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AN EXPLORATION OF PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS

by

Máire Hanniffy

A thesis submitted to the School of Political Science and Sociology
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Child and Youth Studies

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre,
National University of Ireland Galway
March, 2017

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Abstract

Ireland falls behind many international countries in relation to school readiness research. The rationale behind this study arises from the lack of research in this area and the increasing investment and focus on the 3-6 age range particularly in the area of education and the preparation for primary school. Acknowledging that a child’s readiness is influenced by their surroundings Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) is utilised as the theoretical framework of this study.

A case study research design using a mixed methods approach was employed to explore children’s, caregivers’ and educators’ understanding of what school readiness is in disadvantaged schools in the west of Ireland and also examine children’s early development as they adjust to junior infants. The Caregivers (n=20) and Educators (n=16) took part in semi-structured interviews, and the Children (n=88) took part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ technique (Driessnack, 2005) to illustrate their perceptions of school readiness and starting school. The narratives arising from the data collection were analysed through thematic analysis. The Caregivers and Educators also completed the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2007) based on a number of children to identify their levels of development six months after starting junior infants. This data was analysed using non-parametric tests.

The findings demonstrate that definitions of school readiness are relative (Graue, 1992) as participants’ experiences mediated their perceptions. Perceptions of school readiness are grounded in the need to be accepted in the new school environment. As a result, all groups emphasised the need for children to display high levels of social and emotional development, and cognition and general knowledge skills. The roles of caregivers, educators and the educational settings are also acknowledged however, both the Caregivers and Educators believe that
their views of school readiness are in contrast. The results of the Early Development Instrument indicate that the factors associated with vulnerability include Traveller children and younger children.
Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Joe and Geraldine. You have given me everything I have needed in life and so much more. I have excelled because of your unconditional love and support, and for that I am forever grateful. ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the (PhD) race, I have kept the faith’.

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I am indebted to all the Children, Caregivers and Educators who took part in this research, without your interest, passion and participation it would not have been possible. Thanks to you all.

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Máire
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Statement of Originality

I, Máire Hanniffy, hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author. Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

 Signed: Máire Hanniffy

Date: 02-09-2016
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................iv 
Funding ..........................................................................................................................v  
Statement of Originality ...............................................................................................vi  
Table of Contents ..........................................................................................................vii  
List of Figures ...............................................................................................................xiv  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................xv  

**Chapter One Introduction** .........................................................................................1  
1.1 Introduction ..............................................................................................................1  
1.2 Background to the Study .......................................................................................1  
1.3 Theoretical Approaches .......................................................................................4  
1.4 Aims and Objectives ............................................................................................5  
1.5 Research Design and Methods ............................................................................6  
1.6 Terminology ..........................................................................................................9  
1.7 Reflexivity .............................................................................................................10  
1.8 Thesis Outline .....................................................................................................11  

**Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature** .............................................14  
2.1 Introduction .........................................................................................................14  
2.2 Conceptualising School Readiness ......................................................................14  
2.2.1 Defining and Redefining School Readiness ......................................................15  
2.3 Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................17  
2.3.1 The Bioecological Model ................................................................................18  
2.4 Theories of Development and Sociocultural Theory ...........................................25  
2.4.1 The New Sociology of Childhood ..................................................................32  
2.5 The Application of the Framework to this Study ...............................................36  
2.5.1 Ready Children ..............................................................................................39  
2.5.2 Ready Children – School Readiness Domains ..............................................43  
2.5.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development ..........................................43  
2.5.2.2 Social and Emotional Development ..........................................................45  
2.5.2.3 Approaches to Learning .............................................................................48  
2.5.2.4 Language Use ............................................................................................50
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.3 Children’s Perceptions of School Readiness</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4 Influences on Children’s School Readiness</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.1 Ready Families: ‘Who Caregivers are and What Caregivers Do’</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.2 Ready Communities</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.3 Preschool</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.4 Ready Schools</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.5 Caregivers and Educators Perceptions of School Readiness</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.6 Making Decisions to Start School</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Summary</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Policy and Context</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Overview of the Social and Economic Situation in Ireland</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Policy in Relation to Children</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 Policy in Relation to Care and Education</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Policy Initiatives that Relate to School Readiness</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1 Free Preschool Year Scheme</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2 Better Outcomes Brighter Futures The national policy framework</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.3 Free Preschool Year Scheme</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Social Issues in Education in Ireland</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Early Childhood Care and Education Provision and Curricula in Ireland</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.1 Formal Services</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.2 Informal Services</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.3 Curricula</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Primary School Provision and Curriculum in Ireland</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Preschool and Primary School Differences</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.1 Educator Training</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.2 Class Sizes and Adult Ratios</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 Summary</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four Methodology</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................127
4.2 Central Research Questions .............................................................................127
4.3 Aims and Objectives .........................................................................................127
4.4 Purpose and Rationale Statement ....................................................................128
4.5 Research Design ...............................................................................................130
4.5.1 Mixed Method Study ..................................................................................132
4.5.2 Sample .........................................................................................................134
4.5.3 Recruitment ................................................................................................136
4.5.4 Profile of Schools and Participants ..............................................................137
4.5.5 Administration .............................................................................................141
4.6 Methods Used to Collect Qualitative Data .......................................................143
4.6.1 Research with Children ..............................................................................143
4.6.2 ‘Drawing’ and ‘Telling’ in Research .............................................................145
4.6.3 The ‘Draw and Tell’ Activity .....................................................................147
4.6.4 Semi-Structured Interviews .......................................................................149
4.7 Qualitative Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis ................................................152
4.7.1 Coding Procedure .....................................................................................154
4.7.2 Theory Development ..................................................................................156
4.7.3 Quality, Reliability and Validity ..................................................................158
4.8 Methods Used to Collect Quantitative Data .....................................................160
4.8.1 Early Development Instrument: A Population-based Measure for Communities .........................................................................................................................160
4.8.2 The Caregiver Questionnaire .....................................................................164
4.9 Quantitative Data Analysis ...............................................................................164
4.9.1 Quality, Reliability and Validity ..................................................................166
4.10 Ethical Considerations .....................................................................................168
4.10.1 Consent and Assent ..................................................................................168
4.10.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity .................................................................172
4.10.3 Child Protection and Safety ......................................................................173
4.10.4 Well-Being ...............................................................................................174
4.11 Limitations ......................................................................................................175
4.12 Summary .........................................................................................................177
Chapter Five Children’s Findings ................................................................. 179
5.1 Introduction .......................................................................................... 179
5.2 Theme One: Ready Children – Fitting In ............................................. 180
  5.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development .................................. 180
  5.2.2 Social and Emotional Development .............................................. 182
  5.2.3 Approaches to Learning ................................................................. 184
  5.2.4 Language Use .................................................................................. 185
  5.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge ................................................ 186
  5.2.6 Effortful Compliance ...................................................................... 186
5.3 Theme Two: Ready Families - Supporters .......................................... 188
5.4 Theme Three: Ready Schools and Ready Communities - Newness ....... 189
  5.4.1 The Physical Environment ............................................................ 189
  5.4.2 Supportive Practices ...................................................................... 190
  5.4.3 Work and Play ................................................................................ 191
  5.4.4 Following Rules ............................................................................. 192
5.5 Summary ............................................................................................... 193

Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings ......................................... 195
6.1 Introduction ........................................................................................... 195
7.6.2 Theme One: Ready Children............................................................ 196
  6.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development ............................... 197
  6.2.2 Social and Emotional Development .............................................. 198
  6.2.3 Approaches to Learning ................................................................. 201
  6.2.4 Language Use ................................................................................ 202
  6.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge ................................................ 204
  6.2.6 Uneasiness ..................................................................................... 207
  6.2.7 Considering Children’s Readiness in the Decision Making Process .... 208
  6.2.8 Ambiguous Undertakings: Children’s Voices in the Decision Making Process 211
6.3 Theme Two: Ready Families ................................................................. 212
6.3.1 Stimulating Homes .......................................................................... 213
6.3.2 Unstimulating Homes ...................................................................... 216
6.3.3 Caregivers’ Decision Making Process ............................................. 217
6.4 Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities .................................... 221
List of Figures

2.1 Bronfenbrenner: Ecological Theory of Child Development …………………..23
2.2 School Readiness Theoretical Framework for this Research ………………..38
2.3 Categorisation of Responses from Children, Caregivers and Educators (Perry & Dockett, 2003) ……………………………………………………………………….57
4.1 Breakdown of Research Concern ………………………………………………..130
List of Tables

7.1 Frequency Distribution based on Children’s Gender ..............................246
7.2 Frequency Distribution based on ESL Status ........................................246
7.3 Frequency Distribution based on Traveller Status .................................246
7.4 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability and Normal Distribution .................248
7.5 Summary of Results comparing scores to the Canadian Norms of the EDI ......251
7.6 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Gender ..................251
7.7 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on ESL status .............252
7.8 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Traveller Membership ...254
7.9 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Preschool Attendance ...255
7.10 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Social Welfare Dependency .................................................................256
7.11 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Caregiver Education ....257
7.12 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Caregiver Workshop Attendance ........................................................................258
7.13 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Children’s Duration of Sleep .................................................................................260
7.14 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Playground Safety ....261
7.15 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Reading Frequency at Home ....................................................................................262
7.16 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Safety of Area to Play...263
7.17 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Hours of Television ...265
7.18 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Children’s Age .........266
Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction
This research is an exploratory study of the perceptions of school readiness from the perspective of children, caregivers and educators. This chapter introduces the study; the background to the study, the theoretical approach, the central research questions, the aims and objectives, the research design and an outline of the thesis. This sets the backdrop to the study which is built on throughout the following chapters.

1.2 Background to the Study
The rationale for this study is to create a greater understanding of school readiness. This study arose from conversations with lone parents who were unsure in both their present and past decisions about the readiness of their child to start junior infants. School readiness is a relatively under researched area in Ireland. The position largely held in Irish policy that starting junior infants is considered to be the first step in formal education is slowly being eroded. With the evolution and development of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) system it is now more widely recognised that the early years are a formative period. ECCE is recognised as a means to prevent and intervene early in order to tackle issues related to low educational attainment, as education is viewed as a key driver in economic recovery (DES, 2011a). Despite this, investment in the area has been slow. Provision of childcare has largely occurred in the private market and the lack of affordable childcare continues to be an issue for parents in Ireland (UN, 2015). Furthermore, as a children’s rights perspective has become central to the policy framework in Ireland, listening to children is
essential (DHC, 2000; DCYA, 2014a). However, since the onset of the recession families experiencing financial difficulties increased from 44% in 2009 to 61% in 2011 (GUI, 2011) and child poverty rates have risen by over 10% to 28.6% between 2008 and 2012 (UNICEF, 2014).

Early childhood is considered the period between birth and the age of six. In Ireland, children must be in full time education by the age of six however children can start school from the age of four (DES, 2012). Nearly 40% of four year olds and the majority of five year olds attend primary school (DES, 2012). The introduction of the Free Preschool Year in 2010 facilitates all children to avail of a place in a preschool setting before they start school (DCYA, 2013a). The language attached to this initiative suggests a need to prepare children for school. ‘Preschool’ is considered to be a stepping stone before children start ‘Big’ school. Offering a free preschool place to children the year before they start primary school suggests that children need to experience preschool before they start primary school. This in turn implies that a certain developmental level or skills are required to start school. Ireland falls behind many international countries in relation to research in the area of school readiness. Research in the area of school readiness has only begun to emerge in the last decade, which has largely relied on questionnaire data, structured interviews and analysing and comparing child development or school readiness levels (Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997; O’Kane, 2007; Kiernan et al., 2008; Doyle et al. 2010a, 2010b; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; UCD Geary Institute, 2013). Further to this, children’s views are rarely evident in school readiness research. A recent study examining early childhood development in Ireland (Curtin et al., 2013) using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) (Janus & Offord, 2007a) found that 29% of the sample were not developmentally ready to engage in school. In particular boys, children who spoke English as a second language, children who are
members of the Traveller Community, children who had not been to preschool and younger children are more vulnerable, demonstrating that a significant variations exist in early childhood development in Ireland (Curtin et al., 2013).

Recommendations in the 7th General Comment (UN, 2005) published by the Committee on the Rights of the Child call for up-to-date quantitative and qualitative data on all aspects of early childhood to inform law and policy. Identifying perceptions of school readiness is essential in understanding an important aspect of children’s lives. This can promote the development of informed policies and practices. Definitions of school readiness are contingent on the context in which it is being discussed. Views of school readiness depend upon how participants, teachers, and parents view the educational process (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). In a number of empirical studies, researchers have found that teachers and family beliefs about readiness shape the nature of the first years of schooling in local communities (Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1999). Where there is an absence of a shared understanding of school readiness, educators and caregivers may not encourage in children the necessary skills, attitudes, and attributes. School readiness impacts on both the current and future experiences of the children, the family, the school, the community and society. Scientific evidence in the US affirms that children who do not have positive early transitions to school are those most likely to become inattentive, disruptive, or withdrawn. Later, these same students are the most likely to drop out of school early; to engage in irresponsible, dangerous, and illegal behaviours; to become teen parents; and to depend on welfare and public assistance programmes for survival (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).


1.3 Theoretical Approaches

A child does not simply grow into readiness, but must be exposed to situations and assisted by others to develop the necessary skills and ways of functioning. For this study, school readiness is defined as ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). This research is therefore positioned within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) which states that development takes place via reciprocal interactions between the child, other persons, and objects located within a set of ‘nested’ environments including the family and immediate community. The research is also informed by sociocultural theories and the new sociology of childhood.

UNICEF (2012) postulate that Bronfenbrenner’s theory needs to be considered in the conceptualisation of school readiness because of its strong influence on children, schools and families. Children experience continuity and discontinuity when they start school. Children starting school experience an ecological transition whereby a developing person moves into a new and different ecological context. Each such transition has developmental consequences that involve the person in new activities and types of social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This viewpoint argues that when considering school readiness understandings must go further than assessing a child’s skills and abilities. Relationships are considered as contributing factors. Thus, by employing the bioecological model as the main reference point within this research ensures that the research is grounded in the fact that in conjunction with children’s biological make up, their preparedness for school occurs over time through their own actions and the interactions with the adults they encounter and develop relationships within a range of environments.
1.4 Aims and Objectives
This research explores the perceptions of school readiness of children, caregivers and educators, investigates reasons behind decisions relating to when to send children to school, and identifies factors that influence children’s school readiness levels. Thereby, formulating policy implications and recommendations with regard to the implementation of supports for communities, caregivers, educators and children in relation to education and the lives of young children in Ireland.

Central Research Questions
- What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?
- What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?
- How is school readiness perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?
- What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?

Objectives
- Establish what Children, Caregivers and Educators think school readiness is and what inputs are important as children start school.
- Identify similarities and differences of perceptions between each group.
- Illustrate children’s views of starting school.
- Investigate the basis for deciding when to start a child in school.
- Identify children’s school readiness levels.
- Examine factors that may influence the school readiness ratings of children.
- Make recommendations to organisations that work with caregivers, educators and children, and establish policy implications.
In answering these four questions and achieving the objectives, this research contributes to the understandings of school readiness and caregivers’ decision making process in Ireland, particularly in the West of Ireland. Starting school involves children using their skills to navigate the new environment and expectations. A tripartite investigation is necessary in order to understand what these skills are and how they are fostered in order to ensure all stakeholders are working together towards effectively supporting children starting school. By promoting the voice of Children, Caregivers and Educators this adds a new dimension to the research that exists in Ireland by eliciting each groups views through open questioning. Highlighting the similarities and differences that exist across perceptions illuminates the disparities that exist and identifies a basis to create a unified approach to working together. In addition to this uncovering improvements believed to be needed to support children starting school facilitates the creation of recommendations to inform interventions that will be useful on the ground.

1.5 Research Design and Methods
This research is an exploratory case study of the topic of school readiness. In exploratory research, social phenomena are investigated with minimal a priori expectations to develop explanations of these phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Exploring perceptions and promoting the voice of all those involved facilitates a bottom up approach where the people on the ground are considered experts. This study aims to be inductive in that the outcomes of the research will guide the theory. The ‘case’ in this research is an event; beginning formal school in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) school¹. Purposive sampling is used to document perceptions in two DEIS schools in the West of Ireland.

¹ DEIS schools are schools that receive extra resources to specifically support the educational inclusion of children from disadvantaged communities.
Ireland. Considering the employment of both qualitative and quantitative methods in this case study the purpose of mixing methods is to have greater breadth to the study (expansion) and a more complete and comprehensive understanding (complementarity) by examining different facets of the same phenomenon.

Qualitative research is the dominant approach utilised in this study as the main focus of this study is to explore what school readiness means to the different stakeholders. This allows for the exploration of the perceptions of each group of stakeholders as comparisons are core to qualitative data analysis strategies (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2002). As reality is a narrative construction (Bruner, 1980), semi structured interviews are employed with the adults involved in the study whilst the ‘Draw and Tell’ technique is utilised with the children (Hanniffy & Millar, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are employed when eliciting people’s views, opinions, attitudes and opinions (Gray, 2004). Twenty Caregivers and 16 Educators took part in semi-structured interviews from September 2013 to December 2013. Semi-structured interviews with caregivers focused on their perceptions of: school readiness, the inputs that contribute to children’s school readiness, the decision making factors considered when considering starting a child in school and the improvements needed. Semi-structured interviews with educators focused on their perceptions of: school readiness, what impacts on the children’s level of school readiness, the schools’ involvement in the current preparation of the children for entering formal schooling and possible interventions that may be needed.

Children are increasingly seen as credible informants in research. 88 children took part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity in October 2013. The children were asked to draw and explain their pictures about starting school and the important
things about this experience for them. Drawing is frequently considered to be an enjoyable activity that most children can take part in. The drawing allows for the expression of the association between symbols and their meanings as construed by the artist (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Creating a ‘Tell’ component in research facilitates children to have their voice feature in the results. The accounts obtained from a ‘Draw and Tell’ activity are viewed as an indicator of the children’s experiences rather than a secondary elaboration of the experience (Burgess & Hartman, 1993). The ‘Draw and Tell’ technique is a child centered and child directed approach to self-report. In analysing the qualitative data coding phases outlined by Boyatzis (1998), Neuman (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2006) were adapted and integrated into the thematic analysis.

Quantitative methods measuring the school readiness skills of the children were employed as a secondary research strategy. The caregivers and primary school educators completed an adapted version of the Early Development Instrument; A Population-based Measure for Communities (Janus & Offord, 2007a). This measures children’s school readiness to learn and ability to meet the task demands of school in five domains: physical health and well-being; social knowledge and competence; emotional health/maturity; language and cognitive development; and general knowledge and communication skills. All 20 Caregivers also completed a Caregiver Questionnaire that covered aspects of family life and make-up, neighbourhood, income, health, and caregiver education levels. The quantitative data was analysed using univariate analysis and bivariate analysis in SPSS. It is anticipated that using a mixed method approach examining the meaning of the concept of school readiness and describing its prevalence will uncover trends associated with designated disadvantaged schools and the voices and experiences of the stakeholders; educators, caregivers and children.
Chapter One Introduction

1.6 Terminology

School readiness is a multi-faceted concept. Rather than focusing solely on outcomes in the form of exhibited skills in children, school readiness is viewed as a process, a combination of influences. It is about facilitating a child to be comfortable and successful in school. Throughout this study the term ‘school readiness’ is used interchangeably with ‘preparing for school’, ‘preparedness for school’, ‘starting school’, ‘beginning junior infants’, ‘starting junior infants’, and ‘ready for school’.

The term ‘caregiver’ refers to a parent (biological/adopted/fostered), step parent or a guardian who has custody of the child. Using this term is more inclusionary and acknowledges all family forms and the people that are involved in the upbringing of children. The capitalisation of the word caregiver in the findings, discussion and conclusion and recommendations chapters (Chapter 6-10) refers to the perceptions of the caregiver(s) involved in the data collection.

The term ‘educator’ refers to the preschool practitioners/ECCE workers working in an ECCE setting and the junior infant teachers and principals working in primary schools. At times when necessary, distinctions are made between preschool educators and primary school educators. The reason that the overall term educator was chosen is in recognition that children learn from the adults in both the ECCE setting and primary school. The capitalisation of the word educator in the findings, discussion and conclusion and recommendations chapters (Chapter 6-10) refers to the perceptions of the educators(s) involved in the data collection. The capitalisation of ‘children’ in the same chapters also reflect the children’s input within this study.
Chapter One Introduction

A variety of terms are used to refer to the care and education of children under the age of six, before they start formal school such as ‘early years’, ‘preschool’ or ‘childcare’. In Ireland, the sector is officially known by the term ‘early childhood care and education’ (ECCE). The first class children enter in formal schooling in Ireland is the junior infant class. Throughout the thesis this is referred to as the junior infant class or junior infants.

1.7 Reflexivity

As previously highlighted, this study arose from conversations with lone parents about school readiness. Coming from a community development perspective informed by my Masters studies, I have always had a keen interest in the role education plays in empowering people and supporting life advancements through early intervention and prevention, specifically in the early years.

‘Just as early insults may have long-term effects, early interventions enable children and young people to accrue some of the social capital needed for good long-term outcomes’ (Roberts and McDonald, 2004 p.28).

My Master’s thesis, ‘An Explorative Study of a Community Based Early Intervention Programme that Aims to Combat Educational Disadvantage’ furthered my knowledge and aspiration in tackling educational disadvantage. In working with lone parents from 2010 to 2011 on a back to education and employment course, it became evident that they were concerned about their children’s education, their ability to support their children and their uncertainty about when to start their child in school. These conversations led me to reflect on my own experience starting school. After turning four, my mother sat me down and asked me if I wanted to start school at the school my siblings were currently attending or if I wanted to go to the play school my siblings had
attended. My need to be ‘in’ with my siblings (who I believed often ganged up on me) may have impacted on my decision to tell my mother that I wanted to start school. My junior infant teacher reported to my parents that I was settling into school quite well except I appeared shy and I was not mixing with the other children. My older sister also reported to my mother that I would often play in the playground on my own. After time as I became adjusted to the new people I began to make friends and put into practice the social skills I had developed through living at home with my siblings.

My reflections also fed into my conversations with colleagues and peers about their experiences starting school. It became apparent that this is something that stays with us throughout our lives as the age we start school feeds into decisions about repeating classes, doing transition year\(^2\) and the age we sit the leaving cert examination in the final year of schooling. This led me to further investigate school readiness in Ireland to facilitate my work supporting the lone parents I worked with and also to satisfy my interest in what the research has uncovered. My search for this information exposed a gap in this area in Ireland and fueled my undertaking of this PhD study.

1.8 Thesis Outline

This chapter, Chapter One has introduced the overall study outlining the background and context, and the aims and objectives of the study. The theoretical influences and the research design and methods have been summarised. An explanation of the terminology employed in this study has also been provided.

\(^2\) Transition year is usually an optional year in secondary school offered to students after completing third year. It is a broad educational experience that also includes non-academic subjects such as life skills and work experience.
Chapter Two sets out the bioecological model of development created by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) as the main theoretical framework used in this study to understand perceptions of school readiness from a range of stakeholders. This is also influenced by sociocultural theory that further emphasises the social experience of development through the environment and interactions, and the new sociology of childhood which advocates for a focus on children as active agents. Also provided is an insight into the literature relating to school readiness from both an international and national perspective that supports the development of this research and provides concepts that are relevant to the discussion in this study.

Chapter Three describes the policy developments that have occurred in Ireland that impact on children during the early childhood phase and as they start school from a care and educational perspective. The role and challenges of preschool services and primary school is also detailed.

Chapter Four establishes the research design, and the methods and approaches used for sampling, recruitment, data collection and data analysis. This research entails a case study using a mixed method approach to examining the meaning of the concept of school readiness. The profile of the schools and the participants are also outlined in this chapter and the ethical considerations and limitations are discussed.

Chapter Five illustrates the children’s experiences of school. It explores the qualitative findings within three themes derived from the thematic analysis of the ‘Tell’ component of the ‘Draw and Tell’ technique that was conducted with
the children. This is a standalone chapter that upholds the voice of the children who took part in the research.

Chapter Six uncovers the qualitative findings from the Caregivers’ and Educators’ semi-structured interviews. As a result of the thematic analysis procedures applied the findings are discussed under four themes.

Chapter Seven reveals the quantitative findings derived from the analysis of the EDI using SPSS\(^3\). Within this factors were linked from the Caregiver Questionnaire to the EDI to explore associations.

Chapter Eight entails the discussion of the key findings in depth. This chapter connects the findings from the research conducted to the literature and policy reviewed in the context of the research question and the aims and objectives of the study. As a result, the discussion is divided into the four sections each examining one of the central research questions of the study.

Chapter Nine concludes the study by presenting the conclusions and recommendations of the study. It considers the significance and contribution of the study as well as its merits and limitations. Recommendations for policy and practice and directions for future research are outlined.

\(^3\) SPSS is a statistical analysis package used in the analysis of quantitative data.
2.1 Introduction
This research study supports the perspective that ‘a combination of micro- and macro- theory and politics provides the best framework to explore contemporary society with a view to radical social transformation’ (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 298).

This chapter discusses the theories relevant to school readiness. In exploring perceptions of school readiness this research is centred on the argument that meaning is not given it is constructed. A number of theorists and investigators advocate for the study of human development within a contextual perspective (e.g. Rogoff, 1990; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). As such, this research project utilises the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as a theoretical framework and is also informed by sociocultural theories and the new sociology of childhood. The relevant Irish policy and context is set out in Chapter Three which also contributes to the understanding of the sociocultural nature of the phenomenon. This research is designed using these theories as guidelines.

2.2 Conceptualising School Readiness
A plethora of definitions of school readiness exist. It is a multi-faceted concept that has been modified to correspond with different stakeholders’ views and to fit different purposes. Evidence suggests that the term holds different meanings for different people. Caution must be practiced when considering definitions of children’s school readiness as misconceptions of school readiness also exist. These include the ideas that; learning happens only at school; readiness is a specific condition within each child; readiness can be measured easily; readiness
is mostly a function of time (maturation); children are ready to learn when they can sit quietly at a desk and listen; and children who are not ready do not belong in school (Willer & Bredekamp, 1990). These (mis)understandings are believed to be misguided as they look at school readiness as an outcome of a single input such as time or the school environment in isolation and they place excessive focus on the child and their skills and competencies alone.

### 2.2.1 Defining and Redefining School Readiness

In the past it was assumed that school readiness was inherent in a child. Based on Gessell’s maturational theoretical perspective this view expects a child to fit into existing school practices. It assumes development leads learning and recommends waiting until children are ready before introducing relevant learning experiences (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Throughout the literature many definitions of school readiness have been inconclusive with regard to the exact abilities and skills a child should have. There is no widely accepted theory or evidence from which to judge the skills for readiness, ‘one child’s readiness may be another child’s long-ago accomplishment or another child’s yet-to-be-achieved success’ (Meisels, 1999, p. 44). Author’s views and studies concur, diverge and oppose the content and components of school readiness. Many have called into question the very notion of school readiness. Clearly, all children at all ages are ready. The significant question is not whether a child is ready to learn, but rather what a child is ready to learn (Stipek, 2003). Each child’s performance is multi-dimensional, extremely variable, periodic, and culturally and contextually influenced. Consequently, a fluid and flexible approach to school readiness is needed.

Exploring descriptions of school readiness reveal components and criteria that some authors believe to capture school readiness in itself, whilst others believe
that it is an accumulation of these components, criteria and other factors that describe school readiness. For example, Davidowitz (1988) views school readiness as a representation of academic and motor skills. Alternatively, Zigler (1998) emphasised a more inclusive nature of school readiness that considers the child’s behaviour, cognitive development, and adaptation to the classroom. Understandings of school readiness have broadened and now largely refer to all child competencies which are important for success. This includes their academic and cognitive skills, language and literacy abilities, and social–emotional functioning (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; Zill et al., 1995; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Kagan et al. (1995) identify five domains of children’s school readiness:

- physical well-being and motor development
- social and emotional development
- approaches to learning
- language use
- cognition and general knowledge.

Children’s individual attributes that are developed over time impact on their approach and participation in school. Thus, school readiness qualities afford a child to participate successfully in school and are not a static attribute.

The concept of school readiness is now seen to reflect the holistic nature of children’s cognitive, social, physical and emotional development and takes into account a range of factors in their wider environment (Janus & Offord, 2000). Therefore, the establishment of any single ‘readiness’ threshold is ambiguous and dangerous (Kagan et al., 1995) as it has the potential to exclude children from school and does not acknowledge children’s wide reaching capacity to learn. Readiness is not an end in itself; it is the beginning of an active teaching and learning engagement (Meisels, 1998). With the inclusion of the relationship
element, this relates to aspects of Kagan’s (1990) ‘readiness for learning’ construct as it focuses on future possibilities, rather than past shortcomings. According to Bruner (1966, p.29) ‘one teaches readiness or provides opportunities for its nurture, one does not simply wait for it.’

According to Graue (1992, p.226) school readiness is

‘a set of ideas or meanings constructed by people….out of community values and expectations and are related to individual children in terms of attributes like their age, sex, and preschool experience.’

School readiness is fostered; therefore, the inputs involved in this are crucial. Readiness is a process that occurs over time and is not complete by the first day children start junior infants. An understanding of school readiness perceptions is necessary in order to take the next step of determining how to attend to children’s school readiness.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

School readiness studies are normally underpinned by child development theories. In the past developmental psychology dominated the field of child development, viewing children in a state of biological ‘becoming’ through natural universal stages of development. As discussed by Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) the Child Effects Model emphasises the characteristics of the child as being the core component in understanding school adjustment. This takes a maturationist perspective of children’s development similar to the approach of developmental psychology; development is an innate process in which, the children must develop sufficiently to be mature when starting school. In reframing this approach it is acknowledged that children’s development does not occur in isolation, and is an individualistic experience.
The Direct Effects Model (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) acknowledges the role of social context in predicting school adjustment (environmentalist perspective) whilst the Indirect Effects Model (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) incorporates interactions in social contexts in predicting school adjustment, describing the links among these contexts, and considers the bidirectional influence between child factors and contexts (social constructionist and interactionist perspectives). This bidirectional influence is the interactions between children and their environment where the cause and effect are intertwined. As a framework the social ecological perspective examines the multiple effects and interrelatedness of social elements in an environment. Children are embedded in structures of society, particularly the family and the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) setting. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition takes the Indirect Effects Model and adds the dimension of time, placing an importance on how relationships change over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The systems of society impact on school readiness through the lenses provided by society that set the cultural norms and values in relation to starting school. It is these last two models that are of most relevance to this study as there is a growing consensus in the belief that there is a coherent connection between the individual and interactions in their social and cultural surroundings.

2.3.1 The Bioecological Model

Specifically, Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (1998) bioecological theory recognises the importance of both the individual, and the context and the interactions between these. Development is defined as

‘the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings both as individuals and as groups. The phenomenon extends over the life course across successive generations
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

and through historical time, both past and present’ (Bronfenbrenner, 2001, p. 3).

The primary reason for employing the bioecological model as the main reference point within this research is grounded in the fact that in conjunction with children’s biological make up, their preparedness for school occurs through their own actions, and the interactions with the adults they encounter and develop relationships with within a range of environments. In this way this theory attaches a role to the adults in the environments the children inhabit as they enter school. UNICEF (2012, p.7) postulates that Bronfenbrenner’s theory needs to be considered in the conceptualisation of school readiness because of its strong influence on children, schools and families. This distributed responsibility removes the sole focus on children’s outcomes in the form of skills evaluation starting school and incorporates the processes involved in school readiness. This viewpoint argues that when considering school readiness, understandings must go further than assessing a child’s skills and abilities. Readiness for school must take into account the interactions between children, their families, schools and communities.

In view of the bioecological model, a child’s biological development, the range of environments they occupy and the processes and interactions within and across these environments contribute to a child’s development before, during and after starting school. Children live and interact with their families, engage in community life through attendance at events such as library readings and conforming to the norms of the area with regards to education practices, access services such as health check-ups and often attend preschools and schools prior to officially starting junior infants. Across these experiences, the child is exposed to different learning opportunities. The quality of these learning opportunities is dependent on the ability of those creating the learning
opportunities and the interactions across systems to inform the learning opportunities. This, alongside the child’s capacity to participate impacts on the child’s overall development and preparation as they start school. This corresponds with the school readiness model outlined by Rhode Island KIDS Count (2005) as ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’. Based on this interactionist model, readiness can mean different things to different people (Meisels, 1999) and these relationships and interactions also have an impact on perceptions and expectations of readiness (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Exploring and presenting perceptions can support children’s school readiness as it can promote mutual understandings.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) first model ‘The Ecology of Human Development’ has become the foundation to all human development models (Damon & Lerner, 1998). On reflection of this model Bronfenbrenner observed that the environmental contribution dominated developmental studies at the expense of the biological nature of the developing person. In expanding the microsystem and incorporating the characteristics of the developing person Bronfenbrenner refined his work and produced ‘The Bioecological Model of Human Development’ which also places a stronger emphasis on the time component (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This renewed focus acknowledges that the person in the microsystem is active in their development over the life course, constructing and reconstructing.

‘In sum, in the bioecological model, the characteristics of the person function both as an indirect producer and as a product of development’ (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.996).
Focusing on the context element, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) retain the model of nested systems ranging from the most direct or immediate settings in the child’s experience to the more remote contexts of the child’s life, ‘each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.3). Children are recognised as active agents in their development. A child’s abilities and capabilities can be derived from within themselves, their family, their community and their extended social environment and can therefore impact on a child’s school readiness. An ‘ecological transition’ is defined as a change of contexts. Reflecting this, Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox (1999, p.4) suggest that,

‘a child’s transition to school is understood in terms of the influence of contexts and the connections among these contexts at any given time and across time’.

This reinforces the notion that a child’s move into school is a qualitative shift along several dimensions (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 1998). Each such transition has developmental consequences that involve the person in new activities and types of social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Ecological transitions usually involve a change in role and expected behaviours associated with this role. For a developing child starting school the transition process begins before the child starts school and continues throughout their first year in school.

The microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) incorporates the biological make up and the relationships and interactions of the child in their immediate environment. At the microsystem level, bi-directional influences are strongest and have the greatest impact on the child. The fact that the structure most conducive to a child’s development turns out to be the family is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the family is not all-determining (Bronfenbrenner, 1973). Within this system the immediate environment of a child starting school
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

is considered to include their family, their childcare, their preschool and school environment, and elements of their community. The mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) incorporates the connections of the structures in the microsystem. In this way parents have the role of supporting the child with their education as learning, education and knowledge that is obtained in preschool and school should be supported in the home (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). The exosystem is composed of contexts that have some bearing on the person’s behaviour and development; a child does not necessarily feature in this layer yet their development is affected by events occurring in these other settings. The exosystem indirectly shapes a child’s development.

The macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) encompasses culture, macroinstitutions, and the laws and policies of the country. Together these components influence the nature of interaction within all the other layers. Norms, values, customs and policies both at the national and local level can determine the ethos, resources, opportunities and constraints available in the area and in the family that children are brought up in. Further to this the socioeconomic status of families falls under the macrosystem. Social policies and different income families will also be considered in this research within the designated disadvantaged area involved in this study. The impact of the macro system on children is obvious in Ireland. Since the onset of the recession employment levels decreased and child poverty has increased (GUI, 2011: UNICEF, 2014). The chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1984) recognises the dimension of time and timing as it relates to a child and their environment both externally and internally throughout all other systems. Human development cannot be separated from social history (Elder, 1994). This is explicable as the historical components of the external environment are embedded in society and shape the experiences, events and development of a child. Historical elements
of time include the structure of the family and the socioeconomic status of the family. Each of these systems is recognised as integrated and interrelated in this study.

![Figure 2.1: Bronfenbrenner: Ecological theory of child development](source: Santrock (2007)).

Within this model four interrelated components exist: Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, p.994) process ‘encompasses particular forms of interaction between organism and environment’ and vary due to the characteristics of the person, the context and
the time periods. Thus placing children as active participants in the centre of the
system. Taking into account the biological, cognitive, emotional and
behavioural features of the individual child it is the combination of three main
characteristics that is most influential on development: dispositions;
biocological resources of ability, experience, knowledge and skill to facilitate
proximal processes; and demand characteristics that invite or discourage
reactions from the social environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.995).
This stresses the significance of accounting for the person in development
studies. In relation to context the microsystem was redefined and expanded in
the updated model to emphasise the role of the person’s characteristics and
interactions. The microsystem is recognised as

‘a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations
experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with
particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or
inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction
with, and activity in, the immediate environment’ (Bronfenbrenner,

More emphasis is also placed on the time component of the model. Time is most
evident and applicable to the micro, meso, and macro- levels.

‘Microtime refers to continuity versus discontinuity within ongoing
episodes of proximal processes. Mesotime is the periodicity of these
episodes across broader time intervals such as days and weeks. Finally,
Macrotome focuses on the changing expectations and events in the larger
society, both within and across generations, as they affect, and are
affected by, processes and outcomes of human development over the life
Time is undoubtedly of substantial importance as when children start school there is both continuity and discontinuity between settings and children’s adaptation and adjustment varies over days, weeks and months.

This ecological approach has also been taken in previous school readiness studies in Ireland (O’Kane, 2007; O’Toole et al., 2014; Ring et al., 2015) and internationally (Perry & Dockett, 2003; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Inherent in this is the belief that a developing child can be affected by their own actions and the perceptions and the practices of the people who surround them. These perceptions and practices can be affected by factors such as culture, national policies and socio-economic status. Therefore, this is the rationale for using this model as a guide in this research as

‘the ultimate goal of this line of research is to understand social processes and the important influences on transition ecology to guide policy and practice’ (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p. 505).

Children and their caregivers are crossing systems as they start junior infants. New intersections are created. The ECCE setting is left behind as the primary school educators step in. Crossovers and intersections are not always coherent. It is the interactions and changes within the model that contribute to perceptions of school readiness and children’s level of preparation.

2.4 Theories of Development and Sociocultural Theory

Much behaviour is learned and it is the earliest years of life when children are at their most susceptible to learning new behaviours (Sutton, 2000, p.1). Development is a prerequisite to a child entering school but how a child’s school readiness is determined varies when applied to the theories and models of development. The two core environmental principles of development reinforce the sociocultural theories;
‘(1) In order to develop normally, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child; (2) The involvement of one or more adults in joint activity with the child requires public policies and practices that provide opportunity, status, resources, encouragement, stability, example, and, above all, time for parenthood, primarily by parents but also by other adults in the child’s environment, both within and outside the home’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1988a, emphasis in original).

Children’s readiness is often viewed as the time when they are capable of responding appropriately to the environment of the school and the classroom such as; rules and regulations; curriculum activities; prosocial behaviour; peer engagements; and directions and instructions from teachers. Interactional and transactional processes illustrate pathways and factors of development. In the context of readiness, interactional and transactional processes include the connections and communications between a child, their caregiver and the educators in ECCE settings and primary school. Such communications can encourage the creation of development opportunities for the child at home and in the educational setting by incorporating the child’s interest and their ability to extend their learning.

Entry from the home into early childhood settings has been viewed as an experience of socialisation (Blatchford, Battle & Mays, 1982). Structural functionalism theory maintains that child socialisation occurs through institutions; structures created agency. The goal of socialisation is to enable children to eventually control their own behaviour and to choose socially responsible alternatives.
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

‘Socialisation has traditionally been viewed as the imposition of rules and standards on an unwilling child (socialisation from the outside), but developmentalists have increasingly viewed socialisation as a process that stems from children’s internal desire to comply with their parents’ requests and expectations (socialisation from the inside)’ (DeHart et al., 2004, p. 292, emphasis in original).

Starting school can also incorporate a change in socialisation practices as the school culture may be different to the culture of the child’s home and family life. In school this requires children to conform to the rules and routines in the environment without question. A child is socialised by belonging to a ‘particular culture at a certain stage in its history’ (Danziger, 1970, p.18). More recently the concept of social construction is in contention with the concept of socialisation and its focus on outcomes. Due to the emergence of the new sociology of childhood, children are now considered to take part in the process of socialisation and construct the experience they have within it (Prout & James, 1990). Through the process of reflexive monitoring (Giddens, 1976) children exhibit their agency as they evaluate and monitor their own behaviour in light of the expectations and evaluations of others.

The basic principles of theorists such as Piaget (1950) and Vygotsky (1962) contribute to the understandings of child development especially in the context of education and school. Both theorists fall into the constructivist viewpoint of development where school readiness is concerned (Graue, 1993). Active children can be stimulated to construct knowledge. Piaget’s stage theory (1950) is based on the idea that the developing child builds cognitive structures. Influenced by his background in biology, his four stage model is based on how a child’s mind processes new information encountered, therefore regarding knowledge as a process. Each stage is characterised by the development of new
cognitive structures or schemes that organises an individual’s interaction with the environment and is attached to a period in a child’s life (Piaget, 1969).

This stage theory focuses on the individual and the progression of their cognition through the continual process of making meanings. Children must reach each stage in sequence in order to learn. Knowledge is constructed and processed based on the learner’s past and future (Piaget, 1978). Piaget identifies social experience as relevant especially from middle childhood onwards but not solely sufficient in the construction of knowledge. The individual interacts with the culture but it is the individual’s judgement of this interaction that the resulting knowledge is based on. Direct transfer of knowledge through culture discounts the agency of the individual. According to Piaget (1995, p.138),

‘Each individual is called upon to think and to rethink – on his own account and by means of his own system of logic – the system of collective notions’.

This four stage model has been used as a reference point for tracking children’s development. Within this line of thinking, school readiness is based on chronological age as children should achieve the necessary developmental level at the starting school age. Readiness in Piagetian terms is based on the actual skill level held by the individual child as they enter the school environment. His theory has been used by many educators and researchers as a theoretical background for the idea that children need to be in a certain biological based developmental stage to profit from school or instruction (Kagan, 1990). This is reflected in the maturationist perspective of school readiness advocated by the Gesell school readiness test (Ilg et al., 1978). Currently it is understood that a number of developmental pathways exist as children develop at different rates. Juxtaposed to the biological approach and arguing that childhood is not universal
as childhoods are socially and historically constructed, Jenks (1996, p.32) describes the child as ‘a status of person which is comprised through a series of, often heterogeneous, images, representations, codes and constructs’. School readiness has therefore been seen as a function of developmental age, in conjunction with the context.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky advocate that social experience is pervasive and there is a social element in the development of knowledge; learning is context bound. However, the difference lies in the fact that Piaget regards the context as one contributing element whilst Vygotsky believes it is the central element (Smith, 1996). Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Development Theory (1962) deviates from traditional developmental psychology, focusing on culture and social interactions and considers learning as a social activity that results in development. Development is not viewed as a process within the child but rather development takes place when the child participates in practices within their cultural context. Consequently, an important concept to this theory is the social situation of development. What children see and hear influences their development. Through the assistance provided by more experienced people in the social environment, a child gradually learns to function intellectually on their own. For Vygotsky the unit of analysis is the context. A person’s own experience and understanding of experiences only exists in their consciousness until it is communicated through certain categories that human society recognises as a unit (Vygotsky, 1934/1962). This process is in essence the social development of thought communicated through language. Children starting school learn and develop largely because of the interactions that take place in the social situations they encounter. This mainly incorporates the microsystem and mesosystem, typically the home environment and the ECCE environment.
In contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky does not advocate that a certain developmental stage has to be reached in order to learn (Feldman & Fowler, 1999, p197). For Vygotsky learning precedes development, especially in relation to language. The transition between learning and development occurs in the so-called ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978). This is the distance between the most difficult task a child can perform without help and the most difficult task the child can do with support; where their potential lies. Scaffolding, the provision of support and assistance, and gradually withdrawing this as the child’s capacities and abilities grow is intertwined in this and as a result development evolves. This demands the person scaffolding to be supportive and encouraging in their interactions. Providing progressively more complex activities is essential for development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Caution is also advised with interpretation of these concepts as the emphasis is placed on the adults and peers in furthering the child’s development without accounting for the role of the child in the interaction (Hayes, 2004).

On the other hand, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.60) places the required emphasis, ‘Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person.’

Rogoff (1990, p.vii) another social constructivist, also agrees that interactions that ‘provide guidance, support, direction, challenge, and impetus’ guide children’s participation and act as catalysts for cognitive growth. Thus, adults and more skilled peers contribute to children’s development and learning and school readiness by responding appropriately and providing sufficient
stimulation in interactions on task and also by facilitating the child’s participation in the interaction.

Readiness in sociocultural terms involves not only the state of the child's existing knowledge but also his or her capacity to learn with help (Woods, 1988). Therefore, children are always ready to learn. This encourages research to examine the people in young children’s immediate environments as they start school; caregivers and educators, those who interact with children as ‘what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow’ (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 211). Examining children’s status in primary school, Devine (2000) found that teacher perceptions of children based on their social class were mostly informed by a cultural deficit perspective, with children from working class families typified as being disinterested in education and lacking the parental support required to do well in school. Children are not viewed as individuals in isolation from their social backgrounds in school and this experience is then reproduced internally in the child,

‘Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57).

As such a child’s social capital is of relevance here.

In this context the role of the community cannot be denied and the logic of community emphasises interconnectedness (Dhesi, 2000, p.200). Communities provide infrastructure and social links that together make up social capital which benefits the whole of society (Putnam, 2000). According to Coleman social capital is,
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

‘the norms, the social networks and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up. Social capital exists within the family, but also outside the family, in the community’ (1987, p. 36).

In an education context high levels of social capital are associated with achievement outcomes and staying in school (Putnam, 2000). However, Bourdieu (1986) more specifically argues that it is the significance of these connections that determine their value, ‘well connected’ people who hold various forms of capital (e.g. economic, cultural, linguistic, social) are more valuable to the individual. For Bourdieu ‘economic capital is at the root of all other forms of capital' (1986, p. 54). The social connections of middle class parents can provide advice, information and examples which their children can use to their educational advantage (Ball, 2003). This suggests that taking advantage of bridging social capital\(^4\) is more difficult in designated disadvantaged areas and working class families. In areas with low social capital the community must be proactive, ‘Early interventions enable children and young people to accrue some of the social capital needed for good long-term outcomes’ (Roberts & McDonald, 1999, p. 65). Taking account of the role the community plays in school readiness the Early Development Instrument (EDI) (Janus & Offord, 2007) reports school readiness at a community level rather than at the level of the individual child in order to monitor and attend to local resources and supports to improve children’s lives.

2.4.1 The New Sociology of Childhood

Taking a social constructivist approach within this, the new sociology of childhood is also relevant to the framework of this study. Within this

\(^4\) Bridging social capital is the relationship between members of lower and higher SES groups that enable people to engage in social mobility.
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

perspective, children are accepted as ‘vehicles of power’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 96). Children are not considered as a silent presence, they are the primary source of knowledge about their lives (Alderson, 2000). Time is central to concepts of childhood, both the time of childhood and the time in childhood (James & Prout, 1997), similar to chronosystem in the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Moving from either the home or preschool context into school starting junior infants occurs during early childhood. Childhood is as important if not more important that adulthood. It is during childhood that the most cognitive, social, emotional and physical learning and development takes place and this in turn impacts on adulthood. It is therefore necessary to document children’s experiences as children are insiders to these experiences whilst adults are outsiders. Insiders have a privileged access to knowledge of their own experiences, whilst outsiders can only offer interpretations and perspectives (Tangen, 2008).

James et al., (1998) distinguish the four main theoretical positions to childhood studies: the socially constructed child; the tribal child; the minority group child; and the social structural child. The socially constructed child specifies that childhood is constructed within the social, historical and cultural context in which the child lives. The tribal child is the lens in which children are viewed as inhabiting a totally different culture to adults, completely removed and separated from adult culture. The minority group child categorises children as structurally different, a minority group in relation to adults. The social structural child acknowledges that children are part of social structures, their lives vary yet this approach maintains that the childhood period is universal. The new sociology of childhood identifies childhood as a variable of social analysis. Childhood is always nested in a social context and does not operate in isolation.
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

‘There is not one childhood, but many, formed at the intersection of different cultural, social and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments. Different positions in society produce different experiences’ (Frones, 1993).

Living in Western society, children’s lives interact with the current ideology focusing on education to further society by advancing a ‘knowledge economy’; this is particularly evident in Ireland’s economic recovery plans (see for example, Government of Ireland, 2010). Acknowledging children as social actors, they feature in their own existence and construction, not just in relation to adults’ social construction of children. As children start school they are novice students, they are learners, nonetheless they are knowledgeable in their own right, they make friends themselves, they navigate the new environment, they interact with a range of adults and children and they evaluate and make sense of the new experience in their own way in their present social lives. This understanding of children is now promoted in child specific policy in Ireland, beginning with The National Children’s Strategy (DHC, 2000).

Cultural politics feature strongly in the formation of childhood in Ireland. Power is central to this in relation to children’s positioning as a social group with distinct needs, duties and rights (Devine, 2000). Children’s needs, duties and rights are socially constructed. Applying the new sociology of childhood, Devine (2000) examines children’s experiences in the institution of school and concludes that teacher constructions of childhood are framed within a ‘needs’ discourse. This represents the dangers of previous conceptualisations of the ‘social structural child’ where the process of socialisation is to the fore and children are viewed as inadequately socialised future adults (James & Prout, 1997). Historically, children in Ireland were taught to practice self-denial and
humility which according to Inglis (2006) was connected to the dominance of the Catholic Church. Although now their agency is facilitated in school by catering to individual needs and talents, nonetheless the past structure of children being submissive to teachers’ authority continues to exist (Devine, 2000). The children view the educators as superior and although the children themselves appear more assertive they are still considered somewhat innocent and educators therefore are paternalistic in their approach (Devine, 2000). Children’s input and participation is difficult to articulate. Despite the acknowledgement of children’s rights educators are trained to deliver the primary school curriculum, structure the classroom for this learning and achieve outcomes related to this thereby limiting children in their ability to contribute to and shape the school environment. This resonates with Rogoff et al., (2005),

‘People’s repertoires of practice describe the formats they are likely to employ in upcoming situations, based on their own prior experience in similar settings. Repertoires of practice are highly constrained by people’s opportunities and access to participate directly or vicariously in settings and activities where particular formats are employed’ (Rogoff et al., 2005, p. 27).

As recognised by the bioecological model, sociocultural theory and the new sociology of childhood, children are active participants in the environments they occupy. In understanding school readiness, it is essential to understand, how children interpret and comprehend their experience as they participate at the centre of the nested systems (Ready Children). The element of time features strongly in the theoretical underpinnings utilised in this research. The time of childhood and children’s time in childhood is important. As children start school they undergo an ecological transition that presents both continuity and
discontinuity, yet children’s readiness is not dependent on their maturation. Children are always ready to learn.

It is acknowledged that children’s agency should be typically viewed in the form of ‘interdependency’ (Dunne, 2005). This understanding of interdependency highlights the impact of the people and processes that take place in a range of environments as outlined in sociocultural theory and the bioecological model. The context is viewed as a contribution in the determination of the opportunities that are available to enable, facilitate and empower young children to be social actors (Vygotsky, 1962; Rogoff, 2003). For this reason, it is important to understand; the beliefs of children’s caregivers who prepare the children for school and occupy the microsystem and are influenced by the remaining systems (Ready Families); the beliefs of preschool educators who also contribute to the children’s development as the exist in the microsystem and interact with the children and their caregivers (Ready Communities); and also the perceptions of the primary school educators who structure the environment the children enter, support the children and over time become present in the microsystem and operate with regard to influences of the exosystem and the macrosystem (Ready Schools).

2.5 The Application of the Framework to this Study

The social constructivist and interactionist perspectives best describe school readiness in today’s world. An accommodating framework for school readiness integrates the interaction between a child’s inherent characteristics and past and present environmental and cultural contexts (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1999). The school readiness of children exists within an ecological system. A child is seen as successful in school when a positive attitude about school and learning is developed and exhibited; supportive social ties with teachers and
classmates are formed; comfortable and positive emotions, as well as positive engagement and participation in the classroom, are experienced; and academic achievement and progress are shown (Meisels, 1998). There is emerging consensus that any definition needs to reflect a child’s personal readiness and the influence of context. Caregivers are children’s first educators; yet, young children may also spend a large amount of time in the care of others outside of these environments. The expectations of those involved in all these environments help shape a child’s school readiness. Dockett & Perry (2009) contend that school readiness is a relational concept. Harnessing this, the ‘Ready Child Equation’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) outlines what children need in order to be ready for school: ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’.

This takes into account;

- **Ready Families**: Describes children’s family context and home environment.
- **Ready Communities**: Describes the community resources and supports available to families with young children.
- **Ready Services**: Describes the availability, quality and affordability of proven programmes that influence child development and school readiness.
- **Ready Schools**: Describes critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success.

(Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005)

UNICEF (2012) also highlighted the dimensions of school readiness as Ready Children, Ready Schools and Ready Families within the broader sociocultural context. Each of these elements influence children prior to starting school, as
they start school, and continue to do so after starting school. Also the macro level is accounted for as the educational system, social, historical, cultural, economic and political context influence the home, community and school context (Bruner, 1996). As can be seen in the following diagram, readiness does not reside solely in the child, but is a result of the interactions of environments.

Figure 2.2 School Readiness Theoretical Framework for this Research
The bioecological model, sociocultural theory and the new sociology of childhood are applicable to holistic school readiness studies as they attribute a role to the child, the environment and the people in the environment. Each child responds to starting school differently,

‘by drawing on their accumulated experience and biographical resources, they will act strategically in accommodating to the demands of the new situation’ (Pollard & Filer, 1999, p.25).

2.5.1 Ready Children
Brostrom (2003) reflects on characteristics of children who have settled in to school; children feel apt in school, when they feel like they belong, have a sense of well-being, and can successfully work through the daily challenges of school, including both social (peer related) and academic (content related) challenges. With this new beginning comes the decision of when to start a child in school and the determination of whether or not a child will be able to manage the school environment and demands. Poor school readiness is believed to predict short-term academic problems (La Paro & Pianta, 2000) whilst in the long term it has been linked to academic failure (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007), poor socio-emotional adjustment (Ladd, 1999), teenage pregnancy (Brooks-Gunn, 2003), unemployment (Rouse et al., 2005) and criminality, and psychological morbidity (Power & Hertzman, 1999).

It has been argued that the application of a legal chronological age for starting school in the school readiness debate is the only fair and ethical criterion as it applies equally and removes the sole burden of readiness from the child (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). Nonetheless expecting all children to be equally ready for school at the same age is ill-conceived (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Chronological
age does not necessarily equate to developmental age as although children develop along the same patterns they do not develop at the same rate. In line with the new sociology of childhood, Solberg (1996, p.54) advocates for ‘a certain ignorance of age’, whilst James et al., (1998) argue for age to be a social variable rather than a natural variable. Recognising multiple influences Darrah et al.’s (2003) study on children’s development found that children are not a homogenous group, they develop at different rates in different developmental domains and these domains develop independently. The rate of maturation can be characterised by ‘leaps and bounds’ as well as continuous increases (Darrah et al., 2003). Each child starting school enters school at a stage in their development distinctive to each child.

Policies that dictate the age of entry are important as they impact on the variety of ages within a single class. Age debates strongly feature as children start school (O’Kane, 2007). There appears to be a lack of agreement about whether age affects children’s school success. Some studies have found that age of entry does not really matter for children’s academic progress and well-being (Jones & Mandeville, 1990; Morrison et al., 1997). It is suggested that appropriate developmental activities contribute to children’s competencies more so than age. In the Crone and Whitehurst study (1999) a year in school explained 62% of the literacy skill improvements at the kindergarten level, and 81% in second grade and that relatively young children benefit from school as much as relatively older children. Although the actual age of the child is not a sole determining factor, it is seen to contribute to children’s personal readiness for school. Older children display greater school readiness (Doyle et al., 2010b; UCD Geary Institute, 2013) whilst younger children have been deemed more vulnerable in relation to school readiness (Janus & Duku 2007; Janus & Offord, 2007; Curtin et al., 2013; McKeown, et al., 2014). Raising the school entry age is a contentious issue in
Ireland. Some educators believe it is not necessary to change the starting school age and that 4.5 years is suitable (Ring et al., 2015). On the other hand, some educators recommend an increase in the age (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009) to avoid ‘schoolification’ (Bennet, 2005) as four is believed to be too young to introduce children to the formal curriculum. Schoolification also appears to be a concern in relation to the emphasis caregivers in Ireland place on pre-academic skills and the knock on effect on the preschool curriculum (Ring et al., 2015).

Curtin et al., (2013) conducted a cross-sectional study in 42 primary schools in a major Irish urban centre. Developmental data and background data was collected on 865 children in junior infants. Using the Early Development Instrument (EDI), 29% of children were identified as not being developmentally ready to engage in school. In an earlier Irish study based on 89 children living in disadvantaged areas (Kiernan et al., 2008), using the Bury Infant Quick Check and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, 56% of the sample showed difficulties on at least one of the three variables; cognitive ability, social and emotional strengths and social and emotional difficulties. Child level factors associated with increased risk of vulnerability identified by Curtin et al., (2013) were: being male; being under five years at the time of the study; and low birth weight. Gender gaps were also evident in another Irish study as the development of both social & emotional skills and language & cognitive skills were delayed in males (McKeown et al., 2014). In Ireland mothers from low SES backgrounds and those with low levels of education were significantly more likely to smoke and maternal smoking during pregnancy is strongly linked to children’s low

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5 ‘Schoolification’ refers to the introduction of the policies and procedures of primary schools. This can include the introduction of knowledge transfer education through a prescribed curriculum, large class sizes, one educator in the classroom, or play becoming a secondary concern.
birth weight (Layte & McCrory, 2014) which in turn affects children’s school readiness, as does caregivers education levels (Doyle et al., 2010b).

Children who had not attended preschool also scored below average scores in each domain as did children from the Traveller Community (Curtin et al., 2013). In general, ethnic minority groups demonstrate lower school readiness scores and are therefore more likely to be classified as vulnerable in relation to school readiness (Lapointe et al., 2007; Muhajarine et al., 2011). It may be the case that Traveller children are less likely to attend preschool as some Travellers think that it is too early to separate from their child (Cavaliero, 2011). Traditionally Travellers are on the margins of Irish society and factors associated with Traveller status include low-income, low levels of employment and low levels of education (CSO, 2012). This marginalisation that results in structural inequalities may act as an obstacle for positive child development as children grow up in their ethnic home and which is often very different to the values, norms, and strategies for communication and learning in the school environment (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). It is argued that marginalisation, discrimination, and poverty, rather than ethnicity that harm children’s school readiness (McAllister et al., 2009). The dislocation and isolation attached to marginalisation can undermine parenting practices and in turn child development (McAllister et al., 2009). Children may struggle in the balancing of the two cultures. Curricula that use culturally appropriate approaches can promote engagement in school for indigenous children and families (Dockett et al., 2010), thus supporting children and their caregivers to feel like they belong in the school environment.

Curtin et al., (2013) also found children who spoke English as a second language (ESL) to be more at risk in relation to reaching early development outcomes. Language skills are emphasised for school readiness and school success.
Proficiency in the language of instruction is essential (EU Commission, 2008). ESL children can struggle in a school that functions through English as their language skills may not match the English language skills required in school. Both ECCE and primary school educators believe it is more important for children to use the language of instruction effectively than their mother tongue (Ring et al., 2015). Further to their academic functioning language barriers can create difficulties for ESL children in making friends (O’Toole et al., 2014). This places children who speak English as a second language and children in environments that do not promote language acquisition in a less favourable position in relation to school readiness. Attending preschool raises immigrant children’s proficiency in the English language (Magnuson et al., 2006). This suggests that variations in children’s development levels starting school relate to the socioeconomic, environmental and ecological circumstances in addition to the children’s biological make up.

