relevant to the majority (Sleeter, 1992).

> "Because as I said, I worked in a school under a single ethos and it would be
> completely differentiated to the one medium but like they learned nothing
> about other religions, cultures specifically. It was a single culture look at
> things.. which.. like the diverse nationalities in that school was huge. So you
> definitely did have people with different beliefs eh.. but yeah they kinda
> weren't spoken much about that in school (Teacher 9)".

This teacher has expressed the idea that there is a demand for more

multicultural dialogue, especially in schools operating under a single-denominational

ethos. This teacher details how a single-denominational setting does not have policies

that approach the diverse children in the school despite the significant proportions of

these students. It seems to highlight how unbalanced it is having such a homogeneous

teaching force and limited inclusion policies while the student population in our

schools is becoming increasingly culturally diverse (Sleeter, 1992). However,

teachers cannot change who they are but teacher can step into a leadership role and

work to counteract the potentially negative effects of this on minority children.

> "We are a fully multicultural preschool so our plans and everything are
> inclusive of all children. I've been teaching preschool now for 10+ years and I
> can say that from using our inclusive framework, the minority children will
> learn the same as majority children. Their social development, cognition,
> verbal communication and competence has grown so much from September til
> their Primary Education and it's from using inclusive practice and practicing
> Inclusive policies. I believe the only way forward for children is if inclusive
> practices are adopted but [and] actually implemented (Teacher 10)".

This teacher outlines her role as a leader by talking about the steps her

preschool took towards ensuring the necessary inclusion of all children was embedded

explicitly in her policies, planning and practices. A teacher must recognise the power

they have to positively develop the voice and agency of minority children by creating

culturally responsive learning environments (Villegas and Lucas, 2007).

The idea of creating a more culturally responsive learning environment, that is conducive to fostering voice and agency, has been met with adversity by other teachers. There are those who feel their role as an educator is being put under pressure to reinvent the wheel in an already overloaded curriculum (Kumashiro, 2000).

> "It's too crammed and each year you're snipping things away. Everything is diluted down. I remember even having a Nigerian mum into speak and everything, there is now way you have the time to do that now (Teacher 7)".

In reality, the primary education curriculum in Ireland is overloaded. However, teachers are not being asked to try to alter everything or reinvent the wheel, rather being open to enhancing what we already have (Kumashiro, 2000). An educator who is willing to begin to see themselves as having a role in conducting their class under a culturally responsive pedagogy will create a climate of trust with their pupils by drawing on strategies, routines and lesson content that shows the children their diverse voices and agency should be embraced (Samuels, 2018).

A means of cultivating the voice and agency of minority children is by affording them the chance to be active participants and discuss matters that pertain to them and the diverse cultures to which they belong (UNCRC, 1989).

> "A child who is six can experience racism, so why can't we talk about it? Do we let them stay and fester in this awful place til they're twelve and then talk about it? Then you're 'fixing things' that you could have instead usualised everyday so it's not weird, it's not different and it's just a part of life because it IS a part of life. Also, a child that you could have a small child with two mammy's and their mammy is somehow inappropriate? Ridiculous. Like even things with gender are in everyday life, it's not different (Teacher 9)".

This teacher considers their role as a figure that fosters minority children in engaging in open dialogue about issues pertaining to them, issues often considered by many teachers as 'taboo' (Vasavi, 2000). A teacher who chooses to consider certain topics pertaining to minority children as 'usual' rather than 'us' and 'them' are self-reflecting and examining their own prejudices. They are giving those children access

to voice and agency by making them a part of the normal everyday world (Villegas &

Lucas, 2007). The role a teacher takes with respect to minority children will either

perpetuate children to maintain masks of assimilation or embrace the development of

their voice and agency (Kafele, 2013).

  2.3 Approaches to Minority Children. The percentages of people now

residing in Ireland from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds has

quickly begun to change igniting both a welcomed acceptance of difference and a

hostile display of deficit thinking (Fanning, 2002). The findings of this data have

shown an element of both.

> "As a class in general for children who are EAL, they go out three times a
> week specifically for oral language so I would say they get their chance out in
> a small group setting to be able to develop their language. Culturally I see
> them as very similar to the rest of the kids more [but] there's just a language
> barrier. Kids with learning difficulties, you obviously have to cater your
> lessons around them all the time, but would I specifically pick a lesson that
> incorporates diversity for those children? No (Teacher 7)".

  Deficit ideology arises from one's consideration that the 'norm' is a universal

truth (Murray & Urban, 2012). This teacher feels as though the minority children in

her class do not differ massively from their fellow classmates, creating the illusion of

a universal child. This approach to minority children runs the risk of feeding into a

cycle of deficit ideology (Gorski, 2008). Once again the notion of a 'no problem here'

picture means teachers are conducting classrooms with a 'one size fits all' perception

and the voice and agency of minority children becomes diluted by the cultural and

social norms of the majority of the class (Gaine, 1995).

  However, teachers do have the power to transform this 'one size fits all'

deficit thinking by taking steps to abandon the narrowed outlook of a universal child

and make small changes to help minority children access their voice and agency in

equivalent measure to their fellow pupils (Penn, 2005).

"Sometimes it's the vocabulary or it's a turn of phrase that you know these children won't understand. So maybe pre teaching little bits first. Then they are well able [capable], just little bits of language can catch them [impede them] sometimes (Teacher 5)".

This teacher states quite clearly that minority children are different and that certain nuances in the English language can make oral language an area of difficulty for them. She did not find using simple strategies like this any extra effort. In reality, minority children from multilingual backgrounds have both cognitive and linguistic advantages as they have to adapt to surroundings different to their own, making them an asset to any classroom (Hoffman, 2001).

"My EAL kids. Like they are an example of how children have different strengths but because of the language barrier you have to help them evoke those strengths across the curriculum. Like those children are so good at drama and using their bodies to explain things. I also use recording devices with them as away of presenting their work as some children don't like the pressure of standing up (Teacher 9)".