2.5.2 Ready Children - School Readiness Domains

Accounting for the ‘Ready Child’ the nurturing of the five school readiness domains (Kagan et al., 1995) is important for children and their early childhood development in general, for starting school successfully and for further achievement in later life. Numerous skills within the five domains are interrelated, nonetheless it is also argued that each also exist independently within the school readiness construct (Kagan et al., 1995).

2.5.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

Unsurprisingly children’s early physical health is an important determinant of readiness for school and school success as it has a bearing on participation levels. Studies have found that poor health in childhood, including inferior health status, growth deficiencies, disabilities, poor gross and fine motor skills, are associated
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

with a lack of school readiness (Dockett et al., 2000). This includes children’s health status from birth. In particular low birth weight children may experience more problems with language development (Janus & Offord, 2001). Poor well-being may cause children to experience more absences or discomfort in school as their ability to participate is compromised. Appropriate physical competencies and skills are encapsulated in children’s independence particularly in the area of bowel and bladder control, dressing and feeding oneself (Kagan et al., 1995). Fine motor skills are essential for children in preschool and in junior infants as partaking in these settings involve the use of books, jigsaws, building blocks and sand. Gross motor skills enable children to move around the classroom, school building, and playground, and take part in the physical activity/education component of the educational programme in place. Furthermore, physical fitness and activity contributes to the prevention of obesity (Epstein & Goldfield, 1999).

This incorporates children’s stamina and energy levels. In contrast to physical activity, sedentary behaviours are considered to pose a threat to young children’s cognitive development. Preschool children who watch large amounts of television are likely to experience cognitive difficulties in the school years, including attention deficits; poor language skills; low school achievement; and a short memory span (Okely & Jones, 2011). A study from the EU’s Eurydice Network (2013) placed Ireland’s provision of physical education third from the bottom of 36 European countries. It is recommended that emphasis should be placed on general movement activities in preschool children that promote gross development. Following acquisition of these skills health, fitness, and behavioural components of physical activities should be emphasised (Strong et al., 2005). Further to this, the benefits of physical activity extend beyond physical health, having a positive impact on the domains of motor skills
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

(Williams et al., 2008), psychological well-being, cognitive development, social competence (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005), and emotional maturity, all of which are important when starting school. Age impacts on physical health and well-being linked to school readiness. A systematic review found that age was consistently shown to have no association with preschool children's physical activity (Hinkley et al., 2008). Yet, at school entry, older children have more advanced motor skills especially in relation to coordination (Zill & West, 2001).

Considering physical well-being, the nutritional status of children has effects on their development and growth, intellectual capacity, school achievement and immunity (Waterlow et al., 1992). Food poverty is the inability to afford or access a healthy diet. This may arise due to issues of low income or awareness. In Ireland children are arriving to school hungry (Callaghan et al., 2010). This is in line with increasing child poverty in Ireland (CSO, 2013) and poverty also increases the likelihood of childhood obesity (Bhattacharya et al., 2004) as children from lower-income groups consume significantly more calories per day on average (GUI, 2013a). The connection between socioeconomic status and children’s diet and nutrition is therefore a pressing concern in designated disadvantaged areas. Nonetheless the prevalence of childhood obesity in Ireland is not confined to these areas, approximately a quarter of three-year-olds in Ireland has a BMI outside the range that is considered healthy (GUI, 2011) which in turn may impact on their physical well-being and motor development.

2.5.2.2 Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development incorporates children’s sense of personal well-being, their interpersonal skills and intrapersonal skills which are core to the relationship element of starting school. Emotional development pertains to a child’s understanding of ‘feeling states regarding the self and others’ whilst
social development relates to interaction between the child and at least one other person (Kagan et al., 1995, p. 18). Children need to be emotionally supported in secure relationships that also practice and promote prosocial skills throughout their childhood. Children’s emotional well-being empowers them in school as children who are emotionally stable and display positive attitudes are more prepared for learning (Quality Curriculum Authority, 2000). The development of this domain in particular takes into account children’s temperament and the contexts they inhabit. Risk factors that contribute to child conduct problems include:

- ineffective parenting (e.g. harsh discipline, low involvement in school activities),
- family mental health and criminal risk factors, (e.g. marital conflict, depression, drug abuse),
- child biological and developmental risk factors (e.g. attention deficit disorders, learning disabilities and language delays),
- school risk factors (e.g. large class sizes, teachers using poor classroom management skills), and
- peer and community risk factors (poverty, crime)

(Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2008, p.2)

Conduct problems arise from deficits in social and emotional skills. There are four categories of behavioural difficulties: aggressiveness to people and animals; property destruction; deceptiveness or theft; serious rule violation (McMahon & Kotler, 2006; World Health Organisation, 2009). In the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, 12.5% of the infant cohort at the age of three were identified as having a problematic behavioural profile. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to score in the problematic range, as were children in one parent families and children in families categorised as ‘never worked’ (GUI, 2013b).
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

Research has indicated that the experience of starting school may cause anxiety that affects children’s emotional well-being and their long-term social adjustment (Cleave & Brown, 1991) which can be difficult as children vary in their capacity to manage feelings of distress, anger, and frustration (GUI, 2013b). The new demands of starting school places stress on a child and their emotions as they are figuring out their self-identity and place in the school environment. These demands include independence from adults, getting along with other children, recognition and adherence to routines, and being alert and active for long periods of time (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). It also involves self-regulatory skills such as following instructions and working cooperatively with others (La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Blair, 2002).

Socioemotional skills contribute to children’s engagement in school and their experience of school. Considering the prevalence of problematic behaviour in Ireland (GUI, 2013b) educators are likely faced with such issues in the classroom. This is troubling as children who struggle socially and emotionally do not meet the expectations of educators and are therefore more at risk of not developing a supportive relationship with the class educator (Pianta & Walsh, 1998) and not fitting in in general as children with conduct problems frequently experience peer rejection and social isolation in school (Hartman et al., 2003). In school this behaviour includes being disobedient, biting, hitting, bullying and being mean to other children in school. Such children may be viewed as difficult and therefore educators provide them with less instruction and less positive feedback (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). This can result in children liking school less and doing poorly in school as they find it difficult to adjust socially and lose out on opportunities to interact with positive peers and adults. The GUI study (2012) found that attitudes to school and levels of
misbehaviour vary by social background as those in the higher SES category were more positive about school and less likely to misbehave.

2.5.2.3 Approaches to Learning

It is advocated that ‘learning to learn’ is a necessary life skill for the 21st century (Burgogne, 1998). It is grounded in ECCE and reflected in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) that children should have positive outlooks on learning. Approaches to learning refers to children’s attitudes and dispositions in how they engage in the learning environment. It is not so much the skills and capabilities they possess but rather how they handle themselves in obtaining the skills and their willingness to engage. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes ‘educational competence’, in terms of dispositions to think, to persist in tasks, to voice ideas and work cooperatively, whilst Carr (2001) refers to dispositions as participation repertoires. This therefore takes into consideration the process of learning and the children’s active involvement in this. The domain incorporates dispositions and learning styles such as eagerness, initiative, curiosity, independence, and perseverance. Carr (1999) also identifies courage, playfulness, confidence and responsibility as learning dispositions. These empower children to be interested, enthusiastic, motivated and more positive towards learning. This domain is the least understood school readiness domain (Kagan et al., 1995) although the use of learning styles is more prevalent in adult education (Honey & Mumford, 2006). This may be because

‘dispositions inevitably include reference to things that are genuinely hard to pin down: motivation, affect, sensitivities, values and the like’ (Perkins et al., 1993, p.18).

Furthermore, Fantuzzo et al., (2007) suggests that some aspects of the approaches to learning and social and emotional development domains overlap and may therefore be viewed as different components within the same domain.
Although dispositions are a separate goal in early education (Katz, 1988), there is a relationship between the ability to learn and the approach to learning. Children who succeed in using their skills to learn may enjoy learning more and therefore become more inclined to maintain their engagement and continue to learn thereby increasing their chances of developing the learned skill. However, this is not always the case, one can exist without the other and one does not necessarily produce the other. Intrinsic motivation theory (White, 1959) suggests that children are innately inclined to seek and engage in learning. This internal force is fuelled by the need to feel competent even in infants and young children. Nonetheless, Aistear asserts that children ‘have an innate drive to get to know the workings of their world’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 43) but also advocates the need for adults to foster learning dispositions by being role models and planning activities that children can be challenged and successful.

Learning approaches are observable and have proven significant in determining success in school as they have been shown to contribute to the prediction of academic achievement and reduced risk of serious academic failure (McDermott, 1984; McDermott, 1999; McWayne et al., 2004) and also to positive peer connections (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). This domain is malleable. Caregivers and educators must provide sufficient guidance and support for children to build these competencies but they must not be overly directive and controlling. Scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) can be used as a means to foster this competency in children as children are challenged to take part in new learning that involves both the use of their previous knowledge and creativity to problem solve. Thereby, manipulating feelings of control and competence can improve children’s motivations to learn (Stipek, 2002). Positive feedback on the process of learning enhances children’s learning experiences by reinforcing the child’s
awareness that efforts and approaches to learning are important in their own right.

2.5.2.4 Language Use
Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez (2009) posit that language is foundational to children’s school readiness. Language development consists of content, form and function. This is influenced by children’s experience of communication in written and oral form. Children with poor listening and speaking skills are considered to have language delays or impairments. The Ottawa Language Study found that children with language impairments showed long-term deficits in the cognitive and academic domains relative to peers without early language difficulties (Johnson et al., 2010). As children start school, they are expected to use their language skills and general knowledge to interpret and express themselves in their learning and social interactions.

Children with strong emergent literacy and numeracy skills are at an advantage in terms of initial school adjustment (Lonigan et al., 2000) yet children lacking in emergent literacy skills often experience lifelong reading disabilities and underachievement (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). Language and communicative competence provide critical tools for learning, engaging in social relationships, behaviour, and emotion regulation from infancy onward (Cohen, 2005). Children who have poor language skills have trouble expressing themselves and communicating effectively. Therefore, it may be more difficult for others to understand and respond appropriately. A three-year-old typically comprehends more than he or she can produce and is in a position to obey simple instructions (Haugaard, 2008 cited in Greene et al., 2014) however, this needs to be extended to fit in within the school environment. Many children in Ireland live in households that speak English, Irish or another language on a daily basis thus
contributing to the children’s breadth of vocabulary. In the 2011 census in Ireland, 16,870 children in the 3-4 age bracket spoke a language other than English or Irish at home. Only 39.8% of those children could either not speak English well or at all (CSO, 2012). The GUI (2013b) study found that the children in the sample scored above the norm on Picture Similarities and Naming Vocabulary scales from the British Abilities Scales (Elliott et al., 1996) thereby displaying high language ability.

The home literacy environment is pivotal in language development. The availability of books in the home, positive interactions and the frequency of story time contribute to the opportunities children are exposed to in developing their language (Melhuish et al., 2008). A child’s expressive language prior to beginning school is the best determinant of his or her reading performance at the start of primary school (Dionne, 2009). Research has identified oral language, print knowledge, and phonological sensitivity as evolving literacy skills central to the development of reading. Clay (1979) and others have emphasised the importance of children's knowledge of the principles of written language when they come into school, such as the knowledge that print extends from left to right, from line to line, from page to page and that print differs from pictures and words differ from letter.

Responsibility does not solely reside with caregivers. There is a need to invest into community supports in enhancing the stimulation children receive. Barnett (2001) demonstrated that high quality preschool education reduces the deficits in emergent literacy for lower SES children, and improves English proficiency for immigrant children (Magnuson et al., 2006). In addition, Hannon et al. (2005) demonstrated that caregiver programmes that attend to child literacy during the preschool period are effective in improving the children’s literacy
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

skills. Reading stories supports children’s language development in an interactive way. However, for many children preschool activities may not be enough. Availability of speech and language services in Ireland are dependent on geographical location. Thousands of children are waiting years in Ireland to avail of specialist speech and language therapy services especially those who cannot afford to access the services privately (Conroy & Noone, 2014).

2.5.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge

The cognition and general knowledge domain refers to a child’s stock of knowledge of how the world operates. It refers to Piaget’s (1952) categories of knowledge; physical; logico-mathematical; and social-conventional (Kagan et al., 1995). Physical knowledge relates to the properties of objects derived from observation and interaction such as hard and soft surfaces. Logico-mathematical knowledge is knowledge of relationships across objects, events or people identifying to similarities, differences and associations. For example, both squares and rectangles have four sides but have a different overall shape as a result of different lengths. Social-conventional knowledge is knowledge that reflects the norms of society and school learned knowledge such as counting by rote. It is often assumed that there is a set body of knowledge when children start school such as being able to recognise colours and shapes. This knowledge features strongly in school readiness discussions, sometimes at the expense of the other domains and also the cognition aspect of this feature. According to Kagan et al., (1995, p.35)

‘the general public’s expectation limits the cognition and general knowledge dimension to social-conventional knowledge such as the names for colors and numbers’.

Although the three types of knowledge are interrelated they are also distinct. Children may be able to recite the alphabet in line with social-conventional
knowledge but they may not grasp the logico-mathematical understanding that the combination of different letters results in different words. Given this it is unsurprising that cognitive ability has been shown to be linked to children’s performance in school. Executive skills are important predictors of the acquirement of language, emergent literacy skills and social–emotional competencies (Bierman et al., 2008a) and also impact on language and math skills (Blair & Razza, 2007).

The extent of knowledge a child possesses when starting school is dependent on their cognitive processes. According to Case (1992), cognitive development is where a child becomes more efficient in using mental strategies to learn skills and competencies. Children’s brains increase in weight and capacity during childhood as connections are formed between existing neurons. Developmental neuroscience has highlighted the rapid growth and malleability of the brain in infancy and early childhood especially in areas of the brain that control self-regulation, including emotion, memory, and attention (Nelson & Luciana, 2001). Through play children in the early childhood period display evidence of cognitive development. Piaget’s (1945) theory of cognitive development is centered on children’s development of internal representations through their relationships with the external world. He saw play as a cognitive activity, as symbolic play is the use of objects to symbolise alternative objects or alternative activities. In testing Piaget’s stage theory, Beilin (1978) found that children can be trained to perform cognitive tasks that characterise a later developmental period thus assigning a role to the adults and social environment (Vygotsky, 1978) to build children’s thinking about how the world works.

Three functions in the executive regulatory systems are important for starting school: inhibitory control (the ability to resist a strong urge to act); working
memory (holding information in mind while mentally working with it or updating it); and cognitive flexibility (being able to switch perspective or the focus of attention) (Diamond, 2009). Inhibitory control skills support the ability to follow classroom rules, and learn on demand through listening and watching. This ability to manage and sustain attention as well as participate in classroom activities predicts achievement test scores and grades during preschool and the early elementary grades (Alexander et al., 1993; Raver et al., 2005). Signs of attention and impulsivity can be detected as early as age two and a half but continue to develop until reaching relative stability between the ages of six and eight (Posner & Rothbart, 2000; Olson et al., 2005). Blair (2002; Blair & Raver, 2015) attributes a central role to emotional functioning in children’s adjustment to school with respect to the self-regulatory cognitive processes involved in learning. Children who can manage stimulation and are not easily distracted can focus more on the task at hand in the classroom.

Language development enables children to develop concepts and working memory enables children to recognise and retrieve previously encountered information. Children are then able to gain academic knowledge by allowing them to retain more information for a longer period of time, engage in mental rehearsal, this thereby increases the opportunity to imprint information into long-term memory (Bull & Scerif, 2001). Working memory can also support social–emotional competence in the social interactions of school. As children become more competent and efficient in cognitive strategies cognitive flexibility is developed. Children are enabled to strategically focus and disengage attention, maintain concentration, resist interference, and ignore distractions (Posner & Petersen, 1990; Rothbart et al., 1995). In the school environment this can affect their ability to learn academic skills, play games and complete tasks.
2.5.3 Children’s Perceptions of School Readiness

A limited number of studies have explored children’s views of starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004, 2005; Brostrom, 2000; Ramey et al., 1998; O’Kane, 2007). Studies that uncover children’s beliefs give a voice to children and their worlds as children have a plethora of information to contribute. A Danish study found a degree of insecurity and nervousness in children’s expectations about the first year of school. Within this a number of children expected to meet controlling teachers in authoritarian schools (Brostrom, 2000). Despite this, a study involving 4,284 children across 28 Head Start projects in the US found that the majority of children were positive about school (Ramey et al., 1998). Children’s positivity towards school was also reflected in a German study of 162 children (Niesel & Griebel, 2001) and by children and caregivers in an Irish study (McGettigan & Gray, 2012) whilst other studies have demonstrated children’s mixed emotions (O’Toole et al., 2014). In Australia, children frequently mentioned feelings related to school talking about positive and negative attitudes and feelings towards school or learning (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2002; Perry & Dockett, 2003). Positive feelings often referred to friends, and feelings of happiness and excitement, whilst negative feelings referred to feeling sad and scared, ‘I cried because I was shy and didn’t know my teacher’s name’ (Dockett & Perry, 1999, p.114). This was also found in an Irish context (O’Kane, 2007). Children’s feelings towards school are important for children’s adjustment in school. Having friends and making friends in school is of importance to children (O’Toole et al., 2014). Children who did not have friends stated that they did not want to be at school (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

Children in the US (Ramey et al., 1998) reported that it was ‘very important’ (78%) to them to do well in school whilst only 9% stated that it was ‘not very important’. Similarly, they perceived that their parents also highly valued doing
well in school with more than 80% stating that it was ‘very important’ to their parents. In their attitudes towards school, boys (60%) were significantly more likely than girls (40%) to be in the less positive group. Interestingly, the children who were less positive often reported that they did not try as hard in school (Ramey et al., 1998). At times it is clear that adults have different opinions to children about school and school readiness. The aim of the Starting School Research Project in Australia is to find out what starting school is like for children through the use of conversations, drawings, and photographs. Dockett and Perry’s pilot studies (1998) established eight categories that were referred to in relation to school readiness: knowledge; adjustment; skills; dispositions; rules; physical; family issues; and educational environment. This study found that children spoke frequently and in detail about rules in school and consequences yet, in interviews parents and teachers spoke little about rules. This was again confirmed in their research that followed the pilots (Dockett & Perry, 2004). The type of rules mentioned most often by children in both of these studies are conventional rules relating to expected behaviour at school which also incorporated social adjustment for the children, ‘Can’t touch the piano’ and ‘You have to do what the teacher says’ with a large focus on routines (Dockett & Perry, 1999, p.113).

In Dockett and Perry’s research, dispositions were mentioned by adults in about 13% of responses compared to 27% of responses from the children. Children also mentioned that school was a place to learn highlighting the knowledge category more often than the caregivers or educators (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Children believe there is a need to know certain things before they go to school including the ability to count and say the alphabet. Children that cited separating from their parents was part of starting school were categorised within social adjustment. Their references to physical issues when starting school related to
the size of the area and people in the areas with the children underlining that they experienced the school as ‘big’. This was also found in Irish research (O’Toole et al., 2014). The nature of play and the playground, and the physical expectations and abilities such as the use and gender divide of the toilets were also evident in the physical category of Dockett and Perry’s research (1999, 2004). Children rarely spoke of family issues and the role their parents played in starting school and the skills needed (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004). However, when children mentioned skills (Perry & Dockett, 2003) they often related to academic skills such as knowing how to write their name. Much of what the children felt was important related to the everyday functioning of the classroom (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Figure 2.3: Categorisation of responses from Children, Caregivers and Educators Source: Perry & Dockett (2003)
The children in O’Kane’s (2007) study in Ireland believed school was a place where learning took place and that is the reason why they attend. This included the aspect of homework which the children had mixed feelings about. In this learning environment the children clearly distinguished between work and play, this was also evident in the German study (Niesel & Griebel, 2001). This separation of work and play was also described by the children as a difference between preschool and school (O’Kane, 2007). The playground featured as both a place to play and also a place to interact with others. Despite the stated enjoyment that school brings some of the children highlighted their dislike of work and also the prospect of being bullied, ‘people were calling me freckle face’. The children also brought attention to the rules in school controlling their actions and behaviour such as raising hands and the educators were the figures of authority that imposed the rules. Rewards and penalties followed the type of behaviour they demonstrated. Children who did not follow the rules were disciplined. Being bold carried with it the penalty of being sent to the office, whilst children earned stars for good behaviour (O’Kane, 2007).

The children clearly established their insights into junior infants and their role as students. Children continuously highlight the significance of grasping the disciplinary context (O’Toole et al., 2014). The focus on dispositions and behaviour was also evident in McGettigan and Gray’s study (2012) in Ireland that explored the information children in rural schools would give to incoming junior infants. Their advice included ‘learning how to write’, ‘learning not to cry’, ‘not to be shy’ and to ‘be good’ and adhering to school rules such as listening to adults. This would avoid the incoming children being punished. Together, these studies indicate the powerful insight that children can prove and contribute to research projects. Documenting children views provides a reference point for both research and adults in understanding how children
experience school and what they think of it despite children’s acknowledgement that their sources of information about school included their parents and teachers in preschool, and from story books or television programmes (Niesel & Griebel, 2001).

2.5.4 Influences on Children’s School Readiness

School readiness is bounded up with children’s development as they traverse through the micro- and meso- system. As children enter the junior infant classroom three elements are active: the environment, the student, and the teacher (Davydov, 1995). In the past, preschool and the infant curricula were grounded in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (Dunphy, 2008; Nic Craith & Fay, 2008). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) views learning as a process that incorporates active learning, relationships, play and the environment in order to support children’s learning. Accounting for context within learning and development facilitates the application of knowledge. The social and individual being is interconnected, functionally unified, always interacting, and the change in one automatically influences the other thus explaining both social and individual change (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Based on the sociocultural conception of development the interactions within a child’s social context must be accounted for. As is evident in the bioecological model children interact with a range of people and social structures. By incorporating sociocultural theory this extends the understanding of the framework in an Irish context where the family and school are two foundational institutes,

‘Social structures are both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time are the very medium of that constitution’ (Giddens, 1976, p. 121).

These places are also commonly identified spaces of early childhood.
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

At the macro level the systems involved in creating ready children are influenced by the evolution of ECCE and current policies in relation to the child, family and education. In preparing to start school children’s dispositions, biological resources and demand characteristics interact with their caregivers in the home environment and educators in the ECCE environment and educators in the school environment. Caregivers’ caregiving style in conjunction with the family environment and the caregivers’ knowledge all interact with the developing child. Caregivers may also interact with educators and people in their social network as they too undergo an ecological transition as they enter the school environment with their school going child. ECCE educators interact with the children who will be starting school at the age of four or five. They carry out the specifics of their role which is mediated by each particular child in the setting. They may also influence caregivers by providing them with information. Primary school educators are also stakeholders involved in the process as they gradually become integrated into the microsystem. This is acknowledged prior to the children starting school and they too may provide information on their expectations to both caregivers and ECCE educators. As primary school educators become established in the microsystem their interactions with the children impact on the children’s development. The proximal processes are represented in the interactions of the stakeholders, each child is recognised as being active in the process and the contexts refer to the home, ECCE setting and primary school.

Starting school reflects the time component of the bioecological model. Historical elements of time feature in this study such as the historical evolution of the ECCE sector and the social and economic situation of the country. Furthermore, caregivers who have older children that have already started school may contribute an explicit perspective related time component. Children
experience continuity and discontinuity when they start school. Dewey (1938, p.35) describes continuity as an experiential continuum, ‘that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after’.

In each of these contexts the child’s status and identity may be viewed differently. Where there is a large amount of diversity and disparity among the environments children move through, children’s prior learning and experiences may be inconsistent resulting in difficulties settling in and adapting to the new environment which can cause stress for all those involved. Continuity across settings can be provided in the form of philosophic, curricular, developmental, physical and administrative aspects (Mayfield, 2003). Considering the time component of the framework children starting school must be facilitated periodically, it is a continuous process throughout the year.

Piotrkowski (2004) outlines school readiness in terms of the joint responsibilities that families, schools, and communities have in providing caring environments that encourage and stimulate children’s learning. Family readiness resources include nurturing parenting, social support for childrearing, financial resources and educationally stimulating materials and resources. School resources include policies, the physical environment and the quality of the interactions among children, teachers and parents. Community resources include high quality childcare and preschool, parental support services and playgrounds (Johnson, 1997 cited in Dockett & Perry, 2007). In addition to a child’s biological characteristics each of the elements in the ‘Ready Child Equation’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) influence children prior to starting school, as they start school, and continue to do so after starting school.
2.5.4.1 Ready Families: ‘Who Caregivers are and What Caregivers do’

The involvement of caregivers is important when children start school (Dockett et al., 2011). Families can impact both positively and negatively on children’s school readiness as their input is a major contribution in the preparation phase. It is recommended that caregivers should speak positively to their child about school (INTO, 2009). Caregivers who have had positive experiences in school are more likely to foster a positive outlook in their children about school (Howes, 1992). Warm, nurturing, and responsive parenting is viewed as the ideal (Maccoby, 1992; Collins et al., 2000) compared to caregivers who demonstrate hostile parenting, engage in more conflict, and give more attention to children’s negative rather than positive behaviours (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1999). Responsive and stimulating care fosters language and cognitive skills that facilitate learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Research indicates that attendance at caregiver workshops is beneficial. Evidence based parent programmes have been proven to be effective to improve children’s developmental advancement (e.g., Jones et al., 2007; Sanders et al., 2008), however it is difficult to recruit male caregivers (Bayley et al., 2009). Caregiver beliefs about school readiness can shape their child’s outcomes particularly in the area of academic skills. Caregivers who emphasised the importance of numeracy and general knowledge in relation to school readiness had children who exhibited greater knowledge of letters, numbers and colours (Barbarin et al., 2008). Further to this, caregivers’ perceptions of their own readiness have also been highlighted. A child’s entry into school can be emotionally stressful for parents as they adjust to new social demands, routines, and the changing relationship with their child. Of most importance, they have to be ready and able to help their child cope with the challenges that emerge in the
school environment (McAllister et al., 2005). Caregivers take on the new role of ‘school parents’ (O’Kane, 2007).

Janus and Duku (2010) exploring the gap in children’s personal readiness in Canada identified the risk factors. Almost 20% of the 2,196 children were classified as vulnerable in relation to the five domains of school readiness. A logistic regression indicated that children’s low health status, male gender, and coming from a family with low income are the strongest variables associated with low school readiness. Other factors that also increased the likelihood of vulnerability include low caregiver education, low parent health, children starting school at a younger age, not looking at books with parents, and parent smoking (Janus & Duku, 2010). Family level factors associated with school readiness vulnerability identified in Ireland also included low maternal education and children who had not been told or read stories in the previous week (Curtin et al., 2013) and social welfare dependency (Doyle et al., 2010b).

Poverty creates more barriers and challenges for families to overcome in order to function at an optimal level and prepare children to start school. The GUI study (Watson et al., 2014) found as economic vulnerability increased during the recession children’s socio-emotional development suffered due the strong association between economic vulnerability and children’s socio-emotional development. The identified factors that protect children from the impact of economic vulnerability on children’s socio-emotional development included that the primary caregiver was over 30 years old at the birth of the child, has degree-level education and an absence of caregiver mental distress (Watson et al., 2014).

Children developing in low socioeconomic environments have less quality early language experiences resulting in weaker language ability which is associated
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

with later academic achievement (Walker et al., 1994; Washbrook & Waldfogel, 2011). However, according to White’s (1982) meta-analysis of socioeconomic status only explains about 5% of difference in academic achievement. Caution must also be exercised in this assertion as maternal education is longitudinally predictive of pre-academic reading skills (Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006). Taylor and colleagues’ (2004) conceptual model of academic socialisation suggests that caregivers’ beliefs about school readiness impact on their preparation of their children for school which in turn effects the children’s outcomes. Although family poverty impacts on the availability of resources, the experiences and development opportunities created within the family are also important. Caregivers from a disadvantaged background in Ireland acknowledged and indeed emphasised the importance of education (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). Children in low income families who experience positive parenting have better communication skills and those who are read to daily have larger vocabularies and a better understanding of numbers (Thomas, 2006). This may be a result of the activities that take place in the home. It has been found that the frequency of reading moderates the association between maternal education and oral language skills (Dionne et al., 2014). Also, the number of books in the home and the caregiver’s engagement with learning activities plays a prominent role in children’s cognitive outcomes (McGinnity et al., 2015). In the US, children of caregivers who report in engaging in home learning activities had higher achievement scores when starting school (Puccioni, 2015).

This is also evident in Ireland. The ‘Preparing for Life programme’ (UCD Geary Institute, 2016) aimed to change parental knowledge, attitudes and feelings in order to improve parenting behaviour that will positively affect children’s development and school readiness in North Dublin through a home visit mentoring programme and a parenting programme. Children in this programme
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

were deemed to be more ready for school in all domains when compared to their counterparts who did not take part in the programme (UCD Geary Institute, 2016). The parent child relationship is crucial in encouraging children’s development and preparation for school whilst also enabling a child to enjoy their childhood. Children whose caregivers regularly use local parks, libraries, community centres and family resource centres have better vocabularies and higher language and communication skills at five-years old (KSI Research International Inc., 2001, 2003). This is a result of children being exposed to stimulating environments that they extend children’s interactions with new environments and people.

Secondary family influences include the amount of television a child watches and the amount of sleep they have. On average, three year olds in Ireland watch for approximately 112 mins a day and 16% of three year olds have a television, computer or games console in their bedroom (Egan & Murray, 2014). Several caregivers thought television offers some instructional input in children’s learning (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Some television programmes can be educational but watching television can also be damaging to all aspects of children’s development. Increases in total time watching television at the age of two are associated with subsequent decreases in vocabulary and math skills, attention skills, and physical development at the age of five (Pagani et al., 2013) whilst watching more than three hours of television a day places children at a significantly greater risk of having emotional and behavioural issues (Egan & Murray, 2014). Long periods of television are believed to displace more valuable educational activities and social interaction (Wright & Huston, 1995; Huston et al., 1999; Vandewater et al., 2006).
Sleep duration, sleep deprivation and the extent of sleep restriction interfere with many aspects of children’s development including children’s cognition and learning. Significant decreases in cognitive performance are evident after a full night of sleep deprivation (Carskadon et al., 1981, 2001) or following sleep restriction of five hours (Randazzo et al., 1998). Children’s behaviour also deteriorates; significant associations are apparent between shortened sleep duration, hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention (Touchette et al., 2007) and social skills (Vaughn et al., 2015). Optimal sleep plays a vital role in early childhood development and supporting preschool children to meet the demands of their environments especially in the school context.

Ready and resourced families are salient in children’s positive school readiness. Families that are structurally and financially stable and that proactively participate in developmental activities with their children produce a more favourable environment for children to prepare for school. In essence, this supports the conclusion that what caregivers do in relation to their children’s education is more important than who they are (Kellaghan et al., 1993).

2.5.4.2 Ready Communities
Considering the school readiness equation (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) communities play a role in determining the readiness of a child. This incorporates the micros-, meso- and exo- systems of the bioecological model of development. It has also been found that neighbourhood contextual factors are related to the school readiness of young children. Lapointe et al. (2007) examined the relationship between the neighbourhood and school readiness using the EDI in Canada. Their findings suggest the promotion of neighbourhood culture, stability, and heterogeneity in the advancement of children’s school readiness especially in relation to their physical health and
well-being. Negative neighbourhood effects impacted on children’s development. In areas with high levels of low income households, children’s physical health and well-being outcomes were lower. Areas with high levels of unemployed males were a significant negative predictor on children’s language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (Lapointe et al., 2007). This is unsurprising as neighbourhoods with a high SES are positively associated with school readiness and achievement outcomes (Leventhal et al., 2009). At times the negative impact of neighbourhood disadvantage does not emerge until children are older (Sylva et al., 2012).

Heterogeneous populations are important for children’s developmental outcomes. It is not the presence of low income households that defines the relationship between neighbourhoods and children’s development but the presence of affluent residents (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). Affluent households act as a buffer within the community improving the available social and material advantages. As the number of affluent males increased so too did children’s emotional maturity (Lapointe et al., 2007). Furthermore, high numbers of males in management occupations impacted positively on children’s physical health and well-being, social competence, and emotional maturity (Lapointe et al., 2007). These community level considerations are important to the people who live in the area as the home and school are nested in the community. Community resources and atmosphere impact on children’s development indirectly through the trickle-down effect. Areas categorised as disadvantaged endure social, material and economic deprivation. In addition to having a lack of social resources disadvantaged areas typically experience less interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity and diminished capacity for informal social controls (Sampson et al., 1997). This can lead to higher levels of crime. Dangerous neighbourhoods are typically abandoned by people who can afford to do so. This
impacts on the heterogeneity of the area and decreases the protective factors available to children and their caregivers. Lower perceived neighbourhood safety is associated with low scores in receptive vocabulary (Kohen et al., 1998) and higher levels problem behaviours (KSI Research International Inc., 2003). Means of tackling this include the need to build collective efficacy as this mediates the relationship between poverty and violence (Sampson et al., 1997).

2.5.4.3 Preschool

High quality childcare and preschool are recognised community readiness resources (Johnson, 1997 cited in Dockett & Perry, 2007) and may even compensate for a low resource home environment (Cote et al., 2008) although in general children attending different types of care at age three have similar cognitive outcomes as children in full-time parental care in Ireland (McGinnity et al., 2015). High quality ECCE includes effective staff-child ratios, and educated and trained educators. Educators providing positive interactions are responsive and sensitive to individual children’s needs, and stimulates children’s cognition, providing language input and guiding the child to explorations of the environment (Emig, 2000). It was found that children in the GUI study who attended a setting where a graduate leader was working had slightly higher non-verbal reasoning scores than children who attended a service without a graduate leader (McGinnity et al., 2015). In their analysis of the GUI study data, Byrne and O’Toole (2015) argue that uptake of non-parental childcare is socially stratified with higher income families and families where the primary caregiver or parents are in employment are more likely to access non-parental childcare. Also just over 25% of parents acknowledged that without the introduction of the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) they would not have been able to afford to send their child to preschool (McGinnity et al., 2015) as it lessens the financial burden
Ramey and Ramey (2004) believe that early intervention can be a major positive factor in the developmental course of high-risk children as they reviewed evidence from randomised controlled trials aiming to improve readiness for school and subsequent academic achievement. They reported findings of the highly esteemed Abecedarian Project in the USA. It is one of the earliest randomised controlled trials that tested the efficacy of early childhood education for high risk children and their families. It demonstrated that throughout the majority of the preschool period the children in the treatment group averaged approximately 14 IQ points higher than the control group. In addition to this reading and math achievement of the children in the treatment group was significantly higher at every age tested up until they were 12 years old (Ramey & Ramey, 2000; Campbell et al., 2001). At the age of 21 the treated children were still performing better on intelligence, reading and math assessments, and almost 70% were in skilled jobs or higher education compared to 40% of those in the control group (Campbell et al., 2002).

An Irish study evaluating the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) found that children availing of the free preschool year improved in all of the five EDI domains and the study attributes this to both natural growth and the impact of quality preschool as the study design did not incorporate a control group (McKeown et al., 2014). Nonetheless the study’s findings are in line with international research. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Study in the UK demonstrated that the higher the quality of the preschool, the greater the benefits for children from all social backgrounds in areas including literacy, mathematics and self-regulation (Sylva et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2014).
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

Duration in preschool and early childcare also impacts on skills development. According to McKeown et al., (2014), the amount of time children spent in an early years centre before they availed of the FPSY had a positive influence on the child’s progress during the FSPY. This furthers the argument that children should participate in ECCE for more than the year prior to starting school. Barnett and colleagues (2005) studied state prekindergarten programmes in five states across the US and found strong evidence that quality preschool programmes produce improvements in children’s learning and development when starting school, especially in the area of language, literacy and math skill. Furthermore, Magnuson at al. (2004) found that in most cases these effects are largest for disadvantaged groups. McKeown et al.’s (2014) research also found that social class differences in language and cognitive skills and social and emotional competencies remained unchanged following a year of preschool suggesting that although the year in preschool improves children’s skills it does not strongly reduce the skills gap. Nonetheless the social and emotional skills gap reduced for ESL children but the language and cognitive skills gap persisted (McKeown et al., 2014). Preschool appears to be particularly advantageous for ESL children as a similar finding was evident in the EPPE study as ESL children made more progress during preschool than non-ESL children (Sammons et al., 2002). ESL children may face further difficulties starting school as caregivers from non-Irish backgrounds experience barriers in not having come through the Irish education system (O’Toole et al., 2014). These findings are particularly pertinent for children living in disadvantaged families who have less social capital to draw from.

2.5.4.4 Ready Schools

As children start school they enter an environment that places new demands and expectations on them both from the school and the educators; children are
expected to participate for a longer duration and complete the curriculum tasks assigned to them by the adult in charge albeit with less support from the adult due to large class sizes. Examples of high quality scaffolding are rare at primary level (Sylva, 1997). Children are in a new physical environment, they are expected to learn and retain that learning, and they are expected to follow the rules of the classroom, to sit at their seat and to behave in a prosocial manner in order to develop relationships with new adults and peers. This may be a completely new undertaking for the children or they may have received messages about the upcoming experience. This environment may be different to the ECCE setting where children have more freedom to move and to choose activities and play, less emphasis is placed on learning and the adults have more time to spend with each individual child. The preschool environment is more conducive to scaffold children (Sylva, 1997, Jacobs, 2001). Again the school environment is different to the home environment where there are less children to interact with, children can explore the rooms in the house as they play and the adult may or may not be concerned with creating opportunities to stimulate the child’s development further.

Schools need to be ‘child ready’ in order to support the young children starting school and their families. Ready school characteristics include: striving for continuity between the school and the home/preschool; fostering learning in the context of relationships; being aware of each child’s individual needs and attempting to meet those needs; taking responsibility for supporting the learning process and resulting outcomes; and assure access to services and supports in the community (Kagan et al., 1995). Ackerman and Barnett (2005) depict that ready schools are schools that: (1) provide necessary supports for children including transition practices; (2) have teaching and learning programmes that support professional development and incorporate educational approaches that
meet the needs of the children and include parental involvement; (3) are adaptable in their approach by altering or abandoning strategies and have sufficient resources to meet the needs of the students and; (4) partner with caregivers and community organisations and services.

The readiness and capacity of schools to receive children was emphasised in the INTO’s study (2009). Primary school educators highlighted the need: for more space; to have the environment welcoming, organised, well-resourced, bright clean, friendly and fun; for a suitable curriculum; for staff to be prepared and; for open communication and an open door policy particularly with parents, as school factors that contribute to children’s experience starting school (INTO, 2009). Class sizes are a concern for ready schools as children starting school enter an environment with much higher adult:child ratios and research has shown that children are aware of the different levels of adult attention within the two settings (Ledger, 2000). The INTO (2009) study emphasised the need for a reduction in class size in the early years and recommended that a qualified classroom assistant/childcare worker be appointed to all infant classes. Strategies employed by primary schools in order to be ready and support the children starting include: allowing an older sibling into the class to comfort a child that is upset; establishing a daily routine; setting clear and simple rules; gradually building up to the full day duration; focusing on play; providing praise and encouragement and; setting up a buddy system. Amongst all these strategies it is imperative that the educators exhibit dispositions that are kind, caring and patient (INTO, 2009).

Transition practices are attempts to create contact opportunities, communication networks and partnerships. They are reciprocal activities and cooperation amongst stakeholders that assist children and adults in adjusting to the new
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

environment and demands (Ahtola et al., 2016). The practices operate at four levels before the children start school; mutual activities between the preschool and primary school help children adjust to the new environment; passing on relevant information about the children can assist planning and provision; cooperation amongst professionals can create continuity across settings; and educators must engage with families (Athola et al., 2016). Examples of transition practices include letters or phone calls to caregivers and open days where it is possible to explore the new school (Pianta et al., 1999; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). These practices are similar to those carried out in some schools in Ireland (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009; McGettigan & Gray, 2012) although formal transition plans are not common (O’Kane, 2007).

Further practices include a written report from the preschool (O’Kane, 2007; O’Kane & Hayes, 2010), information packs, a registration day for caregivers, an information meeting with the educator, an induction day for children and a visit to the school’s toy library (INTO, 2009; McGettigan & Gray, 2012). Junior infant educators in Ireland overwhelmingly agree that having information on the children transferring from preschool to their primary school would be useful (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010) the need for positive relationships across the home and school is beneficial (O’Toole et al., 2014). The interactions across these systems have a bearing on the extent of development that occurs as they mediate the environments. The type of relationship that exists between the primary and preschool educators, the educators and the caregiver, the educators and the child and the caregiver and the child are all important variables. However, often preschool educators are unclear on the actions and expectations of school, and very often the primary school educators’ knowledge of preschool life is equally unclear (Fabian, 2002). A mutual clarification of school readiness expectations
across ECCE settings and primary school is essential (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; O’Kane, 2007).

The additional barriers to transition highlighted by Neuman (2001) include not only time but also differing visions and cultures, a lack of shared goals, and different pedagogical approaches and methods. She also maintained that many different preschools feeding into a range of schools can cause difficulties in transition (Neuman, 2001). The need to respect both the ECCE culture and the primary school culture is important within effective partnerships (O’Kane, 2007). Contact prior to the children starting school can assist educators in their planning for the class, for individual students, and children and caregivers know what to expect and what can be involved. Educators’ efforts to involve caregivers in the preschool, primary school, and in their child’s learning is also necessary. This partnership approach creates consistency and has positive effects on children’s academic, social and emotional competence (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Starting school confronts caregivers with new expectations, school policies and practices. Whilst educators are cognisant of doing more to help families understand the demands of school (Wesley & Buysse, 2003), caregivers feel that they have little knowledge about what is happening in school when their child starts (Wesley & Buysse, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007). This may be due to a lack of communication and involvement across settings. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) found that the parents from a low class background identified a general lack of consultation as the single most important issue in relation to school involvement. Nonetheless caregivers are involved in their children’s education. In the Growing Up in Ireland studies, 80% of caregivers attended an information meeting before their child started school (GUI, 2013c), 72% of caregivers help
with their nine-year-old child’s homework regularly, and 98% of caregivers said they attended a formal meeting with their child’s educator (GUI, 2009). These findings provide evidence that schools are engaging with caregivers which is an important element of a ready school.

Communication is also important between settings. A lack of communication between preschools and schools has been documented (Love, 1992; O’Kane & Hayes, 2006; O’Toole et al., 2014). This can create inconsistencies between the two settings which can be unsettling for children moving from preschool to school. Educators have suggested that there should be greater communication between primary school educators and caregivers, and preschool educators and primary school educators (O’Kane, 2007; O’Toole et al., 2014). This was also stressed by caregivers (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Extensive partnerships can help educators in the classroom as they suggested it is important to know who students are before the first day of school (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Open communication and interactions can assist caregivers in feeling more included, educators feeling more productive and children feeling more accepted and supported. Thereby improving adjustment for all stakeholders in this new experience.

The school should account for the children’s needs, varying levels of development and the backgrounds. This includes both the physical and the psychological environment (Brostrom, 2000). Schools should also be inviting and encouraging environments that are equipped with materials and resources that stimulate children’s development through classroom activities and play. They should be a place of diversity and inclusion enabling all children to adapt and feel like they belong there (NCCA, 2009a). An appropriate curriculum should create a balance in meeting a child’s needs in each of the five
developmental domains (NCCA, 2009a). Aistear’s (NCCA, 2009) focus on the development of learning opportunities through the use of a range of types of play including pretend play, language play, physical play and early literacy and numeracy play grounded in the themes of well-being, identity and belonging, exploring and thinking and communication can provide for children’s needs in each of the five developmental domains. The importance of creating continuity between curricula (Neuman, 2001) also contributes to the readiness of the school. Young developing children are afforded a significant amount of attention in preschool. Unsurprisingly schools should take this into consideration as large class sizes in schools are related to difficulties in the transition to school (Hausken & Rathburn, 2002) as children face more children in the classroom and school environment and less contact time with the educator and children are aware of this (Ledger, 2000).

2.5.5 Caregivers’ and Educators’ Perceptions of School Readiness

Starting school is a co-construction (Griebel & Niesel, 2002) where children are supported by those around them including their caregivers and educators. The perceptions of caregivers contribute to the readiness of families whilst the perceptions of educators contribute to the readiness of services and schools. Families differ in their social, economic, and educational backgrounds. As a result, caregivers bring different beliefs and expectations to schools (Bowman 1994; Bernhard et al., 1998). Caregivers who know what is expected of children in school are more likely to provide experiences that will prepare the children for this new phase in their lives. Levine (1980) suggests that caregivers as conforming members of their culture will afford goals and expectations in their caregiving that will best serve their child's adjustment in society (cited in Rogoff, 2003). This implies that caregivers’ beliefs and actions, in part are subjective, persuaded by societal norms. Caregivers’ judgements are based on their
familiarity with the child and their knowledge of what is expected. Educators, both in preschool and primary school play a sizeable role in the lives of children who participate in their classes. Educators are regarded as a good source of information about children’s readiness for school as they are with children every day, observing their reactions and their relationships with others, witnessing their struggles and successes (Boyer, 1991). In addition to this their beliefs are influenced by prior training, dispositions and personal experiences (Smith & Sheppard, 1988).

Lewit and Baker’s (1995) study incorporated the perspectives of caregivers and educators in America from the National Household Education Survey (NHES), the Kindergarten Teacher Survey on Student Readiness (KTSSR) and the National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers (NSKT). Responses from the NHES compared with the KTSSR, illustrates that 84% of caregivers agree with educators on the point that being enthusiastic and curious in their approach to new activities is a very important characteristic for children starting school. However, caregivers are more likely than educators to judge basic academic skills as important, approximately 60% versus 10%. 92% of caregivers rated the ability to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally in a child’s primary language, and the ability to take turns and share as the highest essential or very important characteristics. Twice as many caregivers to educators strongly believe that abilities in sitting still and paying attention are essential or very important (Lewit & Baker, 1995). However, this is not always the case as educators in Dockett and Perry’s research (2004) placed more emphasis than caregivers on the need for children to concentrate and pay attention.

In the NHES in the US (O’Donnell, 2008) caregivers were asked what they thought was important to teach their children to prepare them for school; 62%
of children had parents who reported is was vital to teach their children about sharing, 56% reported it was essential to teach children letters, 54% believed that it was necessary to teach numbers, 45% reported it was important to teach children how to read, and 41% identified that holding a pencil was fundamental. Within this study, the caregivers placed more emphasis on academic related skills than the educators. This is also evident in other studies (West & Collins, 1993; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2004). However, it has also been found that caregivers do not always highly rate knowledge aspects (Perry & Dockett, 2003; McGettigan & Gray, 2012) and participants in Wesley and Buysse’s (2003) research largely de-emphasised knowledge attributes. From this data it is evident that children’s ability to function in the classroom is central to their success. Caregivers largely believe this functioning relates to their, language development, social competence, approach to learning and sometimes encapsulates their knowledge and skills.

Educators perceive children’s school readiness in the context of the school structure and social forces (Graue, 1993). From educators’ perspectives, children being physically healthy, rested and well nourished (Heaviside & Farris, 1993; West & Collins, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995) is believed to be an essential characteristic in children’s school readiness. However, educators have also been found to regard this area as one of the least important child developmental areas (Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997). Data collected in the NHES did not question caregivers about this aspect of school readiness although Piotrkowski et al. (2000) found that caregivers and educators in a disadvantaged area agreed that children must be healthy starting school. In the NHES, 84% of educators indicated that children need to be able to communicate wants, needs, and thoughts verbally, 76% identified the idea that children need to be enthusiastic and curious, and approximately 60% of educators signalled that
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

Children need to be able to follow directions, not be disruptive, and be sensitive to other children’s feelings. On the other hand, only 21% of educators believed it is necessary for children to be able to use a pencil or paintbrush, only 10% classified knowing several letters of the alphabet as an as being essential or very important school readiness characteristics and a mere 7% thought being able to count to 20 should be included in a child’s knowledge and skills base (Lewit & Baker, 1995). Participants in Wesley and Buysse’s (2003, p.357-358) research also mentioned children’s approaches toward learning. Specifically, prekindergarten teachers highlighted

‘the importance of building children’s confidence, stimulating their creativity, engaging their attention, and being mindful of their curiosity related to various tasks.’

Amongst these educators it is clear that social skills are considered more valuable than academic skills for children starting school.

Educators report a sense of starting all over again, as they experience their former pupils move on and as they prepare to meet the new group of pupils (Perry et al. 1998). This process occurs each year enabling teachers to revisit their beliefs, continuously reaffirming or reshaping them. Be that as it may, it has also been shown that educators may have competing views between what they think readiness is and what it needs to be or should be. Wesley and Buysse’s (2003) study showed that kindergarten teachers described ‘wrestling with their thoughts,’ ‘mixed feelings,’ and ‘being torn’ when they answered what children needed to know prior to starting school. There was a distinction between what they thought was appropriate from a child development perspective and what they knew children would be expected to demonstrate. An Irish study (INTO, 1995) also found that junior infant teachers believed pre-academic skills are the least important area in the infant curriculum yet they begin to teach these skills
in the first term of junior infants. This is similar to Hayes and O’Flaherty’s (1997) findings which also demonstrated the primary school educators spend most their time engaged in teaching behaviours rather than shared activities. This pressure largely relates to academic outputs at the expense of fostering social and emotional skills and approaches to learning, a clash between what Woodhead (2006) terms as the developmental perspective, and the political and economic perspective.

Piotrkowski et al. (2000) explored the school readiness views of 355 caregivers, 52 preschool educators and 57 primary school educators in a disadvantaged area in New York through exploratory factor analyses. In relation to their general readiness resources category they revealed a small significant group difference: primary school educators rated motor skills as less important than caregivers and preschool educators did. Otherwise, caregivers and the two groups of educators agreed that health and social competencies, communicating needs and feelings in their own language, and emotional maturity, were ‘absolutely necessary’ for children starting school. Dockett & Perry (2004) also found caregivers and educators agree that it is essential that children separate easily from their caregiver. This was also found in an Irish study (Ring et al., 2015) Further to this, caregivers in an Irish study identified social and emotional skills as important factors in children’s personal school readiness (McGettigan & Gray, 2012).

Piotrkowski et al. (2000) also found that lesser importance was attributed to self-care, being interested and engaged, and motor skills by all three groups. Although all groups rated compliance with educator authority as ‘absolutely necessary’, caregivers were more likely to allocate more importance than the educators to this feature. No group rated compliance with classroom routines as
“absolutely necessary,” yet caregivers rated this resource marginally more important than the preschool and primary school educators. Seven out of 10 caregivers believed it was ‘absolutely necessary’ for children to be able to express their feelings and needs in the language of instruction compared to three out of 10 educators.

Caregivers also believed that basic knowledge, such as knowing some colours, and the alphabet, was ‘absolutely necessary’ yet educators rated this attribute significantly lower. Within this, the preschool educators identified basic knowledge to be significantly more important than the primary school educators did. Advanced knowledge attained the lowest score from all three groups. Again, caregivers placed more importance on children having advanced knowledge, such as can write first name or can read a few simple words compared to the educators in general and preschool educators believed that advanced knowledge was more important than primary school educators. All groups viewed interest and engagement as substantially more important than advanced knowledge. However, only primary school educators believed interest and engagement to be substantially more important than basic knowledge (Piotrkowski et al., 2000). This study reaffirms the findings of Dockett & Perry (2004) that caregivers and educators often place similar value on some school readiness resources such as dispositions but also highlights that disparities exist such that caregivers’ believe that a bank of knowledge is a prerequisite.

Hayes and O’Flaherty (1997) and Kernan and Hayes (1999) indicate a low to moderate level of agreement between educators and caregivers in relation to their rankings of the important areas of development for children aged four. This study compared the expectations of 113 preschool and primary educators and 382 caregivers in non-designated disadvantaged (NDD) areas and designated
disadvantaged (DD) areas involved in the IEA Pre-primary Project (Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997; Kernan & Hayes, 1999). The educators and caregivers indicated their choices based on these eight developmental areas: pre-academic skills; motor/physical skills; self-expression skills; language skills; social skills with peers; social skills with adults; self-sufficiency skills; and self-assessment skills. Social skills with peers, followed by language skills, were categorised by educators in all settings as the two most important skills whilst all caregivers ranked social skills with peers as the most important skill for young children to learn. The educators in the DD school regarded language skills as the most important developmental area. Educators also placed social skills with adults among the least important skills.

Conversely, although caregivers identified motor/physical skills at the lower end of the ranking, in three of the four settings they set social skills with adults amongst the three most important developmental areas. Interestingly, preschool educators rank pre-academic skills amongst the three least important skills for young children to learn however teachers in DD schools ranked pre-academic skills as the third most important skill. Moreover, caregivers in DD settings also identified pre-academic skills amongst the three higher rankings. Self-sufficiency skills were rated within the three least important skills by caregivers in all of the setting types except the DD school. Although none of the correlations were statistically significant, the lowest level of consensus was evident between the educators and caregivers in the NDD schools whilst the highest level of consensus was in NDD preschools which showed a moderate agreement. Both the primary school educators and the caregivers in this study believe it is their responsibility to teach children pre-academic skills (Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997).
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

Furthering this, O’Kane (2007) documented educators’ views of transition in Ireland. This study found that children with low self-esteem, children who have difficulty sitting and listening and children with behavioural problems were considered as being most at risk of experiencing difficulties in the transition from preschool to school. The main skills that children need starting school according to preschool and primary school educators are social skills, independence, language and communication skills, and the ability to listen and concentrate. In particular, it was agreed that it is important to foster independence in children in preschool through the use of classroom rules and encouraging responsibility for themselves and their belongings.

This emphasis on independence was also found in research conducted by O’Toole and her colleagues (2014). Self-help skills and independence were also viewed as important by both sets of educators however the ECCE educators rated both higher than the primary school educators (Ring et al., 2015). Again, pre-academic skills were not believed to be of high importance (O’Kane, 2007) yet ECCE educators placed more emphasis on these skills (Ring et al., 2015). Both sets of educators estimated the number of children they felt may have some difficulties starting primary school; 61% of preschool educators and 70% of primary school educators felt that less than 20% of children were at risk whilst a further 23% of preschool educators and 24% of primary school educators believed the figure was between 20% and 40%. A further Irish study found that junior infant educators believe that caregivers do not fully understand the importance or the method of play in the classroom and that the caregivers’ expectations revolved around academic based skills (INTO, 2009). O’Kane and Hayes (2010) also highlighted that some ECCE educators believe that some caregivers misunderstand the skills that are necessary when starting school.
Many caregivers believe their child’s preschool experience prepares them for school (McGettigan & Gray, 2012). Intrinsic characteristics such as gender and age have also been considered when exploring perceptions. The gender of students has been found to influence educators’ perceptions of being prepared for school, girls have been perceived as being more ready for school than boys (McBryde et al., 2004), and also by some caregivers (O’Kane, 2007). Many educators and caregivers also believe that age plays a role and that the older children are when starting school, the more ready they will be (Margetts, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2004; INTO, 2009). Yet, the incongruity in expecting all children to be equally ready for school at the same age has been highlighted (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Educators have also drawn attention to the home environment in relation to preparing children for school. Educators believe that a stable home environment/family background has a major influence on how well children settle in junior infants (INTO, 2009). Many believe that caregivers are not doing their job as children’s first educators and that they put pressure on educators to teach academic skills (INTO, 2009), yet this is not always clear-cut as some caregivers noted their surprise of the schools’ higher academic expectations (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Caregiver education was repeatedly suggested as a means to improve children's readiness for school in the National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers (Boyer, 1991).

In the ‘Children’s Profile at School Entry’ study which is part of the ‘Preparing for Life Evaluation’ conducted in Ireland (UCD Geary Institute, 2013) the largest percentage of educators (44%) indicated emotional maturity to be the most important developmental domain for school readiness and physical health and well-being was perceived to be the least important domain (33%). On the other hand, the largest percentage of caregivers (40%) rated the physical health and well-being domain to be most important whilst 35% of caregivers rated the
language and cognitive development domain to be the least important developmental area for a child’s school readiness. Communication and regulatory skills are all considered core to children’s school readiness according to educators and caregivers. Nonetheless, both agreements and differences in what each group constitutes as important elements for a child’s school readiness are evident. Over the four waves of data collection the caregiver ratings of the children’s school readiness were higher than the teacher ratings (Doyle et al., 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2013). Overall, these studies reviewed here indicate that the school readiness views of caregivers and educators are interchangeable and conform to Graue’s (1992) view that beliefs about school readiness are locally-determined. Thus, the transferability of the findings is limited in an Irish context.

2.5.6 Making Decisions to Start School

Decision making literature in relation to starting school is limited. Caregivers are typically viewed as rational actors. They may evaluate their child’s readiness on the basis of their beliefs and rely on these beliefs to decide when it is appropriate to start their child in school (West & Colllins, 1993). The extent of their knowledge however contributes to this process, as does social class and networks of social relationships (Bosetti, 2000; Reay & Lucey, 2000).

Caregivers choose schools for their children based on costs and benefits, the availability of information, and the presence of choice (Bast & Walberg, 2004). Over 80% of caregivers had a choice in which school their child attended and this choice was strongly related to higher maternal education levels, high family income and living in urban areas (GUI, 2013c). For these caregivers the most important factor for them was that the school had a good reputation whilst proximity to home, language of instruction and sibling attendance were also
important. 27% of caregivers considered what their child’s friends were attending when making their decision (GUI, 2013c). Bosetti’s (2004) research in Canada examines 1,512 caregivers’ rationalities that inform their decision making in the deciding on a school for their children. This found that academic reputation is a concern for all caregivers to varying levels when choosing a school for their child to attend. Furthermore, some caregivers did not seek information whilst others sought information about the school. The main sources of information used by caregivers were talks with friends, neighbours, and other caregivers indicating the importance of social networks that are educated and informed. Other methods employed include talking with school educators, visiting the school and school information meetings. Consulting with children is also a practice carried out by some caregivers (Bosetti, 2004).

At times, educators are also assigned a role in the decision making process through caregivers’ networks of social relationships. Decisions to send children to school are regularly made on the basis of caregiver and educator perceptions of a child’s abilities, and their opinions about the skills needed for the child to start school (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Meisels, 1998). The majority of the preschool educators in O’Kane’s study (2007) felt they jointly made the decision with caregivers of when to start a child at school, while the minority felt that caregivers make the decision alone. Furthermore, approximately half the educators reported that caregivers asked for their opinion on the readiness of their child yet the advice given may not have been implemented by the caregivers. The majority of both the preschool and primary educators advocated for the decision to be made based on children’s development of the necessary skills in combination with their age and that decisions based solely on age ‘causes barriers to successful transitions’ (O’Kane, 2007). It has been suggested by ECCE practitioners in Ireland that caregivers send their children to school at
Chapter Two Theoretical Framework and Literature

the age of four without considering their skill level (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010). In addition to this the educators outlined their perceptions of the factors caregivers take into account when making the decision (O’Kane, 2007). The cost of childcare is seen as a major factor in the decision. Other factors include social expectations, caregivers working, family situation, external pressure, and friends’ patterns (O’Kane, 2007). Gender has also been found to be a factor in caregivers’ decisions in America as a higher percentage of boys than girls (9 % vs. 4 %) were to be delayed starting school until the following year (O’Donnell, 2008). Interestingly in O’Kane’s study (2007) the two sets of educators did not consider boys to be at risk of experiencing a difficult transition.

2.6 Summary

In the past children were often viewed as developing beings. Their development was dependent on their biological characteristics. It was later acknowledged that the environments children inhabit play a role in their development however they were considered passive in their experiences of this. It has since been acknowledged that children are active in this process through their involvement in the experiences they encounter. This interactionist perspective also takes into account the dimension of time. Thus, combining the components of Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ bioecological model, sociocultural theory and the new sociology of childhood as a theoretical framework demands the examination of children’s reality as a dynamic occurrence. As children start primary school it is recognised as an ecological transition as children move from either the home or preschool environment to the primary school. There is also a shift involved for the caregivers and primary school educators who begin a new relationship whilst the preschool educators are involved in supporting the children prior to the transition.
In the context of school readiness this theoretical framework requires an examination of the components of the Ready Child equation, Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). This incorporates children’s own perceptions of school readiness perceptions; the perceptions of the people in their immediate environments; the local and national policy realm and demographics; and possible associations between local demographics, environmental variables, and school readiness skills.

Across the bioecological contexts, concepts and attributes of school readiness are understood and construed differently. Children’s experiences of school are dominated by their preoccupation with the school and classroom rules. Their feelings towards school and friendships are also prominent in their experiences. The emphasis on school rules is pivotal in creating an effective functioning classroom where the curriculum can be implemented. This is further evident as educators focus on children’s adjustment to the environment particularly from a social and emotional standpoint. Caregivers also believe it is important for children to settle and fit in at school. Their focus on knowledge is a reflection of their understanding that school is an academic learning environment and attempt to ensure that their children successfully manage the curriculum. Communication is essential in disbanding this disjoint in perceptions and creating shared goals.

Children’s levels of school readiness have been shown to be affected by age, gender, ESL status, ethnicity and preschool attendance. Family influences include maternal education, income levels, caregiver health and reading activities in the home. Surrounding the child and family is the local community. Communities that have affluent families living in the area positively contribute
to children’s early development. In addition to these influences transition practices between caregivers, preschool educators and primary school educators are also of importance as they create opportunities for communication, sharing of information and collaborative efforts to assist all stakeholders in their adjustment to this new experience. Children who are nurtured and taught, early and effectively are afforded with more opportunities to excel than those who miss out on those supportive relationships and interventions. Making the decision to start a child in school is not always an easy decision as there are many factors to consider and inevitably the decision comes down to the caregiver. In choosing a school caregivers are most concerned about the reputation of the school clearly demonstrating that they want the best for their children. However, some educators believe that other constraining factors also impinge on caregivers’ decision such as the cost of childcare.

Chapter Three outlines the historical and current policy and context in which this research takes place.
3.1 Introduction

Children starting junior infants are stepping into a new ecological system for the first time, extending their individual ecology through interactions. Although individual experiences, the historical and social context in which this arises are also contributory factor when children start school. Hence, this chapter contextualises school readiness in Ireland. Firstly, the social and economic situation in Ireland is outlined, which sets the backdrop for the evolution of ECCE in Ireland in relation to policy, legislation and initiatives. This is then followed by a brief discussion on social inequality issues in education. Finally, the current role, function and challenges of preschool services and primary school is considered.

The conceptual framework underpinning this research can be classified as social constructivist, as childhood is understood as a social construction (Prout & James, 1997). This recognises the importance of social and cultural contexts that derives from social constructivist theory and therefore defines school readiness as a relative term, focusing on the interaction between characteristics of the individual child and the child’s environment (Meisels, 1998). Context plays an important role in children’s development and therefore must be documented in sociological studies, ‘The child is always revealing of the grounds of social control’ (Jenks, 1996). From the perspective of conducting research ‘Knowledge and analysis of social policy are essential for progress in developmental research because they alert the investigator to those aspects of the environment, both immediate and remote, that are most
critical for cognitive, emotional, and social development of the person’
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.8).

3.2 Overview of the Social and Economic Situation in Ireland

The education system operates within the context of the broader social and economic situation of the country. From 1990 onwards Ireland’s economy began to grow, and this peaked during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era from 1995 to 2007. Economic growth averaged 6.3% per year (Whelan, 2013). During this rapid period of economic growth unemployment rates dropped dramatically (CSO, 2002). With high levels of employment for both men and particularly women, demand for childcare increases (Corrigan, 2004). The Government responded in the late 1990’s by creating policies in the ECCE sector that mainly focused on childcare infrastructure, the provision of which largely remained in the private sector. This market approach to provision creates the image of parents as buyers of childcare (Hayes, 2008a), rather than policies focused on children’s best interests. The lack of affordable childcare continues to be an issue for parents in Ireland (UN, 2015).

In September 2008, Ireland officially entered recession. During the recession unemployment soared, social welfare payments were cut and tax payments increased. The reality faced by many families experiencing financial difficulties (GUI, 2011) involved unemployment, reduced working hours, one parent having to move away to work, financial pressures to pay bills and less income. Such a rapid change in family life can damage family functioning as family members become more stressed and find it hard to cope. Monteith et al. (2008) found that parents living in poverty in Northern Ireland had poorer mental health. Policies aimed at alleviating stress and improving family life can support the
development of all family members, and reduce the risk of poor social and emotional outcomes for children (Nixon, 2012).

Ireland exited recession at the end of 2013 and employment levels have begun to increase since then. In the last quarter of 2015 the employment rate stood at 63.6% (OECD, 2016), yet social adversities still exist. Economic downturns will impact on the future prospects of all family members, including children, and will have consequences for years to come (Irons, 2009). The damage of the austerity measures which continue to be applied by the Irish Government has been highlighted as a concern by the UN (2015) particularly on disadvantaged and marginalised populations. Unlike economic markets, social difficulties are deemed more difficult to tackle. Recovery within families and communities is not immediate.

3.3 Evolution of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland

Improving children’s lives involves respecting them in their own right, listening to them, nurturing their potential and facilitating them to enjoy their childhood (UNCRC, 1989). Policies that seek to advance the status and quality of life of children are essential. The right to the early care and education of children must be realised, respected and protected (Munoz, 2012). General and specific policies have been designed to attend to the many issues facing children in Ireland.

Policy is advancing in Ireland, recognising that children need stimulating environments rather than environments that simply provide care. ECCE policy is still considered to be at an early stage of development in Ireland. It aims to cover the period from birth to six years. However, ECCE policies in Ireland largely reflect a focus on the three to six years age range, overlooking a critical
phase of development for infants. It has been suggested that a vacuum may exist in Ireland in relation to policies for children under the age of three (Start Strong, 2012). Children are required to be in formal education from the age of six and can begin formal education once they have turned four (DES, 2012). In contrast to this, the most common age for children to start school in other European countries is either six or seven (Eurydice, 2013).

Prior to starting school education is considered to be informal as the Irish state considers primary school to be the first step on the formal education ladder. This is reinforced by the ‘United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (UNCRC) (1989) as Article 28 focuses on primary education upwards. Yet, education is vital for children at a young age, children are learning to learn on an informal basis and foundations are laid. The traditional view of education is beginning to change however, as evident in the DES Statement of Strategy 2011 – 2014 in which one of the goals is to ‘provide a quality inclusive school and early years education system with improved learning outcomes’ (DES, 2011a, p. 5). This is reiterated in the 2015-2017 strategy (DES, 2015). Furthermore, the policy document ‘Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures The national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020’ recognises that learning ‘goes beyond formal schooling’ (DCYA, 2014a, p.5). This continues to be built on as the ‘Programme for a Partnership Government’ (2016) aims to prioritise the early years. Nonetheless, Ireland only spends approximately 0.5% of GDP on childcare and early education. This figure is significantly less than to the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP (DCYA, 2015a). UNICEF recommends an expenditure of 1% of GDP (UNICEF, 2008).
3.3.1 Policy in Relation to Children

Policies relating to children began to surface in the 1990’s, largely influenced by the 1989 UNCRC which was ratified by Ireland in 1992. This required that Irish law be amended to take into account the provisions of the Convention which incorporates children’s participation rights, survival and development rights and protection rights. Initially, this Convention offered Ireland a framework to develop policies which took children into consideration in their own right as well as the family and society. Following on from this, ‘The National Children’s Strategy Our Children Their Lives’ (DHC, 2000) set out a series of objectives to guide policy in relation to the lives of children. Policy should be: child centred; family oriented; equitable; inclusive; action oriented; and integrated. This strategy sets out to create

‘An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential’ (DHC, 2000, p.4).

This was the first step in Irish history towards acknowledging the new sociology of children, taking children into account in their own right rather than what Prout and James (1997) refer to as their silent existence.

This Strategy (DHC, 2000) places emphasis on listening to children, understanding their lives and acting with this in mind. In 2011, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs became a full cabinet minister. The passing of the Children’s referendum in November 2012 removed Article 42.5 from the Constitution and introduced Article 42 (a) which explicitly recognises the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children in Ireland. These explicit rights are authoritative and must be upheld by the law. This recent amendment can be
considered to build on preceding policies as it is the first step in incorporating the UNCRC into Irish law whilst also making the goals of the ‘National Children’s Strategy’ more achievable and grounded in the legal sphere. In addition to this, the amendment is a reminder of the progress in the policy sector that Ireland is making in fulfilling the vision of the ‘National Children’s Strategy’ (DHC, 2000), however late it may be.

Focusing on the early years, the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs announced that Ireland’s first ‘National Early Years Strategy’, for children aged 0-6 years would be developed in 2012. This policy has yet to be published despite the publication of the early years advisory group report ’Right from the Start’ (DCYA, 2013b). Nonetheless policy advancements are being made. The Child and Family Agency, Tusla was established on the 1st January 2014. This new state agency has been assigned the responsibility of improving well-being and outcomes for children. Despite these advances the development of the ECCE sector remains piecemeal.

3.3.2 Policy in Relation to Care and Education

Care and education are ‘inextricably linked’ and inseparable elements in the life of the child according to the DHC (2000). Childcare in Ireland is defined as:

‘…daycare facilities and services for pre-school children and school going children out-of-school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community’ (DJELR, 2000, p. xxii-xxiii).

The theme ‘learning and education’ was uncovered as an important concern for children involved in the consultation for ‘the National Children’s Strategy’
Chapter Three Policy and Context

(DHC, 2000). Education is strongly promoted by the Irish Constitution. It states that:

‘the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children’ (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Article 42.1).

The 1998 ‘Education Act’ refers to primary and post primary education. It states that schools should

‘ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for’ (Education Act, 1998, Section 9).

In relation to ECCE the most relevant component of this act is that it defines educational disadvantage. Educational disadvantage is described as

‘the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools’ (Education Act, 1998, Section 32).

Focusing on education the policy initiatives set out in the White Paper ‘Ready to Learn’ (DES, 1999) seek to embrace the concept of lifelong learning, and develop and raise standards in the preschool sector by meeting the developmental needs of young children. It advocates for high quality and early intervention. The State’s involvement in this largely relates to facilitating provision and promoting quality through financial and technical means. The main goal of Government policy in regard to early childhood education is:

‘to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus
on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs’ (DES, 1999, p.14).

According to this policy document, early childhood education will produce a disposition and state of readiness in children to learn in both formal and non-formal settings. Thereby, a focus on preparing children for learning is evident. In order to achieve this, high quality care and education are vital. ‘Ready to Learn’ (DES, 1999) promotes some parental involvement. It outlines that parents should be offered advice and support relating to the learning process; be supplied with information to assist them in fostering their children’s education and development; and be facilitated and encouraged to get involved in the provision of early childhood education (DES, 1999). In addition to this it proposes the development of curriculum guidelines, rather than prescribing specific curricular details as it states that,

‘research appears to show that curricula … are similar in their short-term effects so long as they are consistently of a high quality’ (O’Flaherty, 1995 cited in DES, 1999, p.56).

This argument created a rationale for the Irish Government to publish curricula standards and guidelines rather than prescribe one core curriculum. A 'one-size fits all approach’ is deemed unsuitable and as a result Aistear (NCCA, 2009a) was developed. This in effect is caters for children's differing developmental statuses and different starting points.

The targeting efforts of the Government aim to eradicate educational disadvantage. In order to promote a more equitable society, identifying at-risk children and educationally disadvantaged groups, and targeting resources at these populations is endorsed (DHC, 2000) as children living in disadvantaged circumstances score lower in the areas of language and cognitive development
Policy has focused on curriculum reform and the provision of additional funding for schools serving disadvantaged areas (Barnardos, 2009). This has resulted in the introduction of programmes such as the ‘Early Start’ preschool scheme in some disadvantaged areas and the implementation of the ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools’ (DEIS) framework. In the interests of efficiency, a policy targeted towards those in need is suggested to provide better value for resources invested (Levin, 2003, p.9). When considering the identification of schools as DEIS, the area is taken into account as:

‘the disadvantage associated with poverty and social exclusion assumes a multiplier effect when large numbers of pupils in a school are from a similar disadvantaged background (the ‘social context’ effect)’

(Educational Research Centre cited in DES, 2005 p.27).

This continues to be demonstrated through Ireland’s performance in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as the print reading literacy scores and print mathematics of children aged 15 in 2009 and 2012 was significantly higher for children in the higher social class category. The scores drop as the level of disadvantage increases (DCYA, 2014b).

Building on the ‘Disadvantaged Areas Scheme’ (DAS) introduced in 1984, ‘DEIS (Delivering Equality Of Opportunity In Schools) An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion’ (DES, 2005) was published in 2005. The purpose of this plan is to address the complex barriers people face in accessing and progressing in education from the age of 3 to 18 in schools serving disadvantaged populations. Measures include: maximum class sizes of 20:1 from junior infants

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6 Early Start is a one year preventative intervention scheme that operates in a classroom in the primary school with qualified primary school educator acting as the children’s educators. The curriculum focuses on language, cognition and social and personal development. Children take part in structured play activities that involve specific learning objectives.
Chapter Three Policy and Context

to second class; the introduction of a standardised system for identifying schools in need of additional assistance based on the concentration of disadvantage; further extension of the existing School Meals Programme; allocation of additional funding to the School Books Grant Scheme in DEIS schools; and an integration of schemes such as Early Start, the Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme. Targeted early childhood education provision was considered to be central to the plan through funding, delivering education-related professional support and training, together with a curriculum and quality framework. In addition to this additional supports were to be provided to Traveller students and students for whom English or Irish is not their first language (DES, 2005).

A report on the implementation of the DEIS programme (Smyth et al., 2015) recommends the continuation of the programme as high levels of concentrated disadvantage are prevalent. Since the introduction of the programme the achievement gap between urban DEIS and non-DEIS schools has not narrowed. Nonetheless, DEIS students’ numeracy and literacy skills have increased, attendance rates have improved in urban Band 1\(^7\) primary schools and retention rates in general have increased. Improvements are recommended including a move away from streaming, improving the quality of interactions between educators and students and fostering high expectations of students (Smyth et al., 2015). Early childhood education findings demonstrate largely positive results from the implementation of the Early Start intervention programme (DES, 2014a). Children who had attended ‘Early Start’ received higher ratings from the junior infant educators on language and cognitive skills than pupils who had

\(^7\) The bands designated under the DEIS scheme relate to the location and level of disadvantage in the School. Urban and rural distinctions are made and band 1 indicates a higher level of disadvantage than band 2.
not (Lewis et al., 2011) and they were viewed as more competent/developed than their peers that had attended another preschool (DES, 2014a). Together this demonstrates that advancements are being made in the area. Despite this, funding remains a concern as does the declining socioeconomic status of individual students and families due to the continuing effects of the recession. Nonetheless, the proactive nature of the supports and schools involved is clearly beneficial to the children.

A long term objective of the Government outlined in ‘The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020’ is to:

‘improve the communication and oral-language competence of young children in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings and their readiness to develop early mathematical language and ideas’ (DES, 2011b, p.17).

These are believed to be core skills. This strategy recognises that stakeholders need to understand and promote these skills from a very young age. This has implications for the ECCE sector and the partnership the setting creates with parents as together they set the foundation for the accumulation of literacy and numeracy skills throughout the rest of the education system. The need to engage and network with supports such as the local library, family resource centres and family literacy services is also necessary to create a supportive community environment. A very positive aspect of this strategy is the connection between children’s well-being and learning. It is evident throughout the strategy that supporting children’s learning is done in conjunction with supporting their well-being. ECCE workers are recognised as a ‘powerful resource’ (DES, 2011b, p. 27) and the need to increase the qualification level of those workers is essential as,
‘the role of the adult working in ECCE settings is no less critical to ensuring positive experiences and outcomes for children’s learning well-being and development’ (DES, 2011b, p.27).

The actions outlined in ‘The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young people 2011-2020’ (DES, 2011b) that relate to upskilling ECCE practitioners focus on the review and provision of training, the incremental increase of the minimum qualification requirements and the provision of incentives to ECCE practitioners to obtain higher qualifications by maintaining the link between the higher capitation rates\(^8\) and higher qualification rates. Content of ECCE training is mentioned only in the context of including mandatory modules on the general assessment of children, and supporting children with additional needs. It focuses particularly on the inclusion of mandatory modules that enable ECCE workers to specifically address the learning needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ESL students and students with special educational needs with regards to literacy and numeracy. In the context of ECCE literacy and numeracy activities should be playful, focus on the area of language awareness, language development and early mathematical concepts and ‘be developmentally appropriate and avoid premature formality’ (DES, 2011b, p.47). In contrast, the actions that relate to the upskilling of primary and post-primary educators are quite detailed and focused on the development of literacy and numeracy content on training programmes, the provision of examples of work and guidance on the approaches.

\(^8\) Providers of the FPSY scheme receive €62.50 per child availing of the scheme. A higher capitation grant of €73 per child applies when the the leader in each room has a level 7 or higher qualification. This is to be increased to €64.50 and €75 respectively in September 2016 (DCYA, 2016).
Despite the range of legislation and strategies available, wide scale monitoring and evaluation of implementation may be difficult at the national level. The Children’s Rights Alliance$^9$ awarded the Government a B- grade in 2013 in relation to ECCE as a result of the inconsistency in the quality of early care and education services (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2013). The grade dropped to a D+ in 2015 and now stands at a B- grade, the improvement in the grade achieved is a result of Budget 2016 (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2016). Practical implementation must occur at the local level. Active professionals and community members together in partnership must strive to integrate and adhere to these policies and strategies within their own communities, in order to improve the quality of life experienced by children. Taking into account the local needs creates a more focused delivery of supports and services (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010).

3.4 Policy Initiatives that Relate to School Readiness

Young children usually engage on some level with their community before they start school. Encounters may be informal in that children can automatically be members of a community by nature of their existence in their family, conforming to their ways. Semi-formal and formal encounters occur as they engage with services offered in the community such as parent and toddler groups or playgroups. Policy initiatives have been designed and established recognising the importance of the tripartite nature of this partnership. It is within these initiatives that school readiness becomes contextualised.

$^9$ The Children’s Rights Alliance is a registered charity that brings together over 100 members that work to improve children’s lives in Ireland. The Children’s Rights Alliance monitors and evaluates the Government’s commitments to children and delivery of such arising from the Programme for Government.
Chapter Three Policy and Context

3.4.1 Free Preschool Year Scheme

Levels of early childhood education are relatively low in Ireland by international standards (OECD, 2008) and Ireland is also one of the most expensive countries in relation to childcare in the OECD (OECD, 2007; OECD, 2014). The Irish welfare system has been the subject of much debate in relation to service provision versus provision of income support. In particular,

‘Whether increased income transfers are at the heart of alleviating poverty or can only produce better outcomes if they are linked to improved support services’ (NESC, 2005, p.31).

Prior to the introduction of the ECCE scheme also known as the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) scheme, the Early Childcare Supplement was in place since 2006. This was a direct payment to caregivers intended to be used towards the cost of childcare. It can be argued that the FPSY is the beginning of an acknowledgement that a universal programme is more socially and economically beneficial. The FPSY introduced in 2010 was a free year of part-time preschool education for all children aged between three and four (DCYA, 2013a). This initiative was viewed as a school-readiness initiative that will benefit the economy,

‘Pre-primary education significantly enhances the subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for State investment in education generally’ (Department of Finance, 2009).

When the FPSY was first introduced children between the ages of 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months on 1 September of that year were eligible to participate. The FPSY entitled children to a three-hour session, five days a week. Alongside this, minimum qualifications are required for practitioners delivering the FPSY (DCYA, 2013a). Both private and community services are contracted
to offer this programme. The FPSY scheme pays these services directly for the
care and education of the children who meet the age criteria and are availing of
the free year of preschool. In 2011, a total of 4,162 ECCE services were
contracted to deliver the Free Pre-School Year Scheme to 65,592 children, an
increase of nearly 10% between 2010 and 2011 (ECCE Database, 2011 cited in
DCYA, 2012a).

One of the commitments most relevant to the area of school readiness outlined
in ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’ is the commitment to increase investment
in high quality ECCE, and introduce the second free preschool year (DCYA,
2015a). The second part of this commitment has now been realised whilst
initiatives are in place to improve the quality aspect of ECCE. The majority of
the €260 million invested in the early years and school-age care and education
services in 2015 was spent on the FPSY, the Community Childcare Subvention
programme, and the Training and Employment Childcare (DCYA, 2015a). The
Community Childcare Subvention programme facilitates families to access full
day, half day, or sessional childcare services depending on the parent’s ability
to pay the remainder of the balance. The Training and Employment Childcare
programme also enables caregivers to access these childcare services depending
on the duration of the course they are attending (DCYA, 2013a). The 2016
budget provided an additional €85 million investment in the ECCE sector. This
included the expansion of the FPSY scheme thereby enabling children to access
a free preschool place from the age of three up to the age of five and a half or
when they begin primary school. This creates the opportunity for children to
freely avail of two years of part-time preschool. To increase accessibility
children can enrol at three points throughout the year, September, January and
April (DCYA, 2015b). It is anticipated that the number of children accessing the
FPSY scheme will rise to approximately 127,000 (DCYA, 2015b). As access
Chapter Three Policy and Context

and uptake of ECCE is improving this is beneficial to children, families and society as a cost-benefit analysis of ECCE in Ireland estimated the benefits to be €7 for every €1 invested (NESF, 2005) whilst studies in the US, New Zealand, England and France state returns of between three and ten times the original investment (DCYA, 2012b).

As a direct result of this scheme children are guaranteed to have the opportunity to be involved in early education. To achieve this, service providers involved in the scheme are obliged to implement both Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009). ‘Síolta The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education’ was published in 2006 (CECDE, 2006). It is a set of quality standards that extend across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings and infant classes where children aged birth to six years are present (CECDE, 2006). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland for children from birth to six years in Ireland. The curriculum framework provides guidelines on how to create important learning opportunities for children and how to support this learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

Effectively supporting preschool children in their development before they start primary school is core to this initiative. Further to this all ECCE staff must hold a major award in ECCE at level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications of Ireland whilst preschool leaders in preschools delivering the FPSY scheme must now have a minimum of a level 6 qualification (DCYA, 2015b). No doubt the introduction and expansion of the FPSY is beneficial, yet the quality of the service may have been somewhat hampered despite the mandatory introduction of the minimum qualification requirement and the increase in preschool leaders’ qualifications. When the FPSY scheme was first initiated the child-staff ratio
was 10:1 (DCYA, 2011a). However, budgets have increased the child-staff ratio to 11:1 (Budget, 2012), decreasing the amount of time each child has with staff affecting their relationship and the running of the setting. Further to this, children in the 0-3 age range largely remain outside the ECCE efforts made by the Government. It is argued that the FPSY maintains the care and education divide with early education beginning at the age of three (Wolfe et al., 2013).

3.4.2 ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures The national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020’ (DCYA, 2014a)

This framework intends to align policies across the Governmental departments to improve the lives of children and young people. This focuses on achieving five goals for children:

- Active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing.
- Achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development.
- Safe and protected from harm.
- Economic security and opportunity.
- Connected, respected and contributing to their world.

The main outcome outlined in this framework that relates to children’s starting school is that children are ‘achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development’ (DCYA, 2014a, p. xiv). The implementation plan suggests that the ‘National Early Years Strategy’ should begin to be implemented in 2015. Thus far the strategy has not yet been published therefore the Government is falling behind in its commitments. Other relevant commitments outlined in this document include: the commitment to place more of a focus on effective transition particularly in education; and the commitment to research and adopt strategies to strengthen transitions in the education system as it is acknowledged
that the lack of consistency in the transfer of data ‘contributes to potentially damaging discontinuities in the learning of students’ (DES, 2011b, p78). The framework aims to have education passports\(^\text{10}\) used for students transitioning between preschool and primary school (DCYA, 2015c). Thus supporting effective transitions is recognised as a means to contribute to more positive outcomes for children and young people. The commitment to provide evidence informed parenting supports (DCYA, 2015c) recognises the contribution of caregivers to children’s lives and the need to support caregivers in their role.

### 3.4.3 Siolta and Aistear

Siolta was developed as an evidence informed framework based on an extensive literature review of early childhood, a national consultation process, and reviews of policy, practice and research on quality in Ireland and in an international context (CECDE, 2006). 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the framework, the most relevant to children and school readiness include:

- Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.
- Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.
- The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.
- The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.

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\(^{10}\) Education passports are a collection of materials that support the sharing of information about the child’s learning across settings. The material can include a report card and a profile of the child’s learning.
Chapter Three Policy and Context

- Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education. (CECDE, 2006)

In Siolta, Standard 13 focuses solely on transitions. One such transition is the move from the early childhood setting or the home to primary school. This standard acknowledges the importance of the continuity of children’s experiences thereby reinforcing the socio-cultural nature of ECCE. Smooth transitions that involve the relevant stakeholders are facilitated through consistent relationships and liaisons between settings; and that the setting is linked and integrated with the local, regional and national community (CECDE, 2006). Written policies and procedures should be put in place to support children’s transitions. In relation to starting school, prior to when the child makes the transition practices can include the communication of information and advice between the settings the child is transferring from and to, visiting new settings, staff engagement with parents and facilitating parents to spend time with the children in the new setting. In addition to this the child should be consulted and involved in the process (CECDE, 2007). Adhering to the principles, standards and components of Siolta ensures that a child centred perspective is in place. As already seen, ‘Ready to Learn’ (DES, 1999) recognises the fact that the quality of service provision is of critical importance in the lives of young children and their families. Fidelity to Siolta maximises the potential of educators to support children in their development so that they may reach their full potential. Delivering high quality ECCE should not be optional.

Following on from the focus on quality and the development of Siolta, Ireland needed to complement this advancement with a resource that supports parents
Chapter Three Policy and Context

and practitioners in choosing appropriate activities for the ECCE environment. In line with this, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009. This sets out the content that should be covered by ECCE practitioners under four themes, in order to give children opportunities to become confident, competent learners. The principles and good practice guidelines are similar to Siolta. In addition to this, Aistear,

‘describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding) that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured’ (NCCA, 2009a, p.6).

Similar to the development of the ‘National Children’s Strategy’ (DHC, 2000) the development of Aistear involved consultation with children.

The four themes describe what children will benefit from learning:

- **Well-being** - confident, happy and healthy children are more secure.
- **Identity and Belonging** - a positive sense of self and feeling valued and esteemed as part of a family and community gives children a foundation.
- **Communicating** - sharing experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with other children and adults in different ways enables children to express themselves.
- **Exploring and Thinking** - understanding the things, places and people in their world through interactions and by, playing, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas gives children a knowledge basis to work from.

(NCCA, 2009a)

Each theme is broken down into four aims, which are then further broken down into learning goals. This offers a number of ideas and suggestions that parents
and ECCE providers may use to provide for the types of learning experiences necessary under each theme (NCCA, 2009a). Aistear is more descriptive rather than prescriptive therefore can be viewed as a syllabus rather than a curriculum that focuses on broad early learning experiences. It is to be used in conjunction with other curricula and programmes, reinforcing the position in ‘Ready to Learn’ (DES, 1999) that a ‘one size fits all approach’ is not appropriate in the ECCE context.

Settings that engage with Síolta and Aistear can support children’s development before and during junior infants. Widespread implementation of Aistear is connected to the commitment in ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’ to build children’s emotional literacy to set a foundation for educational attainment (DCYA, 2015c). Aistear was published ten years after the Primary School Curriculum. Its themes and principles are thought to reflect the curriculum areas and subjects outlined in the Primary School Curriculum. Therefore, they can be used to complement each other. It is believed that continuity in curricular approach and links between preschools and schools can help ease the transition between the two settings (Neuman, 2001). However, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy highlights the need to revise the literacy and numeracy aspects of the primary school curriculum for infant classes in order to create continuity with the teaching and learning approaches in Aistear (DES, 2011b, p. 48). Also within the ‘Better Outcome Brighter Futures’ implementation plan a key action to be implemented in 2014 was a consultation held by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on the future reform of the primary school curriculum. This requires an exploration of the relationship of the preschool year to junior and senior infants (DCYA, 2015c). As a result, a new primary language curriculum (NCCA, 2015a) from junior infants up to second class has been developed that ‘espouses the principles and methodologies of Aistear’ (NCCA,
These consultations and developments are essential considering the continued and growing investment into the free preschool year. The introduction and expansion of the Free Pre-School Year (FPSY) scheme, the introduction of minimum qualification requirements and the inclusion of ECCE in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy have all contributed to boost awareness and appreciation of the importance of quality and of the ECCE sector.

However, awareness and appreciation do not ensure implementation. It is not mandatory to adhere to Síolta and Aistear unless the setting is providing places on the FPSY scheme. Educators who do not incorporate the outlined practices in their work environment run the risk of creating an unequal starting point for these children compared to children who have been supported. Many ECCE practitioners acknowledge that their knowledge and ability to implement both frameworks is limited (DES, 2016). Limited supports have been put in place to train ECCE workers in the implementation of the frameworks. One such support is the ‘Aistear Siolta Practice Guide’ that was developed under the Better Start Early Years Quality Development Service by NCCA (NCCA, 2015b) in line with the commitments of ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’ (DCYA, 2015a). Furthermore, 6,000 primary school educators have taken part in Aistear training (Hough & Forster, 2013). Compulsory implementation and stricter monitoring and evaluation of policies and frameworks would begin to help resolve varying levels of quality and consistency among ECCE providers. One of the first steps in this process is the commitment to the national roll out of Síolta and Aistear in ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’. Although this appears promising the updated ‘Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016’ missed the opportunity to enforce compliance across all ECCE settings.
3.5 Social Issues in Education in Ireland

It is evident that a relationship exists between social class and education achievement (OECD, 2012; DCYA, 2014b; McKeown et al., 2014; Smyth et al., 2015). Inequalities result in some children not reaching their potential. It has been emphasised that children are not on ‘an equal playing field’ and many are already disadvantaged relative to their peers when starting school which in turn impacts on their ability to engage in an overly complex system (Barnardos, 2009; Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Social background effects reflect a range of processes including differences in parental economic, social and cultural resources and attitudes, the different costs and benefits attached to staying in education for different social groups, the interaction between home and school, and potential differences in ‘ability’ (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Despite this, education is regarded as a principal means by which greater social equality can be achieved (Tovey & Share, 2003). Educational disadvantage is of concern in society. Succeeding in education is instrumental in creating high quality life chances. Levin (2009) attaches a further role to education and equality, ‘Educational equity is a moral imperative for a society in which education is a crucial determinant of life chances’ (p. 5).

The need to improve education levels amongst disadvantaged communities is now widely recognised. A recent study indicates that disadvantaged children are more likely to arrive at school lacking basic socio-emotional skills and have considerably lower scores in measures of cognitive ability (Kelly et al., 2011). The majority of children in poverty live in social welfare dependent households. An ESRI study (Russell et al., 2010) that analysed household income data for the period 2004 to 2007 found that where a household is headed by an unemployed person the risk of child poverty was two to five times more likely; consistent poverty was also higher particularly in cases of illness or disability.
Overall, children were more than five times more likely to be in poverty in jobless households (Russell et al., 2010). Considering the importance of family background and caregiver involvement in education it should be noted that one in three children live in families where their mother has a third-level qualification and 56.1% lived in families where the highest level of educational attainment by mothers was a lower or upper secondary education (CSO, 2012).

The ‘State of the Nation’s Children Ireland’ (DCYA, 2014b) outlines the most up to date socio-demographic information on children and data on child well-being indicators in Ireland at the time of data collection. In primary schools in the 2010/2011 school year the average percentage of children missing 20 days or more was higher in DEIS schools than non-DEIS schools (DCYA, 2014b). For secondary schools, the average percentage of children missing 20 days or more was almost twice as high in DEIS schools when compared to non-DEIS schools (DCYA, 2014b). Low levels of attendance can impact on opportunities of progression. Past studies exploring progression found that over 70% of young people from higher professional backgrounds progress to higher education within the first two years of leaving school, compared to less than 50% of those from intermediate and other non-manual backgrounds and just 30% of those from semi- and unskilled manual backgrounds (McCoy et al., 2007). This suggests that social backgrounds impact on children’s attendance and that these early experiences and approaches become entrenched in children’s lives affecting their progression in the education system. This is also influenced by achievement levels. Reading, mathematics and science achievement scores all differ when accounting for social class (OECD, 2012).

Countries with low child poverty rates tend to achieve such through a combination of services for children and child income supports, high
employment rates and good adult social welfare payments (Sweeney, 2007). Ireland operates a meritocratic system, a ‘winner takes all’ approach whereby educational inequalities continue to exist. In a meritocracy the individual alone determines success and failure (Drudy & Lynch, 1993) impacting on their social position. This fails to recognise that peoples’ choices in society are constrained. To fully benefit from education, resources are necessary. Lower social classes have fewer financial resources to invest in education, and less ‘valued’ cultural and social capital to impart to children in these families (Reimers 2000, p.55), compared to higher social classes. Thus, children coming from low socio-economic backgrounds are limited in their ability to pursue upwards social mobility as low educational success acts as a barrier (ESRC, 2012). Having an equal opportunity to access education is not sufficient in a system that intends to create an equal playing field. Rather than overhauling the education system and social policy in Ireland, the political approach has been one of positive discrimination where groups are targeted based on their vulnerability. Bringing this into the early childhood sector, Brennan (2003) warns that using early education and care as the sole intervention to compensate for disadvantage in the home is inadequate.

3.6 Early Childhood Care and Education Provision and Curricula in Ireland

A wide variety of services exist in the ECCE sector. There are approximately 4,600 services in Ireland (Early Childhood Ireland, 2013a). Daly (2002, p.32) notes that ‘diversity underpins the range of early childhood educational provisions and their curricula in the Republic of Ireland’. Services are based on the type of curriculum being used, the opening hours, the type of funding and its requirements, and the identified needs of the area. As seen in the previous section developments have been made to coordinate and regulate the system.
Sessional services refer to services that typically last for 3.5 hours or less whilst full day care refers to services that last longer than 3.5 hours. Childcare providers are a mix of private and community based not for profit. Services and programmes available are outlined below.

### 3.6.1 Formal Services

Preschools typically provide sessional services which children normally attend either in the morning or afternoon. Usually, these services cater for children aged from three to five years and combine education and care through a play based curriculum. Naonrai are preschools that cater for children aged three to six years and operate through the Irish language. These preschools also use a play based curriculum. Nurseries and Crèches usually provide full day services catering for children from two to three months up to five years. Many provide a structured educational element for the older children that will be moving into primary school soon. Montessori Schools cater for children aged three to six years. These schools use the Montessori Method which focuses on children’s development and education, teaching learning skills and social skills.

(Early Childhood Ireland, 2013)

### 3.6.2 Informal Services

Parent and Toddler Groups offer informal situations for children to play and socially interact whilst their parents engage with the other parents of the children at the same time. This is a form of support group for both caregivers and children as it creates opportunities for parents to build social support networks and it enables children to engage in free play. Groups may be available in a community setting, generally catering for children from birth to three years. Childminding is arranged to suit both the caregiver and the childminder’s needs. Education does not normally feature as an intended outcome of this service. Childminders
care for children in an informal environment as it is normally based on a private arrangement between parent and provider (Early Childhood Ireland, 2013).

3.6.3 Curricula

The building and enhancement of children’s dispositions is the typical focus of ECCE settings rather than their level of knowledge. These dispositions are acquired, supported, or weakened by interactive experiences in their immediate environments (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). As a result of the contractual obligation with regards to the FPSY the implementation of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is widespread. Three other curricula approaches used in Irish preschools are Play Based Learning, High Scope Curriculum and Montessori Methods, which are often attempted to be integrated with the themes of Aistear. Often these attempts to integrate lead to confusion within settings and this can impact on the quality within the service and thereby the ‘Ready’ nature of the service that contributes to preparing children for school.

Play based curricula allow children space to discover and learn in creative ways. It is suitable for their development before they start learning through the traditional method in primary school. The environment is structured so that the adult through a daily routine facilitates the children to play and then uses this to create a relaxed learning experience for the children. This involves a combination of free play and activities both child- and adult- led. Programmes of activities in areas of physical, social, emotional, intellectual, creative and language encourage children’s development (Early Childhood Ireland, 2013). The importance of play is recognised at this early stage as play creates a brain that has increased 'flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life' (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 9). Play stimulates development, helps develop mechanisms for learning and also permits children to be children.
Chapter Three Policy and Context

The High Scope Curriculum is used internationally. It uses a hands-on, active participatory learning approach. A Vygotskian influence is evident in the constructivist approach of this curriculum (High Scope, 2013). The High Scope Curriculum stresses the importance of adult-child interactions and a well-designed learning environment. A key strategy for adult-child interaction is sharing control with the children. High Scope settings are enriched with a range of materials, divided into specific areas that encourage different types of play such as art and story time. Unique to High Scope’s daily routine is the plan-do-review sequence. Children choose what they would like to do, carry out this activity, and reflect upon this with others present in the environment (High Scope, 2013). The curriculum content incorporates; approaches to learning; social and emotional development; physical development and health; language, literacy, and communication; mathematics; creative arts; science and technology; and social studies (High Scope, 2013).

The Montessori Curriculum is based on the belief that children learn best from sensory experiences. The educators determine the curriculum by deciding which of the prescribed Montessori materials to make available to the children based on the needs and the natural development of the children. This range of manipulative materials are then organised and presented to the children. The children spontaneously choose the material in the classroom they want to engage with for independent use. This curriculum is more focused on preparing children for school. Children are guided through the structured programme. Subject areas include mathematics, reading and writing and science whilst also teaching children everyday skills such as dressing themselves (Saint Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland, 2013).
3.7 Primary School Provision and Curriculum in Ireland

The primary school cycle is eight years in total. Children progress through eight phases, two years of infant classes, followed by first class to sixth class. Young children start primary school in the junior infant class. All children entering that class begin in September of each year. A revised primary school curriculum came into effect in 1999. This covers seven curriculum areas; Mathematics; Language; Social, Environmental and Science; Arts Education; Physical Education; Religious Education; and Social, Personal and Health Education. The content of each curriculum is presented at four levels—infant classes, first and second classes, third and fourth classes, and fifth and sixth classes. Learning experiences and activities that assist the child to obtain and develop the appropriate level of knowledge for their stage of development are outlined. For example, language activities for infant classes will include; picture matching games; naming distinctive characteristics and attributes of people, objects, etc.; ‘I spy’ games (NCCA, 1999). A suggested time framework that allocates a minimum time to each of the curriculum areas is also laid out. However, this time framework is not directly applicable to the infant classes. Working at each child’s level requires educators to be somewhat flexible in the infant classes. Reviews were published in 2005 and 2008 and resulting guidelines and support have been provided. As previously mentioned the language curriculum has since been updated (NCCA, 2015a).

The curriculum aims to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities to develop their full potential, to prepare them to engage in further education and equip them to meet the challenges of society. The focus is on the child as the learner through the use of a variety of teaching methodologies yet the traditional approach encompasses a one way transfer of knowledge between the primary school educator and the child; ‘secular instruction’ (NCCA, 2010).
The primary school educators must adhere to the curriculum. Assessment is central to this curriculum as this monitors teaching, learning and achievement levels. This is believed to be an indicator of quality. Good communication and regular consultation between parents and the school is also advised within the framework of this curriculum. Further to this the role of the community is invoked,

‘it should be a general aspiration that the school would be seen as a key resource in improving the quality of life in the community and would, in turn, regard the community as a rich resource from which to draw educational assistance’ (NCCA, 1999, p.23).

The Primary School Curriculum acknowledges the importance of the transition into this setting; ‘the child’s entry into the formal education system marks a significant transition in his or her life’ (NCCA, 1999, p.30). Starting in primary school, moving to this new environment can be difficult for some children. The curriculum stresses;

‘the centrality of language in early childhood learning and the importance of activity and the manipulation of a variety of materials in promoting motor and sensory development’ (NCCA, 1999, p.30).

### 3.8 Preschool and Primary School Differences in Ireland

Play is a central feature of the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) curriculum. This encourages the development of children’s dispositions. In addition to this, children are in more flexible settings that promote exploration. Children engage in a range of activities. Staff guide children rather than teach them through a balanced adult-child relationship. On the other hand, play is a limited feature of the Primary School Curriculum. Standardised formal education and knowledge
is more focused on in the primary school environment as the curriculum is based on six core subjects and the adult as the educator is more entrenched.

‘The Curriculum places importance on the ‘next’ stage of learning in a child’s life and the importance of laying foundations for that learning. While Aistear’s aims do not draw attention to this outcome of early learning’ (NCCA, 2009b, p.13).

The demands placed on primary school educators to implement the prescribed primary school curriculum rather than an emergent curriculum restricts the child centered nature of education (Hayes, 2004, 2008b). Further prominent differences include the training and qualifications of the adults responsible for children in a care and education environment from birth to six years and the class sizes the children experience in each environment.

### 3.8.1 Educator Training

As education is a valued commodity in Ireland there is an expectation that those who provide the education are competent in the sector yet underlying this competency is also the need for the educators themselves to be trained. In the past Government policies failed to uphold the value that is apparently placed on ECCE by placing low educational requirements on educators in this sector. On the other hand, in line with ‘Teaching Council [Registration] Regulations 2009’, primary school educators are required to hold a Bachelor of Education degree or a recognised Graduate/Higher Diploma in Education (Primary) in combination with a level 8 or level 9 qualification. This discrepancy may have served to emphasise the quality and status divide within the sectors and impinged on integrated transition practices and approaches.

Prior to 2012, the B.Ed. degree was a three-year degree programme but has since become a four-year degree programme, in line with the recommendations made
by NESF (2005) and DES (2011b). Further to this the postgraduate programmes were converted from an 18 month programme into a two year programme from September 2014 (DES, 2011b). This extension in training time suggests the high level of importance attached to this profession. Advancements are continuing to be made along the continuum. Throughout a primary school educator’s career, it is considered their right and responsibility to engage in continuous professional development as it is deemed necessary for effective professional practice. The Professional Development Service for Teachers was established in 2010 offering professional development to both primary and secondary school educators (PDST, 2016). It is clear that primary school teaching is a graduate profession and the education system is clearly demarcated. The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for the teaching profession (Teaching Council Act, 2001). It caters for primary school and secondary school educators acknowledging the continuum of teaching however, the early years sector remains absent thereby diminishing the role ECCE practitioners play in the education of children.

In comparison to the strong footing of primary school teaching profession, the ECCE training sector is less developed. The quality of tuition was raised as a concern in a report on preschool inspections carried out by the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills (Hanafin, 2014). This report identified issues in some preschool such as not having a programme of activities, not adhering to the programme set out, and insufficient or inappropriate content (Hanafin, 2014). It is clear that provision of services is not sufficient, quality must be ensured in order for children to benefit. The first requirement initiated by the Government in relation to the ECCE sector came about in the ‘Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006’, 50% of staff in a service must have a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children. In the
years after this the qualification requirements were attached to funding programmes such as training qualifications: from 2012 the FPSY scheme required that the leader in each room of a service must have a minimum qualification of a major award at level 5 in ECCE. This has since been elevated. Most recently the ‘Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016’ require all staff working with children to have at least a major award at level 5 on the NQF in ECCE and training programmes must include content on child development and early education and a placement must also be undertaken.

Working with children from birth up until they start school is multifaceted and ‘sound training is required’ (Bennet, 2007). The implementation of qualification requirements is in line with the recognition for the need to develop practitioners’ abilities to improve the quality of the service provided (Dahlberg et al., 1999; UNESCO, 2004; CECDE, 2006). The advancement into degree level qualifications has been slow as the only incentive for ECCE educators to undertake such studies is the higher capitation fee11. In addition to this, unlike the primary school profession, continuing professional development is less pronounced despite the wealth of new research in the area furthering the understanding of young children’s development and identifying new ways of nurturing this development. These structures impact on the ECCE educators pay, status and working conditions. The ECCE sector in general has battled and continues to battle with professionalising the sector (Hayes, 2015).

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11 Providers of the FPSY scheme receive €62.50 per child availing of the scheme. A higher capitation grant of €73 per child applies when the the leader in each room has a level 7 or higher qualification. This is to be increased to €64.50 and €75 respectively in September 2016 (DCYA, 2016).
3.8.2 Class Sizes and Adult Ratios

By and large, the number of children in primary school classes in Ireland is too large. ‘Ready to Learn White Paper on Early Childhood Education’ (DES, 1999) stated the average class size should be 21.8:1, with an average class size of 30. In 2002, the Government committed to gradually apply an 18:1 ratio for all classes with pupils under nine years of age over the following five years (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002), but this ideal was not implemented and continues to be a voiced concern (National Parents Council, 2004; OECD, 2004; INTO, 2015). Class sizes affect the caregiving in the setting, as larger adult child ratios have negative impacts (Howes et al., 1992). The average class in primary education in OECD countries is 21.3 students, whilst in Ireland it is 24.4 (OECD, 2014b). Class size distinctions based on students’ stage of the primary education system do not exist. These large class sizes can present challenges for children moving from preschool settings into junior infant classes. In preschools the ratio of children to adults is 11:1. Outside of the preschool session, providers must apply the staff ratios in respect of full-time, part-time or sessional services as outlined in the ‘Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2016’. This means that children must be socially and emotionally prepared to cope with many more children present in their environment, whilst educators must be in a position to manage a large class size and sufficiently attend to, educate and care for all the children in the class rather than to merely ‘manage’ the class.

According to the then Minister for Education Jan O’Sullivan, the priority in the education system is to cater for increasing demographics rather than a reduction in class sizes (Jan O’Sullivan, Minister for Education, Dáil Questions, 8th October, 2014). The youth population in Ireland is increasing thus additional educators were employed to preserve the student teacher ratio. Nonetheless, more attention is needed in the area of class sizes as class sizes deal with the
number of class educators per class. In Ireland schools with junior and senior classes classified in the DEIS Urban Band 1 National Schools are allocated one educator for every 22 students, whilst for all other schools it is one educator for every 28 pupils. This however does not attend to children categorised as disadvantaged attending DEIS band 2 schools and DEIS Rural Band 1. The DEIS scheme fails to attribute the necessary attention to these children despite recognition that research indicates that classes with less than 20 students have been identified as more beneficial for minority students and disadvantaged students especially in the early years (Finn, 1998; Krueger et al., 2001). Class sizes were also a concern in a recent school readiness study in Ireland (Ring et al., 2015). The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy recognises the need to have lower adult-child ratios in the infant classes (DES, 2011b). The current Programme for a Partnership Government (Department of An Taoiseach, 2016) has outlined a reduction of the adult-child ratio as a priority. This should facilitate the children’s learning further and support them in moving into primary school by providing more continuity between preschool and primary school.

3.9 Summary

In exploring school readiness, both the past and present social, cultural and economic context needs to be presented in order to contextualise the research. During this research Ireland was in recession until 2013 when the economy began to recover. However, the effects of the recession and the austerity measures that followed continue to be felt. The low levels of unemployment that existed contributed to high child poverty rates and many families became dependent on social welfare payments. In addition to this the education system suffered cutbacks despite the focus placed on education to drive the economic recovery.
The ratification of the UNCRC in 1992 laid the foundations for the Government to become more aware of Children’s Rights and how they are upheld in Ireland. The evolution of ECCE began slowly in the 1990’s with the White Paper “Ready to Learn” with the acknowledgement that ECCE should produce a disposition and state of readiness to learn. The development of Siolta and Aistear has provided ECCE settings with a framework to guide their work in creating high quality environments and activities. Although a welcome introduction, many ECCE practitioners continue to struggle with the implementation of both frameworks because of a lack of training and support from the government in the area. The mandatory qualification requirement goes some way towards addressing this however a major award at level 5 can be considered relatively low and the differences between the qualifications of ECCE practitioners and Primary School Educators can also be seen as a quality issue.

Formal education is considered to begin in Ireland when children start primary school. However, in line with the demand for childcare and the recognition that the early years are the most formative the Government has replaced the 2006 Early Childcare Supplement provided to parents to ‘buy’ childcare with universal access to two free years of part-time preschool for all children. This has contributed to a more equal access to ECCE yet it does not create equal opportunity. Targeting populations is the approach utilised in an attempt to address the educational disadvantage experienced by children throughout Ireland. Although positive results are evident from both the Early Start Programme and the DEIS initiative the wider social constraints such as poverty experienced in the home and low parental support continue to hinder children’s educational advances.
Despite the delay in the publication of the Early Years Strategy, the number of strategies published since 2010 is promising, particularly the ‘Literacy and Numeracy Strategy’ and ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’. Commitments in these documents are paving the way for improved quality in the ECCE sector. A recent result of this is the introduction of the new language curriculum at primary school level. When published, Aistear was initially regarded to reflect the content of the junior curriculum. Nonetheless, it is now recognised that the principles and methodologies of Aistear need to be more evident in the primary school curriculum to support children as they progress from preschool to primary school.

Chapter Four details the research design and methods used for recruitment, data collection and data analysis employed in this research.
Chapter Four Methodology

4.1 Introduction
The purpose of this research study is to explore school readiness in disadvantaged schools. Taking into account the aims and objectives of this study, a mixed methods approach was decided as the most suitable research design. A case study using a mixed method approach examining the meaning of the concept of school readiness will uncover trends associated with designated disadvantaged schools and the voices and experiences of the stakeholders; educators, caregivers and children. This chapter outlines the research design, data collection methods, data analysis procedures and the ethical considerations and limitations involved in this research.

4.2 Central Research Questions
Four central research questions form the basis of this research:

- What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?
- What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?
- How is school readiness perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?
- What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?

4.3 Aims and Objectives
The aims and objectives of this study guide and supports the research to address the central research questions:

- Establish what Children, Caregivers and Educators think school readiness is and what inputs are important as children start school.
- Identify similarities and differences of perceptions between each group.
Chapter Four Methodology

- Illustrate children’s views of starting school.
- Investigate the basis for deciding when to start a child in school.
- Identify children’s school readiness levels.
- Examine factors that may influence the school readiness ratings of children.
- Make recommendations to organisations that work with caregivers, educators and children, and establish policy implications.

4.4 Purpose and Rationale Statement

Ireland falls behind many international countries in relation to research in the area of school readiness. Further to this, children’s views are rarely evident in school readiness research. Up to date research in the area of school readiness has only begun to surface in Ireland in the latter years of the last decade. This study will enhance and extend the depth of existing research available in Ireland. According to O’Kane (2007) previous research in Ireland has relied on surveys and forced choices and rankings, which may under- or over-estimate beliefs about the importance of readiness characteristics. This study uses semi-structured interviews to provide a rich description of perceptions of school readiness supplemented by school readiness ratings. My research stance resembles that of a modern qualitative research study in that research ‘honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation’ (Creswell, 2009, p.4) whilst also incorporating a deductive approach that accounts for previous research in this area.

In line with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ (1998) bioecological model, the paradigm underpinning this research can be classified as social constructivism. The world is complex and as a sociologist the sociology of knowledge must
concern itself with the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.15). The importance of experience in social and cultural contexts is accounted for within a constructivist approach and derived from an interpretive epistemological position. Thus, how people understand society and their experiences is of importance here. Each individual’s agency is subjective as they are active in their own environment. Individuals negotiate culturally defined structures of meaning. Knowledge is not received; information is received, considered and processed through reflection thereby creating meaning. Knowledge is experiential and situational. Thus, interactions are interdependent and influence knowledge. Such a relationship is exploratory as it is through the interpretation of the environment that reality is co-constructed and as a result multiple individual and collective perceptions exist (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In essence, applying constructivist theory identifies school readiness as a relative term, focusing on the interaction between characteristics of the individual child and the child’s environment (Meisels, 1998). This is the prime focus of this study as the child’s beliefs and the surrounding people’s beliefs may impact on that child’s school readiness. Exploring and presenting perceptions can support children’s school readiness as it can promote a mutual understanding of the different beliefs of each group. Multiple subjective experiences create a more complete picture of a phenomenon (See Chapter Two).
4.5 Research Design

An inductive theoretical drive (Morse, 2003) is the basis of this research due to the relevance of the topic of school readiness. In depth descriptive research of the central phenomenon is the outcome of this study. Existing literature is lacking a detailed insight of both an Irish context and children’s input in relation to the phenomenon of school readiness (See Chapter Two). The aim of this study is to explore school readiness perceptions in two disadvantaged schools in the West of Ireland. Generalising to the larger population is not the intention of this study, but rather creating comprehensive insights into school readiness that can be built upon in future studies.

This section of the chapter provides an overview of the research design. Subsequently, each specific element of the design is discussed in greater detail. Caregivers and educators involved in this study took part in semi-structured interviews in order to voice their perceptions of school readiness, starting school
and what impacts on school readiness. Both caregivers and primary school educators completed an adapted version of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) (Janus & Offord., 2007) to identify factors associated with level of school readiness of the children in the sample. In addition to this, caregivers also filled in a Caregiver Questionnaire to add some background information to the study. The children participating in this research took part in a ‘Draw and Tell’ activity. The children were asked to draw pictures about starting school and the important things about this experience for them. Each child was then asked to explain their pictures to me as I noted and recorded their responses. With permission from the children these drawings were taken and copied by myself. I then returned them to the children and together made a book of all their pictures.

In order to explore this topic, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments allows a more complete story to be uncovered as two angles are included; perceptions and ratings. Exploratory case studies allow for this. A case study is an:

‘Intensive examination of one phenomenon or a small number of instances of a phenomenon. The goal in a case study is deep understanding of a small number of cases rather than broad knowledge of data about variables drawn from many cases’ (Vogt et al., 2012, p.336).

Case studies are defined by sampling: a case study examines one instance (or sometimes, in a comparative case study, a small number of instances) of a given phenomenon. A case study focuses on experiential knowledge of the case and its context (Stake, 2005). The ‘case’ in this research is an event; beginning formal school in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) school. The perceptions and level of school readiness in the two schools are explored. As the sample (i.e. the stakeholders; the children, educators and caregivers involved in the experience) is the unit of analysis, this is a multiple case study.
where each group is embedded in the case (starting school) and context (one of the two schools involved in the study).

It is anticipated that the perceptions of school readiness and experiences provided by the stakeholders will uncover interrelated beliefs and practices related to school readiness. Yet at times it is clear that some stakeholders addressed their own interests rather than that of the research. In such instances I documented the subjective experiences and through the coding process in the analysis attempted to find a link between these interests (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Patterns of association relating sociodemographic factors to school readiness ratings are also an outcome of this case study as it is not possible to distinguish between cause and effect. Nonetheless these patterns are useful indicators of issues that need further probing.

4.5.1 Mixed Method Study
Social science research represents an attempt to provide reasonable assertions about human beings (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In addition to the notion that multiple realities exist based on people’s beliefs and experiences, multiple ways of representing these subjective realities is possible. School readiness can be explored through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative research pertains to induction, discovery, exploration, theory/hypothesis generation (Johnson & Onwuegbuzi, 2004). Qualitative research in basic terms refers to the collection of data that emphasises words. Furthering this, Bryman (2008, p.366) describes its interpretivist position; that stresses the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants. Its constructionist position implies that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals. Quantitative research concerns deduction, confirmation, theory/ hypothesis testing, explanation,
prediction, standardised data collection, and statistical analysis (Johnson & Onwuegbuzi, 2004). Quantitative research in general refers to systematic empirical investigations, incorporating the practices and norms of positivism which represents a view of social reality as an external, objective reality (Bryman, 2008, p.22). The epistemological positions and ontological implications of both the qualitative and quantitative paradigms are increasingly seen as flexible rather than fixed; giving rise to mixed methods research. In order to create useful conclusions, answering the four research questions of this study requires a mixing of methods that will allow for both types of findings to be illustrated.

Qualitative research is the dominant approach utilised in this study as the main focus of this study is to explore what school readiness means to the different stakeholders. This involves examining perceptions of each group of stakeholders as comparisons are core to qualitative data analysis strategies (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2002). However, quantitative methods also feature in order to supplement the qualitative aspects of the study by associating factors considered important in the school readiness literature to the children’s school readiness ratings. It is accepted that the less dominant strategy in a research design does not have to be a complete study in itself and the findings from such are used as indicators (Morse, 2003). The reason for combining both qualitative and quantitative data is to develop further knowledge and understanding of school readiness. Further to this, integrating the two types of data can advocate for improvements and strengthen each of the elements of the school readiness model (See Chapter Two).

Considering the employment of both qualitative and quantitative methods across the research questions, objectives, data collection, data analysis and data
interpretation, this research is described as a mixed method research project that intends to create a better understanding of school readiness. This confirms Onwuegbuzie & Leech’s (2004) observation that the goal of mixing is not necessarily to seek corroboration but instead to expand understanding. The purpose of using both qualitative and quantitative methods within this research is to expand the breadth of the study by further addressing concepts and measuring different facets of school readiness; different groups perceptions of school readiness, and the children’s level of school readiness. From this, inferences can be connected. Conducted in phases the results obtained from the quantitative research are expected to further inform the data previously obtained from the qualitative research methods and confirm or contest the school readiness literature. According to Bryman (2008, p.603) the two types of data obtained from mixed methods research should be ‘mutually illuminating’. Thus, combining aspects of each, mixed methods research allows for different ways of knowing about the broad phenomenon of school readiness in the one project. Johnson and Onwuegbuzi (2004) contend that mixed method research enables more effective educational research.

4.5.2 Sample
The sampling method employed was chosen before data collection in order to answer the research questions. Probability sampling techniques are typically used in quantitative studies to attain a degree of representativeness of the entire population. However, this research does not intend to generalise its findings to an entire population. The main purpose of this study is to explore school readiness perceptions in DEIS schools, therefore, purposive sampling was deemed more suitable as extensive narrative data is required, which is then supplemented by numeric data. Maxwell (1997, p.87) defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which,
“particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices”.

This also enables this research to compare data across the different stakeholders. Inputs from educators, children and caregivers are sought as they are the three stakeholders involved in the process of children starting school. These three natural groups were selected as the population of interest due to their ‘conceptual categorical characteristics’ (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 221). Utilising purposive sampling in this study involves the recruitment of a DEIS primary school in two designated disadvantaged areas in the West of Ireland. The principal and staff of the junior infant classrooms were the first gatekeepers approached in this study. Following their consent, junior infant students and their caregivers were targeted as well as staff in the preschools previously attended by the junior infant children as qualitative researchers should be familiar with the characteristics of ‘both sending and receiving contexts’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297). Accordingly, purposive sampling involves outlining the characteristics of the participants. These specifics are available within the sociodemographic information which is detailed later in this chapter.

The four to six age range used as the criterion for the children’s group is a result of Irish policy. A child may not start in primary school in Ireland until their fourth birthday and the compulsory school age for children is six. The children’s caregiver, their preschool educators, their current primary school educators and the principals of these schools are also included in this study as their perceptions feed into the topic of school readiness. The relationships between a child and their various environmental systems are important. Thus, these groups are also
part of each child’s ecological framework that contributes to a child’s development.