Although these findings indicated divergent opinions between educators, in most cases the teachers recognised the benefit minority children bring to their classrooms. They also felt that adopting approaches in developing the voice and agency of those children was not considered an extra effort but a responsibility (Batra, 2005).

"Smaller group times, I find, works well, as there is more one to one support given to the minority children who need it. As well as that, this leads to more staff in the room so, we have more staff than what is recommended in the standard preschool. But it means you have to employ more staff so the children get to enjoy everything they equally deserve (Teacher 10)".

While one cannot disregard the hectic job of teachers and the regular pressure they are under to improve their capabilities and maintain various educational policies and practices (Gunter, 2001), all educators can equally redirect their focus to their classroom of diverse children (Samuels, 2018). A teacher who can only see diversity as an additional issue that has to be 'managed' will always stifle the voice and agency

of minority children (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). These findings depict not only how some educators went to extra lengths in terms of staff allocation to afford equality to minority children, but the small steps all educators can take in their daily routine to recognize the difference in minority children and implement simple strategies that afford them the chance to access what they have the equal right to (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

Theme 3: Teacher Education and Training Issues

The findings from the data shows the links between initial teacher education and training as elements impacting the role of cross-sectoral teachers and their competencies in engaging with the voice and agency of minority children.

3.1 Limited Education and Training. Overall, the Irish Education System and subsequent teacher training education have experienced a prolonged period of change (Woodhead, 2006). In these more modern times, the most noteworthy change to the Irish Education system is that of the diversity present in our classrooms which has given rise to the need for more training in the area of diversity (Byrne, McGinnity, Smith & Darmody, 2010). These findings presented how teachers identified with a lack of adequate training in diversity across both educational sectors.

> "We are hugely multicultural now and that's just it but why don't we have the tools we need to move with change (Teacher 4)".

This teacher welcomed the influx of diversity into her setting but reinforced the lack of tools available. Why training is in such insufficient supply may be linked back to the homogeneous work force in Ireland. Primary schools in Ireland are predominantly single-denominations operating under a Roman Catholic ethos, much like the teachers employed to teach there. There is a much lower percentage of multi-denominational schools making the demand for more multicultural training a

significantly lower priority in an Irish context despite the growing presence of our

diverse student body (Byrne et al, 2010).

There is a very real need to ponder just how effective the initial teacher

education is for teachers preparing to embark on their teaching career with the desire

to teach pupils to the best of their abilities.

> "The Bachelor of Education Degree, the teacher training education needs to be done better.. because there were one off mentions of things in psychology but that isn't giving people the tools to approach these children, having one guest lecture in doesn't give people the tools and then you should be worried. You can mess up what you're doing, if you're doing it the wrong way. You can isolate children based on their culture, sexuality, gender (Teacher 9)".

This teacher spoke very passionately about the burden a teacher may bear by

approaching diversity without the adequate training and the risk a teacher may run the

risk of isolating a now large percentage of their classroom. As a researcher analysing

this data, I found unrealistic the concept of demoting a teacher's inability to approach

minority children as a consequence of poor initial teacher education.

> "Diversity was such an influx years and years ago when I started teaching. There was such a focus on it, it was the head word in schools. But even in college it was a buzz word so I think we taught diversity in isolation (Teacher 7)".

Teachers are incredibly well educated individuals trained to foster a child's

innate curiosity about the world (Freire, 2000). Teachers know the rapid speed to

which knowledge is adapting and are hyper aware of how no single teaching approach

is flawless and suitable for all children (Woodhead, 2006). While initial education and

training matter, education is changing at too rapid a pace to place all the blame for

inadequate approaches on a professional degree someone may have completed years

ago. Diversity is not a 'buzz word' it is an intricate element of the teaching profession

and its importance should be in equal measure to any other element of education

(Devine, 2005). Many teachers seek continued professional development (CPD) in

other areas improve their teaching competency. Perhaps the issue therefore lies more

primarily in the lack of CPD available in diversity.

> "Yes realistically it needs to be included in eh.. the Bachelor of Education
> Degree and, like, yeah.. People are afraid of doing it wrong. Now, half of me
> is like, okay. so go educate yourself the same way you would if you were
> doing the Aztecs or addition; but in being a professional about it you need to
> adequate CPD and do something about it. Not doing something about it, is
> like.. as bad. Like pretending those minority groups don't exist, is not helpful
> (Teacher 9)".

This particular educator has pinpointed a very prominent deficit in our

education system as a whole. CPD seems to be based mainly in areas that are

considered most valuable in education, primarily the areas of numeracy and literacy

(Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013). Thus this consideration may allude to the idea that

the education system is merely a mirror of society reflecting the issues of the time in

question (Devine, 2005). The cultural recognition of minority ethnic groups coupled

with their economic positioning and overall placement in the hierarchy of society

cannot be ignored (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). The low positioning of minority groups in

society could very well be connected to the lack of urgency in the Irish education

system to alter initial teacher training or provide more adequate CPD for teachers.

There is a sense of power and deficit ideology permeating through our system

(Foucault, 1980; Gorski, 2008).

Theme 4: Home/School Issues

This final theme will discuss the findings that depict the extent to which cross-

sectoral teachers consider the inclusion of a child's cultural background as a

necessary development tool with respect to the voice and agency of minority children.

4.1 The Complexities of Childhood. The concept of childhood is one that has

changed significantly over time making it difficult to pinpoint what specifically

underpins childhood (Waller, 2005). Dunne (2006) would say that childhood is underpinned by a series of stages. The developmental, therapeutic, protection and privilege stages. The findings of this data gives credence to the idea that the majority of modern educators prioritise the privilege and protection stages.

> "Well, every week we have a sorta sample. We have to observe a child's interest from circle time so midweek we sit down and we say to the children "what group activities have you got? What would you like us to do next week to do with what you like?" we then write it down, everything that each child says and put their names beside it so as a staff we can say "okay this child wants to do this, this child wants to do that" and we group them together and make activities that way so you're never planning activities that the children might have no interest in at all (Teacher 10)".

This teacher endorses the privilege stage of childhood placing great value on the agentic child believing this is an important part of childhood viewing children as citizens with the skills, dispositions and capabilities to activate their voice and agency in issues pertaining to their own lives (Dunne, 2006). This teacher felt strongly about how important it was to provide learning opportunities conducive to children who are capable learners, competent enough to teach adults and their fellow classmates an abundance of new knowledge. It is crucial to foster this stage while a teacher can, as the older a child gets, the more disciplined they become by the world and it causes them to lose a large fraction of their innocence, creativity and open-mindedness (Dunne, 2006).

    The shift toward the modern age of the agentic child is quite compelling as there was a period in which the concept of childhood was based primarily on developmental factors as opposed to the social and cultural influences now taking centre stage (Waller, 2005). These changes should now give rise to the encouragement of children partaking in issues that affect them and subsequently the

inclusion of their childhood and cultural backgrounds, however this is not always the case.

> "I would be wary of themes of adoption because of this child. So I've met with the parents who've given me guidelines. I did make the parents aware when we were doing the family book and the word adopted would be coming up. Just with that case, I think I would be hyper-aware (Teacher 8)".

This teacher has indicated that she favours the protection rather than privilege stage of childhood. This teacher omitted the inclusion of the child's background in a certain situation, fearing she would place this child in a situation they would be uncomfortable with.

> "One of my children is Polish and she has a name we would pronounce a certain way in Ireland and pronounced a different way in Poland. I've heard her parents and they say it the Polish way, but that child wants me to pronounce it the Irish way and she has corrected me when I haven't and said no (Teacher 8)".

I found this particularly interesting. This teacher identified her decision to shield a pupil from a possible awkward moment, but in turn so too did another minority pupil in her class. This child (almost) self-protected, by determining that she considered the place for her cultural background to be at home with her parents. From this we see that a teacher who picks and chooses which elements of a child's childhood may be included into the classroom is impacting the way a child sees themselves in school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). It is almost in direct contrast to an educator who perceives children as citizens with the skills, dispositions and capabilities to activate their voice and agency in issues pertaining to their own lives (Dunne, 2006).

The teacher, sharing her experience of an instance when her attempts to include an element of a child's home background into the classroom were rejected, opened up another door for further exploration. Connolly (2011) details that minority children often struggle to access their voice and agency, as they are aware from a

young age that they are different, which tends to make them want to move away from

their diverse backgrounds.

> "I found this in the past as well, that I would invite my children to teach me
> some words, (-especially in my class there is two sets of children who speak
> the same language) and on a few occasions I've asked one to teach me a word
> I could use with the other.. just to try and speak a bit of their language. But…
> they're very much like no. They don't want to share that and its nearly like, I
> don't know if it's a thing of fitting in or they don't want to show that
> difference (Teacher 8)".

This teacher felt this child opted to take this approach to her diverse culture as

a means of fitting in better with her classmates. However, children can only interact in

the type of environment that is presented to them.

> "I have two Irish families whose siblings have Special Educational needs and
> a conversation came up on day about Lámh and those children were more than
> happy to share Lámh with the class. But like that I have a similar thing with
> languages where they are happy enough to tell me a word but they wouldn't
> share it with the class… Is that because they see Lámh shared around the
> school? I don't know, possibly. It's interesting because it could be that, maybe
> if there were more languages promoted around the school then maybe it
> normalises it? (Teacher 6)".

This teacher recounts an instance when she felt a minority child in her class

was reluctant to share their cultural background in school feeling it was not presented

and subsequently celebrated in their school environment. A child relies heavily on the

interactions that are modeled for them. If said interactions and experiences are not

inclusive of their culture, then it stands to reason that this becomes their frame of

reference and they learn by the example of adults in their lives (Dockett & Perry,

2014).

4.2 Experiences with Parents. Although a very influential figure, a teacher is

not the only important adult in a child's life (Burchinal et al, 2000). Bronfenbrenner

(1979) highlights how critical all the interactions are to a child describing them as

intersecting systems of people that influence a child's opinions and behaviours. It

seems therefore that a child's parents will form an intricate part of this system and

influence how a child perceives their cultural background as a whole. These findings

presented a divergent outlook on the experiences teachers from a single -

denominational school had with parents in comparison to that of teachers from a

multi-denominational setting. The educators from a single-denominational school

focused massively on language as multicultural celebrations in their school are

minimal in comparison to the teachers from a multi-denominational school. These

educators spoke about their experiences with parents in a much broader capacity.

> "I also think there is pressure, particularly for Eastern European children that
> like Polish kids, their aim is to improve their English. So they don't want to be
> speaking Polish. The aim is to improve their English and they go to school to
> improve their English. So it's not that they are not proud of their culture and
> everything to do with their home setting. I don't even think it's fitting in, I
> think it's ingrained in them the focus in school is to learn and learn English.
> I've had a parent ask me to move two children with the same language away
> from each other so they could continue to improve their English (Teacher 7)".

This teacher felt that in some instances, a child's reluctance to engage in their

culture is not rooted in an aim of fitting in, rather influenced solely by their parent's

aim of fitting in. To them, to have a high level of proficiency in the English language

in school is more desirable than an exhibition of their diverse culture as it closes the

cultural mismatch (Lopez, 2001).

> "The parents have said they won't speak English to them at home so already
> they have made very clear distinctions where at school is where I speak my
> English and at home is where I speak my home language (Teacher 8)".

Similarly, this teacher has focused predominantly on her observations of the

children's reluctance to engage in the shared dialogue in their native tongue. A

possible tie to this observation is based on the fear minority parents often have in

being misunderstood by teachers, staff and other parents due to their cultural

mismatch, they then do not want this same fear for their children (Lopez, 2001).