**4.5.3 Recruitment**

I previously worked with lone parents in line with my role as the Key Support Worker with lone parents on a back to education and employment course in Galway City Partnership (GCP). I continued contact with the organisation following commencement of this postgraduate research. In the early stages of my doctorate I attended an Incredible Years Training Workshop\(^\text{12}\) organised by GCP. This led to contact with practitioners in the local schools and services in the area and from this, connections were made with School A and maintained in order to recruit from the local DEIS school for the study. In addition to this, it was decided to include another site in the study. Due to School A’s designated disadvantaged status and its urban town location in the West of Ireland, it was decided to include a site similar to this. As a result, School B was chosen. Contact was made with the principals of the local primary schools in area B through the School Completion Officer. As a result of this School B, another DEIS school provisionally agreed to take part. Following on from this I met the principal of each of the two schools in May 2013. I explained the research and distributed the information sheets and consent forms. The junior infant educators in each school read and signed indicating their agreement to participate in the study. Children who started junior infants in each of these schools in September 2013, and their caregivers were then approached and recruited. Staff in the local preschools attended by these children and outlined by the caregivers were then

\(^{12}\) The Incredible Years Programme is a series of evidenced based programmes for parents, teachers and children that aim to promote social, emotional, and academic competence in children. It was developed by Carolyn Webster Stratton.
approached and invited to take part in the study under the category of educators. Consent procedures are outlined in Section 4.10.1.

4.5.4 Profile of Schools and Participants
School A and School B are catholic schools and identified as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools (See Chapter Three) as they are based in designated disadvantaged areas. None of the schools had preschools attached.

The two schools are based in two of the 51 areas designated as the most disadvantaged in Ireland. School A is categorised within the DEIS band 1 (where the level of disadvantage is highest) and School B is categorised within DEIS band 2. Home school liaison teachers, parent associations and parent rooms are in place in both schools.

- School A has two junior infant classes made up of 40 students in total.
- School B has four junior infant classes made up of 82 students in total.
- Intervention programmes run in each school – the Incredible Years Programme and the Parent Early Education Programme (PEEP) Programme.
- All of the 16 educators are female.
- The primary school educators’ teaching experience ranges from novice to experienced.
- Out of the six classrooms one has a special needs assistant.
- Of the 8 primary school educators three fell into the 26-35 age range, four fell into the 36-45 age range and one fell into the 45+ age range.
- Of the 8 preschool educators two fell into the 26-35 age range, six fell into the 45+ age range.
Chapter Four Methodology

- At a minimum, all of the primary school educators had a Bachelors of Education, seven of the preschool educators had a level 6 qualification and one preschool educator had a degree in Early Childhood studies.

Taking into account the children in this study:
- The 88 children who took part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity were aged between four and six in line with Irish policy.
- Of the 40 children who EDI’s were completed for the children were aged between three years and 11 months and five years and five months at the start of September 2013.
- The average age of the children starting school is four years and seven months.
- Considering gender 57.5% of the children were female whilst 42.5% were male.
- 27.5% of children were considered to speak English as a second language (ESL).
- A quarter of the children were considered to be members of the Traveller Community.
- Based on the quantitative data collected on the 40 children, 70% of the children attended preschool, 7.5% did not. The educators were unsure if 7.5% of the sample had attended preschool whilst the remaining 15% were unaccounted for.

Based on the 20 caregivers involved in this study:
- 20% were males and 80% were females.
- The mean age of the caregivers when their first child was born was 23.5 years old.
- 85% rated their own health positively.
Chapter Four Methodology

- 40% of the caregivers were married, 40% were living with their partner, 10% were separated, 5% were single never/married and 5% were divorced.
- This broke down into 15% one parent families and 85% two parent families.
- The average number of people living in the household was 3.95.
- Amongst the 20 caregivers, 15% did not state at what age they left school, 30% of the caregivers left school at the age of 17, 25% left at the age of 18, 5% left at the age of 13, 14, 16, 19, 23, and 26 respectively.
- 55% of the sample completed the leaving cert and 5% completed the junior cert. After school 70% received a qualification.
- The highest qualification received broke down into 40% for a diploma award, 10% for a level 7 degree, 15% for a level 8 degree and 5% for a level 9 degree.

All of the caregivers stated that they felt welcome in their child’s school.

- 50% the caregivers had attended a general school meeting
- 5% had volunteered in the school
- 25% attended a caregiver programme or workshop.

Nineteen of the caregivers had one child starting junior infants in September 2013, one caregiver had two children starting junior infants in September 2013. Of the 20 caregivers:

- 52.4% believed their child(ren) to be in excellent health
- 33.3% believed their child(ren) to be in very good health
- 9.5% believed their child(ren) to be in good health
- 4.8% believed their child(ren) to be in fair health.
Chapter Four Methodology

Although none of the 21 children were identified as having special needs by their Caregivers many attend support services or are on the waiting list to do so:

- 23.8% accessed speech and language services and 4.8% were on the waiting list;
- 4.8% were on the waiting list for blind or low vision services;
- 9.5% accessed occupational or physical therapy and 4.8% were on the waiting list;
- 9.5% accessed hearing services and 9.5% were on the waiting list;
- 4.8% attended programmes/services for behavioural issues;
- 4.8% attended programmes/services for developmental issues;
- 4.8% were on a waiting list to access programmes/services for English as a second language.
- In relation to preschool attendance 9.5% of the children did not attend preschool prior to starting junior infants.

Considering the demographics of the families involved in the qualitative data collection,

- 75% were Irish.
- 5% were Polish.
- 5% were Lithuanian.
- 5% were Pakistani.
- 5% were Malawian.
- 5% were Filipino Irish.

Considering household income, the caregivers reported that

- 10% had an income between €201-250, 5% had an income between €251-300, 65% had an income of €300+, whilst 20% did not state their income.
15% did not identify their source of income, 35% stated that state benefits are their main source of income and 50% stated wages as their main source of income.

- 35% stated they were working: 15% full time and 20% part time
- 40% of their spouses were working: 25% full time and 15% part time.

Material deprivation was evident in numerous households involved in this study.

- 5% could not afford a roast joint once a week
- 20% could not afford new rather than second hand clothes
- 5% could not afford two pairs of strong shoes for each member of the family
- 45% could not afford to replace worn out furniture
- 5% were without heating at some stage in the last year
- 10% could not afford to keep the home adequately warm
- 20% could not afford to have family or friends over once a month for a meal or a drink
- 35% could not afford to buy presents for family or friends at least once a year
- 45% could not afford time out in the last two weeks (prior to data collection) for entertainment.

4.5.5 Administration
This research focused on the school year 2013-2014. I had contacted School A and School B by phone and in person in May 2013 to begin to formalise the progression of the research. I followed up on this at the end of August and the start of September. From the middle of September, I was present in each school for one day a week. I contacted preschools in each of the areas via phone and email to recruit preschool educators. Interviews were conducted with the
caregivers and educators from the schools and preschools up until December 2013. The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity took place in the middle of October, four weeks after I introduced myself to the children and spent time each week in the classroom. This completed the qualitative data collection. I returned to the schools in March 2014 to distribute and explain the EDI to the primary school educators and the EDI was sent home with the children whose caregiver previously took part in the semi-structured interview in the previous term. I also carried out two follow up phone calls to the caregivers to ensure they received the EDI, to explain the instrument and answer any questions. I collected the EDIs at the beginning of April 2014.

Out of 122 children in the junior infant classes, 88 were present on the data collection days. All 88 children assented to take part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity that took place in their classroom. All 88 drew pictures and 82 chose to tell me about the pictures. All the children in the junior infant classrooms were given the caregivers information packs by their primary school educator to bring home and give to their caregivers. As a result of this two caregivers came forth and indicated their wish to take part in the research. A further 18 caregivers were recruited from meeting and talking to the caregivers about the research on the school grounds. Nineteen of the caregivers completed the Caregiver Questionnaire and semi-structured interview in a room allocated to me in each of the schools. One caregiver completed the process at their place of work. Of the 20 EDI’s sent to the caregivers 17 completed and returned the EDI’s. All the eight primary school educators approached (the junior infant educators and the principals) in the two schools agreed to participate in the research and completed the process in the school. A total of eight preschool educators took part in the semi-structured interviews that took place in their place of work. Four preschools were contacted in the area of School A. One preschool educator from
three of the four preschools agreed to participate. Five preschools were contacted in the area of School B. One preschool educator from three of the five preschools agreed to participate. In the fourth preschool that agreed to take part two preschool educators participated in the interview.

4.6 Methods Used to Collect Qualitative Data

Qualitative research is deemed appropriate where a new field of study or new informers are examined. The methods used in this study are semi-structured interviews and the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity.

4.6.1 Research with Children

In the past research largely focused on ‘the child’ as the object of the study rather than a subjective view that takes into account the active role children play in their own lives. Sociologists believe childhood is socially constructed yet children are active agents in this (Prout & James, 1990) (See Chapter Two). Shaw (1996) concludes that children’s views must be accepted as a legitimate, lived reality in the world.

Progressively, a children’s rights perspective has come to the fore, in which listening to children is essential. In Ireland, the Constitution was amended in 2012 introducing Article 42 A, thus recognising the rights of all children in Ireland. Accepting that children have rights suggests that children are capable of participating in research. Recognising children as social agents evokes the understanding that children are competent contributors in research and the responsibility lies with the researcher to facilitate their participation. Thus, these theoretical perspectives have influenced the researchers’ view of children and the need to enable their involvement in this research and include their perceptions of school readiness. In seeking to understand school readiness it is
anticipated that children will be supported fully in their participation in society by promoting their voice and agency in conjunction with caregivers’ and educators’ voice and agency. This approach accepts Waksler’s (1991, p.63) proposition:

‘In everyday life we adults take for granted that children as a category know less than adults, have less experience, are less serious, and are less important than adults in the ongoing work of everyday life. I suggest that for the word less we as sociologists try substituting the word different and consider the theoretical and methodological implications.’

Childhood is not universal therefore children have a range of different experiences during their childhood. The collection of child specific data on children’s lives through the Growing Up in Ireland study\(^{13}\) acknowledges and documents the variability of children’s experiences Ireland. This pluralism of children’s experiences underpins ECCE in many Western Societies (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). This is evident in the flexibility of Siolta\(^{14}\) (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear\(^{15}\) (NCCA, 2009), however the optional nature of adopting the framework and putting the guidelines into practice undermines the progressive features of the policy. As this study is context specific, based in two designated disadvantaged schools in the West of Ireland the researcher cautions against generalisation of the findings but also acknowledges the contribution of the exploratory nature of the research and appreciates it as the beginning of a form of model building where school readiness as a relatively non-researched area in Ireland is given a preliminary mapping (Wengraf, 2001) from a marginalised and minority perspective.

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\(^{13}\) The Growing Up in Ireland study is a study of approximately 20,000 children across Ireland examining children’s experiences and development.

\(^{14}\) Siolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland

\(^{15}\) Aistear is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland
Children are increasingly seen as credible informants and as having the capacity not only to be full participants in the research process but also to take part in research as researchers (Kellett, 2005). Children as young as three years of age are capable of providing detailed and accurate reports of events; the data obtained from any investigative interview is determined by a wide range of factors including the context of the interview and the questioning style of the researcher (Ceci et al., 2002). The primary qualitative method of eliciting young children’s views in this study is the ‘Draw and Tell’ technique/activity. The objective of this is to explore children’s thoughts and experiences of starting school and school readiness. From the early preschool years, children can remember and recount their own past experiences (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Fivush et al., 1995; Stein et al., 1997). However, young children can struggle to spontaneously retrieve information from their memory. Recognising this, research has begun to use different methods in order to access children’s own perspectives and experiences. Different interview strategies elicit different types of information and influence the quality of the information (Salmon, 2001). The most effective retrieval cues for younger children are likely to be sensory or perceptual rather than semantic or verbal, to have a precise overlap with aspects of a specific event (Ackerman, 1981, 1985; Pipe et al., 1993). Cues and props such as toys, photographs and drawings may add to children’s responses by acting as aids to retrieve and report information (Salmon, 2001).

4.6.2 ‘Drawing’ and ‘Telling’ in Research

Drawing is frequently considered to be an enjoyable activity that most children can take part in. Drawing is usually familiar to young children and it can stimulate their thoughts before they share them. An advantage of drawing highlighted by Burt (1921) is that it is less dependent on learned skills such as arithmetic or writing (cited in Malchiodi, 1998) which makes it suitable to be
Chapter Four Methodology

used with preschool children and children who have just started school. In geography children’s drawings have been used to document their ‘ways of seeing’ their environments (Matthews, 1995) highlighting the importance of the influence of the social context, which in this study is the home, preschool and school environment. Focusing solely on an adult’s interpretation of children’s drawings can result in the retrieval of limited data or incorrect interpretations. In the absence of children's verbal input, interpreting their drawings can be a challenge (Butler et al., 1995).

The drawing allows for the expression of the association between symbols and their meanings as construed by the artist (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Creating a ‘Tell’ component in research facilitates children to have their voice feature in the results. The accounts obtained from a ‘Draw and Tell’ activity are viewed as an indicator of the children’s experiences rather than a secondary elaboration of the experience (Burgess & Hartman, 1993). Conducive conditions must combat the imbalance of power between children and adults. Children can control the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity by directing the topic of interest and the duration as they explain their pictures and also have the opportunity to add extra verbal information (Butler et al., 1995). Drawings can facilitate communication between a child and adult where the child may feel uncomfortable or unable to express their thoughts and experiences. Drawing provides the child with a focus other than the interviewer, and may therefore ease the social demands of the interview (Butler et al., 1995; Thomas & Jolley, 1998). It is a nonintrusive indirect approach. The drawing activity acts as a medium; the main focus is then placed on the verbal report that ensues.

It has been found that in research, drawings enhance the amount of information reported (Wesson & Salmon, 2001). The outcome of the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity
is an account of children’s voices. A free-narrative account is a story of the interviewee’s experiences about a situation or event that enlightens the researcher who is uninformed about these activities to understand precisely what happened according to the interviewee (Powell & Snow, 2007). At times, information may not be spontaneously provided necessitating some questioning and or prompts. Open ended questions and prompts enable children to produce a free narrative based on the area of interest. Specific questions or repeated questions for recall may lead to an increase in information quantity at the expense of information quality (Elischberger & Roebers, 2001). Excessive questioning can therefore be distracting. Thus, a modest number of open ended verbal prompts and questions are effective ways of eliciting accurate additional information with children (Brown & Pipe, 2003).

4.6.3 The ‘Draw and Tell’ Activity

The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity is a child centered and child directed approach to self-report. It incorporates children’s drawings for their facilitative effect rather than as a direct method for interpretation. As previously noted drawing enhances children’s verbal reports. Considering the young age of the children involved in this study it was believed that incorporating a drawing activity with a verbal activity would create a more relaxed environment and produce more information than solely questioning the children. Underlying this study is a commitment to uphold the voices of children and value their contribution in research. The ‘Draw and Tell’ method was coined by Driessnack (2005) following a meta-analysis of literature and studies that introduce drawing to young children before they are interviewed. In this study, the drawings children produce about starting school are used as a stimulus for ‘talk’. Children explain their drawings removing the researcher’s need to make interpretations, as a result the drawings are not part of the presentation of the findings. The two parts, ‘draw’ and ‘tell’ also allow
Chapter Four Methodology

children more opportunities to communicate comfortably, enhancing the breadth and depth of data collected and creating a more extensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Hanniffy & Millar, 2015).

I was present for an hour during classroom activities in each of the classrooms one day a week for a four-week period prior to conducting the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity as it is essential to build a rapport with the children. Children report more inaccurate details when probed by a perceived authority figure (e.g. Tobey & Goodman, 1992), rapport can reduce children’s uneasiness and improve their accuracy. Following this I conducted a ‘circle time’ activity with the children to talk about the research with them during the first week of October 2013. ‘Circle time’ involved the creation of a circle with all the children either sitting on the floor or on chairs in the classroom. I talked to the children about the project using the Information Leaflet for Children in Junior Infants (see Appendix 1). I also used school related items including a blank page, crayons, books and a school bag to help explain the project to the children. The children were then given the opportunity to ask me any questions about the project. The children were then encouraged to go home and talk to their caregiver about the project. Each child was given an envelope with information about the project including the Information Leaflet for Children in Junior Infants and a Caregiver consent form (see Appendix 1 & Appendix 2) to bring home to help them and their caregiver decide if they can take part. The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity was conducted in the classrooms the following week based on caregiver consent and child assent.

The time period between starting school in September and conducting the activity in October was to allow children to adapt to this new environment and to build a familiarity and rapport with me. It may also have enabled children to
familiarise and/or develop vocabulary related to school. This may have improved their description of their experience, as young children are still relative novices in their language and cognitive development (Salmon, 2001). Children in the junior infant class in each school were asked to draw pictures about starting school and the important things about this experience for them. I provided the art materials on a table in the centre of the room. Children were encouraged to get up from their table and choose the materials they would like to use to draw their picture about starting school. As the children were drawing their picture I circulated the room and complimented the children’s efforts. They were given approximately 10 minutes to draw their picture after which the educator resumed regular class activities. I then either placed myself at an individual desk within the classroom or circulated the classroom and sat beside each child. Each child was asked to individually explain their picture, what starting school was like for them and whether they liked taking part in the activity. Probes were also employed when necessary (see Appendix 3). I recorded the children’s responses on paper in accordance with the child’s own assent and where the child’s caregiver had not withdrawn them from this. Following the completion of the activity I took the children’s drawing and copied them. I returned to the schools and classrooms the third and fourth week in October with the children’s original drawings. Together a book of these drawings was collated. This book remains at the school and is collectively owned by the junior infant classes.

4.6.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research instruments in this study to collect qualitative data as I sought to elicit the educators’ and caregivers’ perceptions of school readiness. The selection of these participants aimed to
represent the views and experiences of those involved in the broad phenomenon of school readiness in two DEIS schools.

Hakim (1987) asserts the significance of qualitative methods in accessing individual’s personal accounts of their opinions, attitudes, behaviour and motivations. Qualitative research supports the use of interviews as a research method, advocating the need to understand the social world by examining people’s interpretations of it. Thus, interviews are one of the most widely used methods of qualitative research. An interview is an interaction between two or more people where the interviewer acquires information offered by the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews are employed when eliciting people’s views, opinions, attitudes and opinions (Gray, 2004). Semi-structured interviews follow a flexible format and involve the recording of the participants’ responses to a number of open ended questions. This allows the researcher to engage with information that is not readily available or accessible through standardised questionnaires or closed questions as was the previous practice in many Irish studies on this topic. Neuman (2003) highlights the advantages of face-to-face interviews as having the highest response rate and permitting the longest questionnaires. Following on from the social aspect of the interview open ended questions have a number of advantages; they can be used when the researcher wishes to uncover what the respondent views as appropriate answer categories; they allow the respondent to answer adequately in their own way; they can be used when there are too many potential answer categories to list on a questionnaire; they are preferable for complex issues that cannot be condensed; and they allow more opportunity for self-expression by the respondent (Bailey, 1982, p.125-126).
Chapter Four Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the caregivers and educators who consented to be involved in this study. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ place of work, or the school to reduce any disruption to their schedules and to deter any feeling of unease that may have occurred in an unfamiliar environment. Participants are unidentifiable throughout the study. A prepared interview script guaranteed that the same topics and areas of interest were covered in each interview (see Appendix 4). In designing the interview questions, I used the literature and my past experience of engaging with professionals and working with lone parents as a guide to choosing terminology that is relevant and comprehensible to the target groups. Familiar language facilitates respondents’ ability to answer questions thus improving the quality of the data. The scripted open ended questions created opportunities for new areas to be explored if topics that had not been pre-empted by myself emerged such as the issue of bullying. In order to document the interviews for future reference and analysis all interviews were audio recorded as consent was obtained for such. This also facilitated an increased level of interaction with the participant. An audio recorder was switched on at the beginning of the interview and switched off after the interview had been concluded.

Despite the small number of difficulties that arose, such as two caregivers not turning up at the arranged time for the interview, and initial shyness the interviews proved an effective research tool in extracting information sought for this research. Semi-structured interviews with caregivers focused on their perceptions of: school readiness, their impact on the children’s level of school readiness and the factors that contribute to children’s school readiness. Semi-structured interviews with educators focused on their perceptions of: school readiness, what impacts on the children’s level of school readiness, and the schools’ involvement in the current preparation of the children for entering
formal schooling. These semi-structured interviews were conducted from September to December 2013. A total of 20 caregiver interviews took place. On average these interviews lasted 20 minutes 30 seconds, with the shortest lasting 11 minutes 40 seconds and the longest lasting 54 minutes 7 seconds. A total of 15 educator interviews took place; one of the interviews included two educators. Therefore 16 voices appear in the findings. On average these interviews lasted 27 minutes 1 second, with the shortest lasting 15 minutes 41 seconds and the longest lasting 47 minutes 16 seconds.

4.7 Qualitative Data Analysis – Thematic Analysis

‘Rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualizes the subject matter’ (Reicher & Taylor, 2005). Thematic analysis guided by coding principles was chosen as a suitable method to analyse the qualitative data collected from the ‘tell’ component of the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity and the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is described as ‘a way of seeing’ (Boyatzis, 1998, p.1). Advancing the descriptive nature of thematic analysis allows for theme connections and standalone themes to be evident in the theory that emerges from the data. Therefore, a number of issues related to different aspects of school readiness were uncovered on the surface level that was then integrated into a broader understanding.

In line with an inductive approach to theory case content evolves throughout the study, even in the last phases of writing (Stake, 2005). Although case researchers usually bring some expectations and knowledge to the event they discover that some of it may be of little consequence (Smith, 1994 cited in Stake, 2005, p.456) as the data that arises in the actual study is of core concern and more useful in building the theory. The adequacy of the data relates to reaching saturation point rather than the number of interviews conducted in qualitative research. This
occurred in this study where no new sufficient insights were emerging. Following on from this, the researcher’s interpretation must be supported by the data. Themes derived from the manifest level as they were semantic and directly observable in the data but also from the latent level, implicit data underlying the topic of school readiness (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis involves the collection of data and analysing it for codes and patterned themes. Semantic content augments the voice of the participants yet effective thematic analysis requires an understanding of ‘the latent meaning of the manifest themes observable within the data’ (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p.57) to facilitate an extensive interpretation. In this study, data analysis began as the data was being collected; I kept a diary of thoughts throughout the process and re-visited this diary frequently as concepts began to take formation. The audio and written recordings from the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity and the semi-structured interviews were transcribed to facilitate analysis. Comprehensive thematic analysis involves imposing a systematic strategy of coding principles and steps to adhere to. Using Nvivo Version 10, I transcribed the data and organised the codes derived from the data analysis processes. The thematic theory generated by the data developed as a result of coding. ‘Coding is two simultaneous activities: mechanical data reduction and analytic categorization of data into themes’ (Neuman, 2003). This involved a number of phases some of which are iterative where constant revision and comparison took place similar to the process of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The generation of codes precede and contribute to the development of themes. Codes are the interesting concepts that exist in the data, ‘the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). Memos were also created alongside the codes. Memos outline the researcher’s thoughts and ideas.
about the codes (Neuman, 2003) and are useful in outlining the development of themes. The thematic analysis undertaken in this research adapted and integrated the coding phases outlined by Boyatzis (1998), Neuman (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2006).

4.7.1 Coding Procedure

- Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data by engaging with the transcription process using Nvivo. Sub-samples were identified based on the key independent variable of the study; Caregiver, Educator and Children. Each group served as a unit of analysis. Also, by actively reading and re-reading the transcripts and field notes I became immersed in the data. I highlighted interesting text and formed a list of preliminary memos based on these readings. Such memos included ‘the importance of play’, ‘big deal starting school’ and ‘many undeclared expectations placed on children, caregivers and educators’. This was the first identification of possible meanings and patterns that may be available for future coding and theory development. The unit of coding is the perceptions of school readiness.

- Next, text relating to the research questions and reoccurring unrelated text was selected through initial open coding which identified abstract codes that were driven by the data in the three sub-samples. Codes such as ‘resources’ and ‘curriculum’ were outlined and matched with extracts of the interviews. All extracts were then grouped under each code and sub-sample they related to, creating a coding frame. 78 codes were identified from the caregiver semi-structured interviews, 77 codes were identified from the educator semi-structured interviews and 28 codes were identified from the children’s responses from the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity. At this stage two coded transcripts from each sub-sample was
independently coded and cross checked by the supervisor of this study to readjust and refine codes. An example of this is evident where I coded data as ‘happiness’ and after cross checking with the supervisor the code was refined to ‘feelings’.

- Where only a small number of extracts were available under certain codes such as religion, transcripts were revisited. This enabled me to uncover matching text that was initially overlooked and decide whether or not the code was important. During this axial coding, initial codes were also reviewed. I applied the codes to a number of transcripts on two separate occasions to ensure that codes could be applied consistently. This imposes a minor test-retest of reliability (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

- Subsequently, I returned to the determined list of codes and extracts, and examined the repeating ideas, exploring their connections. The aim of this step is to establish if the data fits the code. From this, some small related codes were combined such as ‘eating’ and ‘toilet’ subsumed under ‘independence skills’ whilst other larger codes were divided into separate codes such as home environment became ‘activities at home’ and ‘caregiver’s knowledge of school readiness’. Codes now consisted of a title, a description of its area of concern, indicators, and text based extracts that act as indicators. For example, the code ‘physical independence’ relates to children’s ability to use their motor skills to look after their needs in the school environment, “having them confident about using the bathroom themselves…makes life easier for your child”. Thus, concepts became more developed and distinct themes began to emerge from the data as well as the connections between the themes. Codes that did not relate to the research questions were discarded. Based on the similarities of a large amount of codes across the caregiver and
educator data similar themes were identified for each group and are therefore jointly presented in the findings.

- The last step of coding involved selective coding where I for a final time returned to the transcripts to scan the data for additional connections and cases to illustrate the themes.

- Overarching themes were then named to describe the core idea of its content derived from the list of codes (See Thematic Map, Appendix 5). For example, the theme ‘Ready Children’ describes the skills believed to be necessary for children starting school in order to fit in held by the caregivers and educators in relation to the five domains of school readiness. Some codes were relevant to a number of themes. Once again the supervisor of the study independently checked my designated themes to ensure a level of interrater reliability.

Although Hayes et al. (1997) identified differences in the cultural expectations and distinctions in meaning between preschool educators and primary school educators this was less apparent in this research. Therefore, the perceptions of the preschool educators and primary school educators are grouped together. Nonetheless when necessary, distinctions are made between preschool educators and primary school educators.

4.7.2 Theory Development
The final step in thematic analysis is the interpretation of the identified themes in line with theoretical constructs creating a theoretical framework based on the findings. Asking “What were the lessons learned” initiates this process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Chapter Four Methodology

- Reviewing the existing theories present in the literature enabled me to understand the similar themes identified in this study, yet also recognise diverging themes.

- At this point, my memos provided some of the linkages between the themes and my theoretical thinking (Neuman, 2003). The thematic map (See Appendix 5) demonstrated the relationship between the themes. Combined with the literature this created the argument for the importance of each theme and this then resulted in the development of a concrete theoretical framework derived from the data.

- The discussion in this thesis consists of this developed theoretical framework that materialised in the analysis that was then integrated with the literature. The themes and codes were demonstrated using the anonymised text extracts obtained from the interviews in the findings of this report (See Chapter Five and Chapter Six). The analysis details and illustrates the ‘story’ each theme tells in relation to the research questions.

Parallel steps were undertaken in the analysis of the transcripts from the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity and the semi-structured interviews. The ‘Draw’ aspect of the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity is intended to stimulate the children’s thoughts and conversation with the researcher. Therefore, the children’s drawings are used for facilitation purposes (i.e. to generate data) rather than as raw data where interpretation of such may result in skewed findings. For that reason, the drawings were not analysed. The data collected from this activity is based on my conversations with the children about the pictures they drew about starting school (the ‘Tell’ component of the data collection). The content of the Tell component served as the data that was also thematically analysed (See Thematic Map, Appendix 5).
4.7.3 Quality, Reliability and Validity

Kvale (1996, p.145) identifies six quality criteria that are important when conducting interviews:

1. The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.
2. Short interviewer questions and long participant answers.
3. The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.
4. The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.
5. The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview.
6. The interview is “self-communicating.”

On this basis semi-structured interviews were utilised as they allow a flexible approach to be taken. The semi-structured interviews and the ‘Tell’ conversations with the children were designed to guide the participants to broach the subject topic. Open ended questions in the interviews were short and clear, whilst probing occurred with both caregivers and educators to extend the amount of data and clarify meanings. A script was designed and loosely followed to guarantee that all interviews considered the same areas. Probing was also used with the children in relation to describing their drawings. The semi-structured interviews were recorded by a laptop. This allowed me to listen intently to the participants and follow up on the meanings of statements that may have been unclear. Checking with participants ensured that data would be interpreted correctly during data analysis.
Chapter Four Methodology

Being explicit is a methodical virtue (Bauer, 2000, p.136). Reliability is consistency of interpretation in thematic analysis. As a mechanism it can address concerns relating to the role of the researcher within the research and data, and justifies the interpretations made. Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) believe that interpretations must be grounded in the data and qualitative data should be transparent, coherent and communicable rather than reliable and valid. The social world is multi-dimensional therefore so should explanations (Mason, 2006, p.20). A transparent data analysis process is essential in order to outline the steps taken to arrive at the theory that has been developed. The steps taken in the analysis are detailed as are depictions of examples of this including the building of codes and the thematic map.

In order to avoid contamination in research, consistency of judgement is necessary. This addresses consistency of judgement among various viewers (interrater reliability) and consistency of judgement over time, events and settings (Boyatzis, 1998). Independent judgement among a number of viewers enables interrater reliability yet this depends on the number of people who have access to the data. As this is a doctorate thesis a research team was not available. Consequently, the number of people who have access to the data is limited. Thus, interrater reliability is low but I cross checked codes and themes with the supervisor of the study. Consistency of judgement over time, events and settings is based on the same observation being made over a number of different times or in different settings (Boyatzis, 1998). Using a school in two different designated disadvantaged sites enables the findings to be judged across settings, confirming consistency.
Chapter Four Methodology

4.8 Methods Used to Collect Quantitative Data

The quantitative data method utilised in this study is the Early Development Instrument: A Population-based Measure for Communities (Janus & Offord, 2007) and the Caregiver Questionnaire.

4.8.1 Early Development Instrument: A Population-based Measure for Communities (Janus & Offord, 2007)

The Early Development Instrument: A Population-based Measure for Communities (EDI) (Janus & Offord, 2007) (See Appendix 6) measures children’s school readiness to learn and ability to meet the task demands of school in five domains: physical health and well-being; social knowledge and competence; emotional health/maturity; language and cognitive development; and general knowledge and communication skills. The EDI incorporates the more recent holistic definition of school readiness. It was developed at the Offord Centre of Child Studies at McMaster University in Canada with the specific aim of designing an instrument to measure school readiness from a comprehensive perspective (Guhn et al., 2007). The combination of the five domains in a single instrument builds on other available measures such as the Gesell School Readiness Test (Ilg et al., 1978) and the Lollipop Test (Chew & Lang, 1990) both of which do not include a social-emotional measure nor are validated to screen children who were not ready for school. It is frequently used in Canada and has also been used in many other countries including America, Australia, New Zealand, and Jamaica. The adapted Australian version of the EDI became the national measure of early childhood development in 2008 (Goldfeld et al., 2009).

An evaluation of the implementation of its findings demonstrated that it helps promote the importance of attending to early childhood development, assist
communities to work more collaboratively and create plans to work towards improving outcomes for children (Sayers et al., 2007). The UNICEF Report Card on Child Well-being in Rich Countries (2013) highlighted the potential of using the EDI as a national measure to accumulate adequate information on children’s development. An adapted version of the instrument was used in a recent study in Ireland (Curtin et al., 2013). This was the first study to explore the potential of using the full EDI as an indicator of early child development in Ireland. It concluded that the EDI is capable of functioning in the Irish context due to its reliability and normative data. The findings suggest that over one quarter of the children in the study were developmentally vulnerable and that scores varied in relation to socioeconomic, environmental and ecological circumstances (Curtin et al., 2013).

A shorter version of the EDI was used in a longitudinal study in Ireland from 2008 to 2014 (UCD Geary Institute, 2016). The Short-Early Development Instrument (S-EDI) (Janus et al., 2005), is composed of 48 core items. Following consultation with Magdalena Janus, a creator of both the EDI and the S-EDI, I was advised to use the full EDI as its psychometric properties are more suitable for international comparability than the S-EDI. The full version of the EDI that was adapted to an Irish context in relation to terminology (Curtin et al., 2013) was utilised in this study. The purpose of gathering data using the EDI is to outline the school readiness ratings of the children reported by their educators, and identify likely associations that impact on these ratings at the individual level such as age and gender to the micro level of school, family and community. These associations are then used to enhance the discussion (See Chapter Eight) of the perceptions obtained.
Chapter Four Methodology

The five domains/scales of the EDI are outlined below:

Physical health and well-being includes:
- gross and fine motor skills
- adequate energy levels for classroom activities
- independence in looking after own needs
- daily living skills

Social knowledge and competence includes:
- enthusiasm to try new experiences
- knowledge of acceptable behaviour
- ability to control own behaviour
- respect
- cooperation
- ability to play and work with other children

Emotional health/maturity includes:
- ability to reflect before acting
- ability to deal with feelings at the age-appropriate level
- ability to be empathetic

Language and cognitive development includes:
- reading awareness
- age-appropriate reading and writing skills
- age-appropriate numeracy skills
- ability to used memory stored information

Communication skills and general knowledge includes:
- skills to communicate needs and wants appropriately
Chapter Four Methodology

- symbolic use of language
- story telling
- age-appropriate knowledge about the world

The EDI consists of 104 core items grouped into five scales and two indicators of special skills and special problems. It can be used with children from the ages of four to seven. Each item consists of a statement about a skill, disposition or behaviour, and a two-point or three-point Likert-type response format. The questionnaire can be administered to both educators and caregivers. According to Janus & Offord (2007), even though parent ratings correlate well with teacher ratings, teachers and early childhood educators are more accurate in their responses in relation the children’s abilities. An adapted version of the instrument previously used in Cork (Curtin et al., 2013) (See Appendix 7) was administered to the educators and caregivers involved in this study to gauge the school readiness of the children in each junior infant class. The EDI took approximately 20 minutes to complete. 122 EDIs were distributed to the educators, 46 were returned, a 38% response rate. 20 EDIs were distributed to the caregivers, 18 were returned, an 90% response rate.

In order to highlight possible factors associated with the school readiness ratings obtained, a number of variables were chosen in line with previous research: caregiver involvement in child’s literacy development; children’s attendance at preschool; social welfare dependency; caregiver education; caregiver workshop attendance; sleep duration; television screen time; child’s age; child’s gender; English as a second language, Traveller status; area safety; and playground safety (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Magnuson et al., 2004; Janus & Duku, 2007; Lapointe et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2008; Ravid et al., 2009; Janus & Duku, 2010; Doyle et al. 2010; Muhajarine et al., 2011; McKeown et al., 2014). The
majority of this information was obtained through the Caregiver Questionnaire. The EDI identifies the child’s age, gender, ethnicity and preschool attendance.

4.8.2 The Caregiver Questionnaire
A questionnaire for caregivers based on the Kindergarten Parent Survey (Offord Centre for Child Studies, 2003) has been adapted in relation to the terminology used for the purpose of this research. It is not considered to be a standardized instrument. For the purpose of this research the adapted version has been renamed as the ‘Caregiver Questionnaire’ (See Appendix 9). It aims to obtain background information and basic socio-demographic information of the families involved in the study. It contains 45 questions and is completed by caregivers, covering aspects of family life and make-up, neighbourhood, income, health, and caregiver education levels. This data was used in two ways; to identify possible influential factors associated with the school readiness ratings obtained from the EDI; and to identify the profile of the caregivers. The Caregiver Questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete. 20 questionnaires were distributed to the caregivers and 20 were returned, a 100% response rate.

4.9 Quantitative Data Analysis
The analysis of the quantitative data collected plays a supportive role to the qualitative data and is used to answer the research question “What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?”. It serves to further inform the qualitative data that identifies the perceptions of each group of participants. It enhances the obtained perceptions by identifying influential factors that are associated with the school readiness level of the group of children using the variables from the Caregiver Questionnaire and the EDI school readiness ratings. Under the Early Development Instrument licence agreement Offord
Centre for Child Studies in McMaster University score the data. The average EDI scores for each of the five developmental areas are reported through a distribution of scores. The five scales are divided into categories representing the highest scores to the lowest scores in the community thereby determining the percentage of children at various levels of readiness. Each scale score varies from 0 (low ability) to 10 (high ability) and is calculated as a mean score of all the valid answers in that specific scale. Two-point answers were scored 0 and 10 and three-point answers were scored 0, 5 and 10. In that way, each scale has the same maximum and minimum values. ‘Don’t know’ responses were not scored. The returned data contains individual records and each child’s score. This enabled the data to then be aggregated to the units required in order to compare at the micro level and associate factors to the ratings. Using the statistical analysis package IBM SPSS Statistics 20, a one sample t-test and non-parametric t-tests were conducted to compare scores across populations.

Non-parametric tests were employed due to the non-normal distribution of the data. To assess the normality of the distribution of scores for each of the scales skewness values and kurtosis values were used. Normality was also assessed visually using histograms. Outliers were detected on the Physical Health and Well Being scale, the Emotional Maturity scale and the Language and Cognitive Development domain although none of the outliers were considered extreme. Data was rechecked to ensure correct input and the outliers remained. The mean, standard deviation and effect size are also reported for each of the five EDI domains. A one-sample t-test was performed to compare the children’s scores to Canadian norms on each of the five scales. Although the scales were deemed to violate the assumption of normality a one-sample t-test was employed based as large sample sizes (at least 40) as the one-sample t-test can be safely used without regard to skewness or outliers (Moore & McCabe, 2006). In order to
explore school readiness scores and the identified demographics and characteristics Mann Whitney U tests (Mann & Whitney, 1947) and Kruskal Wallis tests (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952) were carried out. The Mann Whitney U test is the non-parametric counterpart of the independent t-test as it establishes if differences exist between two populations. In addressing the type 1 error (Field, 2011) statistically significant values are reported at \( p = <.004 \) to reflect the 11 Mann Whitney U tests that were run. The Kruskal Wallis test also a non-parametric test was used in cases where there were three or more groups. Statistically significant values are reported at \( p = <.05 \) and \( p < .001 \) indicating that the probability of the finding the observed results in less than 5% or 1% random. The effect sizes reported are based on Cohen’s (1988, 1992) criteria; .1 is considered a small effect, .3 is considered moderate effect, and .5 is considered a large effect.

### 4.9.1 Quality, Reliability and Validity

Readiness is a process (Janus & Offord, 2007) therefore completing the EDI in February and March 2014 allowed the children to settle into the school environment, and educators to become familiarised with the children. Time also enables the children to become familiar with the expectations of school and also enables educators and caregivers to observe these responses. This incorporates an element of quality in the EDI reporting as educators and caregivers provide more informed evaluations of the true development of the child.

EDI reporting is typically carried out by young children’s primary school educators as the instrument measures children’s development in relation to starting school, therefore it is more suitable to application in the school context rather than the home environment. Whilst in the developing stages of the EDI, the level of agreement was explored between independent observers; caregivers,
teachers and early childhood educators. It was found that interrater agreements were moderate to high between teachers and early childhood educators and moderate to low between teachers and parents (Janus & Offord, 2007). This relates to both children’s behaviour in different environments and the expectations of adults in different roles. In view of this the children’s school readiness was calculated on based on the educators’ reports.

The EDI has only been validated at the group level, therefore it is not a tool for screening at an individual or diagnostic level (Janus & Offord, 2007). At the group level the EDI has undergone extensive psychometric testing both in Canada and Australia (Janus et al., 2011). It has also been proven valid for use in minority populations (Muhajarine et al., 2011). Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach’s alpha. Ideally the Cronbach Alpha coefficient should be above .7 (Pallant, 2007). According to Janus and Offord (2007) the EDI had satisfactory internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported in each of the five domains: Physical Health and Well Being (0.84); Social Competence (0.96), Emotional Maturity (.92); Language and Cognitive Development (0.93); Communication and General Knowledge (0.95). In this study based on the EDIs completed by the educators the Cronbach alpha coefficient ranged from 0.89 – 0.97. This research also intended to compare the EDIs completed by the caregivers (N=15) and the EDIs completed by the educators (N=15) based on the same children. However, it was not possible to do so due to the lack of reliability of the measure arising from the EDIs completed by the caregivers. As the EDI is an established measure it was not possible to remove items as the comparability would be affected (Pallant, 2007).
4.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the NUI Galway Research Ethic Committee on the 28th February 2013. Ethical considerations in this study largely focused on the issues of: consent; confidentiality; child protection and safety; and the well-being of participants.

4.10.1 Consent and Assent

Information sheets (See Appendix 1) and opportunities to speak with myself were used to thoroughly explain the essential aspects of the research, the need for the participants’ involvement and their approval, the possible benefits, the time commitment involved, follow ups, and the conditions of their involvement such as the option to withdraw at any point or not answer a question. Information and assent forms for children used symbols, colours and pictures. These different forms of communication aimed to support possible participants’ understanding of the study. This was the first step in the consent process. Next, after each person indicated that they understood the information about the research they were asked to sign a consent/assent form or complete the child withdrawal form if necessary.

Consent forms, assent forms, child withdrawal forms (See Appendix 2) and information sheets (See Appendix 1) were written in basic English and contained images where appropriate. For those willing to do so, consent/assent/child withdrawal was verified by a written signature/symbol. For caregivers, educators and children who were not proficient in literacy skills an audio recording of the information and the consent, assent or child withdrawal form in the participant’s first language would have been provided however this was deemed unnecessary by the educators. In the case of the assent forms for children
rather than signing their name, symbols and colours were used instead to indicate agreement or disagreement.

As part of the consent process, I contacted the principals in the two DEIS schools over the phone to discuss the school’s possible participation in the research. A meeting was then set up in the interested schools. The purpose of this meeting was to present the aims and objectives of the research, and the requirements of the staff and school, to the principal, the junior infant educators, the classroom /special needs assistants in the junior infant class and any members of the board of management committee who wished to be present. These meetings took place prior to the end of the 2012-2013 school year. Information packs (See Appendix 1) explaining the research were made available at this meeting and included my contact details. These packs outlined the necessary aspects of the research, the need for the participants’ involvement, the possible benefits, the time commitment involved, follow ups and the conditions of their involvement. The principals of each of the two schools involved in the study signed two consent forms each. The first consent form indicated their agreement that the junior infant classrooms could be involved in the study, that staff could distribute information packs to the caregivers of the incoming junior infant class, I could be present at any open day for the incoming junior infant children in order to make contact with caregivers who may wish to take part in the research and distribute information packs, and that I could be present during art activities during the month of September. The second consent form indicated that they themselves would participate in a semi-structured interview. Both principals signed the consent forms however one principal did not agree to my presence at the open day at it was felt that the open day is very busy and my presence may cause discomfort. The other school agreed that I could be present at the open day but due to other commitments I was unable to attend.
Consent was then sought from the educators once they understood that they would take part in an audio recorded semi-structured interview that may last from thirty minutes to sixty minutes, complete a survey type questionnaire (the Early Development Instrument) (Janus & Offord, 2007) based on each child involved in the study, allow for this data to be analysed and reported and be present whilst I am in the classroom. Subsequently, posters (See Appendix 8) in the local area were used to promote the research and encourage possible participants to contact me, ask questions and put themselves forward if suitable. In September 2013, information packs (See Appendix 1) were given to the caregivers by the primary school educators. This information pack included a caregiver-friendly leaflet explaining the research, the actual processes should they decide to take part and my contact details. Consent forms (See Appendix 2) were also included in the pack which I collected prior to conducting the core data collection. Caregivers who consented to take part in the research agreed to take part in an audio recorded semi-structured interview that may last from thirty minutes to sixty minutes, complete two survey type questionnaires; the Caregiver Questionnaire; and an adapted version of the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2007) based on their child, and allow for this data to be analysed and reported. Caregivers were also requested to consent to staff in the junior infant’s classroom disclosing information about their child via the Early Development Instrument Questionnaire.

As a classroom activity, I was present in each classroom for an hour during September. I conducted a ‘circle time’ activity with the children to talk about the research with them during the first week of October. I sat with the children in a circle and explained the research, what it involves and their possible involvement. This was conducted a week in advance of carrying out the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity in the classroom in order to give the children time to think
about it and talk to their caregivers about it. The children were asked to bring home an information pack to their caregiver. This pack explained the research, the children’s possible involvement and any possible risks. This pack also contained a child withdrawal form to be returned if the caregiver did not wish their child to take part in the research or did not wish the information elicited from their child to be used in the study. The option of permitting children to take part in the activity without using this information in the study aims to avoid the exclusion of any child. Using a tiered approach, I was available and engaged with the children’s caregivers on the mornings and afternoons as they dropped off and collected their child at school to ensure that the caregivers were informed of the research. If the child withdrawal form was not returned by the caregiver it was assumed that the child could participate fully in the research activity.

On the day the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity was conducted I obtained the assent or dissent of each individual child in junior infants to take part in the study. Before I initiated the drawing activity I ensured that the children understood that; they would make drawings about starting school and the things that were important to them when starting school; they would explain their drawings to me and I would write their explanations down; I would copy and return the drawings to the class to collate a book of the drawings; their names would not be mentioned anywhere; and that I would use this information to write a report. Children who did not wish to participate (i.e. children who dissent) in the study were not forced to do so. The classroom teacher provided another suitable activity for children who withdrew from the activity. Of the 88 children who chose to draw a picture for me, six did not wish to tell me about their picture. Only one caregiver withdrew their child from the study. They indicated that the child could complete the ‘Draw and Tell’ part but the data could not be used in the study.
Chapter Four Methodology

Following the identification of the preschools attended by the children involved in the study I approached the manager of these preschools and explained the research. After the manager agreed that the preschool could be involved in the study information packs were distributed. I was available to talk staff through the research and answer any questions. Each of these processes outlined the necessary aspects of the research, the need for the participants’ involvement, the possible benefits, the time commitment involved, follow ups and the conditions of their involvement. Consent forms were also included in the information pack which I collected prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews. Educators who consented to take part in the research agreed to take part in an audio recorded semi-structured interview that may last from thirty minutes to sixty minutes and allow for this data to be analysed and reported. Consent and assent was monitored throughout the data collection by asking participants if they were comfortable and did they want to continue.

4.10.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

In order to ensure that all information remained confidential, all participants were assigned an identification number. Following this the numbers were assigned a corresponding pseudonym that was used in the report of the study. The database relating all participants to their identification number and pseudonym was stored on a password protected computer, only accessible by myself. In addition to this, direct identifiers were also removed from the data as far as possible. The schools involved in the study are referred to as School A and School B.

Audio recordings and questionnaires were coded and labelled with the caregivers’ and educators’ identification number, and were kept separate from any transcripts of such recordings. All transcripts used the assigned
Chapter Four Methodology

pseudonyms. Data collected from the children in the classroom was directly collected by me although the primary school educator was also present in the classroom in line with *Children First* National Guidelines (DCYA, 2011b). This primary school educator was made aware that they must not disclose any information pertaining to the research. The children’s original drawings did not have their own names on them. I sought verbal permission from the children to copy their drawings. These copies and the children’s recorded explanations of their drawings were identified using each child’s assigned identification number. Transcripts were labelled with each child’s pseudonym. The completed EDIs were returned to me in individual envelopes with the child’s name on the outside. I assigned the identification numbers to the EDIs and discarded the envelopes. All records linking the identification of participants and data was securely stored in separate locked filing cabinets in order to avoid cross linking of information and on a password protected computer. The only exception to confidentiality requirements is when there is a child protection concern or issue, or if a child states that they wish to harm themselves or others. Disclosures of this nature did not occur.

4.10.3 Child Protection and Safety
Any child protection or child safety concerns that may have arisen would have been handled in accordance with *Children First* National Guidelines for Child Protection, and NUIG’s Child Protection Policy, however this did not occur. I have received Garda clearance and undergone *Children’s First* Training and made this information available to the schools and caregivers.

4.10.4 Well Being
In order to minimise any possibility of harm and to maintain the well-being of all participants I monitored all aspects of the research process especially in
settings that directly involve the participants. I engaged with the children in the classroom on the basis that the classroom educator was also present in the classroom. Interviews with caregivers took place in either the school or in their place of work. My supervisor was informed of the time and location of each interview in advance. If a participant appeared to be experiencing any adverse effects, the research would have been suspended until the issue has been addressed. This however did not occur. If it was a child that became distressed their caregiver would have been notified. The distressed person’s protocol was available to be used in these circumstances (Appendix 10). Support services in the area and beyond had been identified prior to data collection. If any instances of distress occurred referral to the appropriate service would have been offered.

This research used child appropriate methodology in order to support the children in their participation. Considering the implications of the classroom and that the educator can be seen as a figure of authority, I invited the children to take part in the research activity. Children who did not wish to take part, and children whose caregiver indicated that they did not wish that their child partake in any part of the activity would have been provided with another activity by the classroom teacher in order to avoid potential embarrassment. This was not necessary as all children took part in the ‘draw’ component of the activity.

4.11 Limitations

According to Reiss (1968, p.351) the ‘trained incapacities’ of the researcher may be a hindrance in mixed methods research (cited in Bryman, 2008). At times it can be difficult to integrate the qualitative and quantitative findings of a mixed methods study. However, the integration of the findings in this study was successful as demonstrated in the discussion (See Chapter Eight). I required guidance in conducting the appropriate statistical analysis on the quantitative
Chapter Four Methodology

data and therefore drew on the expertise of my colleagues in the Child and Family Research Centre to assist me in this process.

Accounting for the aims and the objectives of this study, it was impossible to use a large random sample size, therefore purposive sampling was employed. This limits the generalisability of the mixed methods findings. Thus the result of this research approach is a small sample of data, reflecting school readiness perceptions and ratings in the two schools of interest. Yet, considering that an in-depth study of perceptions of school readiness is relatively unexplored in Ireland this research can be used as a foundation to build future research on and create strategic plans for community action. Taking into account the data obtained and the depth of the research, ‘partiality should not be mistaken for impartiality’ (Cherryholmes, 1988, p.451). Statistical analysis accounted for the small sample size using non parametric tests.

The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity resulted in a smaller amount of in-depth data collected compared to the semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the children’s input may be underrepresented when comparisons with caregiver and educator perceptions are made. Yet, considering that 88 children contributed their views compared to 16 educators and 20 caregivers more contributions from the children decreases the gap. I considered using a second round of data collection with the children but decided against this as it was not feasible considering the demands and interruptions that had already been placed on the school, the demands that had already been placed on the children and their attention span, and the limited time and personnel resources. According to Gaskell (2000) the counting of opinions or people is not the purpose of qualitative research, ‘but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue’
Chapter Four Methodology

(Gaskell, 2000, p.41). Bearing in mind that this is an exploration the standalone data collected from the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity creates a foundation of views.

The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity is a child friendly research method but is not without limitations. As previously mentioned it has been found that the draw aspect with 3-4 year olds does not always result in larger amounts of information (Gross & Hayne, 1998) and considering that the children in the sample ranged from four to five years old this may impact on the quantity of information obtained. However, accurate child directed information rather than quantity is considered more important and useful in this study. In addition to this the, my role in the classroom may have also impacted on the results although open ended questions and probing were used in assisting children to both draw and tell their starting school stories. Conducting research in a classroom where school norms exist can also have implications for the findings. Children may have therefore felt that this activity was mandatory rather than optional and that the aim of the activity was to draw the ‘right’ picture and say the ‘right’ explanations. Thus my presence in the classroom during September and ensuring not to engage in a ‘teaching’ role during my interactions with the children intended to dissipate my possible representation as a figure of authority.

The EDI is a well validated population measure of early child development in the five domains of school readiness. The data in this study was compared to Canadian normative data as no Irish normative data exists. The Irish data obtained from the single Irish study that used the EDI (Curtin et al., 2013) acted as a comparison. These studies together are the beginning of an Irish profile of children’s school readiness. Considering that the quantitative data only consisted of 20 Caregiver Questionnaires, at times the sample size was very small when associations were tested.
Due to the small sample sizes generalisability is limited yet the discussion, conclusions and recommendations accounted for this. Nonetheless, two different designated disadvantaged schools were involved in the study increasing the external validity of the study. The analytic generalisations that arose from this case study were thus strengthened by this. The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriot & Firestone, 1983).

4.12 Summary
This chapter outlines the methodological approach to investigating the central research questions and associated objectives of this study. In order to address these areas a mixed method approach is necessary. Taking a constructivist and interpretive position on the existence and creation of knowledge this provides a justification for the application of a predominantly qualitative methodological approach to the research. It also allows for the integration of the quantitative data with the qualitative findings within a case study as it illuminates subjective experiences and objective data in the form of measured constructs. The nature of the case study in this research is multiple as it takes into account two DEIS schools in two different designated disadvantaged areas in the West of Ireland. It also involves a varied sample as the research is interested in the perceptions of the children, educators and caregivers who are involved in the lives of children starting school.

Recognising the importance of the inclusion of children’s voices in research, the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity is the method used to collect qualitative data with the children in this study. This method is considered to be appropriate for data with young children as drawing is a familiar activity and the children control the tell component in relation to the duration and the content discussed. Semi-structured
Chapter Four Methodology

Interviews are the qualitative methods employed to collect the caregivers’ and educators’ perceptions of school readiness. The qualitative research is analysed using thematic analysis. School readiness ratings are identified through the quantitative research using the Early Development Instrument (Janus & Offord, 2007), and factors identified through the Caregiver Questionnaire are associated with these ratings using non-parametric $t$-tests due to the non-normal distribution of the data. The main limitations arising in this study is the limited generalisability of the findings and the small sample sizes within the quantitative data as a result of the case study design. However, merits also lie in the case study design as this enables an in-depth examination of the phenomenon. As children are considered a vulnerable population in research extensive care is taken to ensure their protection and non-exploitation in this research. Processes were carried out to inform the caregivers, educators and children about the research and the implications of their involvement. Consent and assent was obtained from each participant and monitored throughout the data collection.

Chapter Five outlines the qualitative findings from the children’s participation in this research.
Chapter Five

Children’s Findings

5.1 Introduction
The theoretical framework of this study (See Chapter Two) advocates for the inclusion of children in research about children and research that affects children. Accordingly, the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity was chosen to elicit the Children’s opinions as detailed in the methodology chapter (See Chapter Four). As part of the data collection, 88 children drew pictures and 82 contributed a verbal input across two DEIS schools in October 2013. This resulted in a large breadth of data being collected. The drawings are used as a facilitative method to allow the Children to organise their narrative. As a result, the drawings themselves do not feature in the findings. The content of the drawings widely varied. The most common drawings included the school building as either a one or two storey building, others depicted the play area attached to the school or play activities and many children drew their friends in school. Less frequent pictures consisted of the journey to school, images seen on a television programme recently and animals. During the thematic analysis (See Chapter Four), three interconnected themes were identified:

- Theme One: Ready Children - Fitting In
- Theme Two: Ready Families - Supporters
- Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities – Newness

This chapter considers the data collected in relation to the three themes (See Thematic Map, Appendix 5). Theme one ‘Ready Children - Fitting In’ reflects the Children’s explicit views on the skills they use in school, the friendship aspect of school and the discipline system. Theme two ‘Ready Families – Supporters’ explores the family support the Children referred to. Theme three
‘Ready Schools - Newness’ reveals the Children’s voices on the issues of change; the physical environment, the increased expectations, the Children’s distinction between work and play and their preoccupation with the school rules and authority. The term ‘children’ is capitalised when appropriate in this chapter to characterise the Children who took part in the research.

5.2 Theme One: Ready Children - Fitting In

Children play an active role in their experience of school and it is important for them to fit in. Their readiness contributes to this. The Children outlined the skills they use as they start and continue their journey of junior infants depicting themselves as active participants in school concurring with Meisels (1998) who believes that readiness is the beginning of an active teaching and learning engagement. However, at times it is also clear that they believe it is necessary to conform. In analysing the Children’s data, it is clear that the Children often speak of the activities they take part in during school. From this, skills could be extracted and as the Children were in the early stages of junior infants they were applied to the Kagan et al.’s (1995) domains of school readiness. All five domains were relevant to the Children’s expressions: physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; the approaches to learning; language use; and cognition and general knowledge. Knowing people, making friends and being friendly also stood out for the Children as a topic they wished to make known to me. Inherent in this data and how it was communicated is the Children’s aspiration to blend in.

5.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

In relation to the physical well-being and motor development domain the Children were rather vocal on how they navigate the physical school environment. There is a need to manage the physical surroundings, “Go outside,
go on slide, go on round about and bridge” (Odette). Children are usually busy in school. The Children highlight the extent of movement they are involved in when at school. These movements range from sitting and standing to dancing and running, “We walk around” (Cliona), and “Sit at desk” (Breda). Formalised physical activity initiated by their educator was also mentioned, “There is stretch and grow” (Declan) and “Sometimes we go P.E.” (Rita). The classroom activities cited by the Children also involve motor skill development to facilitate both those who had already acquired the skills and those whose skills needed further refinement, “Build constructions, colour, pegging, sort objects, draw letters, building blocks” (Susan), and “Colour in the snakes, go cut them” (Declan). These activities are often categorised as pre-writing skills as they involve the use of hands and fingers for cutting, drawing, colouring and manipulating objects in preparation for holding and controlling a pencil.

Specific physical independence tasks emphasised by the Children incorporated the Children’s motor skills in order to look after themselves. This includes using the toilet “I knew how to go to the toilet” (Declan), and eating lunch whether the child brings it in or they get their lunch at school “Need to bring a lunch” (Moya). The Children often highlighted the common practices surrounding these two tasks such as “Wash my hands” (Odette), and “Put lunch in lunch press” (Shelly). They distinguished between the separate toilets for each gender and the location, “Toilet in big girls’ toilet” (Delia), and “Boys toilet” (Nathan). The types of lunches were also described and lunchtime itself, “There’s only ham in the sandwich” (Barry) and “Eat lunch, I eat everything then I’m finished I go outside” (Fidelma). This demonstrates the Children’s ability to observe and reflect on the school meals programme and the routines surrounding lunchtime. The Children first eat their lunch and there is an expectation that they will eat all their lunch before they go out and play in the playground. Using the toilet
and eating lunch require the Children to function independently as the educator is not in a position to assist all children individually in the class with these tasks. Completing these tasks enables the Children to be inconspicuous. Children’s well-being and health is also of relevance as school is not a place for sick children, “I knew you go home when you were sick, Daddy collect me...get bandage” (Barry). Children’s physical well-being and motor development is related to their ability to participate in these actions which enables the Children to be self-sufficient and meet the expectations of school and its environment.