There is still a sense of 'sameness' and 'otherness' or 'us' and 'them' (Devine, 2003); permeating through this data but particularly in the differences in experiences and knowledge between teachers from single and multi-denominational schools.

> "On occasion, I have had an older sibling come in as an interpreter to translate what I was saying. But no I've had positive experiences. I imagine some children chose an Educate Together over a Catholic school but it's a lovely school, it's well resourced and I can understand why you'd want to send your kids there. Eh.. there's a fairly active PA who organizes different cultural things like a shared food day. I think everybody knows what kind of school it is. It's not "okay you didn't get to go to a Catholic school so you have to go here" no it's "Educate Together" so everyone is welcome. There's no kind of.. nobody seems to think their culture is priority, everyone seems happy (Teacher 9)".

This teacher from a multi-denominational setting has had a contrasting experience to the other educators from a single-denominational setting by describing the strong reciprocal relationships they felt exists between them, their minority children, parents and the overall school community. The design of the multi-denominational school settings means that diversity is not outside of the school, rather weaved organically throughout school life. Thus this fear of a cultural mismatch is not as extreme for minority parents who can identify much easier with a setting that does not differ so vastly from their home (Dixie, 2011). This setting also accommodated the issue of the English language by making us of an interpreter.

While Bronnfenbrenner's Ecological Theory indicates that a child's life is presented in an intersecting system, the system is null and void if cohesion within these inner circles is not taking place. Children depend upon affirming relationships that support their socio-emotional development not just at home but in school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

> "It's the same case with different cultural things and all, parents are very forthcoming if we have different culture days in the preschool, "I'll come in, I'll do this!" and they're really happy knowing they are being included and appreciated (Teacher 10)".

This teacher also coming from a multi-denominational school examines the positive experiences she had with minority parents and their evident happiness at the inclusion of their culture into their child's school life. A school environment like this which explicitly implements culturally sensitive policy, facilitates respectful, reciprocal relationships and provision for the celebration of diverse traditions will influence a minority child's voice and interpretation of the world in which they find themselves (Cole, 1996).

It is not difficult to understand why minority parents and subsequently minority children would be incredibly unwilling to try to exercise their voice and agency if they feel the intersecting systems in their life do not work in cohesion with each other (Choi, 2017). A clear distinction between single and multi-denominational schools has emerged repeatedly in this data, there is a deficit unfolding in terms of the celebration and promotion of diversity.

Conclusion

In essence, the findings of this data can be considered three-fold. Firstly, the data seems to depict distinct differences in policies and practices that exist between early childhood education as a whole. Secondly, there is evidence alluding to disparity permeating between single and multi-denominational settings. Although, the aim of this research project was not to present a comparative piece between early childhood and primary educators or educators of a single and multi-denominational setting, there are indications that disparities exist between these groups and it became core to the research to present this as it alluded to a clear element of deficit ideology present in our system. Lastly, this data points to the notion that these particular teachers do perceive themselves as having a role in developing the voice and agency

of minority children in school but that this role is most effective when the intersecting structure in a child's life all work together. This structure may be enhanced by an education system that is designed to reflect the diverse Ireland we live in today and abolishing this cultural disconnect that exists between teachers and their pupils (Samuels, 2018).

Early childhood and primary educators seem to clash in their experiences of the policy and practice of transitions and the Aistear Framework. While both groups spoke with conviction about their own sector, there was an indication of 'the blame game' taking place. The educators from both sectors described in no uncertain terms the deficit in the opposing sector, but neither seemed to accept the deficit in their own. It appeared the transition from early childhood to primary education was ineffective due to the lack of knowledge either educator had on the sector of the other and most notably the omission of the child's voice entirely, raising the idea that neither sector considers the management of minority children an immediate priority for them (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). With respect to the Aistear Framework, conflict seemed to arise as a consequence of the notion it appears easier for the early years sector to prioritise the policy and practice of Aistear Framework due to the presence of much less academic expectation (Gray & Ryan 2016), primary educators refute this by denoting the lack of training in Aistear combined with the time constraints of the curriculum as the causes for their disengagement (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Nevertheless, this is almost rendered redundant, as primary teachers can a reluctance to move away from didactic methods in favour of child-led practices like Aistear and training is not guaranteed to alter their personal perceptions (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Ultimately, one could say they are deciding to detach from a resource that outlines a child's right to be agents in an education that encourages the celebration of the unique

backgrounds to which they belong (NCCA, 2009; UNCRC, 1989).

Educators with experience of teaching in a multi-denominational setting seemed to differ from those from single-denominational setting in many ways alluding to the notion that inclusion policies across sectors may not be adequate. Teacher's working with the Learn Together curriculum seemed much more explicit and detailed in their description of every pillar of diversity and went beyond 'visible' difference. While a large fraction of single denominational educators described their role in a more minimalistic way, feeling children are too oblivious and young to understand issues pertaining to diversity, the other educators recognised a responsibility to minority children as intrinsic to their role. There was a sense that educators operating under a single ethos are constricted by a prescriptive ethos and often consider open dialogue on certain topics out of place and easily open to conflict (Vasavi, 2000).

One may say that these findings show that an educator whose teaching day is designed with diversity at its core means they are discussing issues consistently. Therefore, there is no sense of 'othering' and cultivating relationships of equality and equity is not considered an extra effort (Batra, 2005). The majority of educators from both sectors and denominations appeared to recognise that minority children may require additional measures to equivalently access their voice and agency. They detailed simple resources and teaching methodologies they avail of reminding teachers they are not being asked to design new curriculums rather take more culturally responsive steps towards providing equal chances for minority children within the system they operate under (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

A large portion of the educators indicated that their initial teacher education negatively impacted how they feel about approaching diversity. These teachers then

examined the necessity to seek further training beyond their initial education

discussing the lack of CPD opportunities available in diversity. This discussion point

shows the rapid changes to the Irish Education system as the flame igniting the need

for educators who welcome and move with the wave of diversity (Waller, 2005). The

lack of CPD opportunities in diversity may allude to a sense of deficit ideology as the

system prioritises areas that are considered most valuable in education, primarily the

areas of numeracy and literacy (Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013). This barrier means an

educator with a more positive outlook on the influx of minority children could be

doing more to close the cultural disconnect between them and their pupils than any

education or training every could (Samuels, 2018). These findings have shown that

the educators of the multi-denominational sector seemed to consider the

homogeneous workforce in Ireland as a debilitating impact on diversity and that it is

problematic to expect inclusive education practices to improve without a multicultural

workforce (Martin, 2005).