5.2.2 Social and Emotional Development

Children’s social and emotional skills range has usually begun to develop as they start school. These skills are helpful for children and educators as settling into school involves managing the demands of the new environment, making and maintaining friendships and demonstrating acceptable behaviour. Larger numbers are present in the school which increases the potential of increased interactions with more adults and children. Socialising and making friends are a common occurrence and expectation in the school environment for junior infant students. During the ‘Tell’ component, the Children often spoke of their existing friends at the time of participating in the research “It’s all my friends in my class and all the other class” (Cliona). They also spoke of the potential of making friends when they started school “We’ll make new friends” (Rita), and the need to be nice to friends. Knowing other children prior to starting school is seen as an advantage by some Children, “I knew people before I come to school” (Declan), and “Steven was my friend in playschool” (Lana). The Children also explained that they drew their friends in their drawings. The Children’s emphasis on friends depicts friendships as a core part of school life and fitting in. There is a social aspect to human nature and the Children clearly demonstrated this by indicating their wish to create friendships with their
Chapter Five Children’s Findings

classmates and to be part of a collective group. They believe this means that they need to be nice, “Don’t fight with my friends, I be nice to my friends” (Fidelma). Friendships offer children support networks, children to play with and children to talk to thereby creating a collective for children to rely on. This is demonstrated many times throughout the research as the Children frequently use ‘we’ to describe their activities.

The Children referred to their own social skills as many indicate that they would make a new child starting junior infants welcome by introducing them, sharing with them, being friendly towards them and offering to play with them, “I be your friend and I won’t ever fight with you...when it’s sunny I will bring her to my house” (Odette). They also identified the need to help a new incoming child become familiar with the physical environment, “Show her to her seat...Tell her you can make friends” (Abbigayle), and “When we go outside she can come outside” (Bartholomew). In addition to interacting with other children, children must interact with the adults in the school, particularly the educator in their classroom. This requires the Children to control their behaviour and act according to the social norms of the school, “Look at teacher when she showing you something” (Jane). Starting junior infants is a new experience for the Children. New experiences stimulate emotions. For some of the Children they spoke about these emotions which were largely represented by positive emotions such as happiness and enjoyment starting school, “I liked it when I started” (Isabelle), and “I have fun in the school” (Jane). Being upset was rarely mentioned by the Children, yet when it was negative connotations were attached to it. Crying is considered to be a negative emotion that is not acceptable for children starting school, they should be emotionally stable, “I was so happy to come to school...Corena (classmate) cry like a baby...When Mommy left that day I didn’t cry, I was a big girl” (Delia). Children’s adaptation to and
acceptance in school is affected by their perception of having friends and being happy in school.

5.2.3 Approaches to Learning
Learning in school is a social activity. The elements of the ready school outlined by Kagan et al. (1995) indicate that learning occurs in the context of relationships. The Children’s focus on friendship, “Friends here” (Frank), and the need to behave appropriately towards friends plays a role in their learning as they work co-operatively, “I give them one of my toys” (Odette). Within this it is clear that the children are participating in the classroom environment, “People were getting taught” (Jennifer) and “We working” (Bernadine). Yet, the Children’s attitude to aspects of learning is variable, “I love homework” (Moya) and “Don’t like homework” (Nadine). The children are also actively involved in learning as they engage with the educator, “Just listen to teacher” (Jake) and voice their own ideas “We put up our quiet hand” (Ray). Taking responsibility is important for children in a learning environment, “You have to not mess in school because teacher get angry” (Jake) and paying attention to the educator “Seats in the class” (Erica) and “Have eyes on teacher and arms folded” (Gearoid) supports the children’s ability to be persistent in the learning activities.

Other elements of approaches to learning that was demonstrated by the Children highlighted their motivation to fit in with the learning environment as they “Go up the ladder” (Bart). Positive reinforcement strategies make obedience attractive by exciting and motivating the children to engage in learning, “You get stickers off teacher” (Bernadine). The playful nature of learning, “Teacher is at school, we go play” (Fionnuala), contributes to positive approaches towards school, “They’re loads of nice things to do, we play games like outside” (Jenna).
5.2.4 Language Use

For the Children, verbal communication is the primary method of interacting with others in school, obtaining knowledge and making requests, instructing and obeying. As previously described friendships are a major feature of school for young children. The Children use their language skills in their interactions in school and in this research. Their acquired language skills assist children to further display their social skills. The Children indicated that they would tell new incoming children “About the teacher” (Carol), and ask them “Would you like to play with toys?” (Olga). The ability to speak coherently in English is key to this. Further to this different languages being taught in the classroom were also highlighted, “Learning Songs, Irish” (Karina), and “Learn English” (Nadine). However, the learning techniques in place in the classroom were most often referred to by Children thereby implying the need for a developed language ability. Participation is largely based on oral and aural skills, “When songs come on we sing” (Gearoid), and “We read a book” (Shelly). Activities involving language create a foundation for developing further academic skills, “Draw letters” (Susan). Songs, singing, nursery rhymes, looking at books, reading, and leaning letters are regular events in junior infant classes.

Taking into account the Children’s preoccupation with rules, a certain level of language attainment is necessary in order to listen and understand boundaries and to communicate their needs. The Children are in a position in school where they must ask for permission to carry out their wishes, “If she was going to the bathroom to ask teachers” (Karina), and carry out what is asked of them, “If teacher tell you to do something, you do” (Olga). The Children’s own language skills were demonstrated through the ‘Tell’ component especially their ability to form sentences, some of them themselves were also aware of this “Do everything tell you to do, everything your told to do” (Gearoid). Children’s
previous engagement with language enables them to be an active participant in the junior infant class both socially and academically. Those who have had restricted language development opportunities are less likely to communicate coherently which may result in them being misunderstood.

5.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge

The Children consider school to be a learning environment. Physical knowledge and logico-mathematical knowledge are not mentioned by the Children. They mainly refer to their social-conventional knowledge such as colours and numbers and shapes, “Colours, numbers...have to do numbers” (Moya), “Do our maths at schools” (Lara), and “Sort objects” (Susan). Play is regarded as an activity that builds children’s cognitive capacity and general knowledge by introducing new concepts and challenging children. This includes, “Play farms, play with tiger, horse, sheep” (Kyle), and “Guess what that is game...matching” (Ray). On the other hand, cognition is rarely spoken about by the Children. The ability to control impulsive actions is a skill that children need to acquire. Being a member of the classroom which consists of approximately twenty or more children in one room with a number of desks forces children “To sit down” (Fred) at their designated desk “Yellow, Blue, Green Table” (Nathan), and stay sitting for the time period set by the educator. Starting school requires children to process large quantities of new information. The Children’s memory is exhibited in their reflections on school as they took part in the research.

5.2.6 Effortful Compliance

Inherent in the Children’s explanation of the skills they used in school is their internal desire to comply (DeHart et al., 2004) with school life. The rules in school were frequently mentioned in a range of contexts. The Children were quite aware of the rules imposed on them and the implications if they obeyed or
disobeyed the rules. Obeying the rules helps children be part of the collective as the Children recognise deviance. Those who engage in deviant acts are rejected and excluded, “If somebody is bold I don’t like them” (Nathan). Children who disobey the rules are also more likely to be disciplined, receive negative attention and chastised by the classroom educator or the principal, “If ye be bold the teacher takes you to the principal” (Karina), and “Teacher will be cross if you are not good” (Marie). This is considered to be a punishment by the Children as the educator is a figure of authority. In both schools, structures were in place to inform the Children of the acceptableness of their behaviour. This includes a traffic light system that informs the Children of how satisfied the educator is with the noise level in the classroom, a ‘sin bin’ in the playground that disallows children from playing for a certain time period due to their misbehaviour, and a ladder system that rewards the Children after they have exhibited good behaviour on a number of occasions and reach the top of the ladder. This enables the Children to monitor and evaluate their own behaviour and the behaviour of others in the new school context.

Children who followed the rules and exhibited good behaviour are rewarded. The Children’s adherence to the rules both in the classroom and on the playground earns them recognition, “Ladders when we are good” (Ray), “People go up the ladders” (Eve), and receive a prize when they reach “10 good things” (Isaac). These forms of praise and positive reinforcement further convey the message to the Children that the classroom and school require compliance with the school system. It is clear that the Children have grasped the concept of discipline and understand how it affects individuals and the collective. Taking this into account and the skills outlined by the Children their actions are deemed to influence their membership of the collective.
5.3 Theme Two: Ready Families - Supporters

Family support is evident as the Children become school children, “My whole family was dropping me” (Abbigayle). Starting school and being a big boy or big girl in school creates new experiences for the Children, “Got a bag, going to play some toys there, get lunch there, get homework” (Delilah). The family often plays a role in preparing the children for school acting as mediators and supporting the children prior to when they start school in an attempt to avoid unnecessary anxiety and shock for children, yet also throughout their student life “Going to school with sister, Mom and David” (Fidelma). Sources of information at home include story books about school: “I knew about the book about school” (Shelly); friends, “I didn’t know anything about (starting school), Sharon (a friend) talked to me about school” (Kelly); siblings “Need to bring a lunch I knows because I have a big brother” (Moya); and caregivers, “Mommy just told me” (Delia). The information is mediated by the Children’s own experiences.

Other preparations also include obtaining materials and resources for school. Unlike preschools most schools require children to wear a uniform, possess the necessary books from the curriculum and have their own stationary to complete the tasks, “Got new colours and new pencil case, rubber topper, two pencils, new lunch box but it’s little, got a new school bag” (Isabelle). This again is something the Children have to become familiar with “Pencil case, bag… and jumpers” (Fidelma). Family members in the school environment also help the Children settle in, particularly people the Children are familiar with. Caregiver presence in the school is important to the Children “Dad come in to school with me” (Harold). Here we are seeing the role of the family in a partnership model that supports children starting school. Siblings also make the Children feel more comfortable and accepted in the school, “Play with big sister” (Moya). Likewise,
cousins play a role in this, “Saw some friends and cousins coming in” (Cliona) and “Show him my different cousins” (Sean).

Considered the contextualised nature of data collection within the school the Children spoke more extensively about the school and the newness aspect. Nonetheless it is clear that the children view the family as a contributor to school readiness.

5.4 Theme Three: Ready Schools and Ready Communities - Newness
Starting school is frequently described as a big event for children. This theme addresses the differences faced by the Children since they have entered junior infants. Starting school requires children to encounter an ecological transition as the school is introduced to their microsystem (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 1998). This takes into account the physical environment of the school and the transition practices in place in the community. The ecological transition is also evident in the Children’s responses as they discuss their lives as students. Underlying this is the work and play divide and the Children’s fixation with the school rules and authority. Starting school has brought about a new social role for the Children. It is clear that the Children engaged in reflexive monitoring (Giddens, 1976) reviewing their own behaviour in light of the expectation and evaluations of others.

5.4.1 The Physical Environment
Schools are involved in the physical preparation of the school environment that children enter when they start primary school. In particular, the Children recognised the differences they encountered as they started school and the resources within the school. For the Children in this study, “School is higher and bigger and more people and faces” (Colin). These facts are repeated on
numerous occasions as the Children observe the school structure and its contents daily, “Upstairs, downstairs” (Harold), and “The library” (Ruthie), in addition to their focus on the playground. The appearance of the school is part of the Children’s experience when starting school. The Children created visuals of the environment in their drawings from their own visuals which establishes the importance of creating an attractive and welcoming surrounding for children. They drew attention to a wide variety of elements in the classroom. The reading corner, the writing table, the “Toys on shelf, books” (Mason), “Show her piano” (Kelly), “The wardrobe in the classroom” (Annette) and “The magic box up there” (Shane) all featured in the Children’s descriptions and the Children often pointed out the items whilst telling me about. This presents the Children with a new environment to process especially as the home and preschool environment are very different to school and the Children recognise this, “We were in playschool before this” (Lana) and “Going to Karen’s school small children” (Carol). Starting school is also connected with a new phase in children’s development, a more advanced stage in their eyes “I started school when I got bigger” (Keith). Despite their status of being ‘big’ now that they started school they are the youngest and usually the smallest there, “We play in the front with the big ones” (Cliona).

5.4.2 Supportive Practices
Prior visits to the schools “saw classroom before I came” (Bartholomew) help the Children feel more at ease with this ‘newness’. This enables them to become familiar with the educators, “I knew Ms. Conway (junior infant educator), Ms. Slattory (other school educator) and Ms. Noone (the principal)” (Paul). This provides the Children with some necessary information about school. It also prepares the Children to expect differences and enables children to grow accustomed to these changes more rapidly. The educators play a big role in
helping the Children adjust, “play games with teachers” (Gearoid). The Children also attain new responsibilities in school as they believe they must learn and adhere to the routines and rules in place, “School is not messy” (Paige), and the Children must “Tidy up” (Holly). On the whole, this reflects the Children’s encounters with new circumstances and occurrences. Unspoken in the Children’s engagement with the school is the discontinuity children have been confronted with but it also demonstrates their ability to reconcile and embrace differences.

5.4.3 Work and Play

The Children did not question school life as it is believed to be compulsory, “You have to go to school” (Frank), because that is where children learn, “Teacher learns us stuff” (Shelly). Nonetheless, the majority of the Children made a clear distinction between the academic work revolving around language tasks and cognition and general knowledge, and the play they engage in during school. Play typically occurs with friends both inside the school and outside in the playground. The play activities in the classroom referred to by the Children usually relates to free play, “In morning we play toys” (Nadine). This type of play is something they do that is separate to their work, often as a reward for completing their work, “I like to play with kitchen” (Aideen). In the playground play usually related to the games organised by the Children, “We playing football outside in yard” (Ray). One girl alluded to play being part of the role of the student, “We learn about playing” (Holly). The Children always regard play as an enjoyable activity. On the other hand, although working and learning are necessary functions of a student in school and some of the Children enjoy them, this is not always the case, “Don’t like reading book all the time” (Cliona). This participation in activities they do not always particularly enjoy indicates the Children’s desire to play and the obligation placed on them to be academic
Chapter Five Children’s Findings

students. This renders children with a dual identity following the ecological transition to school.

5.4.4 Following Rules
The Children are aware of the new social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977b) in place at school. They understand that children in the other classes are older and bigger than them. Of prominence was the authority the Children attach to the educators. As the educators are considered to be the person in charge, the Children often exhibit deferential behaviour. This is evident as the Children commonly state the rules using the terminology ‘you must’. For example, in school, “You sit down and be quiet and you listen to teacher” (Olga). The Children accept this hierarchy as it is the role of the educator. If a new child needed to know about junior infants “Teacher would tell him” (Rick). Part of this hierarchy is the requirement for children to play their role as new young students becoming part of the school environment.

Many of the rules mentioned by the Children related to classroom management strategies and the enforcement of good behaviour and routines. Children are full of life and at times they need to be refocused, for that reason when “Teacher rings bell we have to freeze” (Eve). To keep the classroom calm and courteous the Children recognised the need to “Be quiet” (Annie), “Put up our quiet hand” (Ray), and “You have to say the magic words...abracadabra and please” (Cliona). Rules and routines also exist in the playground, “I put my hand on my lip on way in in the line...you have to not mess in school because teacher get angry” (Jake). Conversely the Children must not get angry, “You have to be nice” (Olga). The Children must control their actions and reactions, “Can’t be getting cross with teacher” (Moya). As discussed in Theme One ‘Ready Children - Fitting In’ (See Section 5.2), the Children comprehend that the rules
Chapter Five Children’s Findings

are there to be followed. The extent of rules outlined by the Children reveal that the Children view rules as a core part of school life and their life as a student. For one child in particular he believes that the best way for a new child starting junior infants to become a student would be to “Copy me” (Colin).

5.5 Summary

Eighty-eight out of a possible 122 children assented to take part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity. This chapter has detailed the thematic analysis of the Children’s inputs in this research through the representation of their voices through three defined themes: Ready Children - Fitting In; Ready Families – Supporters; and Ready Schools and Communities - Newness; The Children’s contributions provide an insight into their experience of starting school and what they think is important. This reaffirms that the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity is a suitable method of collecting data to use with children. Through this the Children have confirmed that they have the capacity to take part in research by expressing themselves when facilitated to do so. Therefore, the obligation is on the researcher to enable children to take part. This supports the theory underlying the interactionist school readiness model utilised by this research. Children when enabled to participate are capable of doing so whether in the context of research or starting school.

The Children highlighted the wide variety of skills they used in relation to the five domains of school readiness. Within this the Children explained the need to possess and use physical and independence skills to navigate the physical environment, social, emotional and language skills to engage in interactions and make friends, and knowledge skills to take part in the learning. From this is it clear that the skills children possess impacts on their experience. The role of the family and family members are viewed as supporters and contributors by the
Chapter Five Children’s Findings

children. The Children also refer to ecological transitions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and the consequences of such as the enter the new school environment. The readiness of the school features strongly in this. For the children, their transition includes managing the increased expectations placed on them, coping with the work and play divide, and becoming accustomed to the school rules and authority. The three themes are interconnected as they demonstrate the Children’s experience of becoming students in an environment that demands them to conform to the social and learning norms in place.

Chapter Six describes the analysed findings from the semi-structured interviews with the caregivers and educators.
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

Chapter Six
Caregiver and Educator Findings

6.1 Introduction
This research takes into account the view of children’s caregivers and preschool and primary school educators as they make up a large portion of the children’s microsystem. Their perceptions of school readiness, experience of the transition and the decision making process were obtained through semi-structured interviews during the first school term, from September 2013 to December 2013. In total 20 caregivers and 16 educators took part; eight primary school educators and eight preschool educators. Similar questions were asked in both sets of interviews (See Appendix 4). Both sets of data were coded separately during the coding phases of the thematic analysis. It became clear to me throughout the process that similar patterns were evident across the two sets of data. As a result, four themes are evident:

- Theme One: Ready Children
- Theme Two: Ready Families
- Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities
- Theme Four: Working Together – Ready Families and Ready Schools and Communities

As can be seen in the thematic map (See Appendix 5) theme one ‘Ready Children’ is interconnected with the four remaining themes. Theme one describes the skills that assist children to fit in at school. Theme two portrays the role of the family in school readiness. Theme three explores the role of the preschool, school and community in children’s preparation for school. Theme four illustrates the public private divide with regard to knowledge and communication. Within each of these themes it is clear that similarities and differences exist amongst the groups. The terms ‘caregiver’ and ‘educator’ are
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

capitalised when appropriate in this chapter to characterise the Caregivers and Educators who took part in the research. After each quote the pseudonym and role of the participant is identified.

6.2 Theme One: Ready Children

Theme one is foundational in answering the research questions “How is school readiness perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?” and “What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?”. As the Caregivers and Educators spoke about the skills children should have when starting school, it became clear that ensuring the children fit in with school life is imperative. A child is seen as successful in school when they are positive about school and learning; form support networks; and engage and participate in the classroom (Meisels, 1998). This idea of being ready for school revolves around meeting expectations, “you’re trying to get them so everyone is not looking at them” (Una - Caregiver). The skills believed to contribute to the children being accepted and adapting correspond to the five domains of school readiness; physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language use; and cognition and general knowledge (Kagan et al., 1995). As noted by Loretta (Preschool):

“If they have the whole five areas, physical, intellectual, emotional and social and language if they have those, if they can have those conquered number one and then life skills with it they are ready then for big school”.

The Caregivers and Educators also explored a child’s characteristics with regard to readiness and the decision making process and the role of the child within this.
6.2.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

Children’s physical ability and motor development affects their overall health and well-being especially in the school environment. Generally, it is believed by both groups that physical skills played a role in school readiness as it impacts on children’s comfort and their ability to attend to tasks, “the child that has to be mentally ready and physically ready” (Imogen - Caregiver). When this is not in place children may be deemed unready, “her motor control isn’t great…they just sent this one I think a year too soon” (Nancy - Primary School). The ability to participate rests on the children’s energy to do so and their capacity. Children need to be physically able to manage the ‘long’ school day as they are in the environment for approximately four and a half hours compared to the typical sessional three hours in preschool. Sleep and nutrition contribute to this, “it's to do with tiredness, you know energy levels” (Pauline - Primary School), and “physically like they need to be good and energetic because it's a long day” (Loretta - Preschool).

Physical skills involving fine and gross motor skills were largely recorded in order to function effectively in the school environment, “it would involve their fine motor skills, and their gross motor skills” (Anna - Caregiver). These skills range from opening and closing lunchboxes, zipping up coats, carrying their own bags and body control movements such as sitting and standing to prewriting skills such as the ability to hold a pencil, “so it's kind of just knowing how to hold a pencil probably properly and all that” (Lorraine - Caregiver). Although prewriting skills were often mentioned in both groups one primary school Educator questioned the ability to hold a pencil correctly as being too advanced of an expectation to place on the children starting school, “how can you expect them to be forming letters and holding pencils?” (Edwina - Primary School).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

According to both the Caregivers and Educators, physical independence skills in the form of using the toilet and eating are essential skills for starting school. It is believed that children are more comfortable when they are capable of using the toilet and washing their hands when they are starting school. One Caregiver emphasised it was the ‘one thing’ they taught their child before starting school. It is also recognised as a means to build children’s self-esteem,

“having them confident about using the bathroom themselves and having them toilet trained…it makes life easier for your child if your child is capable in that department” (Claudia - Primary School).

Considering another aspect of nutrition, children need to have the skills to feed themselves at lunchtime when they are starting school,

“make sure are they capable of eating their lunch on their own, do you know and that mammy and daddy could trust you to eat your lunch” (Eabha - Caregiver).

This is important as if children are not capable of doing so they may become lethargic as the day continues thereby affecting their concentration and participation levels. Being physically well and capable enhances children’s experience of school. This also has a knock on effect on the caregivers and educators who see them managing the demands placed on them.

6.2.2 Social and Emotional Development

Both the Caregivers and Educators undeniably established the social and emotional development domain as one of the most important domains of school readiness. It was recognised that transitioning to the new school environment places new social and emotional demands on the children. Children’s ability to relate with others, socialise and form relationships and friendships were identified as vital skills needed for school. These skills are important for children from both the individual and group perspective. Social and emotional
competencies impact on the type of relationships made within the school environment through the interactions that occur. Friendships are important to the children, but the Caregivers and Educators also like to see the children making friends as it is a sign that they are being accepted in school by the other children. Social and emotional skills also contribute to the effectiveness of the running of the classroom.

“Socially and emotionally, ya absolutely, being ready in all those areas...I think they'd be probably more important than what intellectually” (Nancy - Primary School).

The presence and practice of prosocial skills determines children’s ability to socialise in school where the number of children is typically larger than children’s previous environments such as the home or the preschool. Social skills,

“help them to interact socially with children in the playground, if a child feels comfortable in themselves they will mix with other children but (not) if a child has led a sheltered life” (Anna - Caregiver).

This includes sharing, waiting and taking turns with other children, following instructions from educators and anger management. If children are not in a position to socialise they can struggle in school and it can affect their desire to attend and challenge their ability to adapt. Amongst the desirable social skills, children should maintain a level of toleration and the ability to problem solve as it helps them in their interactions to be independent, and their treatment of others. They obtain these skills through socialising and interacting with others,

“I think experience as well by just being thrown into the group, mixing and trying to solve their own kind of, try to solve problems themselves” (Una - Caregiver).
Established friendships and making new friends are highlighted as a reason why children settle in school. Knowing other children creates a more comfortable, familiar and inviting environment, “she is after blending in with them and getting to know maybe a couple and everything was nice” (Harry - Caregiver).

Social and emotional skills are fuelled by confidence and self-esteem. Children who have established these characteristics are more secure in themselves and have the ability to trust others. Children’s potential to trust lessens their feelings of nervousness and increases their feelings of security and comfort in school. Both groups emphasised the significance of children being able to be separated from their caregivers whilst at school and also having the capacity to be resilient and not to get upset easily,

“It’s more to do with the fact that the child is prepared to have that separation from the parent and that they are trusting enough and secure enough within themselves to actually go into a different environment and be able to function and develop little friendships with their peers” (Claudia – Primary School).

Children’s social development also incorporates their adherence to social norms. Children must exhibit socially acceptable behaviours to adjust in school and fit in with the demands placed on them. Core to this is manners and behaviour, “especially manners, how to talk with teachers you know…manners are the most important” (Doireann - Caregiver). Having manners also entails following rules, “they are able to take instructions, you know standing in a line and things like that” (Aileen - Preschool). This is considered to be obligatory by the Caregivers, “she have to listen her teacher and if she want something she have [sic] to ask” (Bella - Caregiver). These courteous practices contribute to the functioning of the classroom.
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

6.2.3 Approaches to Learning

Children are often referred to as ‘sponges’ in that they ‘soak up’ (learn) quite rapidly, yet the approaches to learning domain proved to be the least cited domain of school readiness by the Caregivers and Educators. From a skills perspective the focus was placed more on children’s ability to meet the demands of school and their feelings towards school rather than their learning style or attitude towards learning,

"the way I feel is if you give a positive attitude at home to children about school not negative, the child will go to school, be happy in school, be comfortable in school, will be willing to learn” (Anna - Caregiver).

A minority of Caregivers and Educators suggest that the children’s approach towards school activities contributed to their school readiness. For these participants, the factors that made up this domain included willingness to learn, seeking a challenge, being organised, enthusiastic, attentive, and able to concentrate. Some of these components are also related to the cognition and general knowledge domain of school readiness. This domain affects the children’s presence in school, their dispositions, and their learning. Children who positively approach learning are eager to attempt new activities in school and take pleasure in learning.

"It's about the child herself...do you know it's all about her willing, her wanting to go do you know what I mean it's not about having them dragged across the yard just to get them in the class, if she's happy to go do you know what I mean she's going to be willing then to sit at that table and do her work and listen and learn and all that” (Peter - Caregiver)

This also places an onus on the adults in the children’s environments to stimulate the children’s interest in learning by making activities more appealing and
welcoming, “create that environment for the children, are happy and learning and engaged and involved, and challenged” (Gillian - Primary School). The lack of emphasis placed on this domain may suggest that once children are conforming to the rules and routines, and displaying academic skills their attitude towards learning may be of less importance to their acceptance in school. It may also be an indication of the difficulty in fostering these skills in children. Caregivers in particular may become frustrated with their perceived lack of progress and outcomes in supporting their children’s development in specific areas.

“We were trying teach him his colours and I'd just say 'go away, please go away' I'd be asking him what colour the fridge is and he'd say it's black, I'd say 'Ultan look again and I'd say what colour is the clouds', 'their white Mammy’ and I'd say 'well what colour is the fridge, it's black’ and I'd just get up then and away” (Una -Caregiver).

6.2.4 Language Use

Language ability was discussed by all participants in relation to school readiness. This involves the competence to listen, to understand and to speak, “ability to express themselves, oral language they come and they are not able to talk, the whole language development, listening, speaking, vocabulary” (Edwina - Primary School). Language affects learning in the school environment as this is the main method used by educators to communicate with children. The majority of the Caregivers and Educators believe it is necessary for children to have developed language skills in the years leading up to starting school,

“even if it's only little things like getting them to colour in pictures or reading them a story or something like that just for vocabulary and stuff like that” (Treasa - Caregiver).
However, in contrast to the majority of Caregivers who speak English as a second language (ESL), one ESL Caregiver viewed school as the place their child will learn the English language when commenting on the benefits of school, “for her it's very good, she start to learn English” (Bella - Caregiver).

Language difficulties for some children when they start school can act as barriers. Two sources of difficulties were cited: ESL children; and children with speech impediments. Children with sufficiently developed language skills are able to speak clearly and are in a better position to articulate their needs. This also facilitates children to understand what is being said to them thereby creating two way interactions. It was considered advantageous if children possess the dominant language of the school as young children starting school may find it difficult to develop the necessary social competence for the school setting, build relationships and interact with other children and the teacher if they do not have sufficient language skills, “she sometimes speaking the Polish language as well for the kids they look just ‘ah okay are you crazy” (Bella - Caregiver). The children may become isolated because of their inability to communicate effectively.

In particular, two primary school Educators (one in each DEIS school) spoke of the seriousness of the weak language ability of some of the children in the classroom. These difficulties need to be attended to as early as possible in order to ease the gravity of the issue and make the children more comfortable in school,

“asked Ali our speech and language therapist who worked here with our two other speech and language therapists to do a little assessment to see what was the level of language the infants came in with, so they come in
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

with the language acquisition of a two and a half year old so that's where we are starting” (Claudia - Primary School).

In order to build children’s language skills before they start school adults can provide stimulating environments where they engage in direct conversations with the children and expose them to vocabulary through the use of books and play. Descriptiveness is key as it enables the children to create images and understanding. This takes time and effort, “of course speaking with them oral language would be huge and cultivating an environment for that...communication skills even basic rhyming, singing with them, talking...develop language through play” (Gillian - Primary School).

6.2.5 Cognition and General Knowledge

Children’s cognition and general knowledge skills are prominent in the adults’ perceptions of school readiness. There is no mandatory requirement that children should begin school able to read, write or complete simple mathematics. However, misunderstandings about whether or not children should know the alphabet, numbers and have the ability to read and write exist. Stark differences in perceptions were evident between the Caregivers and Educators in this domain. The majority of the Educators were of the opinion that it is not necessary for the children to be equipped with this academic knowledge when they start school, “For me it is nothing to do with the academics” (Claudia – Primary School). It is a function of school to teach children this knowledge and despite this some felt that even in the early years of school there is too much focus on academics. Yet, at the same time a minority recognised that academics are important and featured in some preparation practices. Nonetheless, the Educators acknowledged the depth behind children’s capacity in these areas, “they can rhyme up to 10 but if you asked the child to show you three fingers or three articles they are not able” (Loretta - Preschool).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

‘Pre’ skills were emphasised more by the Educators in both preschool and primary school settings, even though as noted previously one primary school Educator even questioned this as being too advanced for children. ‘Pre’ skills include the ability to hold a pencil correctly and exposure to pre-reading and prewriting activities such as jigsaws and cutting activities,

“the shape goes back into do you know, it's also you can do so much from that piece of jigsaw you can teach them their animals...you come along then and you can chats, you can talk about the farm or you can talk about where do we get eggs, you can talk about anything in that picture” (Avril - Preschool).

This varying level of academic skills is catered for within the classroom as primary school Educators indicate that they monitor the different abilities off the children and attempt to accommodate for this in the activities they set out. Some children do not have any academics behind them whilst others have the basics,

“if you are talking about the academic side you have to pace it better, they mightn't be ready for the onslaught of all the books” (Gillian - Primary School).

Conversely, the Caregivers predominantly focused on social conventional knowledge and intellectual skills such as an ability to recite the alphabet, read, write and count throughout the semi-structured interviews. Whether taught in preschool or at home, the Caregivers believe that children should be practicing this knowledge before they begin school,

“well she's able to count, she's able to do puzzles, she's able to spell her own name and write her own name and you know things like that which is good starting off” (Harry - Caregiver).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

As school is considered a place that principally focuses on academic learning and advancement, children who start with a basis in these skills are believed to be prepared,

“I had this fear that I didn't want him to be the child in the class that would be behind you know academically and I just didn't want that for him” (Fiona - Caregiver).

Cognitive skills in the early years of school also encompass learning skills such as memory recall, attending to tasks and thinking. Junior infant children build on their cognitive skills as they enter school. One of the main aspects of cognition expected by the Caregivers and Educators is the children’s ability to control impulses with regard to sitting at their desk and maintaining attention in school. They believe it is necessary for children to resist their urges to act out or not adhere to the school norms. These skills enable the children to avoid disrupting the workings of the classroom and learn and develop further during junior infants, “concentrating on something like you know rather than moving around the place” (Tina - Preschool). However, although necessary it is also understood that children may find it difficult to sit at their desks for a long period of time despite the lack of space in the classroom,

“I would expect them to sit down but for short periods of time but by the end of junior infants I'd expect them to sit for a lot longer than now” (Pauline - Primary School).

Memory recall, recognition, ability to think and organisation were also cited as aspects of cognition that assist children starting school,

“she can learn things by just watching the thing once when she watches it that's it, it's locked, she can watch it...then she can repeat it then maybe three, four days down the line” (Peter - Caregiver).


6.2.6 Uneasiness

The primary school Educators suggested that approximately half the children in the class are insufficiently prepared whilst the Caregivers largely believe their children are ready. The children underwent mixed experiences and emotions when starting junior infants. From excitement to tears some children settled into school easily and were indifferent to it whilst others took time to adjust. According to the Caregivers and Educators, the reasons children undergo positive transitions is due to their friendships and happiness in school. They also believe that young children, children with language difficulties, children with behaviour difficulties or children who are nervous or unfamiliar with the environment may not initially experience a confident transition. Nonetheless, the Caregivers believe that their children all showed signs of enjoyment a few months into junior infants particularly in relation to attending school and school activities,

“she seems to be happy, she seems to like school she skips in in the mornings anyway and it's all good, there is never anything bad” (Josephine - Caregiver).

Some children who are identified as lacking in school readiness are seen to be unable to cope,

“a few of them I'm not sure that they are ready...just very babyish at the moment...I'm not talking about work wise just the routine of the classroom do you know when you notice certain kids that are just not able to eat within the time constraints, and keep up with the routine, what comes next they are just not able to keep up” (Roxanne - Primary School).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

The need to evaluate children’s readiness to determine if they can start school was identified by one Caregiver as a means to ensure that all the children in junior infants are at the same level and therefore fit in,

“I think kids should be tested going into school, not majorly do you know not like an entrance exam to try and get into secondary school nothing by that dramatic, but I definitely think that they should see if they are able to start” (Eabha - Caregiver).

6.2.7 Considering Children’s Readiness in the Decision Making Process

Rarely has research examined caregivers’ decision making process when deciding to start their young child in junior infants. The data from the interviews details the factors either considered or that should be considered in the decision making process. The decision making process concerning children’s readiness is filled with anxiety for many caregivers as they are responsible for the final decision,

“I suppose there's a period it seems from February to June where parents are thinking, really worried whether they'd be ready or not” (Charlotte - Caregiver).

The process begins months before the children actually start school in September. According to the Caregivers in this study, when caregivers make the decision to start children in school they consider aspects of their child’s developed biological characteristics, namely their age and their developmental abilities. The Caregivers advocate for either four or five as the starting school age, as these ages are considered the norm. Therefore, starting a child at school at the age of six is rare,

“I would have asked around and I suppose five...seemed to be the age that people were now sending their children to school” (Charlotte - Caregiver).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

The majority of the Educators also believe that age is a dominant factor in a caregiver’s decision. It appears that many of the Educators consider caregivers to view entry into school solely as a function of chronological age of either four or five,

“from experience in here it's basically down to their age, you know he is five, he is going to be five like in September like he'll be too old next year” (Aileen - Preschool).

Sending children at the same age as other children may be a strategy to ensure that children feel part of the collective and not at either end of the spectrum.

One Caregiver distinguishes the reason she waited until her child was older, she considered her child’s gender to be a factor,

“I think he was more prepared, well he was older a bit as well you know with boys I think it's a significant thing now to be honest the age” (Imogen - Caregiver).

Taking into consideration a child’s readiness and the role of chronological age, five years old is suggested as a minimum age of entry by many of the Educators and in the meantime a cut-off point should be implemented for children in the lower age range,

“I think government should say hang on, let May be your cut off mark if your child isn't four by a certain month then you have to wait until the following year” (Pauline - Primary School).

One more aspect of following the local norms mentioned by a minority of the Educators is sending children because the children’s friends are going. This takes into account the children’s previous socialisation experiences and the resulting friendships acquired. This in fact is reflected by some of the Caregivers who considered their child’s school entry prospects keeping in mind the
transitions on their child’s friends, “these children he's with now they are all his friends like” (Aileen - Preschool). Again starting a child at school at the same time as their friends ensures children have a peer support network in school and may be more likely to be content and settle in.

A fraction of the Educators suggested that some caregivers take into account their child’s actual ability and readiness to cope with the demands of school life in some developmental areas, but the dominant view taken is that readiness is not usually taken into account,

“I suppose they look at, do they feel they are ready you know, can they look after their own needs, can they toilet, can they you know eat and tidy up after themselves and put on their coat and you know small basic thing this now would be the ideal...in other households it might be 'well I have enough of her at home now, off she goes to school’” (Helen - Primary School)

This however is not the case with the Caregivers in this study as only one Caregiver indicated that they made the decision solely based on age. The remaining Caregivers took a range of factors into account, and readiness is at the forefront suggesting that they are making the decision with their child’s best interests in mind. Children being mature, able for the demands of school and having the necessary skills are regarded as central components in the decision making process, “if they have that sort of skills and the ability” (Sarah - Caregiver). Preschool attendance and performance in preschool are also accounted according to the Caregivers,

“she was ready in the sense just it was the next step...she done what she did and I don't think she could have got more out of another year there” (Kate - Caregiver).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

This affirms the significance of children’s experiences prior to starting school. Interestingly the Caregiver who felt that their child was not ready for school was one of the Caregivers who did not send their child to preschool,

“you know as I said I think it was genuinely down to not being put into playschool cause if he was in playschool he would have known the drill and he would have known I was coming back for him like and things like that” (Una - Caregiver).

A few Caregivers were uncertain of their child’s ability to adapt to school and therefore considered removing their child from the class if it didn’t work out after a certain period of time. Yet they were also worried of the affect this would have. Caregivers do not like to see their children struggle in school, “I gave it a month, six weeks and if she wasn’t too happy I was going to pull her out” (Ronan - Caregiver).

6.2.8 Ambiguous Undertakings: Children’s Voices in the Decision Making Process

Since the publication of the ‘National Children’s Strategy’ in 2000, how we view children in Ireland is changing. The constitutional amendment that introduced Article 42 (a) is the first step in incorporating the UNCRC into Irish law and explicitly recognises the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children in Ireland. Core to this is Article 12 and 13 (UNCRC, 1989) that outline the right of the child to express their views freely. In practice, this is a rhetoric rather than a reality as children’s voices and participatory input remains on a consultative basis.

As evident, there is a strong focus on the children’s abilities and needs throughout this research. In addition to this, the Caregivers and Educators were questioned if the children should have a say in the decision making process to
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

start school. Once again age and capacity prominently featured in the responses. The majority of the Caregivers believe that children should be consulted, that a conversation including the child should take place and that starting school should be explained to the children but by and large caregivers make the final decision,

“the child opinions matters as well because at the end of the day it's the child's feelings, it's the child that is going to school not the parents” (Lorraine - Caregiver).

For the remaining few Caregivers they feel that it is not necessary to ask the children about starting school as they are making the decision regardless of the children’s say. This is similar to the Educators as the majority are of the opinion that the caregivers should engage in conversation with the children about school but that the decision should not fall to the children, “to ask their decision but they are too young to make a decision about going to school” (Loretta - Preschool). A minority did not think it was necessary to ask the children as they would not be in a position to contribute.

6.3 Theme Two: Ready Families

Theme two explores the family contribution in relation to the research questions, “What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?” and “What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?”. Not only is school readiness perceived as children’s skills to fit in at school it is also recognised that school readiness is something that is created and formed by the children in conjunction with their families. This occurs over time, largely before the children start school, “if you don't put the time in you’re not going to get the results that you expect” (Donna - Preschool). This indicates that the environments that the children encounter and the people in these environments guide the extent of the children’s acceptance and
readiness when they start school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The home environment is acknowledged as significant preparatory input. For positive development to occur caring, encouraging and stimulating experiences must be provided.

### 6.3.1 Stimulating Homes

The people, the structure, the atmosphere and the activities in the home setting have the potential to impact on school readiness in general. For the most part the role of caregivers in preparing their children for school was emphasised by both the Caregivers,

> “it's good to have that you are not coming in with a child that you have to start from scratch it's good that parents can have something done before” (Fiona - Caregiver),

and the Educators,

> “I had a meeting with a dad this morning...I actually said to him that you know he is so important... 'when she goes to school she's going to be really good except she needs you,' she needs him to take her, to help her to support her” (Paula - Preschool).

It is vital that caregivers are on board and active in order for their children to fully succeed. They too must be prepared, “if the parents are not ready it can't work” (Nick - Caregiver).

The Caregivers believe that at times this can make it difficult for caregivers to stay up to date with their role in supporting their children’s learning. In order to provide learning opportunities and support in the home, the value caregivers place on education and their educating role can determine their level of interest in their child’s education and the home environment,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“my parents took no interest in my education that's why I am only going back to school now but...nowadays parents are taking that interest in their own kid’s education...I have expectations of my kids now” (Lorraine - Caregiver).

Preparing children for school involves the physical practicalities that caregivers engage with such as having the children’s uniform and lunch ready, and having a routine in place. This demonstrates the organisational input of caregivers,

“little things like telling them a story reading them a story going to bed you know what I mean having them eat with you...I mean everything is an education now if they are only learning gym or dancing or something like that it’s all education” (Tina - Preschool).

However, preparing children for school is much more than getting the physical resources and bringing them to the school, the home itself is an educating environment. The activities and the relationships that are in place can either foster or hinder preparation for school,

“parental input, how you talk to your child about school, the light you know the way you address it, how you explain it to a child is you know it impacts on their impression of school” (Pauline - Primary School).

The Caregivers know that they should provide children the opportunities to develop skills for starting school although it may not always be easy to do so,

“we prepare the children first at home...like reading the books and puzzles and things like that...it starts at home anyway...like here in Irish [sic] I'm not sure how to help her but now I go to Irish to try learn” (Geraldine - Caregiver).
The Caregivers are particularly concerned of the suffering young children would experience due to a lack of readiness. Caregiver knowledge and ability to support children before and as they begin school impacts on this,

“affect the one that wasn't prepared like if he or she be watching the one that is prepared, ahead of her do you know what I mean they'd lose momentum and all that ya… it'd be a good advantage to any parent to know cause a lot of children would be coming home now with a lot of different stuff now the stuff changes” (Peter - Caregiver).

Children are believed to be more familiar with school and the routines if they have older siblings or relations who model school behaviours according to the Caregivers and Educators. Another Caregiver considered sibling support as a factor in her decision making. Older siblings can also support the younger siblings as they start school,

“brothers and sisters would be talking about it, I know one child already has told me all about the sin bin...so one of my kids knows all about that already even though I haven't introduced it” (Roxanne - Primary School).

Support from the home is seen as essential component of preparation and should continue to assist the children when they start school. Being there for the child creates stability and security for them. Both the Caregivers and Educators recognise the importance of supporting the primary school educators and the school. This is beneficial as it assists the children’s development and the home-school link,

“sticking to their rules (the school) and getting the children there on time and following through on the learning at home, to take part and in the activities as well, support the school if there's any needs or anything that comes up with the child” (Anna - Caregiver).
Yet this is not practiced in every family,

“well what we find easy is that they are predictable...that sounds probably like that everyone would but here you wouldn't, they come in a half an hour late, and picking them and taking them early it’s all unsettling” (Nancy - Primary School).

### 6.3.2 Unstimulating Homes

Uninterested caregivers are cited as a reason why some children are not prepared for school and therefore experience difficult transitions by both the Caregivers and Educators. Where the caregiver is not interested in their child’s education the home environment can be less than conducive,

“the situation, how they live you know sometimes the people, you see [sic] 'get up, go to school, I don't care' and they don't talk nothing the kids [sic]” (Bella - Caregiver).

Media influences such as television programmes, videos and computers were recognised by a minority of the Caregivers and Educators as a source of influence on children’s preparedness. However, these influences are not always viewed as having a positive impact. Excessive amounts of television cannot replace two-way human interaction and stimulation,

“they may be left in front of the television there may be no stimulation of any sort but that would be the disadvantage” (Claudia - Primary School).

A positive attitude in the home benefits the children’s educational outlook according to the Caregivers and the Educators. Other reasons for children lacking in preparation as a result of the home environment include family stressors that lead to unstable environments such as health difficulties, low finances, domestic violence, addictions and family structure,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“like we had a child in like he started in September like his parents separated and they moved house and his mother moved in with a new partner so like he was just a very emotional upset child” (Aileen - Preschool).

It is reported that low income families struggle with finances in general (See Chapter Three). This in turn can affect the stress level in the home environment, the provision of learning materials and the variety of experiences,

“kids going back to school and they have new shoes, new this new that and other kids would have second hand stuff and they just have to make do with what they have and that's it if you give a parents all the advice in the world it is no good to him if he has no money or financially broke [sic] do you know what I mean” (Ronan - Caregiver).

It is suggested that struggling families need additional support in order to provide a strong foundation for their young children. Extending the FPSY to two years was cited as a means of decreasing the gap by the Educators,

“there's a bit of talk about extending the free school year to two years...everyone should get behind all that 100% and push it to the last do you know what I mean because like you do have children that needs to stay two years” (Aileen - Preschool).

The intensity of the situations for the children determines its impact on their stress levels and emotions thereby having a knock on effect on their readiness and experiences of school.

6.3.3 Caregivers’ Decision Making Process

In the end caregivers make the final decision on when their child will start school once they fall within the four to six age bracket at the start of the school year,
“at the end of the day it is up to the parents, if they want to put them to school they will and if they don't they won't do you know, it's completely; at the end of the day it's pointless saying anything because it is up to the parents” (Celine - Preschool).

Of the 20 caregivers who took part in the interviews, all but one believed that they had made the right decision to start their child in junior infants in September 2013.

As presented under theme one the children’s readiness is taken into consideration in the decision making process. In order to make an informed decision the Caregivers sought advice from educators and their social networks of family and friends. This identifies with the bioecological system’s view of school readiness. Most of the Caregivers value the extra input and opinions of others. For some they sought an input from their family and friends while for others they sought the opinions of the preschool leaders and additional professionals,

“(considered sending her son) when he was four but then when I sat down and spoke with the preschool leader she said that ‘ya, academically he was ready but emotionally he wasn't’ so I didn't (send him to school at four). I didn't even take the emotion side of it into consideration, so now I have another little boy to go to school yet so I'm going to now, that was a learning curve for me” (Lorraine - Caregiver).

The advice provided to the Caregivers assisted them as it enhances their ability to rate the quality of their decision and they clearly appreciated it,

“every bit of advice helps from anyone like, you know what I'm saying, you don't know everything, not [sic] one person that's going knows everything, someday...you still have to ask advice from anyone [sic] else” (Peter - Caregiver).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

For a number of Caregivers, their previous experiences of decision making improved their most recent decision as they have become more familiar with the school system,

“I kind of the first time I sent Ian (oldest son) I thought school is there to teach them and that's it you know that's my job done like to bring him to school...now when I start with Ivan I kind of [sic] more inclined to do things at home” (Imogen - Caregiver).

The school, its location, its reputation and its resources also featured as secondary considerations according to the some of the Caregivers and Educators. These considerations assist caregivers understanding of the support their child will receive in school, in relation to class sizes and additional supports available,

“for parents, well they'd be looking at I suppose the location of the school. They'd probably look at the background of the school, what the school has to offer. Maybe they are children from different cultures they might want to know are there EL (English Language) teachers there, would there be support for their child, they might look at the friends, the neighbours, where they going to school” (Gillian - Primary School).

This in effect can be seen as the caregiver having some control over the amount and quality of education their child receives. It is also an indication of the value caregivers place on education and the protective and nurturing element of their role,

“From a parent's point of view am I suppose us knowing about the school and the reputation of the school” (Charlotte - Caregiver).

The main reason that is highlighted for decisions to be made in the interests of caregivers is the economic situation of the caregivers. This included the effect
of work, of finances, or both. Part of this is due to the cost of childcare and preschool as it is emphasised as being expensive and unaffordable for some caregivers according to the Educators. If this is the case the main option after availing of the FPSY is to send the child to school to be cared for and educated,

“We had told her that child could have benefitted from another year but because of the cost and that’s really what it came down to...A lot of them will send them because of the cost, they can’t afford not to send them” (Jacintha - Preschool).

Finances are considered a resource input in relation to preparing children for school by the Caregivers however it is not identified as a standalone factor in the caregivers’ decision. Working situations however are also a practical consideration for caregivers,

“looking into a school I did look at the different schools in the area...it was actually school times starting, at the time I was working” (Kate - Caregiver).

On a previous occasion a Caregiver realised how her working status impacted on her eldest child’s adjustment in school and therefore gave up her job despite the financial implications. Since then the Caregiver gave attention to her presence at home as a feature in her decisions,

“I made the decision to give up work...and I suppose that was my way to be there to support...personally I’ve never looked back...I didn’t have that time before the eldest started in school do you know cause I was working so but now I know with the other kids since you know I’ve never had a problem with any of them so” (Treasa - Caregiver).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

Although the Caregivers value the advice they receive and suggest that they use it as they make their decision, the Educators were of mixed opinions as to whether or not the advice is necessarily heeded,

“the psychologist felt the child wasn’t ready, she could benefit from another year in preschool and she really could but the mother insisted to go to school” (Helen - Primary School).

If this is the case it may be that some decisions despite expert opinions are not made with the children’s best interests in mind. Other motivations that are unidentified by the Caregivers in this research may exist. However, some Caregivers felt the advice from the Educators can be vague therefore they can still struggle making the decision.

Conforming to social conventions is believed to be advantageous as children start school as they will blend in with the crowd. Nonetheless the social norms related to age and local practices may not fully benefit children as their developmental pathways vary. Thus adhering to social norms may not actually serve the best interests of the child and in actual fact serve the interests of the caregivers to justify their decision making without engaging in deep contemplation of the issues, “some will just follow the crowd” (Loretta - Preschool).

6.4 Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities

Taking into account the local community as the next environment children occupy outside of the home, preschool and schools are accredited as influential inputs in school readiness. The free preschool year (FPSY) is regarded as an asset by both the Caregivers and Educators. The Caregivers cited preschool as a ‘definite’, the ‘most important thing’, and they would ‘recommend’ it. The
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

Caregivers and Educators believe that children who did not attend preschool before they start school struggle in school,

“there's one little boy who is really scared to go out into the yard...he didn't go to playschool so like in his mind he might as well be at Electric Picnic out there, like it's so scary. He's petrified going out there and I can see where he is coming from but if he had been to a playschool he'd be more ready for it” (Noelle - Primary School).

The transition practices facilitated by the schools, the preparation of the school environment and the challenges faced by schools and preschools in supporting children’s transition also play a role in the readiness process.

6.4.1 The Community

Shared local spaces such as estates and playgrounds, and community activities were identified as influential local resources by a minority of the Caregivers. Children benefit from engagement in the local community. This also has the potential to increase caregivers’ social networks. Additional services identified by some of the Caregivers and Educators are also believed to impact on school readiness as the provision of information, the identification of needs, and the resulting steps taken further attends to the children’s effective development and resulting readiness for school, “I would hold Adam back because he needed that bit of extra help with the early intervention team” (Anna - Caregiver). Services do not necessarily have to be focused solely on the child to affect school readiness as a preschool Educator highlighted the fact that parenting programmes may also contribute, “so you know like everything else in life things keep moving on...I would have parenting programmes here” (Paula - Preschool). As can be seen communities play a role in preparing children for

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16 Electric Picnic is a three-day Music and Arts festival held in Ireland. Approximately 50,000 people attend.
school and therefore they too must be resourced and organised sufficiently to deliver effective services to the local children and families.

6.4.2 Preschool

Preschool is a cultivating environment that plays an early intervention role and cultivates skills believed to be necessary for school; independence; concentration; emotional stability; awareness of classroom procedures; the ability to socialise in a group of other children; and the understanding that another adult other than their Caregiver is in control. Children learn about school and life skills as they are immersed in the structures of the preschool,

“all that training would be there that to sit down and to listen and to take turns...it’s all done formally now in playschool” (Helen - Primary School).

This in turn prepares children for school, as school is regarded as an extension of preschool by the Caregivers and Educators, “she was ready in terms of that she was used to going to preschool” (Nick – Caregiver). The skills gained in preschool identified by both the Caregivers and Educators fall into the five domains of school readiness. The socialisation aspect in particular stood out as a fundamental advantage. It helps children meet other children and adults, engage with different cultures, manage caregiver separation and make friends,

“I put it all back down to the preschool...just getting to know people and trust them, getting to trust different people...to be able to play with different children, do you know what I'm saying children she hasn't seen before, so I think I put it all down to that” (Peter - Caregiver).

In general, Educators believe that when children start school it is usually evident whether they have attended preschool or not,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“so that the days that the kids are crying and really upset are kind of over for us, now you will get you will get the odd one but compared to maybe 10 years ago there is no comparison” (Pauline - Primary School).

Acknowledging the strong emphasis placed on the preschool environment as a preparatory input, quality in this environment was raised as an area of concern by a one of primary school Educators.

“well the preschools as well ya but whether they do it properly or not is another thing we just had a discussion came up recently in the staff room that some, no criticism like none of us is (sic) perfect but letters are taught incorrectly, the formation of letters...preschool needs to be developed more and not just one free year” (Edwina - Primary School).

6.4.3 The School

Leading on from the preschool environment it was is felt that the receiving schools and the educators should be prepared for the incoming children. The transition practices that are carried out in the schools and preschools and the information from these environments contribute to the preparations that take place. The Caregivers spoke of the usefulness of the open day and the information they received before their child started school,

“(in preschool) they had a little graduation party and all that craic so she knew she was finishing...the teachers here the principal and that...they go to the preschool and they try to find out...who's in the classes so do you know she does [sic] try to mix some of the preschool so they know somebody going in” (Kate - Caregiver).
A minor emphasis was placed on the readiness of the school from the perspective of the Caregivers and preschool Educators. The primary school Educators were most vocal about the need for preparation of the school environment,

“I think the whole school needs to be ready, you’re talking about the school community...it takes a lot of preparation, well you try to have the room inviting ah just to create that environment where it is a happy safe environment am (sic) welcoming for both parents and child...just have a good kind of programme of work laid out...have lots of variety, children's attention span is very short, you've got to go from Billy to Jack very quickly, break into song” (Gillian - Primary School).

Receiving schools must consider their capacity to cater for the children due to start junior infants. The school must be organised to attend to the children’s needs. Educators, classroom assistant and special needs assistants must be employed and the classroom and playground must be spacious, equipped with educational materials and resources that facilitate the children’s development. Health and safety measures must also be taken into consideration.

For numerous Caregivers and Educators, the large number of children in the class is worrying as it is difficult for educators to educate, control the class and give attention to each individual child,

“They have big numbers...a teacher’s job is a bit like butter on a cracker, they are trying to spread themselves too much over an area that's so thin” (Anna - Caregiver).

The classroom itself becomes difficult to move in, “I feel that the room is so small” (Nancy - Primary School). It is believed that this restricts the educators’ ability to carry out their job requirements and also forces children into unnatural states of being,
“at times I think there can be an awful lot expected and I can see where the teacher is coming from because there can be so many children in the classroom, you know expecting a child to stay seated for hours on end...they should be allowed more movement kind of free play” (Jacintha - Preschool).

According to the Caregivers and Educators, methods of improving schools’ readiness includes class size reduction and the introduction of more educators and classroom assistants, “I think there should be more teachers” (Donna - Preschool). Many expectations are placed on educators to care and educate young children but many are limited in their approach as preschool educators are not required to have a degree and continuous professional development is limited, “but there is no monies there to come out and train us properly” (Avril - Preschool). Education is Ireland is viewed as a means to achieve a successful society however the preschool and school environments are not sufficiently invested in to make this a reality for many children living in disadvantaged circumstances.

6.4.4 Ambiguous Undertakings: Curriculum Disparities

Ambiguous undertakings refer to the uncertainty of the implementation of the curricula in the ECCE sector and in the primary school. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) was developed for children in the zero to six age range. When Aistear was published the intention was to incorporate the curriculum in primary school for children in junior infants and senior infants. However, the implementation of Aistear in primary schools is rare as they are obliged by the government to implement the official primary school curriculum. One of the main differences between Aistear and the primary school curriculum is that Aistear acknowledges the role of play in children’s development and focuses on play based learning
whilst the primary school curriculum focuses on formal academic learning. Many primary school educators struggle with this as they must focus on academic outcomes rather than play (INTO, 1995; Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997; Wesley & Buysse, 2003).

The push for formal learning of literacy and numeracy is unnecessary for children in preschool and junior infants according to some of the Educators. Preschools can provide their own curricula whilst primary school educators follow the designated national curriculum. This gives preschool some flexibility but results are expected in primary school. Aistear the national curriculum is used as a guideline and reference point as it is loosely implemented.

“I know the curriculum still with the primary for the first up until the children are six they follow the Siolta and Aistear and there is a lot of work to be that they have to get done and they have targets to meet…I think it’s too academic for the first year, even two years for some children…Let them be children…I think they have a curriculum that has to be followed through…they’ll have deadlines to get a certain amount of work done every term, like this, this and this has to be covered for every term and I think that kind of takes over” (Jacintha - Preschool).

Preschools are obliged to have a curriculum in place that focuses on play. This allows for different curricula to be in place in preschools which may result in discontinuity as the children start junior infants. Consistency between the preschool environment and the school environments was mentioned by one Educator who felt that sometimes the children can end up being confused as they transition from one environment to another,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“They might do their letters through Letterland” so when they go to school they do a completely system so then the child is confused” (Celine - Preschool).

Primary School Educators in the two areas believe there is a need for an infant cycle to be introduced to their school to assist in the children’s gradual integration and adaptation to the demands of school and the curriculum,

“there should be more there should be a two-year cycle, there should be a year in the school where there is it's play...three years in infants at the school back in junior, middle and senior” (Edwina - Primary School).

This call for a three-year cycle ignores that the implementation of Aistear across all preschool and infant years in the school would contribute to the continuity experienced by the children, educators and caregivers.

More time for play in primary school is advocated for. Some Educators believe that caregivers lack of understanding of developmental activities results in pressure being placed on them by caregivers to conduct academic tasks. Play is a factor in children’s development and school readiness. It is highlighted as a widespread activity in the children’s environment. For the Caregivers, play is seen as a natural recreation activity in comparison to learning, “it's not just to go in and play, there's certain times for learning and there's certain time for play” (Treasa - Caregiver). Nonetheless, a unique view was uncovered in relation to play and preschool. Despite accepting that children should enjoy preschool one Caregiver’s expectation was purely focused on academic learning.

“she learned nothing in the crèche she was in, whatever she learned she learned at home...playing games and things like that ya it's grand but if, I had it in my head to [sic] sending them down to learn something...I'll

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17 Letterland is a phonics based approach to teaching literacy skills using Letterland characters
be honest with ya, I have a two year old and he's three next year and when they are three it's a free year and I'm not going to send him cause it was a total waste of time, she learned absolutely nothing” (Ronan - Caregiver).

The Educators expanded their opinion on this by indicating that they think that some caregivers’ expectations are somewhat unrealistic. This thereby demonstrates that the Educators believe that some caregivers lack an understanding of children’s development and the means to facilitate it,

“I think the actual importance of playing, the parents being aware of it, the importance of play and even for them to play with the children...perhaps when we are having our open day with the parents we could emphasis that with the parents” (Gillian - Primary School).

Yet, this is not the case for all caregivers as evident in this research the level of formal learning was of concern for a minority of the Caregivers who questioned the curriculum in the preschool environment, “the preschool year should be more about play and all that like you know let them go with it I don't think they should be doing junior infants before they go to junior infants do you know” (Kate - Caregiver).

6.4.5 Improvements in Schools and Communities
This component of the theme ‘Ready Schools and Communities’ attends to the research question “What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?”. In portraying the chronosystem, the Caregivers and the Educators contemplate the changes that have occurred in the school system since they attended school. They highlight the current issues that are prevalent for all those involved when children start school. The effects of globalisation have brought about many changes in schools in Ireland; a diverse population; an increase in
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

children being born and an influx of policies in relation to children and ECCE. Children are also recognised as active participants. This is evident in how the Caregivers and Educators speak of the new approach towards children, the opportunities afforded to the children as a result of the FPSY, and attitudes towards education.

6.4.5.1 Supporting Children’s Learning

Education in both the ECCE sector and the primary school sector has changed as a result of the focus of the country. New policies and frameworks reflect the need to intervene early and support young children in their care and education, but unfortunately are not immune from the impact of budgetary adjustments. The FPSY in place since 2010 enables all children within the specified age range to attend sessional preschool prior to beginning junior infants. This is evident as previously stated 18 of the 20 caregivers availed of the free place,

“I took the free ECC year this year for Karen (younger child)...I just took it cause I just went with go with the flow it came with flexibility with days” (Kate - Caregiver).

Having and availing of the option to send children to preschool for free is considered an excellent opportunity for children to experience a new social environment and begin to prepare for the formal school environment,

“I find this preschool thing the free preschool...gives opportunities for people, let's say Ivan was going to the crèche beforehand so he was in the group and all that but it gives every child an opportunity and that's a brilliant thing” (Imogen - Caregiver).

Prior to this, accessing childcare was considered elitist as it was difficult for many families to access due to the cost of childcare,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“we wouldn’t have gone to playschool in my time so now most of them have that experience and its helps them, prepares them for big school” (Gillian - Primary School).

The FPSY is considered to be an initiative to equalise the starting point for all children as they start school. Although many benefits have been accrued, it is clear that it does not outweigh the advantages available to middle and high income families who are in a position to pay for childcare services and preschool in the years prior to or after they avail of the FPSY. Some of the Caregivers opted for sending their child to preschool for more than one year as a result of allowing the child to be phased into the environment or because they were out of the home and needed childcare. Starting school is the next step after time spent in the preschool, “Well I kept him in the Montessori for an extra year...he was in a Montessori for two years” (Fiona - Caregiver). Some families can afford to send their children to preschool for more than one year but this is not possible for all families,

“the one free year and then they have to go after that to school...otherwise they'd have to pay you see, pay crèches” (Edwina - Primary School).

The duration of preschool attendance varied amongst the children in this study as did attitudes amongst the Caregivers and Educators in relation to the appropriate amount of time a child should spend in preschool. At the time of data collection, the ECCE scheme allowed for one free year of preschool. Various Educators recognise that some children need more than one year in preschool to be more prepared for school,

“I can see you know them coming for one year to the playschool some of them and they wouldn't be prepared for school, but the parents would be
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

leaving them another year, and another year that they would open up like flowers” (Tina - Preschool).

This has now been achieved as the FPSY has been extended to two years however, although preschool contributes the school readiness it is not the only contributor therefore the two years in preschool initiative is not a complete solution in itself. More improvements are still required as Ireland is behind some European counterparts,

“they say we're not up to Sweden, they can compare you to Sweden which is absolutely superb wouldn't I love to be over there in playschool, even in England they'd have the real kitchens and the real this and the real that space, I haven't that” (Avril - Preschool).

Educators create a wide variety of opportunities and use different methods to engage children in learning. This activity based learning involves the children in their own learning. The Educators believe that children are treated with respect and their growth and development is encouraged in school,

“there's a far greater understanding of the need for children to be active, and for the active learning, and also for how the learning happens that it’s not all rote learning that you actually have constructivism in the classroom” (Claudia - Primary School).

A minority of the Caregivers also regard this type of teaching and learning as accommodating. Teaching children has become quite active and inclusive in its approach making it more enjoyable for children,

“maybe it's the element of social learning, you know there is much more social learning and it's much more informal than it was and maybe that is it” (Fiona - Caregiver).

Within this the approach is frequently being modified,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“I’ve noticed the little the phonics that she has started doing this year in junior infants is[sic] completely from what the other two did” (Treasa - Caregiver).

6.4.5.2 Supporting Diversity

Ireland has undergone a transformation both socially and economically since the 1990’s. Difference and diversity is a common feature in schools in Ireland now considering that the Irish population consists of a number of nationalities and cultures, and special needs diagnoses are on the rise,

“I remember going to school ah there was 28 in our class, 26 of us were Irish and two of the girls were say Travellers…when Eleanor started school and I read say the list of all the names…it would be either Polish or it was do you know someone from Pakistan or do you know other nationalities” (Eabha - Caregiver).

Yet, this is believed to be an early introduction and preparation for children to the inevitable diversity they will meet throughout their lives. The Educators recognise their role in catering for such diversity but also in educating the children around it,

“in the last couple of years we have children with two languages, bilingual, you know some of them we have a little girl here who has three languages...their kind of international children now...they're citizens of the world” (Tina - Preschool).

Some of the Caregivers taught their children to be non-judgemental and expect educators to also practice this,

“I wouldn't even teach them to think in their own mind that they are being discriminated, I wouldn't even put that up to them that's not an issue” (Peter - Caregiver).
6.4.5.3 Security Concerns
Social issues such as safety concerns are increasing. Children’s safety is highlighted by some of the Caregivers as they think the school environment is a safe place while others were not as sure,

“there is only one fault I have and it’s not with just this school, it's with every school, kids going to the toilet, I do see them [sic] there going on their own, sure they can walk out the door and walk out off do you know what I mean? some mornings now I do drop her in [sic] and wait for 10 or 15 minutes outside just if (she)...follow me out” (Ronan - Caregiver).

One Caregiver questioned the over protective nature of some caregivers in that children need to learn from experience. Safety fears also expanded into bullying concerns, that their child may be the victim or the perpetrator,

“you hear so many stories about bullying and do you know you don't want your child to be bullied, you don't want them to be a bully either” (Olive - Caregiver).

Behavioural concerns are more prominent for the Caregivers now as they acknowledge their role in teaching their children how to behave correctly. It is also a concern for the Educators as “there's a lot more bullying and stuff like that going on and I can see it here myself” (Aileen - Preschool). They acknowledge that if it is not dealt with early both the victim and perpetrator’s sufferings may continue to exist throughout their lives.

6.5 Theme Four: Working Together - Ready Families, and Ready Schools and Communities
Theme four responds to the research question “What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?” as it identifies a number of disconnections that exist on the ground. Firstly, the majority of the Caregivers and Educators believe that their knowledge of school readiness differs.
Secondly, the strongly advocated policy of partnership at both the national and international level does not appear to be functioning effectively.

6.5.1 Disjointed Knowledge

Beliefs are based on the information available to the person. For the most part the recurrent view amongst both the Caregivers and the Educators is that caregivers and educators’ perceptions of what school readiness is differ. This is largely attributed to the different roles and approaches of each group in their separate environments. Caregivers ‘know’ their children and their preferences from the home environment, whereas educators’ knowledge is typically based on their formal education and school procedures. The Educators felt their familiarity with this environment results in them having different views to that of caregivers,

“probably ya cause parents don't always think the way teachers think they are not in situ the situations, they might be only conscious of their own child you know” (Gillian – Primary School).

The Caregivers recognise that educators are specifically trained to understand children’s development and to facilitate children’s learning using recognised guidelines and curricula,

“they would because some parents like, I come from a very bad educational background so I wouldn't have the first clue whereas teachers they are after going to college and learning how to do all this so ya there would be different views and on the parents on the school sides” (Lorraine - Caregiver).

The Caregivers spoke of the source of their school readiness knowledge. Approximately half the Caregivers relied on their family for guidance such as their own parents or siblings who already have or had children in school. Other
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

Caregivers feel that they learned through their own experience of school, through the preschool their children attended, through their other children starting school, and their own work. One Caregiver suggests that cultural backgrounds may affect perceptions between caregivers and educators, “*maybe with us because we are from another country and these are from other country*” (Doireann - Caregiver). It is argued by both the Caregivers and the Educators that everyone involved should know what readiness is.

The Caregivers in this study suggest that they are unclear of the necessary level and timing of development of the skills needed for school, “*because the parent might not know… the requirements to get to school*” (Nick - Caregiver). This can then impact on the children’s participation in school,

“I had already taught Eleanor how to count and write her name and do things before she went into even primary or say to preschool which I was probably told that I shouldn't have because while they were being taught the things she already knew, so I was kind of making sure hoping that wherever she was starting she wasn't going to get bored” (Eabha - Caregiver).

This lack of perceived knowledge is also emphasised by the Educators who feel that caregivers need more information and education in relation to school readiness, “*the parents would need to be informed more*” (Loretta - Preschool). This again is due to the caregivers’ level of education and past experiences according to the Educators,

“*they don't think readiness and a lot of the parents I would be talking about in this category now would be parents that have little or no education themselves and who may have had poor experiences in school*” (Claudia - Primary School).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

The Educators are pushing for more of an understanding on the part of the caregivers about their role, and the role of education environments,

“I think sometimes parents expect the children to be educated at school I don't think they full realise the implications of their own self you know” (Paula - Preschool).

Nonetheless some preschool Educators also acknowledge that educators themselves are not always fully informed,

“I think teachers need to know, I think preschool teachers need to know exactly what school readiness is, I think the curriculum as it's presented is not helping people to understand what they are doing” (Paula - Preschool).

This suggests that knowledge of school readiness is lacking in many of the environments in children’s microsystem.

6.5.2 Building School Readiness Knowledge

The majority of the Caregivers were of the opinion that they need more information regarding sending their child to school and suggest some possible methods for providing upfront information that is within reach for caregivers,

“even if it's around before they move from Montessori or before they move from somewhere...that there is some sort of...talk or something for parents about, even a little workshop about your child moving forward and readiness” (Fiona - Caregiver).

Nonetheless, although suggestions about having caregiver meetings were numerous by both the Caregivers and Educators, an argument against this was also made by one primary school Educator as attendance at these meeting are typically low, “it's hard cause meetings they won't come to meetings” (Edwina - Primary School).
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

The Caregivers and the Educators thought that a list that explicitly outlines what children’s preparation involves would be quite helpful in assisting their knowledge of what skills children are expected to have starting school. A list would be specifically useful for first time caregivers and non-Irish nationals translated into their mother tongue,

“so you'd know then you'd be able to look at the list and be able to say ya she can do this, can she do that, I'd be able to watch now and see, I'll be able to ask these questions and then you’re giving people an understanding; this is what is expected, this is what they should be able to do, if not why would you put your child through you know something they are not ready for” (Josephine – Caregiver).

The Educators acknowledge that this would also open school readiness conversations between groups,

“Yes, no or attempting to do it or working on you know that kind of way...if there was some kind of guideline where we could say we could tick, this child is able to do this, this, this and this...ya something like that we could pass onto the school...and we could pass it to the parents as well and give them something to think about” (Jacintha - Preschool).

Caution is advised by both groups suggesting that the list should not be prescriptive. It should be used as a guiding tool. Another possible disadvantage highlighted by a primary school Educator is the accessibility of such a list for caregivers who have literacy difficulties and suggests that in itself a list is insufficient and that a higher level of intervention is needed,

“well there are parents who can't read, we'd have that problem here, what good is a list to them, it has to come from the top” (Edwina - Primary School).
6.5.3 Ambiguous Undertakings: Partnership Disparities

Working in partnership is core to supporting children’s learning and education. Partnerships involve mutual activities between the preschool and primary school to help children adjust to the new environment; passing on relevant information about the children can assist planning and provision; cooperation amongst professionals can create continuity across settings; and educators must engage with families (Athola et al., 2016). Foundational to this is caregiver involvement and communication between ECCE settings and primary schools. The role of the child in the partnership model is explored in Theme one and demonstrates that children’s participation is expected to be only on a consultative basis. Despite an emphasis on the need to work together, in practice it is not always effectively practiced.

It is worth noting that the majority of the Caregivers and the Educators believe in the importance of working with each other, “It's all working together, it's all trial and error” (Anna - Caregiver). A combined approach is more effective as it capitalises on all groups’ resources yet effective communication is required for this to work. Working in partnership takes into account the home, the preschool, the school and child development and support services. When children begin school the home continues to play a leading role and the school and preschool are seen to trade places. Regardless of the positioning of the environments they all must communicate and work together in order to support the children’s efforts for school. Being open and approachable is foundational to creating partnerships, “just if they wanted to, like not to be afraid to approach preschool teacher and say” (Celine - Preschool). The Caregivers and Educators feel it is the role of caregivers to support their children’s education and the educators’ efforts at home,
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

“you'd expect the parents to kind of come on board with the teachers...once you built up the relationship with a parent that comes along...and that they would feel free to communicate with me as well if there is an issue bothering them I'd like an openness like that so I'd expect that they would have the courage and the trust to trust me”

(Gillian - Primary School).

The Caregivers echo the need for educators to engage in open and active methods of communication. Formal parent teacher meetings are appreciated as they permit detailed feedback. Nonetheless, the Caregivers expect there to be an open door policy in that they can voice their concerns with a teacher when necessary, where this is not in place caregivers feel less involved. Time however is highlighted as a barrier,

“(Parent teacher meeting) well it was nice to get some feedback on her you know what I mean cause you don't get a chance cause there is so many in the class to ask the teacher like, you wouldn't be taking up her time cause it's just pick them up drop them in” (Kate - Caregiver).

Connections across preschool and school environments are also important as it creates stability for the children. Yet, the communication between these settings is limited and irregular, “Every now and again like yesterday the home school liaison officer...called up just to see how we are going” (Jacintha - Preschool).

Working together is not always an easy task. Communication issues contribute to partnership challenges. The divide between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere became quite distinct in the interviews and the roles within these spheres were relatively defined. The Caregivers view themselves as the primary provider of the care, protection and upbringing of their children. The
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

Educators feel that they play a role in providing some information but some cautioned against being overly involved,

"I think that's lack of communication with us you know and I think it is like you know, no preschool teachers wants to say well he's not that bright really, another year would do home well in the preschool, you just don't say that anymore" (Tina - Preschool).

Other Educators suggest that their input is unwanted,

"parents won't listen some of them...they will later they will, you'll meet them later and they will tell you down the road 'I should have listened to you, I made the mistake, I sent her'" (Helen - Primary School).

The Educators indicate that the responsibility lies with the caregivers to initiate communication,

"like you don't want to go interfering and saying 'look it I don't', you know what I mean you'd prefer for them to come to you because at the end of the day it is up to them" (Celine - Preschool).

However, this puts caregivers in a difficult position as the Caregivers do not want to cross boundaries,

"but you know there is a thing fine line you don't want to be knowing teachers either so you know kinda you know you don't ask kinda unless you really think there is something wrong" (Imogen - Caregiver).

Nonetheless, educators should monitor their response to caregivers. A preschool Educator spoke of some educators needing to attend to their treatment of caregivers,

"the teacher's response to the parents I think should be addressed as well, you know I have actually coached parents on going down to the school to communicate with the teachers...and why I have to help them
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

because the parents are so frustrated they don't know how to do it and they feel that when they go down there the teachers get angry with them and then it's not going well” (Paula - Preschool).

The educators’ behaviour impacts on the effectiveness of partnerships and on children’s success in preschool and school. Living in testing circumstances could see children struggle in school as they may not be fully capable to deal with the environment and its demands. Nonetheless school can offer children the opportunity to be part of a positive environment and result in positive experiences. One primary school Educator mentioned that their perception and understanding of the situation of the home environment impacts on their treatment of the children in the class,

“but it's very hard sometimes not to have to say oh 'it won't be taken out of the bag, and this won't be done and that won't be done, and they'll be gone early’ and you know you hand out a new book at it's gone the next day things like that, we really just wipe it clean it's not anything to do with the child and keep giving them every opportunity, ‘cause they are the ones that usually need more input” (Nancy - Primary School).

6.6 Summary

This chapter represents the inputs of the Caregivers and Educators who took part in the semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis of the data resulted in four themes: Ready Children; Ready Families; Ready Schools and Communities; and Working Together - Ready Families, and Ready Schools and Communities. The Caregivers’ and Educators’ in this study explored a wide variety of skills they attach to school readiness (Kagan et al., 1995), the function of the environments the children inhabit and the interactions that take place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), the factors considered in decision making, and the importance of partnership (NCCA, 2009).
The Caregivers and Educators place the most emphasis on the children’s social and emotional skills, and their cognition and general knowledge skills as these domains enable children to make friends, follow the school rules and take part in the learning tasks. The primary inputs recognised are the home environment and the preschool setting both of which should be positively stimulating. A range of factors are taken into consideration in the decision making process including; the child’s age; the child’s abilities; attendance at preschool; advice from family, friends, the preschool and additional professionals; and the norms of the local area. The Educators believe that caregivers do not focus enough on children’s readiness in the decision making process.

The FPSY is believed to offer opportunities to all families. Children are now considered to be more prepared as a result of this scheme. The recognition that children should be more active in their learning is also welcomed. The class composition is more diverse as the number of children from different cultures and children with special needs has increased. Both the Caregivers and Educators largely believe that their perceptions of what school readiness is differ. A partnership approach in preparing and supporting the children is advocated for. However, ineffective communication and time restrictions prove to be barriers to this. The push for formal academic learning is also seen to be unnecessary for children in preschool and junior infants. The emphasis on the academic side of learning reinforces the responsibility of being ready on the child as their academic skills are assessed. While on paper there is a recognition that various players are involved in school readiness, the language used continues to focus on the readiness of the child. There is very little evidence of schools adapting and facilitating Aistear the early childhood curriculum that underlines the process rather than the outcome of learning.
Chapter Six Caregiver and Educator Findings

These findings are discussed in Chapter Eight using the conceptual framework within the context of the four research questions. The ‘Ready Child’ discusses the Caregivers’ and Educators’ view on aspects of the age versus ability debate, the skills children need when starting school and children’s consultation in the decision making process. Under ‘Ready Families’, the input of caregivers and siblings identified by the Caregivers and Educators is considered. This includes the impact of the cost of childcare, the activities the families engage in, the encouragement of education at home and the enabling and disabling conditions that impact on school readiness within the home. Within the ‘Ready School’ component the reputation of the school, the resources available, class sizes, the transition practices in place and the preparation and the organisation of the educators is explored. The ‘Ready Communities’ elements of the discussion consider the Caregivers’ and Educators’ perceptions of the role of preschool in school readiness and the impact of the local area.

Chapter Seven illustrates the analysed quantitative findings from the Early Development Instrument, completed by the caregivers and primary school educators.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Chapter Seven
Early Development Findings

7.1 Introduction
Quantitative data was collected for this study using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) (Janus & Offord, 2007) to obtain an approximate level of school readiness. The EDI measures children’s school readiness to learn and ability to meet the task demands of school in five scales: physical health and well-being; social knowledge and competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and general knowledge and communication skills. EDI scores were correlated with the data from the Caregiver Questionnaire. In respect of the quantitative data in this mixed methods study, the aim is to answer the following research question: “What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?”. This data was analysed using SPSS Version 20. Scores recorded for participants in the sample were compared to the norms of the instrument. Further analyses explored between-group differences in age, preschool attendance, English as a second language (ESL), membership of the Traveller community and gender. Data from the Caregiver Questionnaires were linked to the educator-completed EDIs to explore the differences in groups based on social welfare dependency, low caregiver educational attainment, caregiver attendance at caregiver workshop, frequency of story time, hours of television watched each day, hours of sleep, caregivers’ perception of the availability of safe playgrounds in the area and caregivers’ perception that the area is safe to play in.

7.2 Participants
Six primary school educators completed a total of 46 Early Development Instrument (EDI) questionnaires across School A and School B. Six of the EDIs indicated that the children had special needs and therefore were removed from
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

the sample in line with the EDI instructions. In the case of 18 children in this sample, the EDI was also completed by their caregiver. The children were aged between three years and 11 months and five years and five months at the start of September 2013. The average age of the children starting school in this sample was four years and seven months. The children’s gender, English language as a second language status (ESL) and Traveller status are described in the tables below.

Table 7.1 Frequency distribution based on children’s gender

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<th>Gender</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>42.5</td>
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Table 7.2 Frequency distribution based on ESL Status

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<th>ESL Status</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

Table 7.3 Frequency distribution based on Traveller status

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<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveller</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
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7.3 Missing Data

The protocol for using these instruments requires that no more than 30% of missing answers are allowed in each scale. If more than one scale is missing, the
questionnaire is not considered complete and is discarded from analyses (Janus & Offord, 2007). No questionnaires were discarded from analyses in this study, although the emotional maturity scale was removed in one case in certain analyses. The ‘exclude cases pairwise’ option was chosen during statistical analyses as it only excludes the case if they are missing the data required for the specific analysis. Otherwise the case is included in the analyses if it has the necessary information (Pallant, 2007).

7.4 Descriptives
Based on the 40 EDI’s completed by the educators the distributions of scores were inspected for normal distribution. As presented in Table 8.4, four of the five scales exceeded the recommended values for either skewness or kurtosis (between -1.0 and +1.0) and therefore violate the assumptions of normality. It is also recommended to visually examine the shape of the distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Despite the communication and general knowledge scale reaching acceptable skew and kurtosis levels the distribution displayed on the scatterplot and histogram indicate that the data was non-normal (See Appendix 11). Skewed distributions are not necessarily problematic as it may be a reflection of the construct being measured (Pallant, 2007). Considering the nature of the five scales in the EDI, skewed distributions are not surprising. The 5% trimmed mean and mean values were not overly different therefore the cases were retained. The outliers were not transformed and non-parametric tests were used due to non-normality. As can be seen in Table 8.4 the scales showed evidence of good reliability as the Cronbach Alpha coefficient is greater than .7 (i.e., $\alpha > .70$ ) (Pallant, 2007) for each scale.

---

18 Kurtosis is a measure of the sharpness of the tail relative to a normal distribution.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Table 7.4 Descriptive Statistics, Reliability and Normal Distributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min-Max</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>CI (95%)</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>8.61</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.92-10</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>8.01-9.22</td>
<td>-1.61</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>7.99</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.31-10</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>7.24-8.73</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>3.67-10</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>7.44-8.51</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Cognitive Development</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.00-10</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>6.82-8.70</td>
<td>-1.43</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and General Knowledge</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.00-10</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>5.49-71</td>
<td>-.57</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.5 Vulnerability

It is possible to identify children who are considered developmentally vulnerable when starting school using the EDI. The vulnerability score, is a binary variable (0 = not vulnerable, 1 = vulnerable) and is calculated based on comparing children’s scores with the lowest 10th percentile boundary for each scale. If a child's score falls below the lowest 10th percentile on one or more scales, the score is 1; otherwise, it is 0. Children who score in the highest 25th percentile are considered to be at the top of the ‘On track’ rank. Those who score between the 75th and 25th percentiles are categorised in the middle of the ‘On track’ rank. Children who score below the lowest 10th percentile are believed to be vulnerable and therefore ‘Not on track’ in relation to school readiness. The scoring procedure was conducted by the Offord Centre for Child Studies in McMaster University as part of the licence agreement. In this sample (N = 40) 42.5% of the children are considered vulnerable. This is in contrast to an Irish
study conducted in Cork that found that 29% of the sample were not developmentally ready to engage in school (Curtin et al., 2013). Examining each scale, 17.5% of the children are considered vulnerable on the physical health and well-being scale, 20% are considered vulnerable on the social competence scale, 12.5% are considered vulnerable on the emotional maturity scale, 20% are considered vulnerable on the language and cognitive development scale, and 32.5% are considered vulnerable on the communication and general knowledge scale. Further analyses carried out is described below.

**7.6 Comparison of Two Independent Conditions**

As the EDI scores are reported at a group level, the sample mean is calculated. Therefore, in order to identify differences between two independent groups it is necessary to compare the mean scores on each scale. A one-sample *t*-test was used in this study to test the differences between the data in this study and the norms of the instrument as it is used to compare results to a known value. The purpose of this *t*-test is to determine whether there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the mean of the sample population is different from the specified value. Although the data violates the assumption of normality, the one-sample *t*-test is a robust test that can account for skewness or outliers in sample sizes greater than 30 or 40 according to the central limit theorem (Elliott & Woodward, 2007).

In examining the school readiness scores of two differing groups, a Mann Whitney U test (Mann & Whitney, 1947) was used. This test is the non-parametric equivalent to the independent-samples *t*-test as it establishes if the medians of two independent samples in two conditions are different (Field, 2011). The Mann Whitney U test was used as the scales in this study violated the assumptions of normality. It is based on ranked data and the median scores
are reported. The children’s gender, ESL status, Traveller status, and preschool attendance, were derived from the background information on the EDIs completed by the educators. The remaining variables were derived from the Caregiver Questionnaires. No specific predictions about the direction of the effects were made, and therefore the analysis was two-tailed. The level of statistical significance was calculated in SPSS using an exact test for small samples (Field, 2011). As a number of Mann Whitney U tests were run the multiple testing can increase the likelihood of identifying a significant finding that does not exist. In addressing the type 1 error (Field, 2011) a threshold value was set. As 11 Mann Whitney U tests were run the p value was adjusted to 0.004 based on the calculation .05/11.

7.6.1 Norm Comparison

*How does the early development of the children in this sample compare to the norms of the instrument?*

Based on the EDI’s completed by the educators, a one-sample two tailed t-test was performed to test the null hypothesis that the sample population mean is equal to the instrument norms. Although the mean scores of this sample were lower than the norms of the instrument, the results revealed no statistically significant differences (p<.05) on each of the five scales.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Table 7.5 Summary of Results Comparing Scores to the Canadian Norms of the EDI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Norm</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>-.63</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.32</td>
<td>7.99</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>-.91</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8.04</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Cognitive Development</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.45</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>-1.48</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and General Knowledge</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>-1.92</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.05, **p<.001

7.6.2 Gender Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of boys and girls on each of the five scales of the EDI?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the two independent samples. The null hypothesis employed assumes that the median score of boys is equal to the median score of girls on each of the five scales. The Mann Whitney U test revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales between boys and girls. Girls were rated either equal to or higher than boys on all scales except emotional maturity, but again none of the results were statistically significant.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Table 7.6 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>188.50</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>145.50</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.88</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>142.50</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>140.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td>3.04</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General Knowledge</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.75</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>6.25</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .004

7.6.3 English as a Second Language Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children who speak English as a second language (ESL) and the children who speak English as their first language on each of the five scales of the EDI?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there are statistically significant differences between ESL children and non-ESL children. No statistically significant differences were revealed.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Table 7.7 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons based on ESL Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>ESL</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>122.00</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>125.50</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>-.16</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>80.00</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.33</td>
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<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>150.00</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>84.50</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Knowledge</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.4 Traveller Membership Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between Traveller children and non-Traveller children on each of the five scales of the EDI?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there are statistically significant differences between Traveller children and non-Traveller children. Statistically significant differences are revealed on the physical health and well-being scale ($r = -.55$, large effect size), social competence ($r = -.49$, approaching large effect size) and language and cognitive development scales ($r = -.55$, large effect size).

Non-Traveller children scored higher on all five scales.
Table 7.8 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Traveller Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Traveller</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.12</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>44.00</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td>-.55</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td>-.49</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.79</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>124.00</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>33.00</td>
<td>.001*</td>
<td>-.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development</td>
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<td>8.75</td>
<td>1.53</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.5 Preschool Attendance Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children who attended preschool and the children who did not attend preschool on each of the five scales of the EDI?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there are statistically significant differences between the children who attended preschool and the children who did not attend preschool on each of the five scales. No statistically significant differences were revealed although children who attended preschool scored higher on all five scales.
Table 7.9 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Preschool Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Preschool</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.40</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.86</td>
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<td>8.17</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.24</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>6.90</td>
<td>2.03</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.43</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>3.57</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
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<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.6 Social Welfare Dependency Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children who live in families that are dependent on social welfare payments and the children who live in families that are not dependent on social welfare payments on each of the five scales of the EDI?

Social welfare dependency was indicated in the Caregiver Questionnaires which were linked to the Educator completed EDIs. A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there were statistically significant differences between children who live in families that are dependent on social welfare payments and children who do not live in families that are not dependent on social welfare payments on each of the five scales. No statistically significant differences were revealed. Children who live in families dependent on social welfare payments scored either equal or lower on all five scales.
Table 7.10 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Social Welfare Dependency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Social Welfare Dependent</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
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<td>7.88</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.38</td>
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<td>10.00</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>.62</td>
<td>-.50</td>
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<td>9.81</td>
<td>1.49</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.82</td>
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<td>.84</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<td>8.67</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.85</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General Knowledge</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.38</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.7 Caregiver Education Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children whose primary caregiver has low educational attainment and the children whose primary caregiver has high educational attainment on each of the five scales of the EDI?

Caregivers indicated their levels of education in the Caregiver Questionnaire. The category of low education indicates that the respondent did not complete the junior certificate. The category of high education indicates that the respondent has completed the junior cert. This data was then linked to the educator completed EDIs. A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there were statistically significant differences between children whose primary caregiver...
had low educational attainment and children whose primary caregiver had high educational attainment. No statistically significant differences were revealed on any of the five scales. Children whose primary caregiver had low educational attainment scored lower on all of the five scales.

Table 7.11 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Caregiver Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Low Caregiver Education</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.92</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>-.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Knowledge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.8 Caregiver Workshop Attendance Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children whose primary caregiver attended a caregiver workshop and the children whose primary caregiver did not attend a caregiver workshop on each of the five scales of the EDI?

---

19 Caregiver workshop refers to any type of parenting programme.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

The caregivers indicated whether or not they had attended a workshop based on caregiving and supporting children’s development in the Caregiver Questionnaire. This data was connected to the corresponding EDIs completed by the educators. A Mann Whitney U test was used to test if there were statistically significant differences between children whose primary caregiver attended a caregiver workshop and children whose primary caregiver did not attend a caregiver workshop. No statistically significant differences were revealed on any of the five scales.

Table 7.12 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Caregiver Workshop Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Caregiver Workshop Attendance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>19.00</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>18.50</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General Knowledge</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004
7.6.9 Hours of Sleep Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of children who sleep eight to 10 hours a night and children who sleep more than 10 hours a night on each of the five scales of the EDI?

The Caregivers indicated the average hours of sleep their child gets a night in the Caregiver Questionnaires. This information was linked to the Educator completed EDIs. A Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the two independent samples. The null hypothesis employed assumes that the median score of children who sleep eight to 10 hours is equal to the median score of children who sleep more than 10 hours on each of the five scales. The Mann Whitney U test revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales.
Chapter Seven Early Development Findings

Table 7.13 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Children’s Duration of Sleep

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Hours of Sleep</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>8-10hrs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10hrs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>8-10hrs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10hrs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>8-10hrs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>14.50</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10hrs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive</td>
<td>8-10hrs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>More than 10hrs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and</td>
<td>8-10hrs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Knowledge</td>
<td>More than 10hrs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.10 Playground Safety Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children on each of the five scales of the EDI based on their caregiver’s perception of the area having safe playgrounds?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the two independent samples. The null hypothesis employed assumes that the median score of children whose caregivers’ indicated that the playgrounds in the area are safe is equal to the median score of children whose caregivers’ indicated that the playgrounds are not always safe on each of
the five scales. The Mann Whitney U test revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales.

Table 7.14 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Playground Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Safe Playgrounds</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>17.50</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>-.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Knowledge</td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.11 Reading Frequency at Home Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children who are read to daily by an adult at home and children who are not read to daily by an adult at home on each of the five scales of the EDI?

The Caregivers indicated if an adult reads with their child at night at home in the Caregiver Questionnaires. This information was linked to the Educator completed EDIs. A Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the two independent samples. The null hypothesis employed assumes that the median score of children who were
read to daily is equal to the median score of children who were not read to daily on each of the five scales. The Mann Whitney U test revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales.

Table 7.15 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Reading Frequency at Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Reading Frequency</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>27.50</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>23.50</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.07</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>18.50</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>25.50</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General Knowledge</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.004

7.6.12 Area Safety Comparison

Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children on each of the five scales of the EDI based on their caregiver’s perception that the area is safe to play?

A Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the two independent samples. The null hypothesis
employed assumes that the median score of children whose caregivers’ indicated that the area is safe to play is equal to the median score of children whose caregivers’ indicated that the area is not always safe to play on each of the five scales. The Mann Whitney U test revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales.

Table 7.16 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Safety of Area to Play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Area Safe to Play</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health &amp; Well-Being</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
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<td>9.23</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>14.50</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.97</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language &amp; Cognitive Development</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills and General Knowledge</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Always True</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<.004

7.7 Differences Between Several Independent Groups

In examining the school readiness scores of the children in relation to the child’s age and the caregivers’ perceptions of the amount of television their child
watches, separate Kruskal-Wallis tests (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952) were used. This test identifies the differences in median scores between more than two independent groups as is the case within these variables. The Kruskal-Wallis test is the non-parametric counterpart of the one-way independent ANOVA and was used as the data violated the assumptions of normality. It is based on ranked data. The children’s age was derived from the background information on the EDIs completed by the educators. The remaining variable was derived from the completed Caregiver Questionnaires. The level of statistical significance was calculated in SPSS using an exact test for small samples. This was the case for all the variables except age. The sample size based on the data relating to age is considered large. The Monte Carlo\textsuperscript{20} method was used as it is recommended to calculate the significance of the Kruskal-Wallis test more accurately due to the large sample size (above 40) (Field, 2011). The Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test was employed as a post hoc test where differences were revealed to determine the linear trend in the data. This test identifies the meaningful order of medians.

7.7.1 Hours of Television Comparison

*Are there statistically significant differences between the scores of the children based on the hours of television they watch on each of the five scales of the EDI?*

A Kruskal Wallis test was used to test if there are statistically significant differences between children’s scores based on how many hours of television a child watches each day. No statistical significant differences were revealed on any of the five scales.

\textsuperscript{20} Monte Carlo permutation based inference tests based on 20,000 replications give accurate p-values even when the sampling distribution violates the assumption of normality.
Table 7.17 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Hours of Television

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Hours of TV</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mdn</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Cognitive Development</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and General Knowledge</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 or less</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.88</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<.05, **p<.001

7.7.2 Age Comparison

Do older children score higher when compared to younger children on each of the five scales of the EDI?

A Kruskal Wallis was used to test if there were statistically significant differences between children based on their age starting school. Statistically significant differences were revealed between older children and younger children on the physical health and well-being scale and the language and cognitive development scale based on Monte Carlo permutations. The Jonckheere-Terpstra trend test discovered that as age increases, physical health and well-being scores increase, $J = 352.5$, $z = 2.39$, $r = -.28$, and language and...
cognitive development scores increase, $J = 331$, $z = 1.74$, $r = -.18$, both with small effect sizes.

Table 7.18 Summary of Results of Score Comparisons Based on Children’s Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Age Range Starting School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$Mdn$</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>3yrs10mths – 4yrs 4mths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4yrs 5mths – 4yrs 11mths</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5yrs 0mths – 5yrs 6mths</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence</td>
<td>3yrs10mths – 4yrs 4mths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4yrs 5mths – 4yrs 11mths</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5yrs 0mths – 5yrs 6mths</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Maturity</td>
<td>3yrs10mths – 4yrs 4mths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4yrs 5mths – 4yrs 11mths</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5yrs 0mths – 5yrs 6mths</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Cognitive</td>
<td>3yrs10mths – 4yrs 4mths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.92</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>4yrs 5mths – 4yrs 11mths</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5yrs 0mths – 5yrs 6mths</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and General</td>
<td>3yrs10mths – 4yrs 4mths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>4yrs 5mths – 4yrs 11mths</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5yrs 0mths – 5yrs 6mths</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *$p<.05$, **$p<.001$*

7.8 Summary

Chapter Seven has described the analysis of the quantitative data and the findings derived from this. As this data is specific to this study generalisations cannot be made. Furthermore, it is not possible to infer conclusions about causality, as the findings demonstrate associations. Nonetheless the findings are suggestive of the factors related to the school readiness ratings of the children involved in this study. The reliability of the five scales in this study was satisfactory. The data does not differ significantly from the norms of the
instrument. Forty-two and a half per cent of the children are considered vulnerable on at least one of the five scales. Statistically significant differences were revealed in relation to children’s age and between Traveller children and non- Traveller children.

These findings indicate that a large proportion of the children are not meeting the demands and expectations placed on them in school. Elements of the Ready Child equation are visible here particularly with regard to the environment the children inhabit. The impact on school readiness of children’s ethnicity, gender, hours of sleep, and their experience with the English language is discussed in the context of the ‘Ready Child’. Families dependency on social welfare payments, the frequency of reading with children, caregivers’ educational attainment and caregivers’ workshop attendance is discussed in the context of ‘Ready Families’. ‘Ready Services’ and ‘Ready Communities’ explores the findings that relate to the perceived safety of the area, perceived safety of the playgrounds and preschool attendance.

Chapter Eight discusses the qualitative and quantitative findings in light of the literature and policy and context the data exists within.
Chapter Eight Discussion

8.1 Introduction

The data in this study was collected and analysed with the intention of answering the four central research questions. In line with the mixed method design of this research the quantitative findings are discussed in light of the qualitative findings and the policy and literature to expand understandings in this area. The Children’s input is most evident in relation to their perceptions of school readiness as identified through their views of what children need to be able to do and know when starting primary school. The Caregivers’ and Educators’ inputs weave throughout the four research questions. This chapter discusses the findings and the relevant policy and literature in the context of the four research questions:

- What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?
- What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?
- How is school readiness perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?
- What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?

The first research question explores the inputs regarded as essential for cultivating the skills children need starting school. Within this it is recognised that it is a combination of inputs rather than one single contributor that supports children’s school readiness. The second research question depicts the range of considerations that exist when Caregivers make the decision to start children in junior infants. The third research question explores the competencies and skills children need when starting school according to the Caregivers, Educators and
Chapter Eight Discussion

Children. The fourth research question highlights the suggested improvements from the Caregivers and Educators that they believed would enhance children’s school readiness.

Similar to the findings chapters the preschool and primary school Educators are grouped together unless a divide in perceptions exists. The distinction between Educators will be made in such cases. Furthermore, to illuminate the voices of the three groups within the discussion the groupings are capitalised (e.g. Children, Caregivers and Educators).

8.2 What Factors Are Associated with Children’s School Readiness Skills?

Based on both the qualitative and quantitative data collected in this research it is clear that aspects of the “Ready Child Equation” (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) (See Chapter Two) play a role in the development of children’s readiness for school. In order for positive development to take place environments must be stimulating, this was a core finding within the qualitative data. Children’s prior experiences in the home and in preschool were considered to be the main contributors in preparing children for school according to the Caregivers and Educators. It was further acknowledged by the adult participants that these preparatory inputs must be considered as a process that occurs over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Similar to other research (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004) the Children occasionally acknowledged the input these environments had before they started school.

Taking the ‘Ready Families’ component both the Caregivers and Educators recognised the need for homes to be stimulating. This involves caregivers engaging with their children in activities that contribute to the children’s development such as reading stories but also having positive conversations.
about school. However, the quantitative data did not reveal a difference between caregivers’ frequency of reading with their children at home. Caregivers’ role in providing support to their child, the primary school educators and the school was also highlighted as this provides stability and security for the children. Some of the Children outlined their preparations for school. This included their caregivers organising the practical elements needed for school such as a new bag and uniform, observing their siblings’ school behaviours and having conversations about starting school. Family stressors and caregivers’ lack of knowledge were deemed to constrain the family in its preparation of the children for school according to the Caregivers and the Educators. This was not evident in the quantitative data as the family’s dependency on social welfare and caregivers’ low education were not associated with early development vulnerability. Further to this, taking into consideration factors related to the ‘Ready Child’, age was associated with children’s school readiness skills as younger children were also deemed vulnerable in relation to their early development.

Taking the ‘Ready School’, ‘Ready Communities’ and ‘Ready Services’ components of the equation, preschool was the most emphasised factor associated with children’s readiness skills outside of the home. This however was not evident in the quantitative data. It is believed that preschool is training for primary school. Some of the Children acknowledged that they have friends in junior infants that they knew from preschool. The majority of the Caregivers and Educators viewed preschool as a positive input however a small number of primary school Educators questioned the quality of the preschools and suggested that where quality is low the benefits to the children are less. Also within this the primary school is believed to be associated with children’s school readiness as it supports children to settle in by creating a welcoming environment, being
equipped to meet the needs of the children and having a programme of short engaging activities. Within the broader environment the Caregivers suggested that children’s engagement with playgrounds and community activities created opportunities to develop social skills. Furthermore, some of the Caregivers and Educators identified engagement with support services as a factor associated with school readiness as the services can provide an extra support to the children and assist in enhancing Caregivers’ knowledge. Despite this recognition the quantitative findings revealed that caregivers’ attendance at caregiver workshops, the safety of the local area to play and the safety of the local playground were not associated with children’s school readiness skills. On the other hand, Traveller children displayed vulnerability in a number of areas of development.

Bringing together all elements of ‘Ready Child Equation’: ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) transition practices were also highlighted by the three groups of respondents as contributing to children’s school readiness. Thus advancing the environmentalist and interactionist perspective of school readiness acknowledging the process as an ecological transition (Bronfenbrenner, 1977b; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) where the children are developing in the new social structure of the primary school. Some of the children believed that prior visits to the school and knowing the educators in the primary school were advantageous. The Caregivers referred to the open day and the information they received before their child started school as beneficial in preparing their child for school yet they still felt they were in need of more information. Meetings and written reports of children’s stage of development were identified as constructive transition practices facilitating the sharing of information.
It is evident from this that children’s school readiness is an outcome of the process and execution of each stakeholders’ responsibility (Piotrkowski, 2004). Furthermore, this research suggests that school readiness as measured by the Early Development Instrument (Janus, 2007) is sensitive to some individual and family characteristics. Children who are exposed to more risk factors have less chance of being ready for school. Janus and Duku (2007b) demonstrated that for each additional risk children are more susceptible to developmental vulnerability.

8.2.1 Ready Families
The environment, atmosphere and transactions in a child’s home contribute to their development and readiness for starting school. Readiness resources in the family include nurturing parenting, social support for childrearing, financial resources and educationally stimulating materials and resources (Johnson, 1997 cited in Dockett & Perry, 2007). In this research the actions of the caregivers, their education levels and the income of the family were the most commonly referred to readiness resources suggesting that they are conceived to be the most influential.

Education and becoming educated was highly valued by the Caregivers in this study as a means to improve the quality of life experienced by a person. They view it as a means to create opportunities for children in the future and therefore it is important to have expectations of their children. This is not uncommon for caregivers from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) and may be a result of the culture of the community inhabited by the caregivers in this study (Levine, 1980 cited in Rogoff, 2003) as Irish society values education and educational success acts as a pathway to engage in social mobility (ESRC, 2012). The importance placed on education permeates the Caregivers’
perceptions of school readiness and sometimes the focus on academic outcomes overshadows other aspects of school readiness. The need for caregivers to speak positively to their children about school was also recognised by the Caregivers and Educators. This was also recommended by the INTO (2009). However, it was acknowledged that this is not easy to ensure due to some caregivers’ negatives experiences of school. Caregivers’ positive experiences are often translated in their children’s positive outlook of school (Howes, 1992). Where caregivers who had negative experiences of school have not been confronted with new information that counteracts their negative experience of school it can be difficult for such caregivers to then offer positive information to their children. This in turn can affect the children’s attitude and motivation to engage in learning activities both at home and in school as children from lower SES families are less positive about school and more likely to misbehave (GUI, 2012). The Children who mentioned the preparations that took place before they started school also highlighted the role their caregivers play in talking to them about school. Caregivers are sources of information for children starting school, this has also been specified by children in a German study (Niesel & Griebel, 2001).

Underlying this ability to positively prepare children for school is the knowledge available, accessed and utilised by the caregivers. It has been suggested by the Educators that caregivers’ low level of education impacts on this whilst some of the Caregivers acknowledged that at times it can be difficult to support the children’s preparation for school. Nonetheless, this study differed to previous studies in relation to the impact of caregivers’ low education levels on children’s early development. Although the research was conducted in a designated disadvantaged area only 12.5% of the Caregivers indicated a low level of education (attainment of junior cert or below). Despite the differences in
caregiver education levels no significant difference on any of the five scales of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) was identified. This finding is in contrast to a large body of research that indicates parental education impacts on children’s development and achievement as children of caregivers with relatively higher levels of education displayed higher levels of school readiness on all of the five scales on the EDI (Janus & Duku, 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2013; Curtin et al., 2013).

It is possible that the inequalities between education levels may not be large enough to result in unique contributions. Furthermore, the findings may deviate as a result of using the education levels of both male and female caregivers rather than distinct categorisation based on gender. Mothers are usually sought as the primary source of information about children. Maternal education is sometimes argued to be a more reliable measure and that at an early age it should account for more variation in children’s outcomes than income (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It also may be that in some cases differences emerge later in childhood as maternal education is longitudinally predictive (Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006).

8.2.1.1 What Caregivers Do

Family readiness resources facilitate caregivers in their caregiving and educating role. Environments that are sensitive, responsive and stimulating foster children’s development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Often caregivers are unsure of their knowledge (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Many Caregivers in this study voiced highlighted that there are expectations placed on their children, expectations that they as caregivers are unfamiliar with. The caregivers’ role is pivotal in children’s school readiness because without their input “it can’t work”, they too need to be ready. The involvement of caregivers in their
children’s development, and supporting the educators in both preschool and primary school was highlighted as an important contributor to children’s school readiness as it creates consistency and security. This echoes previous research indicating that in addition to the children becoming students, caregivers also become ‘school parents’ (O’Kane, 2007). Some of the supportive acts to be carried out by caregivers were identified as; being involved with a child’s learning; teaching children skills; and encouraging the children. In general, the caregiver-child relationship is fundamental to children’s development and the emphasis placed on this by both the Caregivers and Educators is unparalleled. In addition to caregivers providing information, older siblings can be a source of perceived emotional, informational and esteem support for the child starting school. Siblings can provide younger children with a sense of school, an idea of the activities that take place there, the routines and structures in place and a physical presence in the school environment especially on the playground.

In particular caregivers’ involvement in developmental activities with children was highlighted by both the Caregivers and Educators. A minority of the Children referred to their knowledge of story books about school. This was also found in previous research (Niesel & Griebel, 2001). Reading to children enhances their exposure to vocabulary and is beneficial to their language development. This study revealed no significant difference on any of the five scales based on how often the caregiver reads with the children. This is dissimilar to a large body of research that demonstrates a link between reading stories, and literacy development and with broader aspects of development also (Williams et al., 2009; Janus & Duku, 2010; Curtin et al., 2013; McGinnity et al., 2015). The frequency of reading by caregivers at the beginning of junior infants may not be associated with any of the five scales that measure school readiness in this study as the sample size is small and variation amongst the three
ranges is not overly large. Further to this differences may not have yet emerged. Nonetheless, exposure to storybooks paralleled with constructive experiences of literacy is important. Considering this, the behaviours, beliefs and characteristics such as sex and temperament of all those involved (e.g., caregivers and children), the interaction between both parties and the materials must be considered in reading exchanges. If it is the doing that is important then this creates the argument for universal interventions that foster knowledge of positive reading interactions and stimulating home practices as this is crucial to children’s literacy learning outcomes more so than their socioeconomic status (Sylva et al. 2004). Adults must structure the book reading in a way that is sensitive to the child’s developmental level to ‘scaffold’ the child’s learning.

8.2.1.2 Secondary Influences

In relation to television, the perceptions evident in this study depict it as a secondary preparatory input by some Caregivers and Educators, a medium that can influence school readiness both positively and negatively. This has also been found in previous research with caregivers who believed that television offers some instructional input in children’s learning (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). The duration and quality of programme content is the deciding factor as some programmes are educational whilst others promote negative behaviours or may impact negatively on areas of development. On average the children in this study watched two and a half hours of television a day. However, the variations in the amount of television ranging from high to low did not impact on the children’s school readiness scores. Studies have found that watching television for long durations decreases vocabulary and math skills, attention skills, and physical development and increases the risk of developing emotional and behavioural issues in young children (Pagani et al, 2013; Egan & Murray, 2014). The finding in this study is at an introductory level, the duration was of concern, rather than
Chapter Eight Discussion

the content which was not monitored. Further to this the sample size of the groups is quite small, therefore effects may not show up.

Children usually sleep in their home environment. Sleep contributes to children’s development and supports young children to meet the demands of their environments especially in the school context. This study explored the duration component of night time sleep in relation to school readiness as duration seems the most implicative across development domains (Vaughn et al., 2015). The qualitative data indirectly referred to sleep in relation to children having energy to complete the school day. Nonetheless, the children’s level of school readiness did not differ based on their current hours of sleep on a school night. The results of the present study do not uphold the findings of the majority of previous studies that posit that insufficient sleep is correlated with learning and behavioural problems (Carskadon et al., 1981, 2001; Touchette et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2015). Two factors may contribute to this; the small sample size; and none of the children in the sample slept less than 8-10 hours on a typical school night thus may not be categorised as getting insufficient sleep. The children in this sample may not suffer from poor sleep health.

8.2.1.3 Unfavourable Conditions

Primary school educators outline that a stable home affects children’s ability to settle in the school environment (INTO, 2009). Despite the Caregivers’ exhibited interest and motivation to support their children the Caregivers and the Educators in this study acknowledged that not all caregivers display these behaviours due to laziness and lack of attentiveness. It was also stressed that low finances impact on caregivers’ ability to provide the necessary material resources for the children starting school. This in turn can affects the caregivers’ own preparation as it causes stress and anxiety which can result in negative
caregiving behaviours. Poverty impacts negatively on children’s development (Washbrook & Waldfogel, 2011; UCD Geary Institute, 2013; McKeown et al, 2014). Caregivers living in poverty can have poorer mental health (Monteith et al., 2008) which obstructs their ability to provide the necessary protective factors to achieve optimal child development (Watson et al., 2014). Looking after a child’s basic needs such as food and shelter is entangled with upholding the external facade of family life and the structure of the household. The capacity to attend to children’s holistic development is impinged upon as basic necessities take the forefront. This is worrying as child poverty is increasing in Ireland (CSO, 2013; UNICEF, 2014).

Reliance on social welfare payments is an indication of the financial difficulties faced by people as the purpose of the payments is to decrease the gap between the waged and unwaged. Within this sample 40% of the families relied on social welfare as their main source of income yet this was not associated with children’s development scores in this study. Considering the effects of the recession many educated caregivers are dependent on social welfare thus their education does not reflect their income. This in turn may place additional stressors on home environments where caregivers are relatively new to unemployment, low income or both and this may override any educational advantages. Some of the Caregivers also alluded to this. Material deprivation was highlighted as some families could not afford new clothes or keep the home adequately warm. The adult participants’ awareness of the impacts of poverty creates a real life image of families living in poverty struggling to prepare children for school.
8.2.2 Ready Child

Age as a contributor to the progress of children’s development is regarded as a factor associated with school readiness. Many studies have found that age of entry does not really matter for children’s academic progress and well-being (Jones & Mandeville, 1990; Morrison et al., 1997). However, this is not always the case especially where school readiness is concerned. Children’s experience of the here and now as they begin school is an important part of their childhood. Their present skills impact on their present experience. It is argued that age contributes to the gap in school readiness. Older children display greater school readiness (Doyle et al., 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2013; McKeown et al., 2014), whilst being younger starting school increases the likelihood of school readiness vulnerability on all EDI scales (Janus & Duku, 2007a; Curtin et al., 2013). This is partially echoed by the analysis of the quantitative data in this study which indicates that older children perform better on the physical health and well-being scale and the language and cognitive development scale. In essence, children who start school at a younger age have less time to engage in environments that can contribute further to their development and have less time for their bodies and brains to develop, thus, starting school at a younger age may be considered to be a risk factor. However, the findings do not suggest that being older is better in an absolute sense as the two affected scales do not make up the full picture of school readiness and effect sizes are small to medium. The qualitative data focusing on the effect of age is presented in the decision making section of the chapter (Section 8.3.1.1).

Taking into account the children’s participation levels in the Draw and Tell activity, it is clear that children are ready to participate in research. Although labour intensive the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity proved to be a successful data collection method. Although it is possible to conduct semi-structured interviews
with children it was decided against this as research methods must take into consideration the needs and abilities of its participants therefore, the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity which is a more child oriented method was chosen. During data collection the children controlled how much they spoke about their picture, with limited probing. The children utilised the pictures they drew to stimulate and support their thoughts about starting school. The drawing aspect certainly enhanced the information disclosed by the children (Wesson & Salmon, 2001) whilst the tell component provided an interpretation of the drawings and added the children’s views and voices to the understandings. The ‘Draw and Tell’ activity enabled the children to communicate comfortably (Hanniffy & Millar, 2015).

8.2.3 Ready Communities and Ready Services
Community resources include high quality childcare and preschool, parental support services and playgrounds (Johnson, 1997 cited in Dockett & Perry, 2007). The knowledge, practices and resources available within the local community, school and services, their responsiveness and proactive nature determines their readiness and their contribution to the children’s school readiness. Communities, schools and services are ready to support children’s school readiness by understanding and supporting the needs of the family and children. Interventions provided at the local level have supported this case. The provision of high quality care and education programmes and caregiver supports provided at the individual and group level require an awareness of the needs of the target population. This enables services and schools to be more ‘ready’ to assist the target population before, during and after the children start school.
8.2.3.1 Ready Communities - Community Living

The direct and indirect interactions of the children and their families involving the mesosystem and exosystem as identified by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) identifies the role of social context in relation to children’s development.

Neighbourhood quality is related the level of deprivation and safety in the area and takes into account social organisational factors such as social cohesion. Areas of high socio-economic status impact on children’s school readiness and achievement outcomes (Leventhal et al., 2009) whilst in contrast children living in disadvantaged areas are deemed to have lower levels of school readiness (Lapointe et al., 2007) regardless of the family’s income (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). Lower perceived neighbourhood safety is linked to lower developmental scores (Kohen et al., 1998; KSI Research International Inc., 2003). The Caregivers in this study referred to the children playing in the common area of estates and the local playground as influential particularly in relation to children’s social skills. However, taking into account the quantitative data of this study differences were not found in relation to the children’s school readiness based on their Caregiver’s perceived safety of the area to play or the safety of the playgrounds. The majority of the Caregivers perceived the area and playgrounds to be safe. This lack of variability in the Caregivers’ perceptions in relation to safety may be a reason that no significant differences were identified.

On the other hand, it has been found that neighbourhood disadvantage does not negatively impact on academic attainment and social behaviour until children are older (Sylva et al., 2012). The lack of difference in children’s school readiness based on their Caregivers’ perceptions of safety may be representative of this phenomenon. The Caregivers and the Educators were aware of the benefits of the health care services and specialist services that were accessed.
Family support services and health services that assist with developmental checks and provide specialist supports were viewed as secondary sources of influence as they increase the caregivers’ knowledge of children’s development according to some of the Caregivers and Educators. The need to engage with local supports is also outlined in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). The Children did not make references to the community surroundings.

The Caregivers and Educators in this study recognised the rising levels of diversity and the need for children to be non-discriminatory and accepting of all people. It was also highlighted that people from non-Irish backgrounds may have difficulty preparing children for school. The Children themselves did not refer to ethnic differences between themselves. The quantitative data found that Traveller children in particular are at a disadvantage. This may be because Irish schools typically reflect mainstream Irish culture. Ethnic minority groups demonstrate lower school readiness scores (Lapointe et al., 2007; Muhajarine et al., 2011). Many children are faced with the task of learning to interact in at least two languages. Although Curtin et al., (2013) found that children in Ireland for whom English is a second language are more likely to be vulnerable in one or more of the five scales of the EDI than their non ESL counterparts this was not evident in this study. Children who are identified as members of the Traveller community accounted for 25% of the children in this study. In this study Traveller children scored significantly lower on the physical health and well-being scale, the social competence scale and the language and cognitive development scale. In a previous Irish study Traveller children scored lower on all of the five scales (Curtin et al., 2013). Travellers in Ireland are a group of citizens who have cultural values, language, customs and traditions distinct from the mainstream ‘settled’ citizens. This can create barriers for Traveller children when they start school and are confronted with a new culture (Vivero & Jenkins
Despite integration efforts such as the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) and learning support, children who are members of the Traveller community remain ‘at risk’ in relation to education.

Similar to O’Toole et al.’s study (2014) the qualitative data outlines that children from non-Irish backgrounds can face additional barriers starting school as ethnic minorities may not be fully informed of the education system, the development requirements of children when they are starting school or the social norms in place in Ireland. These finding place ethnic minority children at a disadvantage starting school as they may not be in a position to learn together with the rest of the class thereby further reinforcing segregation. Their equality of opportunity is not attended to until their learning needs are identified and supported through additional supports in school particularly in the DEIS schools (DES, 2005). Thus, rendering the children’s ‘equality of access’ to education unequal as their foundation for learning is not attended to until they start school (Smyth & McCoy, 2009).

8.2.3.2 Preschool

Quality preschool programmes improve children’s development especially in levels of high disadvantage (Magnuson et al., 2004; Barnett et al., 2005; Sylva et al., 2008). Preschool was accredited as the main environment to influence children’s school readiness in the community setting by the Caregivers and the Educators in this study. This however was not confirmed by the quantitative findings of this study. Although other studies have found that children who do not attend preschool display significantly lower school readiness skills (Curtin et al., 2013; Mc Keown et al., 2014), the small sample size in this study may have impacted on the quantitative findings. Preschool is clearly a valued resource that is indispensable and its uptake is vital in disadvantaged areas. Yet
the Educators suggested that the uptake of the free preschool year is not 100% in the two areas. The Caregivers cited preschool as a ‘definite’ as it socialises children, teaches them skills that are transferable to the junior infant classroom and school environment, and attunes them to a routine. The Caregivers’ view of preschool as a preparatory input has also been found in a previous Irish study (McGettigan & Gray, 2012). It is viewed as the step before junior infants. From the Educators’ perspectives, preschool is an invaluable opportunity as it trains children for school. Again the structure, activities and opportunities to socialise offered by preschool is perceived by the Educators to be in preparation for primary school. According to the Educators, children who attend preschool are distinguishable from children who have not attended preschool. The Children also alluded to the role of the preschool and the activities they performed in their preparation for starting school as it was the environment they occupied. It is important to emphasise here that the preparation of children for primary school is not the sole function of preschool. The role of preschool and early childhood education is to further enhance the well-being of children in all areas of health and well-being, not just educational development.

This association is unsurprising as preschool environments offer increased opportunities for socialisation and learning a range of skills based on the curriculum offered in the preschool and the quality of the preschool. This facilitates improved learning outcomes which is a goal of early years education (DES, 2011). The introduction of the FPSY is widely accepted by the Caregivers and Educators as it is believed to support the pursuance of sufficient developmental levels of young children before they begin school. The value placed on the FPSY is evident as the Educators called for an extension of the scheme to two years. This has since been facilitated by Budget 2016 (DCYA, 2015). Preschool is viewed as an environment that provides children with
opportunities that they may not necessarily experience in the home environment. However, it is worth noting that other studies have found that social class differences in language and cognitive skills and social and emotional competencies remained unchanged following a year of preschool (McKeown et al., 2014). Gaps continue to persist. Hence by starting off at an unequal level creates long term challenges for the children, it is evident that equality of opportunity is not sufficient to eradicate differences and enable children who grow up in low income families to increase their social class ranking.

A child’s holistic development in conjunction with their preparation for the school environment is of concern, whereas the Irish Government’s focus is on the educational development of children and the value for money offered by the initiative (Department of Finance, 2009). Some primary school Educators questioned the quality of the practices within preschool settings. This arose as some children who began school were forming their letters incorrectly. Attending to quality is enshrined in a number of Government documents including Ready to Learn (DES, 1999), Siolta (CEDCE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Nonetheless this concern relating to quality was also raised in preschool inspection reports (Hanafin, 2014). Despite the value placed on preschool it has only been recognised in recent years that children in preschool settings should be cared for by trained professionals. Level 5 and level 6 qualifications are the minimum qualifications required to work with young children (DCYA, 2015) however despite this progression these qualifications are not all encompassing compared to the qualifications required for primary school educators. The commitment to review the training courses in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (DES, 2011) is both timely and necessary particularly as ECCE workers are regarded as a ‘powerful resource’ according to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2011).
8.2.4 Ready Schools and Interactions

Ackerman & Barnett (2005) depict that ready schools are adaptable in their approach by altering or abandoning strategies and have sufficient resources to meet the needs of the students. Both the Caregivers and Educators endorsed this stating that the receiving school and educators need to be prepared to support all the children starting school particularly children with special needs. This requires the school and the staff to have sufficient space, materials and knowledge to make the school a supportive and friendly environment for the children starting school. This was also reflected in the views of the primary school educators in the INTO study (2009).