The teachers seem to identify with the stage of childhood as depicted by

Dunne (2006) agreeing that children are citizens with the skills, dispositions and

capabilities to activate their voice and agency in issues pertaining to their own lives.

The educators appeared to place significantly more emphasis on the stages of

protection and privilege that highlighted a further split screen opinion on educators

from divergent denominational settings. There was disparity between educators

opting to shield children from diversity discourse while others felt this was directly

infringing upon the minority children's right to access voice and agency.

Other teachers noted that they felt a sense of upset from their minority

children in certain instances when they tried to engage with them about their diverse

cultures. From this teacher dialogue, the notion of discrepancies between the educator

and parent's concepts of childhood and value they place on reciprocal relationships began to emerge. While Bronnfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979) indicates that a child's development is greatly improved by all the people in their intersecting system interacting, the system is null and void if cohesion within these inner circles is not taking place. There was evidence alluding to unfavourable home and school partnerships in the single-denominational school in which educators remarked parents reluctance to engage in any multicultural approaches taken by the school citing their interpretation of home as the place to celebrate your culture and school as the place to learn English. This may impinge on a teacher's ability to acknowledge the cultural norms that exist between a minority child's home and school environment (Choi, 2017). This was in direct contrast to educators from a multi-denominational setting whom seemed to describe positive partnerships between teachers, children and the whole school community noting that English should not be a barrier for minority parents as interpreters can often be used. These educators attributed this to their schools policies of multicultural practices that openly welcome teacher and parental partnerships. Minority children depend upon affirming relationships that support their socio-emotional development not just at home but in school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Minority children require a school environment that does not differ so vastly from their home, rather makes them feel at home (Dixie, 2011) or they may continue to struggle to access their voice and agency.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Introduction

  The purpose of this research project was to investigate to what extent early childhood educators perceive themselves as playing a particular role in developing the voice and agency of minority children. To conclude this research project, a summary of the main findings will be presented in conjunction with relevant literature. This concluding chapter will include a set of relevant recommendations with specific regard to policy and practice and teacher education. A set of limitations will also be exhibited with particular focus on sample and time.

Summary of Findings

  The findings of this data seem to conclude that there are significant discrepancies across the early childhood and primary education sectors in relation to the transition process and the place of the Aistear Framework. In relation to both entities, there is a risk that the voice of the child is being stifled. The transition process although of paramount importance (NCCA, 2016) appeared ineffective due to the omission of the child's voice and the emphasis on the lack of knowledge one sector had about the other. Aistear created similar conflict as primary educators felt that they have many more implementation barriers than preschool (Gray & Ryan, 2016), and ultimately concluded they must withdraw from it despite Aistear being a play method that affords minority children the chance to access their voice and agency encouraging the celebration of the unique backgrounds to which these children belong (NCCA, 2009; UNCRC, 1989). The educators from both sectors spoke with clear conviction on the opposing sector, but neither seemed willing to accept the faults in their individual sector showing that neither sector considers the

management of minority children the most immediate priority to them (Lynch &

Lodge, 2002).

These findings also alluded to disparities between single and multi-

denominational school settings. Overall, teachers coming from multi-denominational

school settings seemed to have more knowledge on the range of diversity and did not

consider approaching issues pertaining to diversity as any extra effort. While there

was a sense that educators operating under the single-denominational setting are

constricted in many ways by a prescriptive ethos and often consider open dialogue on

certain topics out of place and easily open to conflict (Vasavi, 2000).

These findings have indicated that a large fraction of the teachers considered

their initial teacher education as ineffective in preparing them for approaching

diversity. However these teachers also recognized the need to look beyond their now

dated training, considering the lack of CPD opportunities available in diversity in

comparison to other areas. The lack of CPD opportunities in diversity may draw

attention to the presence of deficit ideology as the system favours areas that are

considered most valuable in education, primarily the areas of numeracy and literacy

(Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013). It is imperative that an educator chooses to welcome

diversity in a time where there are limited supports available. There was also a sense

that the homogeneous work force in Ireland has a detrimental effect on inclusion. The

cultural disconnect that exists between minority children and their teachers (Samuels,

2018); will increase as long as the homogeneous work force continue to approach

their diverse pupils as though they too were predominantly white, Irish and Roman

Catholic (Sleeter, 2004).

The findings indicate that educators had conflicting opinions on the concept of

childhood and the inclusion of the child's cultural background into school life. While

children learn from all adult interactions in their life (Bronnfenbrenner, 1979), the

educators from a single denominational setting generally did not appear to have

positive responses from their children when they tried to include their cultural

backgrounds in the classroom. Similarly, these educators did not recount particularly

affirming interactions with minority parents. This was in contrast to the educators

from a multi-denominational setting who detailed their policies and practices are

indicative of diversity. They also spoke of strong partnerships with minority parents.

This may impinge on a teacher's ability to acknowledge the cultural norms that exist

between a minority child's home and school environment (Choi, 2017).

Recommendations

A number of recommendations have emerged following my completion of this

research. These recommendations are explained below:

Policy and Practice. It is of paramount importance that early childhood and

primary education sectors work in cohesion with each other. This research denoted

the blame game that ensues between the two sectors. In reality educational policies

present that both sectors are equal stakeholders in the education of all children in their

settings (NCCA, 2016). The disparity between these sectors leads to children, but

particularly minority children, falling through the cracks of an education system that

often considers them at a disadvantage already. The educators in these sectors need to

take proactive steps in closing the gaps that exist between preschool and primary

school to adequately support the children.

It is recommended that those operating within a single-denominational ethos

do not use it as a reason to disengage in the equal celebration of the multi-

denominational children attending the school. This research has indicated that

educators who teach in a school with a single-denomination found issues pertaining to diversity more difficult to approach, than the educators who were working in a multi-denominational school. This was particularly prevalent in issues of religious diversity where minority children do not seem to be afforded opportunities to exercise their voice or agency. A large proportion of schools in Ireland operate under a Roman Catholic ethos and the control that the church associates have in religious practices may make the celebration of diversity challenging for both pupils and teachers in the school (Devine, 2005). However, Ireland is now considered an ever-expanding heterogeneous population, as non-Irish national residents now comprise 12.7% of the total population making minority children a large proportion of our current student body (CSO, 2019). This being said, Irish schools now need to become more proactive in their steps towards developing the voice and agency of these minority children. We cannot do this if we still consider Ireland a country with one nationality, religious denomination, language, sexual orientation etc. Therefore, more prescriptive policies and practices must be implemented in schools with a single-denominational ethos in order to allow for balance between the single religious instruction of the school and the celebration of the many diverse pupils of the same school. This could also help generate more positive relationships between teachers and minority parents as minority children require a school environment that does not differ so vastly from their home, rather makes them feel at home (Dixie, 2011).

Teacher Education. In order to better equip teachers with the tools to create a inclusive classroom it is recommended that third level institutions responsible for teacher education are affording future educators opportunities to effectively cater for diverse cohorts of children, by implementing additional college modules in multicultural and intercultural education.

Similarly, it is recommended that much more Continued Professional Development (CPD) opportunities are made available and are refined in order to aid the cultural disconnect that exists between minority children and their homogenous teachers (Vasavi, 2000). CPD has to adequately assist teachers in the creation of a safe space. This space should encourage the discussion of issues pertaining to the diverse cultures to which minority children belong, rather than considering these issues as controversial areas, often avoided by teachers who feel they are too far removed from them (Samuels, 2018). CPD should also provide teachers with the necessary tools to become more culturally relevant educators. CPD should allow teachers to avail of simple resources and teaching methodologies in the aim of reminding them they are not being asked to design new curriculums, rather take more culturally responsive steps towards providing equal chances for minority children to access their voice and agency. (Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Limitations

As in the case for all research projects, a number of limitations exist in this study. These limitations are presented below:

Sample. Creswell (2006) considers a research sample as a careful choice of a cohort of people essential to the success of ones project. The selection of this sample was based around the method of convenience sampling but this sampling operated under a strict set of criteria (Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). This particular research project consisted of 10 participants, 5 early years educators and 5 primary school teachers respectively. This sample is on quite a small scale by comparison to other research projects of a similar content matter. A subset of sample came from the same single-denominational school setting. The limitation is that the data gathered is only

from experiences and knowledge of a small cohort of people, many of which share similar experiences operating under the same system.

Time. This research is a small-scale qualitative study conducted over a period of ten months. As this study is on a less substantial scale, the research question under investigation may only partially be answered in the allotted time given. It is fair to assume that if this research was to be completed for a longer period, different recommendations and conclusions may have been drawn from the data collected. It is difficult to suggest that one could draw definitive points or universal considerations from this specific study.

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Appendix 1 – Note of Information on Changes due to Covid-19

During the initial proposal phase of the thesis, I submitted an Application for Ethical Approval of Research Proposals. I met the necessary ethical considerations as stipulated by the awarding bodies involved in this Masters in Early Childhood Education and was granted permission to continue with my research. I continued to adhere to the designated guidelines throughout this process. The guidelines at this particular interval of the research project are noted below in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3. These appendices are samples of the letter of information and consent forms provided to and physically signed by my focus groups participants only.

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus resulting in the closure of schools across Ireland, the face-to-face interviews were no longer possible. I was instructed by the awarding bodies to send an email to the Ethics Board explaining that I will continue my data collection by phone interviews instead of face-to-face as originally planned. As the interview participants were unable to sign their consent forms, I provided the participants with an altered version of the letter of information (Appendix 4) and consent form (Appendix 5) below. It was important to provide these participants with a new letter and consent form as phone interviews were not the original method of data collection chosen. I wanted to ensure I was meeting ethical considerations at every phase of this research and highlighting the option the participants had to opt out if they wished. The participants sent back an email declaring their consent. I then organized, completed and recorded the phone interviews.

Appendix 2 - Letter of Information

Date:_____

Dear Educator,

I am writing to ask you if you would consider participating in a focus group towards data collection for my thesis. I would be very grateful as I truly feel your responses are important and would add great value to my research. There would be four educators in total in the group. I would facilitate the process throughout. These focus groups would take place in my classroom at a time that suits everyone.

The research question I aim to investigate in my thesis is as follows: "To what extent do early childhood educators; preschool, junior and senior infant teachers' perceive themselves as playing a particular role in developing a child's voice and agency with specific regard to minority children in mainstream settings?" Therefore the topics of discussion would be centred around this subject matter specifically.

Should you choose to participate, the focus group may last for 45-60 minutes. Your participation would remain strictly confidential. Your name would not be attached to any of the data you provide. You would be 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 nature. While every effort would be made to ensure your identity is protected there is a chance, for example, that someone who listens to an audio recording may recognize you. However, the data would be kept in a secure location without your name attached to it. The recording would be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the recording would 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 completing this. You would be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in this study.