It is vital that all groups engage with each other, although it is not necessarily practiced. Implementing transition practices is a choice in the two areas the research was carried out in. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) describe ready schools as schools that provide transition practices and partner with caregivers and community organisations and services. The interviews with the Caregivers and Educators uncovered practices such as yearly parent-teacher meetings, report cards, informal irregular conversations seeking advice or passing on information, open days and leaflets. The Children also referred to their experiences of visiting the primary school and meeting the educators as methods of helping them start school. Similar practices have been found in Ireland (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009; O’Kane & Hayes, 2010; McGettigan & Gray, 2012). Working as a team to prepare children for school was frequently mentioned as an influential factor in school readiness. A team approach enables children to be more supported in meeting the demands of the environments they inhabit as it brings all available information to the forefront allowing each party to draw from the resource pool.
The implementation of transition practices is an explicit standard in Siolta (CECDE, 2006) as the sharing of information can be advantageous as the home and preschool or school are the settings that children spend the majority of their time interacting with in their early years. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) also advocates for this partnership model between caregivers and educators as a form of good practice. The four modes outlined in the Aistear guidelines: supporting learning and development, sharing information, contributing, and making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action (NCCA, 2009, p. 8) were evident in the interviews however the nature of such was fragmented and piecemeal. As in a previous Irish study (O’Kane, 2007) a formal partnership model or transition programme was not in place in any of the areas in this study despite Siolta (CECDE, 2007) outlining that written transition policies and procedures should be in place. Nonetheless evidence of components of partnerships were present suggesting partial policy implementation. Some of the Caregivers and Educators felt that there was not enough being done by some people who potentially contribute to children’s school readiness. This is explored further as a means to improve children’s school readiness in Section 8.5.2.

8.3 What Considerations are taken into Account when the Decision to Start a Child in School is Being Made?

The intentions of this research question is to uncover the discretionary criteria used by caregivers in deciding children’s entrance to formal education as the decision inevitably impacts on the children’s progression and to build knowledge of this. Additionally, this information can assist further in the identification of interactions between home and school as children start their formal education. From the interviews with the Caregivers and Educators it is evident that the decision making is largely the responsibility of the caregiver.
Chapter Eight Discussion

The Children in the study made very little reference to the decision making process involved in starting school. This may be a result of the instructions and probes used in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity as children were asked about starting school and what school is like for them. Children were not explicitly asked about the decision making process although some children inadvertently mentioned how the decision was made. One Child indicated that they did not have an input in the decision, whilst another referred to the fact that they started school when they got bigger.

Due to the pressure of making the ‘correct’ decision the process can be an anxious period for the caregivers. Based on the Caregivers’ views it is evident that it is a multi-faceted process that entails a number of considerations. The age of their child and their child’s abilities are at the forefront of the Caregivers’ decision making considerations. Within that only one Caregiver made their decision solely based on the age of their child. Decisions were often based on the skills the children displayed and their perceived suitability for primary school. Preschool attendance is viewed as a contributor to this. The Educators on the other hand believe that age and the cost of childcare are the dominant factors taken into account. The Educators have mixed views in relation to caregivers taking into consideration their child’s level of development.

In addition to citing age and abilities as considerations a number of the Caregivers also stated that they took into account their child’s friends’ progression and what school they were attending. This broader social influence also played a role in the age factor as the Caregivers sought out the average age a child in the area started school. This ranged between four and five. Accounting for the social norms of the area was also highlighted by the Educators. Further to this the Caregivers identified engaging with members of their social network
Chapter Eight Discussion

to seek advice. This included friends, family members and also preschool and primary school educators. The Educators concurred with this however they often felt that the advice that they give caregivers is often ignored. Another component of decision making highlighted by some of the Caregivers and Educators is the role children’s opinions play in the decision making process. Children should be heard and involved in conversations with their caregivers about starting school but the children’s opinion should not determine the final decision. A minority of the Caregivers also indicated that the location, reputation and resources in the school are elements to be considered. A number of the Caregivers who had older children also reflected on previous decisions thus impacting on their current decision. Finally, one Caregiver took their child’s gender into account and another Caregiver considered sibling support as a factor in their decision. It is clear that during this transition phase numerous judgements are taking place, judgements based on experiences, perceptions and beliefs.

8.3.1 Ready Child

8.3.1.1 Age and Ability

Undoubtedly, age is one of the most referred to factors that influence decision making, for some it is the sole factor whilst for others it is a contributing factor. This focus on age is in line with previous research (Margetts, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2004; INTO, 2009). This preoccupation is largely based on the time component and maturationist view of school readiness as older children have more time to mature and develop the necessary age-appropriate skills and functions to participate fully in the school environment. The Children are aware that their ‘size’ is an aspect that features in the decision made by their Caregivers. Being ‘big’ enables children to start school. Where age is the sole consideration readiness is an expectation, a function of time, thereby placing complete readiness responsibility on the child. This is in contrast with the widely
accepted view that human development must be considered within a contextual perspective (e.g. Rogoff, 1990; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and an interactionist perspective (Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). Therefore, using age as the single criterion is a barrier to ensuring a successful transition to formal schooling (O’Kane, 2007).

The focus on age has implications on school readiness levels within junior infant classes in Ireland as children can range from four years old to six years old in Ireland. Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six but because Ireland operates a flexible approach to school age entry, many children start at four or five (OECD, 2004). The age of this sample ranged from three years and 11 months to five years and five months at the start of September 2013. The average age of the children starting school was four years and seven months. The age based policy is viewed as the only fair and ethical criterion (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994). The two-year age range in Ireland creates the potential of having a two-year age gap amongst some children in classes throughout the education system yet this flexible approach can be viewed positively as the incongruity in expecting all children to be equally ready for school at the same age has been highlighted (Wesley & Buysse, 2003). The flexibility of this Irish policy creates opportunities to address these issues as it allows readiness to become the main concern rather than solely focused on chronological age. This early age start is normal within Ireland however in comparison to other European countries it is rare for children to start school at such an early age (Eurydice, 2013). Nonetheless, being the oldest clearly carries an unwanted label as a child starting school at the age of six is viewed as ‘too old’ by some of the Caregivers in this study. Children aged four or five are considered most suitable for school, this was viewed as the norm in both areas. The flexible policy in addition to the
Chapter Eight Discussion

single intake at the beginning of the school year has clearly impacted on the
decision making process of caregivers.

Considering the introduction of the two years of FPSY in September 2016 and
the staggered entry system children and their families are further supported in
accessing additional early years education prior to starting primary school as
children can avail of preschool up to the age of 5 years and 6 months. This can
thereby impact on the school entry age. As expressed by some of the educators
in this study children are often believed to start school young as a result of the
cost of childcare or as they have completed their free preschool year. This
scheme can therefore ease the cost of childcare and deter families from sending
their child to school at the lower age of spectrum. As a result, the average school
entry age may rise to five and six thereby creating new norms in communities.

Similar to the ECCE practitioners in O’Kane and Hayes’ study (2010) some of
the Educators in this study believe that caregivers send their children to school
without considering their child’s abilities. However, a minority of the Educators
also thought the opposite. It was suggested in this study by the Educators, that it
is typically lower educated caregivers who are more likely to use age as the only
criteria in their decision making. Caregivers who send their children to school
solely based on age indicate a lack of knowledge in the underlying principles of
child development and the demands of the school environment. Yet the
Caregivers in this study with low education attainment levels also took into
account children’s development, their capacities to fit in with the school culture,
and their later life trajectory as they recognised the influence of environmental
conditions. This is in line with James et al.’s (1998) argument that age should be
regarded as a social variable.
Of the 20 Caregivers only one solely made their decision to send their child to school based on age. The majority of the Caregivers suggested that their decision incorporated a range of factors. In addition to age, a child’s skills level and ability to function in the school environment is also considered. Considering the breadth of knowledge detailed in the findings chapter (See Chapter Six) particularly in relation to the skills that children need when they start school, the Caregivers utilised this knowledge in evaluating if their child was ready for school. This perception of a child’s abilities and the skills impacting on the decision has also been found in previous studies of caregiver and educators’ perceptions (West & Collllins, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995; Meisels, 1998). If their child meets their expectations of a specific skill set, then they will send their child to school. The extent of a caregivers’ knowledge impacts on their decision (Bosetti, 2000). Thus, ill-informed or incomplete perceptions of school readiness skills or the expectations of the receiving schools may have a negative impact on the decision making process. As in previous studies (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009), the Educators in this research believe that children’s readiness should be factored into all caregivers’ decision making. The children’s maturity and stage of development are more significant criteria regarding decisions, as this assists children’s ability to settle in.

### 8.3.1.2 Preschool Attendance

Caregivers are more aware of the need to take into account children’s development than given credit for. Children’s success in preschool is a factor considered by numerous Caregivers in this study. Preschool is viewed as the step before school that introduces the children to the idea and practices of school therefore it is used as a testing ground. Preschool attendance plays an important role in informing caregivers and assisting them in their decision making. The Educators also agreed that it is vital that caregivers factor in preschool
attendance in their decision, although this has not been found in previous studies (O’Kane, 2007). The Children also referred to preschool as the step before beginning formal schooling. Caregivers’ evaluation of their child’s success in preschool contributes to their knowledge of their child’s readiness. Waiting another year in preschool may not be beneficial to some children seeking more of a challenge. The preschool year which is intended as a stimulating experience for children allows caregivers to gauge the participation of their developing child in a structured environment. Accurate estimations involve the need for caregivers to truly comprehend the purpose of preschool and the new school environment.

8.3.1.3 Gender

Interestingly, gender was identified as a contributing factor in the decision made by one Caregiver in this study. It is not uncommon for caregivers to take this into consideration (O’Kane, 2007; ’Donnell, 2008) whilst educators do not appear to do so (O’Kane, 2007). The perception that girls are more ready than boys (McBryde et al., 2004) continues to exist, however the quantitative aspect of this research does not portray this. As the gender division has been largely documented in development levels and education it also features in school readiness. Boys are 2.3 times more likely to be considered vulnerable in the area of school readiness compared to girls (Janus & Offord, 2007b). Even so, no significant differences were found on any of the five EDI scales between boys and girls. This confirms the qualitative findings as gender is less cited as a factor in relation to school readiness.

8.3.1.4 Children’s Opinions

Children’s rights have become a central feature of Irish policy. Exploring Article 3 and Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), the Caregivers and Educators in this
study were questioned on the importance of seeking and including children’s views in the decision making process. It is also stated in the standard based on transition in Siolta that the child should be consulted and involved in the process (CECDE, 2007). Previous research indicates that some caregivers consult with their children when making the decision (Bosetti, 2004). Many of the Caregivers and Educators were of the opinion that children should be consulted but the decision making power should not be transferred to children as a result of the children’s capacities. Children therefore participate at a low level in the decision making process. This takes into account Article 5 of the UNCRC (1989), placing responsibility on caregivers ‘to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance’ in supporting the children to exercise their rights. By giving due weight to the opinions and voices of the children the process combines a welfare-based approach and a rights-based approach to children’s starting school. In contrast to this it is notable that some children were not consulted according to a small number of the Caregivers and Educators. This was also evident in some of the Children’s reflections about starting school as they were ‘just told’ they were starting school by their caregivers. This depicts children as passive agents and may stem from the authority of both caregivers and educators to instruct the children and the responsibility they have in caring for the children.

8.3.2 Ready Families
Caregivers occupy the main environment children inhabit from birth. In this study there is a consensus that caregivers make the final decision about when a child should start school. This however is not always an easy task to undertake and caregivers assume responsibility for the decision they make and the outcomes that follow. Despite this power in decision making constraints are placed on caregivers. In addition to highlighting the considerations they took
into account, the Caregivers in this study also spoke of experiencing doubts and feelings of anxiety related to making the decision of when to start their child in school. This suggests that it can be a difficult process that requires extensive thought on the caregivers’ behalf with many sources of information to draw from and evaluate. The fact that some Caregivers viewed the first number of weeks as a trial and specified that if their child did not settle in school they would withdraw their child and start them the following September is another indication of this uncertainty. After their child starts junior infants, caregivers question if they made the right decision. On reflection only one Caregiver felt that they did not make the correct decision.

8.3.2.1 Cost of Childcare

Preschool attendance is impacted on by the caregiver’s income according to the Educators. The Educators believe that families with less income are financially constrained and therefore start their child in formal education after their child has completed the FPSY even in cases where an additional year of preschool is deemed appropriate. This point was only reflected in the Educators’ perspectives, the Caregivers did not explicitly refer to this. The Caregivers either did not perceive cost to be an issue or because they felt uncomfortable doing so. This perspective appears to be held by many educators throughout Ireland (O’Kane, 2007).

Ireland continues to be one of the most expensive countries in relation to childcare (OECD, 2007, 2014) and the sector is highly privatised. Childcare choices before and after the uptake of the FPSY can therefore, be influenced by the family’s disposable income. As such despite the FPSY, children from higher social classes continue to be at an advantage as their family has the option to pay for their children to attend additional years of preschool if required or indeed if
they wish to do so. Equality of opportunity is curtailed by income. The inability to access and avail of additional preschool can force caregivers into making a decision that is not wholly child centred. On the other end of the spectrum it was highlighted that as a working caregiver it is difficult to balance family and work demands. The impact of this for one Caregiver meant the withdrawal from the workforce in order to support their children starting and during school. This confirms the findings in Bast and Walberg’s study (2004) that caregivers choose a school based on the costs and benefits, and the presence of choice.

8.3.2.2 Children’s Support Network

Families and children are affected by the decision to send children to formal schooling. For the purpose of supporting the children starting school, sibling attendance was highlighted by one Caregiver and two Educators as a basis of decision making. This was also highlighted by caregivers in the GUI study (GUI, 2013c). Older children already in the school system also provide some caregivers with experiences to draw from in making the decision for their younger children. Furthermore, similar to other studies (O’Kane, 2007; GUI, 2013c), a minority of the Educators and Caregivers believe that sometimes caregivers consider their children’s friendship network when making their decision. This reflects the opinion that children need social support from peers when starting school, something which the children themselves highly valued once they started school. Friends and friendships are important as children start school. Relationship support can make children more comfortable at school and in turn may alleviate the worries caregivers may have in placing their child in this new unfamiliar environment.
8.3.3 Ready Schools
A focus on outcomes and the future resulted in some Caregivers basing their decision on the broader macroeconomic perspective. The practical and qualitative aspects of the school environment are additional considerations for some of the Caregivers in this study. These factors include the reputation of the school and the educators, the class sizes, special needs services and the location of the school. For the caregivers in the GUI study (2013) the reputation of the school was of most importance. This also featured in a Canadian study (Bosetti, 2004). Caregivers assess the worth of the school and its ability to provide for their child’s needs and how it fits in with their routine and lifestyle. In O’Kane’s study (2007) a minority of preschool educators suggested that caregivers’ decisions are influenced by availing of a place in the school of choice. The GUI study (2013) found that caregivers’ choice of school is related to higher maternal education levels, high family income and living in urban areas. Notwithstanding the widely held belief that caregivers exclusively make the decision, the resources of their family and the community restricts their access and constrain their decision making. The availability of school places and the ability to access the school are underlying features of this and despite preferences these features may actually determine the choice of school.

8.3.4 Ready Community
Taking Coleman’s (1987) definition of social capital, social norms, support networks and relationships contribute to children’s development. A caregiver’s engagement with their social capital emerged as a factor that influences their decision making. Social support networks that provide opinions and advice are instrumental according to the Caregivers as it enabled them to further understand their task and contemplate the decision of when to start their child in school. Family, friends and other caregivers who live in the area or who have already
started their children in school are viewed as sources of information by the Caregivers. These sources of information provide the social norms and social expectations that exist in the area. Educators were also cited as advisers by the Caregivers, particularly the preschool educators as they have spent time with the children in an educational environment. This reliance on seeking information from others was also found in Bosetti’s research (2004). By receiving advice caregivers are typically informed of the social norms and practices and seek to conform. Bonding capital among homogenous groups and ‘following the crowd’ has the potential to reinforce both positive and negative local practices (Putnam, 1995). Although advice is a source of social support the accuracy and quality of information is contentious.

The social network of middle class caregivers is more likely to include people with more knowledge of the education system thereby creating an educational advantage (Ball, 2003). As this study was conducted in disadvantaged areas people may have less opportunity to take advantage of bridging capital (Putnam, 1995) to share and discuss information, yet it is clear from this study that low socioeconomic areas do not consist solely of low socioeconomic families and resources. The challenge here is the task of permeating caregivers’ social networks to provide useful and correct information to assist them in their decision making again allocating responsibility at the community level rather than the individual or family level. This has a positive effect as indicated by a Caregiver who explained that they did not consider their child’s emotional readiness until speaking to the preschool educator about the possibility of sending her child to school.

The Educators felt that although they may give advice it may not always be followed. This view is comparable to other educators in Ireland (O’Kane, 2007).
As a result of their advice not being implemented the Educators believe that they themselves do not feature in the final decision, unlike the preschool educators in O’Kane’s study (2007) who felt they jointly made the decision with caregivers. Caregivers expect quality assistance yet some of the Caregivers perceived the advice they received as weak or given with hesitation. This may refer to the Educators’ reflection of the need not to overstep boundaries and dictate to caregivers. In order to ensure that educators provide accurate information to caregivers it is important that they are fully trained, understand child development and the school system and have the ability to communicate this effectively in order to act as a useful resource in the decision making process.

8.4 How is School Readiness Perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?

Research in Ireland presents a varied account of perceptions of school readiness (Kernan & Hayes, 1999; O’Kane, 2007; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; UCD Geary Institute, 2013). The intention of this research question is to provide an in-depth account of a range of perceptions of school readiness in order to clarify meanings. One of the most prominent aspects of this research is that readiness exists in the minds of adults, not in the minds of children (Powell, 2010). The children talk about their experiences rather than their readiness although their experiences can be contextualised within the adults’ understandings of school readiness. This may be a result of the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity that asked children to draw a picture about starting school and talk about their experiences rather than what it means to be ready for school. From this it can be surmised that any definition of school readiness is constructed by the people involved and therefore relative (Graue, 1992), depending on the information available, the people involved, the relationships that exist and the structures and expectations in place.
The Children in this study viewed school readiness as having a skill set that enables children to fit in to the new environment and conform to the social hierarchy by obeying the rules set out by the educators, learning new knowledge and skills, being accepted by the other children and making friends. They understand that school attendance is compulsory, the main reason for attendance is to learn and the educators are figures of authority in the social hierarchy. Despite this being imposed on the children they illustrated their aspiration to be part of the collective. For the Children this involves using their capacities to physically navigate the school building and playground, socialise with others, regulate their emotions, participate in verbal interactions, demonstrate general knowledge and control impulsive actions. Children who engage in non-conforming behaviours or misbehave are considered to be deviants and often excluded on that basis.

Across the board the Caregivers and Educators agreed on many of the skills they believe necessary for children to start school. Again similar to the Children, the skills viewed as necessary pertained to the children adjusting successfully to the environment. For the Caregivers, the children’s acceptance in the school environment largely depended on their ability to exhibit prosocial skills, self-regulate, communicate effectively and display social convention knowledge. The possession of these skills should prevent children from falling behind other children in relation to positive adjustment although the Caregivers did acknowledge that for the children who did not immediately settle in they did so over time. The Educators also perceived readiness in terms of the children’s ability to exhibit prosocial skills, self-regulate and communicate effectively. However, in contrast to the Caregivers, the Educators believed that the children do not need to demonstrate social conventional knowledge related to academic skills. Basic pre-reading and pre-writing skills are deemed sufficient.
The findings relating to this research question are discussed using the structure of the five domains of school readiness (Kagan et al., 1995). Numerous skills within the five domains are interrelated, nonetheless it is also argued that each also exist independently within the school readiness construct (Kagan et al., 1995). Within the discussion of the five domains it is clear that the school readiness perceptions of the three groups reflects the characteristics of children who have settled in to school outlined by Brostrom (2003); children feel apt in school, when they feel like they belong, have a sense of well-being, and can successfully work through the daily challenges of school, including both social and academic challenges.

8.4.1 Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

Readiness in this domain from the perspective of the Caregivers focused on the requirement for children to physically function in the school environment. This included having energy to participate fully in school which derives from sufficient nutrition and sleep. In addition to this the Caregivers highlighted fine and gross motor skills that render the children independent as vital in preparing children to start school. Being able to take off their coats, eat their lunch and use the toilet are crucial. These aspects are also highlighted by the Educators yet they further stressed the need for children to possess skills to function independently in school. They also suggested that caregivers need to be educated, in relation to food and nutrition. The Children echoed their need to be ready in relation to their motor development as it determines their ability to navigate the school environment and participate in the school activities, play, adhere to school rules such as sitting and standing when instructed to do so, and the ability to use the toilet and eat their lunch. The majority of the Caregivers in this study rated their child within the healthy range.
From this study it is clear that children need to be healthy starting school. This also reflects the theme of Well-Being in Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Nutrition and sleep were the two main components of health mentioned by the Caregivers and Educators. Educators are more likely to indicate that children need to be physically healthy, rested and well nourished, a finding reiterated in other studies (see Heaviside & Farris, 1993; West & Collins, 1993). However, caregivers in an Irish study were found to rate the physical health and well-being domain as the most important domain of school readiness whilst the educators rated it as the least important domain (UCD Geary Institute, 2013). In order to make a successful transition both the Caregivers and Educators in this study highlighted the need for children to be physically well. This is in line with Piotrkowski et al.’s (2000) findings. The link between the home and school environment is evident as what occurs in the home in relation to nutrition and sleep impacts on children’s capacity to take part in school. Healthy bodies contribute to alertness in the classroom. However, in Ireland children arriving to school hungry is believed to be a common occurrence (Callaghan, 2010). One school in this study provides a free breakfast club and lunch service for the children in the school in order to tackle this as children arriving to school hungry correlates with increasing child poverty in Ireland (UNICEF, 2014).

Motor development is described as body control and manipulation ability. All three groups highlighted a range of fine and gross motor skills required for the school environment. Also intertwined in their views is the children’s independence in the area of bowel and bladder control, dressing and feeding oneself in line with Kagan et al. (1995). In this research some Caregivers mentioned the importance of developing fine motor skills to hold crayons and pencils, whilst the majority of the Educators also placed emphasis on this. This compares to 41% of caregivers in a US study (O’Donnell, 2008) who believed
it was important to teach children how to hold a pencil before starting school and 21% of educators (Lewit & Baker, 1995). This minimal emphasis placed on motor/physical skills by Caregivers and Educators was also found in another Irish study (Kernan & Hayes, 1999).

Children being able to take care of themselves in school demonstrate skills valued by the Educators and Caregivers alike in this study. The Educators repeatedly emphasised physical independence skills. This may relate to managing a large class of junior infant students. Realistically it is not possible for each child to be: escorted to and assisted in the toilet; helped with their lunch; or supported when putting on their coats to go outside. This was also found in other Irish research (O’Toole et al., 2014; Ring et al., 2015). On the other hand, in contrast to this study another Irish study found that self-sufficiency skills were regarded by caregivers as one of the three least important skills children need (Kernan & Hayes, 1999). The Children in this study reinforced the need for self-sufficiency skills in expressing that the need to be able to carry out self-care tasks themselves. They must be in a position to function independently as there is less of a care element in school than at home or in preschool. Independence skills are also explored in the social and emotional development domain below (Section 8.4.2).

The physical nature of school and play was also highlighted by children in Australia (Perry & Dockett, 2003) and in Ireland (O’Kane, 2007). The Children in this study highlighted the physical element of school both in relation to the increased size of the area and the ability to take part in the tasks assigned to the environment. Children often (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004; O’Toole, 2014) refer to the physical appearance of the ‘big’ school and the skills needed to meet the physical expectations of school. In particular, the Children in this study and
in Dockett and Perry’s research (1999, 2004) explained that the toilets were divided by gender. Participation in the activities in the school playground rests largely on refined gross motor skills; the ability to run, to play football, to chase each other and to use the playground equipment such as the slide. Play is an immense focus of the Children in the study, if they are physically unable to take part it can affect their ability to adapt to school and be included in the school environment. Play is a central mechanism in which children enhance their physical well-being and gross and fine motor skills. Considering that 17.5% of the children in this study were identified as being vulnerable on physical health and well-being scale, physical well-being and motor development needs to become a stronger focus of child development and ECCE settings.

8.4.2 Social and Emotional Development
Social and emotional development was frequently referred to and highlighted as one of the more significant domains of development in relation to school readiness by all three groups. Fitting-in in the social environment of the school impacts on children’s participation levels and dispositions at school. This domain takes into account children’s interpersonal skills and their intrapersonal skills thereby encompassing Kagan et al.’s (1995) description of social and emotional skills. Starting junior infants imposes expectations from caregivers and educators that the children will conform to the new social norms and expectations of school; being able to interact with peers, older children and adults; make and keep friends; play collectively; demonstrate respect and appropriate behaviour by following the rules and routines of the classroom and school. These demands are also recognised in other research (Crinc & Lamberty, 1994). The Children in this study often raised the rules and routines in place in school and the sanctions if the rules were not adhered to. Some of the Caregivers recognised that children must be emotionally stable to start school and not get
upset easily. The emotional development aspect of starting school highlighted by the Children often related to the ability to regulate feelings, especially sad feelings associated with separation from their caregiver and being nice to the other children. The Educators also placed weight on this aspect of emotional development.

Educators perceive children’s school readiness in the context of the school structure and social forces (Graue, 1993). This was confirmed in the views of the Educators in this study in the context of the social and emotional development needed for children starting school. Reflecting a theme of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), belonging is a concern for all three groups as it is part of the social conventions, in the form of children’s peer relationships, relationships with the educator and meeting the school regulations. Their level of independence is also factored into their social adjustment. Underlying this is the children’s social skills and competencies. Both the Caregivers and Educators cited prosocial skills as a means for children to integrate in school by interacting appropriately with their peers. These skills included taking turns and being sensitive to other children’s feelings in order to mix with the other children and make friends. This was also found in studies with educators and caregivers (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Kernan & Hayes, 1999; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Perry & Dockett, 2003; O’Kane, 2007).

As in previous studies (O’Toole et al., 2014), having and making friends in junior infants is of significant importance to children in this study. This involves being nice to each other, helping each other, sharing and playing with each other and not getting angry. The friendship element featured in many of the children’s drawings also. Again, for the Children in this study being part of the collective and being accepted in the school environment is easier with friends. Children
who do not have friends do not want to be in school (Dockett & Perry, 2002). The majority of the Children in this study stressed that they liked school and were happy to be there. This has also been found in both national and international research (McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Niesel & Griebel, 2001; Ramey et al., 1998). The Children demonstrated mixed emotions about the school work and homework elements as found in O’Kane (2007). The Children’s positivity towards school is a reassuring finding as Ramey et al. (1998) found that less positive children indicated that they did not try as hard in school.

Children are seen to belong when their behaviour meets the requirements of the school and the classroom and they are content being there. School is a place where numerous rules and structures are enforced on the children. As exemplified by this study and other research the Children are outspoken about the rules in school (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004; O’Kane, 2007; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; O’Toole et al., 2014). This is unsurprising as the children have entered a new environment. Educators reinforce the control measures in place to ensure the children understand and adhere to the rules. The Caregivers and the Educators highlighted the need for children to follow rules as the rules act as control measures particularly within large classes. Following instructions and not being disruptive are also concerns for educators in previous studies (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Dockett & Perry, 2004; O’Kane, 2007) yet it was found that educators place less emphasis on the need for children to comply with classroom routines compared to caregivers (Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Perry & Dockett, 2003).

The emphasis the children placed on the conventional rules and routines in school surpasses the Educators’ and Caregivers’ references to rules and routines.
This emphasis may result from the children’s awareness of the power structures in place at school and the need to display appropriate behaviour. As illustrated in previous research (Devine, 2000) and in this study, in school children view the educator as a person of authority and the children must be obedient. Incompliance with the rules in school results in penalties for the children. Children are therefore praised for good behaviour as positive reinforcement is in place in the schools to foster and further the children’s conforming nature. In addition to the children being disciplined by the educators the Children also revealed that they would not associate with ‘bold’ children. This confirms that children engaging in deviant acts are rejected by their peers (Hartman et al., 2003). The dominance of rules and routines in the Children’s perceptions concurs with previous research (Dockett & Perry, 1999; O’Kane, 2007; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; O’Toole et al., 2014) and is a reflection of an ecological transition that involves the children in a new social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977b).

The need to regulate feelings is a skill that enables children to be independent and adjust to the school environment. Children should be able to cope with separating from their caregiver according to all the three groups. However, it was recognised that children who attended preschool have been exposed to this separation and are in better position to cope with it at school. This focus on emotional maturity lies in the need for children not to be disruptive. Other studies have shown that caregivers and educators agree that emotional maturity and the ability to separate from caregivers are important characteristics that children should demonstrate in school (Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2004; UCD Geary Institute, 2013; Ring et al., 2015). Blair (2002; Blair & Raver, 2015) outlines the central role emotional functioning plays in relation to children’s self-regulation in school, particularly their learning. These
cognitive processes attached to self-regulation are addressed later in this chapter (Section 8.4.5). In the context of the school environment and acceptable behaviour it is important for children to manage the range of feelings they experience in their confrontations with new people and new structures. Not crying and controlling anger featured in some of the Children’s views and this was connected to being ‘big’. This was also stated by children in McGettigan and Gray’s (2012) study. This focus on emotional development is also recognised by the Irish Government as a foundation for educational attainment (DCYA, 2015).

Despite the awareness of the importance of social and emotional skills it is not necessarily translated into practice as 20% of the children in this study were considered vulnerable in relation to their social competence skills whilst 12.5% were considered vulnerable on the emotional maturity scale. According to the educators in O’Kane’s (2007) study, children with behavioural problems are more likely to experience difficult transitions. Children from the Traveller Community, ESL children and children who have not attended preschool were also found to be at risk of social or emotional problems in this study. Although general casual interpretations cannot be made from the small samples involved it is indicative that some children’s skills are lagging behind. ECCE seeks to develop such skills in children as they are ingrained in the themes of Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

**8.4.3 Approaches to Learning**

The focus on ‘fitting in’ with the environment and being able to complete tasks and meet expectations dominated the three groups’ perceptions rather than the belief that attitudes and approaches towards learning such as an interest in learning and curiosity are deemed necessary. It was not acknowledged that the
creation of a foundation of skills such as displaying initiative, being curious and persistent in learning is central to children’s ability to function in a collective learning environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to these skills as ‘educational competence’. This may stem from the compulsory nature of attending school and meeting outcomes rather than the process of the experience. Furthermore, this finding strengthens Kagan et al.’s (1995) position that the approaches to learning domain is the least understood. This suggests that schools may need to reconsider how ready they are.

Despite the recognition of the importance of children having positive outlooks on learning identified under the theme of Well-Being in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) only a minority of the Caregivers and Educators addressed this domain of school readiness. This is in contrast to survey research that had an explicit question on the importance of children being enthusiastic and curious in school (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Aistear describes the types of dispositions and skills that are important for children in their early years as the early childhood curriculum aims to develop positive outlooks on learning and on life in children. Dispositions such as perseverance and determination are considered to be part of children’s well-being and contribute to them becoming confident and competent learners (NCCA, 2009). It is through active learning that children develop these dispositions.

The Caregivers and Educators indicated that children who are not positive about attending school and who do not display a willingness or interest in learning are not in a position to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them and are therefore not ready to be at school. They also spoke about children being attentive and concentrating but the context surrounding those discussions focused more on conforming to expectations of the school and the cognitive
processes aspect rather than as an approach to learning. Thus, a possible reason for the lack of references to this domain as questioned by Fantuzzo et al., (2007) is that approaches to learning and social and emotional development may be viewed as different components within the same domain. Outlining that children should pay attention and complete tasks may involve the characteristics of the approaches to learning domain rather than categorising the need to follow school rules in the social and emotional development domain. The Children referred to this domain acknowledging that learning takes place in school, a finding replicated in previous studies (Dockett & Perry, 2004; O’Kane, 2007). The Children highlighted the learning process they engage in as participation repertoires (Carr, 2001) in school. This incorporates the social and playful nature of learning, the responsibilities they take on as they enter the junior infant classroom and their motivation to be rewarded (Carr, 1999). The Children also referred to the need to sit and work demonstrating the need to be attentive in learning. This is also explored under the cognition and general knowledge section below (Section 8.4.5). The Children’s exploration of the approaches to learning domain highlights their understandings of the learning process as they are aware of their inputs and how the school and educators construct the environment to facilitate their learning.

These learning dispositions may be less explicit in perceptions of school readiness due to beliefs that such skills are innate. This is in line with intrinsic motivation theory (White, 1959) which also emphasises feelings of enjoyment. It is important for children to be happy and like school. Regarding learning dispositions as inherent may present difficulties for children who are not supported to develop positive attitudes and values towards learning. This view potentially fails to acknowledge that approaches to learning can be taught and manipulated (Stipek, 2002). Children’s motivation is affected by the task, the
instructions and the social context. Aistear asserts that children “have an innate drive to get to know the workings of their world” (NCCA, 2009, p. 43) but also advocates the need for adults to foster learning dispositions by planning activities that children can be challenged and complete successfully. Encouragement and feedback are essential to this. This removes a focus on academic outcomes to place more emphasis on building confidence and concentrating on effort. As Aistear (NCCA, 2009) specifically outlines learning dispositions as a component of ECCE curricula, this research suggests that this component of the curriculum is either not valued or that an in-depth knowledge of this component is not held or expressed. It is imperative that understanding and valuing the approaches to learning domain is augmented in its own right as it positively relates to early academic outcomes (McWayne et al., 2004). The ability to learn is not sufficient in itself.

8.4.4 Language Use

Proficiency in the language of instruction is important for children in school especially as verbal communication is the central means of communicating between the children and the adults. Language skills also contribute to the evolving literacy skills in young children starting school. The perceptions of the three groups in this study clearly regard English language skills as “a vital condition for success at school” (EU Commission, 2008, p.8). This domain is also interconnected with the children’s social and emotional development and their cognitive ability to process what has been said to them and their response. The perceptions of this domain held by each of the groups were in line with the purpose of language outlined by Cohen (2005) particularly in the context of social relationships and behaviour. Caregivers and educators in previous studies regarded the ability to communicate in the language of instruction as an essential characteristic for children starting school (West & Collins, 1993; Lewit & Baker,
The Caregivers and Educators in this study believe it is necessary that when children start school they understand what is being said to them and that they are able to express themselves and take part in conversations. In school, verbal cues typically provide children with guidance in the classroom and school. According to the Caregivers and Educators, children who have not developed sufficient language skills are at a disadvantage and such difficulties may escalate over the year. This perception is in line with Lonigan et al.’s (2000) study. In ESL families some of the Caregivers thought it was necessary to send their child to preschool to learn English competently whilst others believed that their child would learn English in school. On the whole, ESL children displaying language skills in their mother tongue, was not considered in the school readiness discussions. The Children spoke about the language skills in the context of what they do at school. They identified the need for children to be able to tell and listen to stories and participate in reciting rhymes and songs. The Children also highlighted their language skills in relation to how they make friends, follow rules and their learning of English and Irish. Language skills in creating friendships is important (O’Toole et al., 2014).

Despite Aistear (NCCA, 2009) focusing on the theme of communicating, this was also one of domains that had a high percentage of children identified as vulnerable in the quantitative data. 20% of the children were vulnerable on the language and cognitive development scale and 32.5% were vulnerable on the
communication and general knowledge scale. Factors that contributed to the children’s low language scores included being younger and being a member of the Traveller Community. Low quality early language experiences result in less language ability which is associated with later academic achievement (Walker et al., 1994; Washbrook & Waldfogel, 2011). These associations are also found in other studies (Janus & Offord, 2007; Curtin et al., 2013) and discussed in Section 8.2.3 of this chapter. This low level of language skills is in contrast to the GUI study’s findings (2013). According to one Educator, after a language assessment was completed on the children the majority were deemed to have the language acquisition of a two-and-a-half-year-old. Thus, the commitment of the DES (2011) to improve the language and oral-language competence of young children in ECCE settings is pertinent although possibly somewhat late for the children in this study. It is possible that although language development is perceived as an aspect of school readiness nurturing the skill may be challenging. The Caregivers in this study frequently read with their child, yet as is evident from this small scale study factors outside their control also impact on language development.

8.4.5 Cognition and General Knowledge
Children’s cognitive development and their general knowledge skills were frequently mentioned as a component of school readiness by all three groups. The Caregivers predominantly focused on knowledge and intellectual skills such as an ability to recite the alphabet, read, write and count throughout the interviews. This is believed to be an asset for children in the junior infant class as they do not want their child to ‘be behind’. Yet, on the other hand it was also acknowledged by the Caregivers that they are unclear of the threshold and what is expected of the children. Pre-writing skills were also mentioned by some Caregivers, whilst the majority of the Educators placed more emphasis on these...
skills rather than the need for children to be able to demonstrate advanced literacy and numeracy skills. The Children referred to knowledge skills in the context of the school activities they currently take part in in junior infants. This includes developing ‘pre’ academic skills, learning languages and reading and writing. They also highlighted shapes and animals in relation to their learning and attainment of general knowledge. The mental strategies referred to by the three groups revolved around being attentive, sitting at the desk and concentrating.

These findings demonstrate a mismatch of perceptions. The different perceptions between the Caregivers and Educators centered on children’s basic pre skills and advanced academic skills whilst the children spoke about their numeracy and literacy skills. The Caregivers place more emphasis on the need for children to possess advanced academic skills when starting junior infants whilst the Educators prefer children to be developing pre-reading and prewriting skills as they enter school. This divergence is evident both nationally (O’Kane, 2007; Ring et al., 2015) and internationally (West & Collins, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2004; O’Donnell, 2008) Even so, caregivers’ emphasis on knowledge aspects is not always evident (Wesley & Buysse, 2003; McGgettigan & Gray, 2012). The Children in this study referred to knowledge skills in the context of the work they do in school, as did the children in Australian studies (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Perry & Dockett, 2003).

According to educators being able to function in the classroom is viewed as more important than having academic skills (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Perry & Dockett, 2003; Wesley and Buysse, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004). This is also evident in this research. As previously stated the school environment is considered to be a
learning environment, nonetheless classroom management is also necessary in order to facilitate learning. This impacts on educators’ expectations of the skills children should possess when they start school. Children are expected to fit in and adjust to school life more so than be able to complete the academic tasks when they start school. Primary school educators may then view some children as “unready” and treat them differently (West & Collins, 1993) if they arrive with strong knowledge skills at the expense of the other areas of development.

Caregivers try to prepare their children for the new educational encounters they face in primary school by equipping them with knowledge skills. School is viewed as a place where formal education takes place and is the first step in the education system. This creates an expectation that formal education is the main focus of school and it determines how children are perceived. Additionally, the focus of the FPSY as a pre-primary education initiative (Department of Finance, 2009) also contributes to a focus on young children’s academic abilities and outcomes. Caregivers’ level of education is put forward as an explanation of placing emphasis on the attainment of knowledge skills according to the Educators. This perception concurs with findings from West & Collins (1993) that caregivers with low levels of education have developmentally inappropriate expectations. Nonetheless, the majority of the Caregivers involved in this study had an education level above Junior Cert. As school is the place where children begin to learn formally it was highlighted by a Caregiver who spoke to an educator that children who possess a high level of knowledge skills on entering school may become “bored” during class activities. This reflects the nature of the classroom activities that the children described as work but also that educators do not expect the children to have these skills starting school. It also may indicate that Caregivers who did not voice this view may not have communicated with any educators about the issue. Despite the discussion on
academic skills the inclusion of additional areas of development indicates the move away from “narrowly constructed, academically-driven definitions of readiness” (Kagan et al., 1995, p. 1).

Children’s attention span and concentration levels are cited aspects of cognitive ability by the Caregivers and Educators in this study. This takes into account children’s ability to sit at the desk for certain periods of times and perform tasks for increasing amounts of time. The educators in O’Kane’s (2007) study also identified the ability to listen and concentrate as one of the main skills children need when starting school. A minority of the Caregivers in this study also included organisation, memory recall and the ability to problem solve as indicators that children were ready for starting school. Sitting and thereby not walking around the classroom is a central component of being a child in the school environment according to the Children and the Educators. In previous studies the educators placed more emphasis than caregivers on the need for children to concentrate and pay attention (Dockett & Perry, 2004), however the opposite is also true (West & Collins, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995).

Despite this it is clear that cognitive skills are an important area of school readiness that enables children to function in the classroom and learn. The development of cognitive skills is foundational for higher intellectual performance however this was not explicitly expressed in the interviews. Blair and Raver (2002, 2015) argues for a strong focus of self-regulation in relation to school readiness. The main executive function expressed in the qualitative data is inhibitory control (Diamond, 2009). Following rules, regulating feelings and dealing with feelings appropriately require the use of the cognitive inhibitory control. Children must control urges to rebel against the rules and expectations of the school. The element of persistence and completing a task which features
Chapter Eight Discussion

in the approaches to learning domain (Section 8.4.3) is also strongly dependent on this executive function.

8.5 What Needs to be Addressed to Effectively Improve School Readiness?
The Caregivers and Educators voiced three main areas that would contribute to improving the experiences of all involved when children start primary school. Clarification of what school readiness involves and the expectations of children in primary school is considered necessary. Leading on from this is the need for communication to become more open in both a formal and informal manner. The third area relates to the structural issues that create barriers to impede children’s school readiness. The Caregivers and Educators identified the need to tackle issues such as the duration of the FPSY and the large class sizes thus questioning the readiness of primary schools. The Children’s narratives did not address this question.

Both the Caregivers and Educators largely believed that their perceptions of what school readiness is differ to each other, thereby creating uncertainties and doubt in how to prepare children for school. The perceived differing perceptions were largely attributed to the different roles and approaches of each group in the separate environments. School readiness conversations and transition practices between a range of stakeholders need to occur. A partnership approach in preparing and supporting the children was advocated for however, ineffective communication and time prove to be barriers to this. Also the Educators identified the push for academic learning as unnecessary for children in preschool and junior infants whilst only a minority of the Caregivers thought the push for academic learning is unnecessary. Both the Caregivers’ unrealistic expectations and misunderstandings of appropriate developmental activities combined with the focus on outcomes in the primary school curriculum have
contributed to the over emphasis of teaching academic knowledge according to the Educators.

The FPSY was welcomed by all. Nonetheless, the Educators in particular called for an increased duration of the scheme as caregivers in higher social classes are in a position to pay for additional terms and this is believed to be advantageous to the children’s developmental. Both groups recognised the restrictive nature created by the large class sizes in junior infants. It affects the functioning of the classroom in relation to the space available, the attention the children receive from the educators, and the learning approaches. The focus of these improvements is unsurprising as the need for such improvements was also evident to the researcher during the course of data collection. Classrooms were overcrowded and the Children, Caregivers, Preschool Educators and Primary School Educators indicated a lack of consultation and communication. These improvements require the interactions across the elements of the school readiness model to be enhanced. By working together each group must acknowledge and support the input of each group.

8.5.1 Clarification of School Readiness
Readiness is a beginning of engagement in the primary school environment rather than an evaluation of children’s current development (Bruner, 1966; Meisels, 1998) yet the knowledge to prepare children for this engagement is not always explicit amongst the Caregivers and preschool Educators in this study. Due to being unsure of their children’s readiness, a number of Caregivers stated they were willing to withdraw their child from school after a certain time period if their child did not appear to be adjusting to school. Also attached to this idea of ‘settling in’ is the enduring duration component of development in that it is still occurring rather than the idea that a specific development level should be
Chapter Eight Discussion

reached as children start school. This takes into account the time element of the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Despite educators deemphasising preacademic skills they spend a large proportion of their time teaching academic skills to children (INTO, 1995; Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997). The preschool and primary school Educators in this study spoke of the pressure being placed on them to teach academic skills to the children too early from Caregivers, and also that the junior infant curriculum introduces academics too early. This results in educators being ‘torn’ (Wesley & Buysse, 2003) between what they think is best for the children such as playing and what they are employed and pressurised into doing by caregivers such as teach reading and writing skills before creating a foundation for such learning. Educators in junior infants have identified that they believe it is their responsibility to teach preacademic skills (Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997). This weight placed on knowledge skills is at the expense of children’s holistic development and suggests that in line with Wolfe et al., (2013) a care and education divide exists in ECCE.

Being child centred is not always possible when meeting curriculum targets is perceived to take precedence. Attending to children’s social and emotional needs or their physical development and well-being needs may be outweighed by the need to prove children’s academic learning and thereby the ability of the educator to teach. The infant curriculum is more academically focused on educational outcomes and Hayes (2004, 2010) is critical of the demands placed on educators to implement the primary school curriculum. Furthermore, some of the Educators in this study suggested that caregivers did not fully comprehend the power of play, similar to other studies (INTO, 2009). Addressing this deficient comprehension and school readiness expectations may increase the
support the educators receive from the caregivers with regard to the work they
carry out and the skills they facilitate the children to develop. This can avoid
premature ‘schoolification’ (Ring et al., 2015).

The Government is attempting to deal with this by revising the lower primary
school curriculum. These revisions are in light of the recognition that the
principles and methodologies of Aistear need to be more evident in the lower
primary school curriculum. Currently, it is obligatory for all schools offering the
FPSY scheme to implement Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum (NCCA,
2009). Aistear recognises children as unique citizens with rights and
responsibilities. The learning environment should facilitate children to feel
confident and comfortable, and have opportunities to share experiences, stories,
ideas, and feelings (NCCA, 2009). Children develop through nurturing
relationships and need to engage with both adults and children. The adult’s role
is pivotal in supporting children’s learning and the development of trust plays
an important role in this. Time and individual attention contributes to the
development of trust however the overcrowded nature of junior infant classes
can impinge on this. Focusing less on subject areas and didactic teaching, the
revisions of the curriculum aim to introducing more play based active learning
that will support children’s learning in a holistic manner. Aistear guides adults
in the creation of learning opportunities under the interconnected themes of
Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and
Thinking (NCCA, 2009). These revisions will support schools in becoming
more ready to receive and support children starting school as it will create
continuity in the curricula being implemented in preschools and primary school.

The majority of the Caregivers and Educators in this study believe that their
knowledge of school readiness differs from the other groups. Automatically this
creates a challenge in transition between the differing cultures of the home, preschool and school, for all stakeholders. A mismatch of expectations therefore exists within the children’s mesosystem particularly in relation to children’s knowledge skills. This is a long term issue as O’Kane’s study (2007) corroborates this perspective. In particular, the Caregivers in this study illustrated their uncertainty of what the actual expectations of the primary school are. Caregivers’ knowledge of what is happening in school is limited (Wesley & Buysse, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007), thereby constraining their ability to provide ‘school trained’ children (Sharp & Green, 1975, p.86). Running through a number of the findings is the Educators’ belief that the caregivers do not have the knowledge or capacity to prepare the children for school. O’Kane and Hayes (2010) also highlighted the belief that some caregivers misunderstand the skills required by children when starting school.

This suggests that the recommendation in the White Paper Ready to Learn (DES, 1999) that advice and support relating to the learning process should be offered to children’s Caregivers to support them in their role in strengthening children’s education and development has not been fulfilled nationally. Addressing caregivers’ knowledge and attitudes through a mentoring programme and a parenting programme has proven to improve children’s school readiness (UCD Geary Institute, 2016) as caregivers’ beliefs about school readiness impact on their preparation of their children for school (Taylor et al., 2004). This emphasis on caregiver education as a means to improve children's readiness for school is not a new phenomenon (Boyer, 1991). It is anticipated that by attending to ineffective parenting, the gap in children’s levels of development will be reduced and their experience of childhood and family life will be more positive. The NCCA are attempting to do this by introducing online resources for Caregivers.
Although 25% of the caregivers in this study attended a caregiver programme or 
workshop the children’s early developmental level did not differ based on this 
factor. Nonetheless, correct and explanatory information will assist caregivers 
in their own preparation and ‘what they do’ in the preparation of their child to 
cecope with the challenges of school (McAllister et al., 2005). Yet caution must 
also be exercised as it is possible that the Educators’ perceptions in this study 
are informed by a cultural deficit perspective (Devine, 2000) as this study was 
conducted in designated disadvantaged areas. Thus, as suggested by the 
Caregivers and Educators in this study clarification of school readiness 
expectations is essential. This has also been stressed elsewhere (Dunlop & 
Fabian, 2002; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; O’Kane, 2007). The likelihood that 
children are categorised as ‘at risk’ in relation to school readiness is further 
exacerbated by this mismatch and as a result all stakeholders are vulnerable to 
being viewed as inadequate in their abilities. Rimm-Kaufmann et al. (2000) 
question whether transition problems reported by educators are an indication of 
this mismatch, as explicit perspectives can promote school success (Pianta & 
Walsh, 1996).

8.5.2 Improved Transition Practices
The Children spoke frequently about the different types of play they engage in 
including physical play, social play, manipulative play, imaginative play and 
object play. In line with previous studies, the children saw play as distinct from 
work (Niesel & Griebel, 2001; O’Kane, 2007). This may be because the children 
were rewarded after the work activity with a play activity. Thus, access to play 
in school is controlled by the rules imposed by the educators. Their work 
activities in school encompass writing letters and reading books. For the 
Children, play is enjoyable and it represents opportunities to socialise and 
explore at their own pace and have a break from learning. This distinction
between work and play suggests that the junior infant children have not experienced a smooth transition in relation to play and learning (Dewey, 1938) despite the belief that continuity across curricula is beneficial (Neuman, 2001; Fabian et al., 2006). The somewhat disjointed approach identified here fails to facilitate smooth transitions from educational settings for young children and furthers the argument for established partnerships and communication structures. This need to address continuity has also been accepted by the Irish Government (DES, 2011; DCYA, 2015).

A child’s move into school is a qualitative shift along several dimensions (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 1998). Both the Caregivers and the Educators pinpointed the need to work together in order to improve children’s transitions. In addition to outlining the transition practices that exist (Section 8.2.4) the majority of the Caregivers identified their want and need for more information. The Caregivers and Educators believe that a list identifying the children’s skills, expectations and progress would be a useful tool. Aistear outlines the importance of assessment in the early years to focus on

‘building a picture of children’s individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 11).

The argument created here then is rather than assessing children in their abilities as a means to determine their potential to enter and adapt, the school environment should be adapted, thereby supporting a child in what they are ready to learn (Stipek, 2003). Thus both groups acknowledged that the list should be flexible and not overly prescriptive, conforming to Kagan et al.’s (1995) recommendation that a single ‘readiness’ threshold is ambiguous and dangerous. For the purpose of a successful transition a joint assessment of the children’s capabilities by their preschool educators and caregivers should be
Chapter Eight Discussion

passed on to the receiving school in advance to enable the school to prepare a supportive learning environment. These abilities should be monitored during the school year as school readiness does not end immediately after the children start school.

This passing on of information is considered useful in creating a more complete picture of the children as the start junior infants. Greater communication is wanted on the ground (O’Kane, 2007; O’Kane & Hayes, 2010; O’Toole et al., 2014). It is also recognised at the Governmental level (CECDE, 2006; DES, 2011) and plans to implement the use of education passports have been identified (DCYA, 2015). Despite the recognition of the benefit of passing on information the interaction between settings is limited and intermittent. This has also been documented elsewhere (Love, 1992; Wesley & Buyesse, 2003; O’Kane & Hayes, 2006). Similar to Neuman (2001), the Caregivers and Educators in this study outlined time constraints and differences in cultures as barriers to transition. The crossover of spheres between the public and private is difficult to navigate; the need to maintain social norms and respect the private sphere of family life is essential, and caution was practiced by the participants to avoid overstepping the boundaries on both sides. Boundaries, roles and expectations are not in place and therefore hamper the interactions that occur between caregivers and educators. Time to engage with each stakeholder is also a barrier as often caregivers and educators only meet at drop off and pick up times and therefore there is limited time to create a relationship. Providing transition practices and partnering with caregivers and preschools are components of ready schools (Kagan et al., 1995; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).
8.5.3 Structural Improvements

The FPSY is seen as an invaluable resource as it is considered to be a major influence on the children’s school readiness. The Educators and Caregivers spoke highly of the FPSY as it creates opportunities for children to develop and benefit from. The majority of the Caregivers availed on this scheme although it is not compulsory. According to the Educators in this study one year of preschool is not sufficient for all children and an increase from one year to two years would be beneficial as it would increase the developmental opportunities available to the children and reduce the financial cost on caregivers paying for childcare. This perception is not unfounded as the uptake of non-parental childcare is socially stratified (McGinnity et al., 2015) and the FPSY lessens the financial burden (Ring et al., 2015).

The rationale behind the Educators advocating for a two-year free preschool scheme revolved around children’s development and preparation for school. Studies have found that children who attend an ECCE setting for longer exhibit higher levels of development (McKeown et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2014). Again, considering the expensive nature of childcare (UN, 2015) and the difficulty for lower social classes in accessing it due to lower incomes, the ‘double disadvantage’ is then reinforced as social disparities are in place before children are eligible to avail of the FPSY. Therefore, children who do not have the opportunity to avail of additional time in preschool may not start on ‘an equal playing field’ (Smyth & McCoy, 2009). Furthermore, attendance at preschool for a year does not decrease the gap, except in the area of social and emotional skills for ESL children (McKeown et al., 2014). Thus the FPSY may begin too late for children from lower SES backgrounds. Although the FPSY has now been increased to two years (DCYA, 2015) this does not attend to the policy vacuum from birth to three (StartStrong, 2012). Policy for the ECCE sector must take
this into account and supplement the FPSY as early interventions can improve children’s school readiness particularly for at-risk children (Ramey & Ramey, 2004).

Tying in with this, the Educators in this study and other Irish studies (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009) recommend increasing the school entry age. This is due to their observations of older children in the classroom compared to younger children. As is evident in the discussion of the quantitative findings older children are typically more developmentally advanced starting school. The fact that starting children at the age of six is considered to be against the norm this results in children being taught an academic subject based curriculum at the age or four or five, although the ECCE phase takes children into account from birth to six years. An increase in the starting school age would also bring Ireland more in line with international trends (Eurydice, 2013).

The educators’ workload was also highlighted by both the Educators and Caregivers in this study as an area in need of attention and improvement with a specific focus on the adult-child ratio in the junior infant classroom. The adult-child ratio is also a concern in a recent school readiness study in Ireland (Ring et al., 2015). The large class size is seen to impose a difficult job on educators in junior infant classrooms. Ready schools should have sufficient resources to attend to each child’s needs (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Quality of teaching may be affected as a result if the educator in junior infants is unable to cope with the large class size. The amount of attention each child receives is also reduced (Ledger, 2000). There is evidence that classes with less than 20 students are more beneficial for minority students and disadvantaged students especially in the early years (Finn, 1998; Krueger, 2002). Targeting practices and the DEIS programme in place in Ireland suggest some adherence to the fact that class sizes
need to be smaller in all areas of disadvantage. Despite the policy to allocate one teacher to every 22 students in DEIS band 1, the policy to allow DEIS band 2 schools one teacher for every 28 students which is the same policy for those schools that do not qualify for the DEIS scheme. This does not recognise the fact that smaller classes are more conducive to learning for these children. Despite commitments to have lower adult-child ratios in the infant classes (DES, 2011; Department of An Taoiseach, 2016), the Educators and Caregivers in this study reiterate the concerns of the OECD (2004), the INTO (2013) and the National Parents Council (2002, 2004). This is unsurprising as a similar commitment by the Irish Government in 2002 (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002) was not applied.

8.6 Summary
This chapter has discussed both the qualitative and quantitative findings in line with the four central research questions of the study and the relevant policy and literature. It is clear from the findings and discussion that school readiness is perceived as both the skills the children in junior infants exhibit and the development of these skills which is nurtured by the environments the children engage with. By addressing deficits in knowledge and communication across a range of stakeholders it is believed that children will be more supported and prepared starting school.

Children are not solely responsible for their skills, a holistic perspective is taken into account in preparing the children. Within this research each of the four elements of the ‘Ready Child Equation’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005); the family, the community, the services and the school are confirmed. In order for positive development to take place environments must be stimulating. The two main environments that are believed to be foundational in this are the home
and the ECCE setting, the other elements of the equation take a secondary role. The input of the home environment largely rests on the practices of the caregiver. Practices that positively contribute to children’s school readiness include having positive conversations about school, being involved with a child’s learning, and teaching children a range of skills. Caregivers must also be ready to support the educators involved in this process. The Educators often attributed children’s low levels of school readiness to their caregivers’ level of education. Caregivers with low levels of education are deemed to be less effective in preparing their children. The quantitative data in this study did not affirm such a hypothesis although previous research has (Janus & Duku, 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2013; Curtin et al., 2013). Furthermore, family stressors including the reliance on social welfare payments is found to impact negatively on children’s school readiness in this study. The preschool is thought to be an environment that eases children into the routines of school and facilitates their adaptation to a collective environment. It is therefore viewed as a training environment for children that support the development of skills utilised in primary school. The quantitative data confirmed this belief and previous research findings (Doyle et al., 2010; Curtin et al., 2013; Mc Keown et al., 2014). Nonetheless, some primary school Educators questioned the quality of the practices within preschool settings.

Decision making is not a linear process for caregivers. It is fraught with contemplation and anxiety. The age of their child and a child’s abilities are the main considerations in caregivers’ decision making according to the Caregivers. The Educators also believe that a child’s age was a major consideration in caregivers’ decision making. Four or five is considered the most suitable age for starting school. As recognised in this study and previous research (O’Kane, 2007) age should not be used as the only criteria in the decision making process. Nonetheless some of the Educators believe that caregivers do not take into
account the abilities of the child which has also been found in other studies (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010). This perception of a child’s abilities and the skills impacting on the decision has also been found in previous studies of Caregivers and Educators (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Meisels, 1998; West & Colllins, 1993). Further to this the Educators also believe that the cost of childcare is a prevailing factor although this was not evident in the Caregivers’ perceptions. This focus on abilities creates a rationale that all stakeholders should be aware of the demands placed on children in the school environment in order to prepare the children and make informed decisions.

Perceptions of school readiness are a collaborative construction within a local area (Graue, 1992). The underlying concern of all three groups is the need for the children to fit in to the school structures and feel at ease in the environment (Brostrom, 2003). The Children in this study suggest that children need a skill set in school to conform to the demands of the learning environment, the collective nature of school and the disciplinary features of the school. Within this the Children spoke frequently of the rules they are exposed to and should obey in school. This preoccupation has also been found in other research studies (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004; O’Kane, 2007; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; O’Toole et al., 2014). Friends and friendships also proved to be a large part of the school experience according to the Children. The Caregivers and Educators were in agreement in relation to a number of skills they believe necessary for children starting school. Their perceived demands of school see emphasis being placed on children’s ability to exhibit prosocial skills, self-regulate and communicate effectively, thus rendering children’s social and emotional skills as one of the most referred to domains of school readiness. The identification of the importance of these skills is unquestionable (Lewit & Baker, 1995; Kernan & Hayes, 1999; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Perry & Dockett, 2003; O’Kane,
Children must also be in good health, energetic and independent in order to participate in school. This is also evident in other areas in Ireland (O’Toole et al., 2014; Ring et al., 2015). A large disparity was evident within the cognition and general knowledge domain as the Caregivers placed a larger emphasis on children’s need to demonstrate social conventional knowledge than the Educators. Advanced knowledge is not a prerequisite for children starting school, foundational skills such as prewriting skills are sufficient according to the Educators. This gap in perceptions has also been found in other research (West & Collins, 1993; Lewit & Baker, 1995; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2004; O’Kane, 2007; O’Donnell, 2008; Ring et al., 2015). The approaches to learning domain is the least referred to domain of school readiness.