If you are willing to participate, it would help me greatly to know this as soon as possible so that your participation can begin as soon as possible. I understand that your time is valuable.
Yours faithfully,
Daríona McClafferty

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix 3 – Consent Form

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Details of the researcher to enable prospective participants to make follow-up inquiries: dmcclaffertymece18@momail.mie.ie

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

Do you consent to participating in a focus group?	Yes	No
Do you consent to your responses being audiotaped?	Yes	No
May I use the audiotapes to study other aspects of my topic That may arise from replaying them?	Yes	No
May I use the audiotapes to play them if needed to other members of the research team at Marino Institute of Education?	Yes	No
Do I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at Any time without a reason?	Yes	No

Signature:_____   Date:_____

Signature of Investigator:_____   Date: _____

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact .You may also contact my advisor for the project, Fintan McCutcheon. *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*

Appendix 4 - Letter of Information

Date:_____

Dear Educator,

I am writing to ask you if you would consider participating in a phone interview towards data collection for my thesis. As you are aware, the original method of data collection was face-to-face interviews, however due to the implications of the Covid-19 virus I have now had to alter my method. If you still wished to participate, I can ensure I am available to complete the interview at a time that is most convenient for you. The research question I aim to investigate in my thesis is as follows: "To what extent do early childhood educators; preschool, junior and senior infant teachers' perceive themselves as playing a particular role in developing a child's voice and agency with specific regard to minority children in mainstream settings?" Therefore the topics of discussion would be centred around this subject matter specifically.

Should you choose to participate, I would want to ensure the interview was not too long. I am conscious you will be under pressure yourself as a consequence of the Covid-19 closing the schools. If you were willing to give 20 minutes of your time, it would be greatly appreciated. Your participation would remain strictly confidential. Your name would not be attached to any of the data you provide. You would be 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. While every effort would be made to ensure your identity is protected there is a chance, for example, that someone who listens to an audio recording may recognize you. However, the data would be kept in a secure location without your name attached to it. The recording would be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the recording would be destroyed on the basis of the schedule outlined in the Institute's data retention schedule. If you would like more information please don't hesitate to contact me directly. There are no risks or direct benefits in completing the interview. You would be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in this study.

If you are willing to participate, it would help me greatly to know this as soon as possible so that your participation can begin as soon as possible.
Yours faithfully,
Daríona McClafferty

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix 5 – Consent Form

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Details of the researcher to enable prospective participants to make follow-up inquiries: dmcclaffertymece18@momail.mie.ie

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

Do you consent to participating in a phone interview?	Yes	No
Do you consent to your responses on the phone being audiotaped?	Yes	No
May I use the audiotapes to study other aspects of my topic That may arise from replaying them?	Yes	No
May I use the audiotapes to play them if needed to other members of the research team at Marino Institute of Education?	Yes	No
Do I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at Any time without a reason?	Yes	No

Signature:_____   Date:_____

Signature of Investigator:_____   Date: _____

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact .You may also contact my advisor for the project, Fintan McCutcheon. *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*

Appendix 6 – Field Notes

I opted to use the method put forward by Chisler –Strater and Sunstein (1997) to write my field notes for both the focus groups and phone interviews. The steps I took were as follows:

1. Date, time, place of observation

2. Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site

3. Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, taste

4. Personal responses to the fact of recording field notes

5. Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations and insider language

6. Questions about people or behaviours at the site for future investigation

7. Page numbers to help keep observations in order

Field Notes for Focus Group 1

Date:	Time:	Place of Observation:
10/2/2020	3:00pm	My classroom
Duration:	**Sample:**	**Participants:**
53 minutes	4 Preschool Educators	Teacher 1
		Teacher 2
		Teacher 3
		Teacher 4
		Researcher

Sensory Impressions:

There were many instances during this focus group were I felt body language specifically tone of voice used and the way someone physically responded to a comment were particularly noteworthy. I noted these observations of body language into my transcriptions:

The inclusion of [body language] in this transcription is to show instances where I as the researcher felt there was more meaning behind what the person was saying. I noticed this from their body language in conjunction with the tone of voice used. The examples are as follows:

Line 40 – Tone of the conversation was immediately noted and changed by another participant.

Line 57 – Body language and tone contracted what was being said.

Line 67 – Tone of voice contracted what was being said.

Line 129 – The tone felt assertive.

Personal Responses:

I found keeping field notes very beneficial. The research project was so time sensitive that it was incredibly chaotic. I found field notes were not overly time consuming and as they were done at the time of data collection, they ensured I did not forget anything valuable to my research.

Specific Words/Phrases:

The use of the following words or phrases really struck me. I felt these particular examples hinted at something beyond what the participant actually said. It was important to keep this in my mind during data handling.

1. 'Once years and years ago, parents didn't want us having Father

   Christmas in and we said keep them out then, don't send them in'

2. 'We are hugely multicultural now and that's just it'

Questions for Future Investigation:

As stated in my methodology chapter, I really felt completing focus groups first, as it

involves more than one participant, would provide me with a varied frame of

references on the different experiences of diversity. I could then keep detailed

accounts of these ranges of experiences in my field notes. It was my opinion that this

in turn would aid my approach as the researcher to one-to-one interviews by

increasing my own funds of knowledge before a much more structured form of data

collection.

Questions that arose for interviews based on focus groups:

1. Are children in early years/junior or senior infants too young to understand

   issues pertaining to diversity?

2. Give me a specific example of how you use additional measures when

   working with minority children?

3. What does diversity look like not just in your class currently but to you

   specifically?

Page Numbers:

I included the specific lines from the transcriptions as opposed to page numbers

Field Notes for Focus Group 2

Date:	Time:	Place of Observation:

26/2/2020	3:00pm	My classroom
Duration: 56 minutes	**Sample:** 4 Primary Educators (2 Junior Infant, 2 Senior Infant)	**Participants:** Teacher 5 Teacher 6 Teacher 7 Teacher 8 Researcher

Sensory Impressions:

Overall, I felt this particular group were quite like minded in a lot of respects. In my personal observation as a researcher, the educators teaching longer felt they knew more and dominated the conversation. Similarly to focus group 1, there were many instances during this focus group were I felt body language came into play. I noted these observations of body language into my transcriptions:

The inclusion of [body language] in this transcription is to show instances where I as the researcher felt there was more meaning behind what the person was saying. I noticed this from their body language in conjunction with the tone of voice used. The examples are as follows:

Line 116 -123 – indicating possible annoyance on the part of one educator at the idea of approaching religious diversity in school with a single denomination for fear of the conflict it may ignite.

Personal Responses:

I found keeping field notes very beneficial. The research project was so time sensitive

that it was incredibly chaotic. I found field notes were not overly time consuming and as they were done at the time of data collection, they ensured I did not forget anything valuable to my research.

Specific Words/Phrases:

The use of the following words or phrases really struck me. I felt these particular examples hinted at something beyond what the participant actually said. It was important to keep this in my mind during data handling.

1. 'I wouldn't want to open a big can of worms.'

2. 'I think a lot goes past them.'

3. 'He excludes himself.'

Questions for Future Investigation:

As stated in my methodology chapter, I really felt completing focus groups first, as it involves more than one participant, would provide me with a varied frame of references on the different experiences of diversity. I could then keep detailed accounts of these ranges of experiences in my field notes. It was my opinion that this in turn would aid my approach as the researcher to one-to-one interviews by increasing my own funds of knowledge before a much more structured form of data collection.

Questions that arose for interviews based on focus groups:

1. Are there issues pertaining to diversity that you would not raise for fear they are 'taboo' and may cause conflict?

2. What do you perceive as the biggest barrier to approaching diversity is for you, as a teacher?

3. What does diversity look like not just in your class currently but to you specifically?

Page Numbers:
I included the specific lines from the transcriptions as opposed to page numbers

Field Notes for Phone Interview 1

Date: 23/3/2020	Time: 6:00pm	Place of Observation: (Over the phone)
Duration: 25 minutes	Sample: Primary Educator	Participants: Teacher 9 Researcher

Sensory Impressions:
This teacher spoke with such conviction, passion and love for all children and people. This teacher gave me many things to think about and re-consider. As this was a phone interview, at no time did I denote time to debating whether a tone of voice suggested something different to what was being said. I felt this interview was a genuine reflection of their opinions.
Personal Responses:
I found keeping field notes very beneficial. The research project was so time sensitive that it was incredibly chaotic. I found field notes were not overly time consuming and as they were done at the time of data collection, they ensured I did not forget anything valuable to my research.

Specific Words/Phrases:

The use of the following words or phrases really struck me. I felt these particular

examples hinted at something very thought provoking. It was important to keep this in

my mind during data handling.

>
> 1. 'You can mess up what you're doing, if you're doing it
>
> the wrong way. You can isolate children based on their culture, sexuality,
>
> gender.'
>
> 2. 'The best thing you can do is usualise it.'

Questions for Future Investigation:

This participant said 'I actually added an Equality Conference where Dr.

Ellie Barns was keynote speaker from Educate and Celebrate in the UK.

Her big thing was, the best thing you can do is usualise it. So read a little

book with two mammys in it and don't talk about it. We shouldn't be

saying things like "did you notice anything about this book?" Read the

book about Eid and don't talk about it. Obviously there is a lovely

resources if you want to a lesson if that's what's in your plans but there's

no reason for it to be made into a big deal. ' I found this concept of 'usualising' issues

pertaining to diversity as something very thought provoking. It made me ask

questions about why teachers are so fearful to usualise issues like this with children

and why 'usualising' something like a child's skin colour isn't as normal as saying a

morning prayer.

Page Numbers:

I included the specific lines from the transcriptions as opposed to page numbers

Field Notes for Phone Interview 2

Date:	Time:	Place of Observation:
26/3/2020	7:00pm	(Over the phone)
Duration:	**Sample:**	**Participants:**
20 minutes	Primary Educator	Teacher 10
		Researcher

Sensory Impressions:
This teacher spoke with great pride for their practice. As this was a phone interview, at no time did I denote time to debating whether a tone of voice suggested something different to what was being said. I felt this interview was a genuine reflection of their opinions.
Personal Responses:
I found keeping field notes very beneficial. The research project was so time sensitive that it was incredibly chaotic. I found field notes were not overly time consuming and as they were done at the time of data collection, they ensured I did not forget anything valuable to my research.
Specific Words/Phrases:
The use of the following words or phrases really struck me. I felt these particular examples hinted at something very thought provoking. It was important to keep this in my mind during data handling.
1. 'The children get to enjoy everything they deserve.
2. 'I believe the only way forward for children is if Inclusive practices are

adopted but actually implemented.'

Questions for Future Investigation:

This participant said 'Sometimes you might have your plans in place but you might not always get everything completed from your plans, you could have to adapt and that isn't just for minority children, all children learn differently, so you can't put that on the child you know maybe we as the adults have planned too much.' This made me think. This teacher believes all children develop and learn differently. Therefore when teachers find adapting plans for minority children as an additional thing 'to deal' with, is it fuelled by deficit ideology or the reality that all children irrespective of their diverse background do not learn the same way. One could argue all children need additional measures in certain instances.

Page Numbers:

I included the specific lines from the transcriptions as opposed to page numbers

Appendix 7 – Sample Research Audit

Grounded Theory Approach

Research area: Inclusive Education
Aim: Exploring the role of early years
educators with regards to the voice and
agency of minority children.

⬇

Careful consideration and critical analyses of
literature based in a similar field of research.

⬇

Refer to literature →

Drafting of a set of criteria before
approaching possible sample participants.

⬇

Refer to literature →

Designing a perspective focus group and
interview data collection timeline

⬇

Refer to literature →

Plan for data handling and finding analysis

⬇

Refer to literature →

Denoting a code to each sentence in the transcription of the focus groups and interviews.

⬇

Refer to literature →

Making note of reoccurring codes emerging from specific words and phrases.

⬇

Refer to literature →

Forming themes based on these reoccurring themes and beginning thematic analysis of the data.