As can be seen woven through the findings is uncertainty amongst stakeholders that although they are working towards the same outcome of supporting children starting school they do not necessarily have the same understanding of what the process or outcomes should look like. Limited knowledge can create a mismatch of perceptions (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; O’Kane, 2007; O’Kane & Hayes, 2010). Therefore, a mutual clarification of school readiness is needed and sought be the Caregivers and the Educators. Shared understandings can create shared processes and outcomes. In addition to this a sharing of information is important for school readiness (O’Kane, 2007; O’Kane & Hayes, 2010; O’Toole et al., 2014) yet as identified in this study interactions across the settings is limited. The adult participants believed a flexible list of what skills a child should be supported to work towards for starting school would be useful as would more opportunities to communicate with each other. The Educators recognised that increased access to preschool removes the financial burden and would be beneficial to all children’s development. The need to increase the
starting school age has been highlighted by the Educators in this study and elsewhere (O’Kane, 2007; INTO, 2009). Both the Caregivers and the Educators indicated that the large class sizes create challenges for the children and the primary school educators to teach and learn effectively.

Chapter Nine offers conclusions to this study and a range of recommendations
Chapter Nine
Conclusions and Recommendations

9.1 Introduction
This chapter presents reflections and recommendations derived from this study. It revisits the aims and objectives of the study which have been attended to through the data collection and analysis phases of the research. The chapter summarises the previous chapters and outlines the significance and contribution of the study as well as the limitations. It also identifies possible directions for future research in this area and recommendations are made, aimed at those who work at the policy level, and those who work with children on the ground from birth to six years old.

9.2 Aims and Objectives
The overall aim of this study is to identify the school readiness perceptions of children, caregivers and educators, understand reasons behind decisions relating to when to send children to school, and identify factors that influence children’s school readiness. To achieve this four research questions were identified:

- What factors are associated with children’s school readiness ratings?
- What considerations are taken into account when the decision to start a child in school is being made?
- How is school readiness perceived by Children, Caregivers and Educators?
- What needs to be addressed to effectively improve school readiness?

The objectives of the study were to:

- Establish what Children, Caregivers and Educators think school readiness is and what inputs are important as children start school.
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

- Identify similarities and differences of perceptions between each group.
- Illustrate children’s views of starting school.
- Investigate the basis for deciding when to start a child in school.
- Identify children’s school readiness levels.
- Examine factors that may influence the school readiness ratings of children.
- Make recommendations to organisations that work with caregivers, educators and children, and establish policy implications.

Based on the findings and discussion (See Chapters Five-Eight) of this study, each of these objectives have been achieved and the four research questions have been addressed.

9.3 Merits and Limitations

Considering the methods employed in this multiple case study approach, this section reflects on the merits and limitations of this study. Caution must be exercised in the generalisation of the findings, especially at the community level outside of designated disadvantaged areas. The aim of this study is to explore school readiness perceptions in designated disadvantaged areas, thus the findings may not be relevant to the wider community. Despite this, the small sample size enhanced the study as it enabled an in-depth mixed methods study to take place. The caregiver sample represented both ethnic and gender diversity. In particular, 20% of the caregiver sample was male whilst 25% were of non-Irish background. Furthermore, although perceptions are not necessarily evidence based facts, they provide an insight into what is believed to be occurring. The consensus across many of the groups insights into school readiness portrayed in the data collected is a strong indication of the experiences on the ground.
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

The sample sizes in the qualitative data are unbalanced particularly in relation to the children’s data. The semi-structured interviews with the Caregivers (n=20) and the Educators (n=16) produced similar quantities of data. On the other hand, approximately five times more children (n=88) took part in the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity yet the ‘Tell’ component duration with each child was significantly shorter than the semi-structured interviews. The duration of the ‘Tell’ component can be viewed in the context of the children’s attention span but also in line with the children’s ongoing consent and wishes to disengage with the topic after explaining their picture. For this reason, more children took part in the research in order to reach saturation point and prevent exclusion of any child who is a junior infant student in the research schools. This resulted in more comprehensive data collected yet the collection and analysis phase were extremely labour intensive. Nonetheless, conducting the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity has increased my confidence as a researcher to engage in child-centred participatory research that supports children to engage in the design and analysis phases of research projects in the future. Taking the quantitative data into account, again a small sample size was obtained and conditions were not controlled for. For this reason, the quantitative data serves as a means to further confirm or contest the qualitative perceptions rather than as standalone findings.

9.4 Key Findings

Taking into account the four central research questions of this study the reflections are grounded in the findings that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data in conjunction with the context in which they arose. This study has contributed to a number of fields of enquiry related to school readiness. The findings in this study point towards the practice that children’s preparation for school is gauged by adults before they start school, as they enter school in September and as they grow accustomed to school over the next few weeks and
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

months during the ‘settling in’ period. The children on the other hand do not rate their readiness, they accept school as something they must do, a part of their life that they undergo because they are expected to do so.

The perceptions of the Children, Caregivers and Educators are indicative of the importance of children being accepted and feeling like they belong when they start junior infants. Conforming to the expectations and demands that exist in school are seen to be the main route into being received positively into the school community. Social acceptance results in inclusion whilst deviance results in exclusion. Fitting in is believed to help children be more content in school and help the educators be more effective in managing and educating the children. In order to achieve acceptance, it is believed that the children should possess skills in the areas of physical well-being and motor development and language. Most emphasis was placed on the need for children to have developed skills in the areas of social and emotional development. The Caregivers and the Children made frequent references to the knowledge category of school readiness particularly advanced knowledge such as reading and writing skills. On the other hand, the Educators did not believe advanced knowledge is a prerequisite, basic knowledge such as holding pencils correctly is more foundational. This suggests that in formal schooling social and emotional behaviours and communication skills determine if a child is ‘ready’ and that the children’s approach to learning is of less importance. The mismatch of perceptions has led to a need to clarify what school readiness means in the local community. This will also contribute to informing caregivers when making the decision of when to start their child at school as the main factors caregivers consider is their child’s age and ability.

Nonetheless, it is recognised that it may be challenging for children to fit in without the necessary nurturance. Thus, the Ready Child Equation, ‘Ready
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) is recognised at the level of the Caregivers and the Educators and to a lesser degree by the Children. This removes the sole responsibility of preparing children for school from the children themselves. This equation recognises inputs at a variety of levels in the bioecological model yet it does not outline the extent of contribution from each factor. In this study the home and the preschool are attributed as the largest contributors to children’s school readiness development. These environments must be of high quality engaging the children in positive transactions and preparations before they start school. In particular children living in Traveller families need additional supports to be effectively prepared for starting school. Preschool attendance is perceived to be an advantage in relation to children’s development and school readiness. Due to the value placed on the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) the Educators believe that increasing the scheme from one year to two years and raising the school entry age will improve children’s preparations for school. The Educators believe that the duration of children’s attendance at preschool and the Caregivers decision making process is somewhat impacted by the affordability of preschool and the Caregivers ability to pay for the service. Furthermore, the school itself must also be ready to receive the children and support them. The Caregivers and Educators believe that by reducing the large class sizes in school this will have a knock on effect on the school’s readiness.

Bearing in mind the home and preschool environments contribution to children’s preparation for school, the Caregivers and the preschool Educators noted their limited amount of knowledge of primary school demands and expectations. The Caregivers and Educators believed that their knowledge of school readiness differs as a result of their backgrounds. Underlying this is a lack of
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

Communication across settings. Transition practices are largely initiated by the receiving school and usually consist of a one way transfer of information. This reality creates the image of primary school educators as the ‘expert’ which has implications for joint efforts to support children starting school. The Caregivers’ views and the preschool Educators’ views clearly indicate that they hold information about the process and the children in their care that would be valuable to the primary school educators preparing the school to be ‘ready’ for the incoming children. A partnership approach that involves clear transition practices that respect each stakeholder’s contribution are necessary.

9.5 Recommendations

This research has confirmed that perceptions of school readiness rest on the interactionist model of ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Ready Children’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). Within this, duties are assigned to the people in children’s environment to support children’s preparation for school by they themselves being ready yet this responsibility is not always exercised. Furthermore, the language utilised in the expression of perceptions continues to place a large portion of responsibility on the children to be ready. This section identifies what needs to be addressed in Irish policy and the provision of services aimed at supporting children starting school which are based on the findings of this study. Additional research is also suggested.

9.5.1 Policy and Practice

It is evident that studies such as this that focus on participants’ perceptions and experiences can illuminate issues on the ground. As identified through the course of this research, policy has a significant effect on the approach taken in early childhood environments in preparation for school. The findings from this
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

research highlights areas where service provision intended to assist children’s development and preparation for school is imperfect.

The Department of Health and Children (2000) maintain that the care and education of children is inextricably linked in early childhood yet the Department of Finance (2009) view the FPSY as a pre-primary education initiative. Furthermore, the infant curriculum is deemed to be overly academic and the pressure caregivers place on educators to teach academic skills to children is at the expense of enhancing children’s holistic development. This is in contrast to the description of ready schools that strive for continuity between the school and the preschool and take responsibility for supporting children’s learning process and outcomes (Kagan et al., 2005). Policy needs to address this imbalance by implementing commitments to review the infant curriculum and support the implementation of Aistear both at preschool and primary school level. The use of the term ‘school readiness’ may contribute to the focus on academic skills and the placing of responsibility on the children to exhibit such skills when starting school. The utilisation of the Ready Child Equation (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005) both in academic and practice circles will contribute to the developing understandings that readiness is not a specific condition within each child, and refocus the understanding that all children are ready to learn (Willer & Bredekamp, 1990) once supported by their environments. It is thereby recommended that the term is replaced with ‘holistic development in the early childhood period’. Many of the skills referred to by the three groups relate to the themes of Aistear, thus it is recommended that the implementation of Aistear is compulsory in all ECCE settings and infant classes in primary school thereby creating curricula continuity across settings.
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

As recognised by the adult participants the FPSY is a beneficial scheme. The Educators highlighted how the scheme supports children’s attendance at preschool by removing the financial barrier on Caregivers to pay for childcare. The role income plays in preschool access has been widely documented (Bryson et al., 2012; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2014; McGinnity et al., 2015; Ring et al., 2015). Since data collection the Educators’ recommendation to increase the FPSY has been fulfilled. However, it is evident that children who live in non-stimulating environments need additional assistance. Past research has found that a year in preschool does not decrease the skills gap based on social class however longer durations spent in preschool has a positive effect on development (McKeown et al., 2014) and early intervention is of particular benefit to at-risk children (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Thus, in addition to the universal provision of preschool, increased targeting efforts are necessary to address the skills gap at the early childhood stage. Intertwined in this is the need to address the quality of preschools as higher quality preschools achieve improved outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2014). Further to this it is recommended that the school entry age policy is reviewed as this has not been changed since 1936. Ireland remains in the minority of countries that allow children to start primary school at the age of four.

The crux of the practice issues on the ground lies in the limited communication that takes place between the stakeholders. This limited communication amongst stakeholders has also been documented elsewhere (Love, 1992; Wesley & Buyesse, 2003; O’Kane & Hayes, 2006). This undermines the ability to create local shared understandings of school readiness and effective transition practices. The partnership approach advocated within Siolta and Aistear is clearly thwarted in its implementation. This research recommends an examination of the ability of settings to create such partnerships in order to fully
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

support preschools and schools to continue the development and implementation of transition practices. It also recommends the promotion and monitoring of the application of the transition practices information in the ‘Aistear Siolta Practice Guide’ (DCYA, 2015). Additional funding is necessary to support the implementation of such.

The Caregivers’ education levels were often questioned by the Educators as in previous research (West & Collins, 1993) and although many of the Caregiver and Educators’ perceptions were in agreement uncertainty was expressed as beliefs are not necessarily facts. This also stems from a lack of communication of expectations. Clarification of school readiness expectations is essential (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; O’Kane, 2007), as explicit perspectives can promote school success (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). This can be addressed by incorporating relationship building skills in the parenting supports that the DCYA (2015) have committed to implementing. Within this research it is clear that children’s participation if often viewed as a tokenistic or a consultative exercise rather than an opportunity to facilitate children to be actively involved in the process. This research therefore recommends that children are considered a stakeholder in the partnership approach advocated by Siolta and Aistear and thereby are involved and share in decisions that affect their life.

In line with the improvements recommended by the Caregivers and the Educators the achievement of further existing policy commitments is called for. This includes placing a stronger emphasis on transition and transition strategies (CECDE, 2007; DES, 2011; DCYA, 2015), the introduction of education passports (DCYA, 2015) and a decrease in class sizes particularly at the infant level (DES, 2011; Department of An Taoiseach, 2016).
Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

9.5.2 Research

Although this research has uncovered insightful and beneficial findings it is recognised that further research can build on this.

The sample size in this study cannot claim generalisability or representativeness of the broader population in Ireland. Therefore, further research that encompasses the perceptions of children, caregivers and educators in both non-designated disadvantaged areas and designated disadvantaged areas should be conducted in order to uncover if this study’s findings are representative of the wider population. Also the quantification of children’s early development and school readiness nationally utilising the EDI (Janus & Offord, 2007) would create a more complete picture.

Research in this area should continue to include children as active research participants. Although labour intensive, the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity proved to be a successful data collection method with children in this research. Researchers and research centres engaging with young children should invest time to build a rapport with the children and facilitate the children to offer their thoughts and ideas about the research. Funders should also be made aware of the importance of doing this and the beneficial outcomes for the research and children.

Also, considering the limited references to the approaches to learning domain by the Caregivers, Educators and Children, and as this domain is the least understood (Kagan et al., 1995), further research is needed to identify the level of understanding of this domain within an Irish context.


Chapter Nine Conclusions and Recommendations

9.6 Final Considerations

From this research it is clear that starting school is a milestone in young children’s lives. However, it is also a milestone for the children’s caregivers and the preschool and primary school educators, all of whom want the children to be content and excel to the best of their ability. Their individual efforts are commendable yet the need to work together is undisputable. It is now widely recognised that the early years are the most formative and foundational in children’s lives, equipped with this knowledge Irish society should be supporting the positive development of all children from conception. The Children in this research are advocates of young children’s abilities and capabilities, it is our duty to respect and uphold this.
Appendix 1 Information Sheets

1. Caregiver Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a PhD degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness.

This is an information sheet about the study and your involvement. Please note that you will receive another information sheet about your child’s possible involvement in the study in the future.

Who am I?

Máire Hanniffy is a PhD research student from the Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. Our research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood.

What is the project about?

In this project we are trying to find out what starting school is like for young children and what is important to you, your child and the school when children start in junior infants. We all want the best for children, but this isn’t always easy if we all have different ideas about what is best. Finding this out will make it easier for the children and the people that help them. Therefore, your participation in this research is very important to the success of this study. Máire believes that asking you what you think is worthwhile. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.
If you decide to take part what does this involve?

If you decide to take part you will be expected to:

- Complete two questionnaires and take part in an interview (very similar to a conversation) that may last between 30 minutes to an hour. The interview will take place in a place both you and the researcher feel comfortable in such as the local community centre, school or in your home. Máire will ask you some questions about your thoughts on children starting school. She will audio record your answers to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes. If however you are extremely uncomfortable with audio recording the interview Máire will take notes of what is being said.

- Sign a consent form indicating that you understand what is expected of you and that agree to take part.

Will the information be confidential?

Máire will be the only person who will conduct the interviews and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis by Máire and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. It will also be available to any interested person, organisation or school. In order to ensure that what you say remains confidential your real name will not be used. Anyone involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a false name to be used when reporting what they have said in the research. Also, the name of the area and the name of the school will not be mentioned. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise. This information will be reported to
the Designated Person in the school and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made the child’s parent/guardian/carer will also be informed.

**Do you have to take part?**

You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part you have a chance to give your opinion about what you think is important when children start school. This may help services in the area that might help children start school, and potentially inform government policy regarding early childhood care and education. What you have to say is extremely important. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will also receive a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study you can change your mind about participating at any point without needing to give a reason. To take part please contact Máire on the details below or talk to her at the school or tell your child’s teacher that you would be willing to take part.

You will be contacted in the future in relation to your child taking part in this research. You will receive information about this next month.

**What if you have more questions or want to talk to someone about this?**

Máire will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so please contact her.
Máire Hanniffy  
Doctoral Fellow,  
Child and Family Research Centre,  
School of Political Science and Sociology, MOB:  
National University of Ireland, Galway Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie  
If you have any reservations or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Chairperson,  
Research Ethics Committee,  
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,  
National University Ireland, Galway Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie
2. Primary School Educator Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a PhD degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness. This is an Information Sheet that aims to address any concerns you may have about the study and your involvement. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

Who am I?

Máire Hanniffy is a PhD research student from the Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. Our research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood.

What is this research study about?

This study intends to explore what school readiness means to the different people involved in children’s experience of starting school for the first time. This includes the children’s parent/guardian/carer, preschool staff, educators in the receiving school and of course the children themselves. Each group plays a part in the life of a child starting school for the first time. We all want the best for children, but this can be difficult if we have different goals and opinions about what school readiness is. By clarifying what it generally means to each group can help inform a more unified approach to support the children and adults involved in the transition. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is very important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

As part of the study Máire will:

- Talk to staff in the junior infant class in your school to shed some light on their thoughts of what school readiness means
• Ask the children in the junior infant class to draw a picture about starting school and then ask them to explain their drawings to her. This is a Draw and Tell activity and will take place in a classroom in the school

• Talk to a parent/guardian/carer of the children in junior infants to discover what they think school readiness is

• Spend some time in your school and take part in some art activities in order for the children to become familiar with her

• Work with the children to put all their drawings together in a book that can be kept in the school

If you decide to take part what does this involve?

If you decide to take part you will be expected to:

• Sign a consent form indicating that you understand what is expected of you and that agree to take part

• Pass on prepared information packs designed by Máire to a guardian of each of the children starting junior infants in September 2013

• Complete a questionnaire and take part in a semi structured interview that may last up to 1 hour. Máire will conduct this interview and audio record it to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes. If however you are extremely uncomfortable with audio recording the interview Máire will take notes of what is being said

• Agree that Máire can be present in the classroom at open days and during some art activities throughout September 2013

• Allow Máire to conduct the Draw and Tell activity with the children in the classroom who want to take part and whose parent/guardian/carer has not opposed their participation in the activity

• Remain in the classroom at all times when Máire is there

• Not disclose the information given by the children relating to the Draw and Tell activity
Will the information be confidential?
Máire will be the only researcher who will conduct the interviews and the draw and tell activity, and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis by Máire and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. It will also be available to any interested person, organisation or school. In order to ensure that your input remains confidential your real name will not be used. Anyone involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a false name to be used when reporting their input in the research. In addition to this direct identifiers such as the name of the area and the name of your school will also be removed from the data. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise, or if a child states that they wish to harm themselves or others. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the school and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made the child’s parent/guardian must also be informed.

Do you have to take part?
You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of what school readiness means, inform possible preparation practices in the area, and potentially inform government policy regarding early childhood care and education. Your input is valuable. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will also receive a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study you can change your mind about participating at any point without needing to give a reason.

What if you have further questions or want to talk to someone about this?
Máire will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so please contact her.
Máire Hanniffy
Doctoral Fellow,
Child and Family Research Centre,
School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway

Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie

If you have any reservations or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Chairperson,
Research Ethics Committee,
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,
National University Ireland, Galway
Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie
3. Principal Information Sheet

You and the school you work in are being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a PhD degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is: *Life Foundations: An Exploration of School Readiness*. This is an Information Sheet that aims to address any concerns you may have about the study and involvement in the study. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

**Who am I?**

Máire Hanniffy is a PhD research student from the Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. Our research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood.

**What is this research study about?**

This study intends to explore what school readiness means to the different people involved in children’s experience of starting school for the first time. This includes the children’s parent/guardian/carer, preschool staff, educators in the receiving school and of course the children themselves. Each group plays a part in the life of a child starting school for the first time. We all want the best for children, but this can be difficult if we have different goals and opinions about what school readiness is. By clarifying what it generally means to each group, can help inform a more unified approach to support the children and adults involved in the transition. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is very important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

**As part of the study Máire will:**

- Talk to you and the staff in the junior infant class in your school to shed some light on ideas of what school readiness means
• Ask the children in the junior infant class to draw a picture about starting school and then ask them to explain their drawings to her. This is a Draw and Tell activity and will take place in a classroom in the school
• Talk to a parent/guardian/carer of the children in junior infants to discover what they think school readiness is
• Spend some time in your school and take part in some art activities in order for the children to become familiar with her
• Work with the children to put all their drawings together in a book that can be kept in the school

If you decide to take part what does this involve?
If you decide to take part you will be expected to:
• Sign a consent form indicating that your school can participate in the study, staff can distribute information packs to the parent/guardian/carer of the incoming junior infant class, Máire can be present at open days for the incoming junior infant children in order to make contact with parents/guardians/carers who may wish to take part in the research, and that Máire can be present at some art activities during the month of September
• Sign a second consent form indicating that you understand what is expected of you and that agree to take part in a semi structured interview that may last up to 1 hour. Máire will conduct this interview and audio record it to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes. If however you are extremely uncomfortable with audio recording the interview Máire will take notes of what is being said

Will the information be confidential?
Máire will be the only researcher who will conduct the interviews and the draw and tell activity, and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. It will also
be available to any interested person, organisation or school. In order to ensure that the school and your input remain confidential real names will not be used. People and places involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a false name to be used in the research. In addition to this, direct identifiers such as the name of the area will also be removed from the data. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise, or if a child states that they wish to harm themselves or others. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the school and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made, the child’s parent/guardian/carer must also be informed.

**Do you have to take part?**
You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of what school readiness means, inform possible preparation practices in the area, and potentially inform government policy regarding early childhood care and education. Your input is valuable. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will also receive a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study you can change your mind about participating at any point without needing to give a reason.

**What if you have further questions or want to talk to someone about this study?**
Máire will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so, please contact her.

Máire Hanniffy
Doctoral Fellow,
Child and Family Research Centre,
School of Political Science and Sociology,
If you have any reservations or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Chairperson,
Research Ethics Committee,
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,
National University Ireland, Galway

Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie
4. Preschool Educator Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study carried out as part of a PhD degree at NUI Galway. The title of the research study is: *Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness*. This is an Information Sheet that aims to address any concerns you may have about the study and your involvement. Please feel free to ask further questions if you wish.

**Who am I?**

Máire Hannify is a PhD research student from the Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University Ireland, Galway. Our research centre works with children, young people and the people involved in their lives to reveal the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their childhood.

**What is this research study about?**

This study intends to explore what school readiness means to the different people involved in children’s experience of starting school for the first time. This includes the children’s parent/guardian/carer, preschool staff, educators in the receiving school and of course the children themselves. Each group plays a part in the life of a child starting school for the first time. We all want the best for children, but this can be difficult if we have different goals and opinions about what school readiness is. By clarifying what it generally means to each group can help inform a more unified approach to support the children and adults involved in the transition. Therefore, the participation of each group in this research is very important to the success of this study. This is why you are being invited to take part in this study.

As part of the study Máire will:

- Talk to a staff member to shed some light on their thoughts of what school readiness means.
If you decide to take part what does this involve?

If you decide to take part you will be expected to:

- Sign a consent form indicating that you understand what is expected of you and that agree to take part

- Take part in a semi structured interview that may last up to 1 hour. Máire will conduct this interview and audio record it to help her remember what has been said for analysis purposes. If however you are extremely uncomfortable with audio recording the interview Máire will take notes of what is being said

Will the information be confidential?

Máire will be the only researcher who will conduct the interviews and analyse this information for this study. The findings will be published as a thesis by Máire and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. It will also be available to any interested person, organisation, preschool or school. In order to ensure that your input remains confidential your real name will not be used. Anyone involved in the study will be assigned an identification number and a false name to be used when reporting their input in the research. In addition to this, direct identifiers such as the name of the area and the name of your school will also be removed from the data. The only exception in relation to confidentiality will occur if any child protection concerns arise. This information will be reported to the Designated Person in the service and in the Child and Family Research Centre. Where a report is made the child’s parent/guardian must also be informed.

Do you have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research however, by taking part in this study you have an opportunity to contribute to the understandings of what school readiness means, inform possible preparation practices in the area, and potentially inform government policy regarding early childhood care and education. Your input is
valuable. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will also receive a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records. Please remember that if you agree to take part in this study you can change your mind about participating at any point without needing to give a reason.

What if you have further questions or want to talk to someone about this?
Máire will gladly answer any of your questions or talk you through the study. If you would like her to do so please contact her.

Máire Hanniffy
Doctoral Fellow,
Child and Family Research Centre,
School of Political Science and Sociology, MOB:
National University of Ireland, Galway Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie

If you have any reservations or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Chairperson,
Research Ethics Committee,
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,
National University Ireland, Galway Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie
Information Leaflet for Children in Junior Infants
(For a parent/guardian/carer to read with their child)

LIFE FOUNDATIONS
AN EXPLORATION OF SCHOOL READINESS
Máire Hanniffy
PhD Fellow

358
This is some information to help you and the person who cares for you decide if you would like to take part in this research project called:

*Life Foundations*
*An Exploration of School Readiness*

**Who am I?**

Máire Hanniffy is a PhD research student from the Child and Family Research Centre, at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Our research centre works with Children, and the people in their lives to uncover the things that matter to children, and what can be done to improve their lives.

**What is the project about?**

In this project we are trying to find out what starting school was like for you and what was important to you when you started. Finding out these things will help adults understand better what the most important things are for kids your age when they start school.

**What will you have to do if you take part?**

- If you are asked to take part you will be asked to draw a picture of what it was like for you starting school.
- This will be done in your classroom with some other children in your class.
- When you are finished drawing your picture you will be asked to tell Máire all about your picture.
- So that she can remember what you say to her, she will ask you if it is ok that she writes this down in her note book.

**Do you have to take part?**

You don’t have to take part. It is up to you and the person that cares for you at home such as your parent, your guardian or carer. It is okay if you don’t take part.

Even if you choose to take part at the start, you can change your mind and choose not to.
take part later on. All you need to do is tell Máire that you don't want to take part in the project any more. If you don't want to tell Máire, you can tell your teacher, or ask the person that cares for you at home to tell Máire. No one will be mad if you don't take part or decide to stop.

Is there anything that might upset you if you take part?
Drawing your picture about starting school and talking about it might make you a bit sad or upset if you weren't too happy about starting school.

If this happens you can tell Máire or the teacher in the classroom and you can stop taking part. Your parent/guardian/carer will be told and they will be given the names of people you can talk to about what makes you upset if you want. Máire can help you and your parent/guardian/carer with this.

Will anyone know that you are taking part or hear what you tell Máire?
The only people that will know that you are taking part are the other children in the class, the people that work in your classroom and your parent/guardian/carer.

After you finish your drawing you will be asked to tell Máire about it. She will write this down in her notebook while everyone else is finishing their drawing and starting the next school lesson that your teacher asks the class to do.

Before the class starts drawing, the class will be asked to come up with a list of all the different names that you know. Máire will use this list and secretly give you another name that nobody knows. This is to help you feel happy to tell Máire all about your drawing about starting school because no one will know what you said.
The only time Máire would have to tell someone what you say is if you tell her someone has hurt, abused or neglected you or that there is a risk that you will be hurt in the future. If this happens Máire would tell the designated child protection officer, and let you know what was going to happen to keep you safe.

What will happen your drawings and the things you tell Máire?
The information you give Máire will only be used by Máire and the Child and Family Research Centre to help learn more about what kids think about starting school.

No one else will be allowed use this information. Some of the ways the information might be used is in reports or papers about the research. You, or any other children, will not be named and no one will be able to identify you in these reports or papers.

If it okay with you, Máire will take your drawing with her and make a copy it for her to keep in a safe place. She will return the real drawing you did to the school and if your class agrees ye will put all the pictures together to make a book of drawings. This book will be owned by the Junior Infants class and will be kept at the school.

The copy of your drawing, and the notes of what you said about the picture that Máire writes down will be kept locked in a safe place, that only Máire will be able to open. Once Máire is finished using the information, it will stay locked in the University in a special place for 5 years, then it can be destroyed.

If you have any questions or want to talk some more about this you can talk to Máire if she is at the school when you are there or you can contact her using the details below.

Máire Hanniffy
Doctoral Fellow, Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.
Phone: Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie
Or you can contact Máire’s Supervisor
Dr. Michelle Millar,
315 Aras Moyola, National University of Ireland,
Galway. Phone: 091 493634
Email: michelle.millar@nuigalway.ie

If you have any uncertainties or complaints about this study and wish to contact someone independent and in confidence, you may contact the Chairperson of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee.

Chairperson, Research Ethics Committee,
C/o Office of the Vice President for Research,
National University Ireland, Galway
Email: ethics@nuigalway.ie
Appendix 2
Consent, Assent and Child Withdrawal Forms

1. Caregiver Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Study: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

Name of Researcher: Máire Hanniffy

Your Name and Address: _____________________________________
_____________________________________
_____________________________________

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information.

3. I agree to take part in an interview with the researcher and I agree to the interview being recorded.

4. I agree to complete two questionnaires as part of my participation in this study

5. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

6. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals or in other publications.
Your Name:

Your Signature:

Date:

For researcher's use only

Participant Identity Number: ________
2. Primary School Educator Consent Form

Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

**Name of Researcher:** Máire Hanniffy

**Name and Address of Participating School:**

____________________________________

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information.

3. I agree to take part in an interview with the researcher and I agree to the interview being recorded.

4. I agree to complete a questionnaire as part of my participation in this study

5. I agree to be present in the classroom at all times that Máire is present

6. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

7. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals or in other publications.
Your Name:

Your Signature:

Date:

For researcher's use only

Participant Identity Number: ________
3. Preschool Educator Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Study: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

Name of Researcher: Máire Hanniffy

Name and Address of Participating Preschool:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding
   the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough
   time to consider the information.

3. I agree to take part in an interview with the researcher and I agree to the
   interview being recorded.

4. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at
   any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

5. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be
   published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals
   or in other publications.
Your Name:

Your Signature:

Date:

For researcher’s use only

Participant Identity Number: ________
4. Principal Consent Form 1

Consent Form

Title of Study: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

Name of Researcher: Máire Hanniffy

Name and Address of Participating School: ______________________________________

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information.

3. I agree that the junior infant classroom in the school that I am principal of can take part in the above study and that staff can distribute information packs to the parent/guardian/carer of the incoming junior infant class.

4. I agree that Máire can be present at open days for the incoming junior infant children and that she can be present at some art activities during the month of September.

4. I understand that the school’s participation is voluntary and that it is possible to withdraw at any time without giving reason and without legal rights being affected.

5. I understand that the school will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals or in other publications.
Name:

Signature:

Date:

For researcher's use only

Participant Identity Number: ________
5. Principal Consent Form 2

Consent Form

Title of Study: Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

Name of Researcher: Máire Hanniffy

Name and Address of Participating School:
_____________________________________

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. □

2. I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information. □

3. I agree to take part in an interview with the researcher and I agree to the interview being recorded. □

4. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected. □

5. I understand that my input will be anonymous and that the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. □
Name:

Signature:

Date:

For researcher's use only

Participant Identity Number: ________
6. Child Assent Form

**LIFE FOUNDATIONS**

**AN EXPLORATION OF SCHOOL READINESS**

My name is ______________ I have been told about this project. I know that I can draw a picture about starting school and talk to Máire about it if I want.

I know that it is okay if I don't want to take part.

I know that if I do take part I can stop at any time I want to and nothing will happen to me if I want to stop.

_After Máire is finished reading this page to you please draw a happy face using the green crayon in this box if you would like to take part in the project. If you do not want to take part please draw a happy face with the red crayon._

Signature of Researcher ___________ Date ___________
Dear Parent/Guardian/Carer,

Your child is being asked to be part of a study called *Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness* being conducted by Máire Hanniffy who is a PhD student in NUI, Galway. An information sheet is also provided in the plastic holder you received this form in. Please read this information sheet with your child to learn more about the study and your child’s possible participation in it. **This form must only be used if you do not want your child to take part in all or some of this study.**

In this project we are trying to find out what starting school is like for young children and what is important to them when they start in junior infants. Your child will be asked to draw a picture about starting school and explain it to Máire as part of a classroom activity. Giving your child an opportunity to have their say is a very important part of this study. This may inform practices in the area that might help children start school.
Please Remember:
This study is Voluntary. Your child does not have to take part. If your child does not take part their teacher will have another activity prepared that your child can do. Children who participate only have to take part if they want to and they can stop drawing or explaining their picture at any time.

This study is Anonymous. Your child’s real name will not be used to identify their drawing or explanation. False names will be used and the information collected will be stored safely. The name of the school and the area are also kept anonymous.

This part of the study will take part in the junior infant classroom in your child’s school, during school time. Children will be given 20 minutes to draw their picture. At this time Máire will be in the classroom and each child will then be given time to explain their picture to her. Máire will write down what your child says about their picture.

It is encouraged that you contact Máire if you have not already met her at the school to spend a few minutes talking about this research with her. If you do not wish to use her contact details please tell your child’s teacher that you would like to speak with Máire. She wants to make sure that everyone involved in the study understands it.
These are her details:

Máire Hanniffy

Doctoral Fellow, Child and Family Research Centre,
National University of Ireland, Galway.
Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie  MOB:

It is possible for your child to take part in all parts (drawing the picture and telling Máire about it) or some parts (drawing the picture) of the study depending on your wishes and the wishes of your child. It is also possible for your child not to take part in any parts of the activity and study. Please see the options available on the following page.

When you fully understand what your child will have to do as part of this study please decide if they can take part in it.

If you allow your child to take part you do not have to return this form.

If you **DO NOT** want your child to take part please fill in the following page then return this form to your child’s school for Máire to collect by the 9th October 2013.
Child Withdrawal Form

By returning this form I Do Not give permission for my child to:

Please initial any of the boxes that apply

Take part in any piece of this research
(Your child will not be asked to draw a picture about starting school, or explain this picture to Máire. Your child’s teacher will provide another activity for your child to do that is not linked to this study)

Give information that will be used for this study
(Your child will be asked to draw a picture about starting school and explain this picture to Máire but this information will not be used in this study)

Give information that will be used for this study
(Your child will be asked to draw a picture about starting school but they will not be asked to explain the picture to Máire and this information will not be used in this study)

My child’s name is _____________________

Signature of parent/guardian _______________________

Date ___________________

For researcher’s use only

Received By ____________________

Date ____________________
Appendix 3

‘Draw and Tell’ Probes

Question 1
Tell me about your picture and starting school or what ye do in school

Question 2
How did you get ready for starting big school?

Question 3
What did you know about school before you started school?

Question 4
Who helped you/told you about this?

Question 5
If a new boy/girl started school what would you show them and tell them about school?
Appendix 4

Semi-Structured Interview Scripts

1. Caregiver Script

Framework of Script

As in the nature of semi structured interviews the same topics and areas of interest will be covered in each interview. This script outlines 25 questions; each question may contain sub questions or different wordings that may be used as probes in order to elicit an answer from the interviewee on the theme of the question. Some questions may overlap depending on the type of response given by the interviewees. These questions will not be asked if the interviewee has already given their thoughts on the topic within their answer to another question. To ensure consistency the researcher will cover the general areas of interest in all interviews.

The interview will be conducted in a quiet safe space for both the interviewee and the researcher. The researcher’s supervisor will be informed of the time and venue of each interview prior to it taking place.

Each interview will open with an introduction, “Thank you for deciding to take part in my research project ‘An Exploration of School Readiness’. This part of the study is all about your thoughts, ideas and opinions, all of which are extremely important. The questions I will ask you are all related to starting school. I will record the interview so that I can remember exactly what you said by using an audio recorder, by taking notes or both. The interview may take up to an hour. If you do not want to answer any questions you can just say ‘pass’ or if you would like to end the interview please say ‘stop’. Have you any questions you would like to ask me before we get started?”

How is School Readiness perceived by Caregivers

1. Could you tell me what it was like for you when you started primary school? (Social Change)

2. Looking back to when you started school in junior infants, what kind of things do you think you needed to know then that would have been helpful?
   Is it different for the children starting school now? (Social Change)

3. As a parent/guardian/caregiver have you ever heard the term school readiness? What do you think it means? Can you describe it (Perception of term)

4. Is school readiness made up of different things? Does it involve different areas of a child’s development? (Perception of term)
   Who does school readiness affect?
And who affects school readiness?
(Factors)

5. Do you think everyone should know about what school readiness is or does it really matter? Why?
(Perceptions of importance)

6. Do you think most children are ready to start school?
(Perception of prevalence/current situation)

7. Do your think your child was ready?
In what ways?
How did you feel at this time?
What do you think helped them become ready?
(Perceptions of term) (Factors)

8. What is expected of the children as they start school?
What is expected of the parents/guardians/caregivers as their child start school?
What is expected of the teachers as they start teaching a new junior infant class?
(Expectations)

9. Where do your ideas about school readiness come from?
Why do you think this is what school readiness is?
(Perception of term/ inputs)

10. Who knows best about what school readiness is?
Who decides what it means to be ready?
Why is this the case?
(Value of perceptions)

11. If I had a list of things that decided how prepared a child a child was for school would that be helpful to you?
If so, in what ways?
Would there be positive and negative aspects to having such a list?
(Perception of measure and assessment)

12. Do you think teachers/preschool staffs have different ideas to parents/guardians/caregivers about what it means to be ready for school?
(Perceptions of term –differing)

13. Is school readiness just about the child being ready? or Do other people or organisations need to be ready?
(Perception of term)
What factors influence a child’s school readiness

14. What are the things that should happen before children begin junior infants that would help children, their parents/guardians/caregivers, the school and the staff members? (Factors-inputs)

15. Was there anything in particular that helped you before you started school?

16. How did your child get on starting school? What was there first month/week like? (Experience of school readiness)

17. Where do children, their parents/guardians/caregivers, school staffs learn about starting school? (Factors-inputs)

18. If we look at the bigger picture, what do you think the reasons are that some children start school more prepared than others? Do you think things in family life, in schools and preschools, in the local area and community affects school readiness? Any other things? (Factors-inputs)

19. Are there circumstances that a child or family may experience that may not have a positive affect on a child starting school? (Factors-inputs)

Factors considered when decisions are being made relating to when to start a child in school.

20. Can you talk me through exactly how you got to the point of deciding to start your child in junior infants this year? What did you do? Did you talk to anyone about it? How did you feel about it? What kind of things did you think about? (Decision making process and inputs)

21. What things really matter at the end of the day when you are deciding whether or not to send your child to school? (Inputs and outcomes)

22. For you, your child and your family what are the good things about your child starting school this year? And the not so good things? (Outcomes)

23. If you have other children, did you think about different things when you decided they should start school compared to now? (Social change)

24. Is it important to involve the children’s opinion when decisions about starting school are being made? To ask them what they think? (Decision making process)
25. Could more be done to help inform all those involved in the decision to send children to school?
   (Decision-making process)

24. Is there anything else you would like to add to or say about any of this?
2. Educator Script

Framework of Script

As in the nature of semi structured interviews the same topics and areas of interest will be covered in each interview. This script outlines 25 questions; each question may contain sub questions or different wordings that may be used as probes in order to elicit an answer from the interviewee on the theme of the question. Some questions may overlap depending on the type of response given by the interviewees. These questions will not be asked if the interviewee has already given their thoughts on the topic within their answer to another question. To ensure consistency the researcher will cover the general areas of interest in all interviews.

The interview will be conducted in a quiet safe space for both the interviewee and the researcher. The researcher’s supervisor will be informed of the time and venue of each interview prior to it taking place.

Each interview will open with an introduction, “Thank you for deciding to take part in my research project ‘An Exploration of School Readiness’. This part of the study is all about your thoughts, ideas and opinions, all of which are extremely important. The questions I will ask you are all related to starting school. I will record the interview so that I can remember exactly what you said by using an audio recorder, by taking notes or both. The interview may take up to an hour. If you do not want to answer any questions you can just say ‘pass’ or if you would like to end the interview please say ‘stop’. Have you any questions you would like to ask me before we get started?”

How is School Readiness perceived by Educators

1. Could you tell me what it was like for you when you started primary school? (Social Change)

2. Looking back to when you started school in junior infants, what kind of things do you think you needed to know then that would have been helpful? Is it different for the children starting school now? (Social Change)
3. As a principal/teacher/classroom assistant/ special needs assistant/ preschool worker have you ever heard the term school readiness? What do you think it means? Can you describe or define it? (Perception of term)

4. Is school readiness made up of different things? Does it involve different areas of a child’s development? (Perception of term) Who does school readiness affect? And who affects school readiness? (Factors)

5. Do you think all parties involved should be informed about what school readiness is or does it really matter? Why? (Perceptions of importance)

6. Considering your current junior infant class, in general do you think these children were ready to start school? (Perception of prevalence/current situation)

7. What things help prepare the children? (Factors)

8. What is expected of the children as they start school? What is expected of the parents/guardians/carers as their child start school? What is expected of the teachers as they start teaching a new junior infants class? (Expectations)

9. Where have your ideas about school readiness come from? (Perception of term/ inputs)

10. Who knows best about what school readiness is? Who decides what it means to be ready? Why is this the case? (Value of perceptions)

11. If I had a list of criteria that decide how prepared a child a child was for school would that be helpful for you? Or do you think it would be possible? If so, in what ways? Would there be positive and negative aspects to using such a list? (Perception of measure and assessment)
12. Do you educators have different ideas to parents/guardians/carers have different ideas about what it means to be ready for school? (Perceptions of term – differing)

13. How do you prepare for a new incoming class of junior infants? / How do you prepare for a group leaving preschool to start primary school? What does your first week of activities consist of? (Factors)

14. Is school readiness all about just the child being ready or do other people or organisations also need to be ready? (Perception of term)

**What factors influence a child’s school readiness?**

15. Ideally, what are the things that should happen before children begin junior infants in order to help children, their parents/guardians/carers, the school and the staff members? (Factors-inputs)

16. Where do children, their parents/guardians/carers, school staff learn about starting school? (Factors-inputs)

17. What do you think the reasons are that some children start school more prepared than others? What affects a child’s preparation?
   Do you think things in family life, in schools and preschools, in the local area and community affects school readiness?
   Any other things? (Factors-inputs)

18. Are there circumstances that a child or family may experience that may not have a positive affect on a child starting school? (Factors-inputs)

**Factors considered when decisions are being made relating to when to start a child in school.**

19. What factors are taken into consideration when the decision to start a child in primary school is being made? What factors should be considered? (Decision making process and inputs)
20. What things really matter at the end of the day in the classroom?  
   (Outcomes)

21. Do parents/guardians/carers ask for advice?  
   What do you base your advice on?  
   Are there any other resources you can point parents/guardians/carers towards?  
   Are there posters/leaflets around the school?  
   Is information sent to the parents/guardians/carers about children being prepared?  
   Are there formal meetings with parents to discuss issues before the children start school?  
   (Inputs)

22. Do any transition practices take place between preschools and this school?  
   If so what are these practices?  
   Why do you think there is/isn’t such practices?  
   Do any practices occur in the school or preschool in isolation?  
   (Inputs)

23. Could more be done to help inform all those involved in the decision to send children to school? Have you any suggestions?  
   (Decision-making process)

24. Is it important to include the children’s opinion when decisions about starting school are being made? To ask them what they think?  
   (Decision making process)

25. Is there anything else you would like to add to or say about any of this?
Appendix 5

Thematic Maps

1. Caregiver and Educator Findings - Thematic Map

- Theme One: Ready Children - describes the varied perceptions of the skills and skill range that assist children to fit in at school. Nobody wants to see the children suffer in school and in turn be left behind either socially or academically. The skills and characteristics believed to contribute to the children being accepted and adapting correspond to the five domains of school readiness; physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language use; and cognition and general knowledge (Kagan et al., 1995). Examples of responses: “sure I haven't got a clue if I did anything right” (Kate - Caregiver) / “You're trying to get them so everyone is not looking at them” (Una - Caregiver).

Caregiver codes: age; academic skills; emotional skills; social skills; cognitive skills; physical skills; language and communication skills; characteristics for school readiness; academic standards and expectations; knowledge of what school readiness term means; feelings; demands on children; children’s knowledge and enthusiasm; discipline and behaviour; independence skills; life skills; impact of measuring skills; maturation; children’s capacity; gender; who needs to be ready; adapting; changing or moving class; special needs; children’s opinion;

Educator Codes: age; ready or not; different abilities and development; children’s capacity; academic skills; cognitive skills; emotional skills; expectations; general knowledge; language and communication skills; life skills; meaning of school readiness term; physical skill, feelings; social skills, characteristics for school readiness; and discipline, behaviour and classroom management; gender; children’s knowledge and enthusiasm; children’s opinion; maturation; time; special needs; and changing or moving class,

- Theme Two: Ready Families – describes the inputs regarded as positive and negative that creates the learning culture the children are exposed to as they prepare for school. This requires time and incorporates the interactions and environments the children encounter in the early years period (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), “if the child is ready and the parents are not ready it can't work” (Nick - Caregiver).
Caregiver codes: activities at home; impact of parenting and family; interest in school and encouragement; role of caregiver; who needs to be ready; routines; rules and procedures; pressure in school and families; resources and dissemination; advice; sources of knowledge; caregivers’ knowledge; class composition and size; different decision making basis between children; society norms; support systems and networks; impact of work; media; fears; support systems and network; and financial aspect.

Educator Codes: who needs to be ready; activities at home; caregivers’ experience of school; caregivers’ knowledge of school readiness; financial aspect; impact of parenting and family; impact of work; interest in school and encouragement; pressures in school or family; role of caregiver; socioeconomic conditions; advice and authority; support systems and networks; resources; sources of knowledge; society norms; and media.

Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities – describes the readiness of the community, the preschool and the school. It explores the transition practices in place, curriculum implementation and the resources needed to support children in the transition to school. It also identifies the current issues that are prevalent as the children are starting school, some of which the adults have little experience of dealing with, “like this is the bigger mixture of different types...there's [sic] more foreigners and other children to get used to...diverse exactly and children with special needs and that, she is kind of going to see more of that” (Kate - Caregiver).

Caregiver codes: free preschool year; preparation resulting from preschool; progression; routines; play; preschool programmes; who needs to be ready; role of educator; role of school; socialisation; it’s a partnership; transition practices; educators knowledge; primary school preparation efforts; additional people and services; difference for children starting school now; improvements experienced for children starting school now; caregivers’ experience of school; learning; curriculum; teaching; society norms; safety; diversity; bullying; discrimination; and class composition and size.

Educator Codes: who needs to be ready; diversity; financial aspect; free preschool year; progression; fears; preschool; class composition and size; preschool programmes; preparation resulting from preschool; advice and authority; early intervention; free preschool year; play; socialisation; rules and procedures; routines; resources; transition and
practices; role of school; gaps; educators’ experiences; additional people and services; difference for children starting school now; educators’ experience of school; curriculum; learning; teaching; society norms; bullying; diversity; and safety.

- Theme Four: Working Together – Ready Families, and Ready Schools and Communities identifies the communication gaps prevalent between settings due to the public private divide, suggesting that the advocated partnership approach is largely absent (Love, 1992; O’Kane & Hayes, 2006). It is acknowledged that it is important to establish similar/joint expectations of what happens in school and the skills needed to navigate this new experience in order to put preparations in place, otherwise a disconnect can occur which is unsettling as children may not meet the expectations attached to school, caregivers are upset by this and educators are challenged by this. Policy and approaches become rhetoric when implementation does not occur or is insufficient, “I think teachers need to know, I think preschool teachers need to know exactly what school readiness is” (Paula - Preschool).

Caregiver Codes: different ideas amongst the groups; learning; play; age; routines; rules and procedures; school readiness affects; teaching children; time; academic standards and expectations; helpfulness of skills list; different abilities and development; importance of preparation; ready or not; who needs to be ready; it’s a partnership; gaps; policy; curriculum; financial cutbacks; attendance; sources of knowledge; caregivers’ knowledge; educators’ knowledge; and knowledge of what school readiness term means.

Educator Codes: different ideas amongst the groups; educators’ knowledge and preparation; gaps; integration; it’s a partnership; learning; play; role of school; school activities; helpfulness skills list; impact of measuring skills; curriculum; policy; sources of knowledge; transition practices; caregivers’ knowledge of school readiness; educators’ knowledge of school readiness; and knowledge of what school readiness term means.

**Theme Connections**

In considering children’s personal readiness, the bidirectional influence between child factors and contexts comes to the fore as development occurs within the bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The combined social constructivist and interactionist perspective of school readiness attributes a role to each setting and the adults within these settings, thus their readiness becomes
a part of the process. Each of these systems is a component of the ‘Ready Child’
equation: ‘Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready
Schools = Ready Children’ (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

The exosystem and the macrosystem of the bioecological model
(Bronfenbrenner & Morris) take in society at large – the culture of the society
and the ideologies and parameter it operates within. In addition to this the
chronosystem of the bioecological model takes into account the passing of time.
Inglis (2011) suggests that global culture has changed the nature of caring,
disciplining, and controlling children in Ireland. Globalisation has brought about
many changes in Ireland that have affected demographics including an increased
and diverse population and an influx of policies in relation to children and early
childhood care and education. In the past it would seem that children were seen
but not heard but this is changing.

Perceptions about school readiness are informed by people’s beliefs and
knowledge. The participants believe that starting school is a big part of
children’s lives and it is important that children are content in school. The
preparations put in place before children start school are fuelled by these
perceptions and the formal procedures in place. Partnership is advocated in
Aistear as it creates consistency, and has positive effects on children’s academic,
social and emotional competence (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The new
sociology of childhood is evident here as children are seen as actors and should
be consulted in decisions. Children’s rights have come to the fore, valuing
children and their inputs. Nonetheless, partnerships are not always practiced
demonstrating the distinctions between settings and the disconnect between
policy and practice.

2. Children’s Findings Thematic Map

- Theme One: Ready Children Fitting In – Children play an active role in
  their experience of school and it is important for them to fit. Inherent in
  their explanation of the skills they use is their desire to comply (DeHart
  et al., 2004). Their individual actions are deemed to be necessary in
  order conform and be part of the collective. The children outline the
  skills they used as they started and continue their journey of junior
  infants, concurring with Meisels (1998) who believes that readiness is
  the beginning of an active teaching and learning engagement. Examples
  of responses: “I was so happy to come to school...Corena (Classmate)
  cry like a baby” (Delia) / “When songs come on we sing” (Gearoid).
Theme Two: Ready Families – Supporters affirms that the involvement of caregivers when children start school is important (Dockett et al., 2011). The practices of caregivers equip the children with knowledge about school and supports the children throughout the transition. Their presence is important to the children. Caregivers also provide material resources for the children to own and use in school. The children’s reflections of their caregivers’ inputs demonstrate the new role of ‘school parents’ (O’Kane, 2007). In addition to their Caregivers the children are also aware that their siblings and cousins are also sources of support.

Codes: Role of Caregiver; Activities at home; Resources for school; Social support and networks; Prior knowledge of school; and Environment and surroundings.

Theme Three: Ready Schools and Communities Newness – The transition into a new environment has been described as an ecological transition; a qualitative shift (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 1998) when starting school. Starting school has brought about a new social role for the children. It is clear that the children engaged in reflexive monitoring (Giddens, 1976) and they are aware of the new social structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1977b). The children concentrated on the physical environment, the differences they encountered in schools and the new activities they took part in during the ‘Draw and Tell’ activity which is synonymous with the bioecological model and Bronfenbrenner’s (1977 understanding of transition. Examples of responses: “We were in playschool before” (Lana) / “School is big…lots of people” (Paige). They describe the work and learning aspect of their lives as students in a new school and the importance of adherence to the rules whilst at the same time they distinguish the play aspect of their lives. Examples of responses: “People were getting teached…people working” (Jennifer) / “In morning we play toys” (Nadine).
Theme Connections
An accommodating framework for school readiness integrates the interaction between a child’s inherent characteristics and past and present environmental and cultural contexts (Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Meisels, 1999). The three themes evident in the children’s data are interconnected. The children’s voices highlight the social situation of development (Vygotsky, 1962), ecological transitions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and the consequences of such. Children are first placed in the school environment between the ages of four and six. School is an unfamiliar environment for many children, settling in is therefore important to children in school as they spend a large quantity of their time there. This requires children to become students and manage the ecological transition from either the home or preschool to school using their skills repertoire. In school children are faced with new expectations and experiences that challenge them to conform to the culture of the school. Children who are seen to be coping with the transition are those who meet the expectations placed on them. A child is seen as successful in school when they are positive about school and learning; form support networks; and engage and participate in the classroom (Meisels, 1998).
### Section A - Physical Well-being

1. About how many regular days (see Guide) has this child been absent since the beginning of school in the fall? Number of days absent: [ ] [ ]

Since the start of school in the fall, has this child sometimes (more than once) arrived:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. over- or underdressed for school-related activities</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. too tired/sick to do school work</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. late</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. hungry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Would you say that this child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. is independent in washroom habits most of the time</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. shows an established hand preference (right or left or vice versa)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. is well coordinated (i.e., moves without running into or tripping over things)</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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<td>[ ]</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

How would you rate this child’s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>very good</th>
<th>average</th>
<th>poor</th>
<th>very poor</th>
<th>don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. proficiency at holding a pen, crayons, or a brush</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ability to manipulate objects</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ability to climb stairs</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. level of energy throughout the school day</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. overall physical development</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section B - Language and Cognitive Skills

How would you rate this child’s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>very good / goal</th>
<th>average</th>
<th>poor / little</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ability to use language effectively in English</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ability to listen in English</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ability to tell a story</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ability to take part in imaginative play</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ability to communicate own needs in a way understandable to adults and peers</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ability to understand on first try what is being said to him/her</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ability to articulate clearly, without sound substitutions</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Would you say that this child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. knows how to handle a book (e.g., turn a page)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. is generally interested in books (pictures and print)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. is interested in reading (inquiring/curious about the meaning of printed material)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. is able to identify at least 10 letters of the alphabet</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. is able to attach sounds to letters</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. is showing awareness of rhyming words</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. is able to participate in group reading activities</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. is able to read simple words</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. is able to read complex words</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. is able to read simple sentences</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. is experimenting with writing tools</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. is aware of writing directions in English (left to right, top to bottom)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. is interested in writing voluntarily (and not only under the teacher’s direction)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. is able to write his/her own name in English</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. is able to write simple words</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Page 3
**Section B - Language and Cognitive Skills**

Would you say that this child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>is able to write simple sentences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>is able to remember things easily</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>is interested in mathematics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>is interested in games involving numbers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>is able to sort and classify objects by a common characteristic (e.g., shape, colour, size)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>is able to use one-to-one correspondence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>is able to count to 20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>is able to recognize numbers 1 - 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>is able to say which number is bigger of the two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>is able to recognize geometric shapes (e.g., triangle, circle, square)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>understands simple time concepts (e.g., today, summer, bedtime)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>demonstrates special numeracy skills or talents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>demonstrates special literacy skills or talents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>demonstrates special skills or talents in arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>demonstrates special skills or talents in music</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>demonstrates special skills or talents in athletics/finance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>demonstrates special skills or talents in problem solving in a creative way</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>demonstrates special skills or talents in other areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If yes, please specify:*
Section C - Social and Emotional Development

How would you rate this child’s:

1. overall social/emotional development: very good ○ average ○ poor ○ very poor ○ don’t know ○

2. ability to get along with peers: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Below is a list of statements that describe some of the feelings and behaviours of children. For each statement, please fill in the circle that best describes this child now or within the past six months.

Would you say that this child:

3. plays and works cooperatively with other children at the level appropriate for his/her age: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

4. is able to play with various children: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

5. follows rules and instructions: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

6. respects the property of others: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

7. demonstrates self-control: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

8. shows self-confidence: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

9. demonstrates respect for adults: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

10. demonstrates respect for other children: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

11. accepts responsibility for actions: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

12. listens attentively: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

13. follows directions: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

14. completes work on time: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

15. works independently: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

16. takes care of school materials: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

17. works neatly and carefully: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

18. is curious about the world: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

19. is eager to play with a new toy: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

20. is eager to play a new game: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

21. is eager to play with/read a new book: ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
### Section C - Social and Emotional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Often or Very True</th>
<th>Sometimes or Somewhat True</th>
<th>Never or Not True</th>
<th>Don't Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. is able to solve day-to-day problems by him/herself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. is able to follow one-step instructions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. is able to follow class routines without reminders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. is able to adjust to changes in routines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. answers questions showing knowledge about the word (e.g., leaves fall in the autumn, apple is a fruit, dogs bark)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. shows tolerance to someone who made a mistake (e.g., when a child gives a wrong answer to a question posed by the teacher)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. will try to help someone who has been hurt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>29. volunteers to help clean up a mess someone else has made</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. if there is a quarrel or dispute will try to stop it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. offers to help other children who have difficulty with a task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. comforts a child who is crying or upset</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. spontaneously helps to pick up objects which another child has dropped (e.g., pencils, blocks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. will invite bystanders to join in a game</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. helps other children who are feeling sick</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. is upset when left by parent/guardian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. gets into physical fights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. bullies or is mean to others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. kicks, bites, hits other children or adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. takes things that do not belong to him/her</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. laughs at other children's discomfort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. can't sit still, is restless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. is distractible, has trouble sticking to any activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. fidgets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. is disinclined</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section C - Social and Emotional Development

**Would you say that this child:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>often or very true</th>
<th>sometimes or somewhat true</th>
<th>never or not true</th>
<th>don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>has temper tantrums</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>is impulsive, acts without thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>has difficulty changing turn in games or groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>cannot settle for anything for more than a few moments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>is irritable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>seems to be unhappy, sad, or depressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>appears fearful or anxious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>appears worried</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>cries a lot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>is nervous, high-strung, or tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>is incapable of making decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>is shy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>sucks a thumb/ingen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Section D - Special Concerns

1. **Does the student have a problem that influences his/her ability to do school work in a regular classroom?**
   - (based on parent information, medical diagnosis, and/or teacher observation)
     - yes
     - no
     - don't know
   - (if answered not know go to question 5)

   If YES above, please mark all that apply.

   Please base your answers on teacher observation or medical diagnosis and/or parent/guardian information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES Observed</th>
<th>YES Parent Information/Medical Diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>physical disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>visual impairment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>hearing impairment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>speech impairment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>learning disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. If the child has received a diagnosis or identification by a doctor or psychological professional please indicate (see the Guide for codes)
Section D - Special Concerns cont’s

4. Is the child receiving any school based support(s)
   (e.g. educational assistant, equipment)?
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don't know

5. a. Is the child currently receiving further assessment?
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don't know

   b. Is the child currently on a wait list to receive further assessment?
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don't know

   c. Do you feel that this child needs further assessment?
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don't know

Section E - Additional Questions

To the best of your knowledge, please mark all that apply to this child:

1. [ ] attended an early intervention program
   Specify if known, please print: ____________________________
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

2. [ ] has been in non-parental care on a regular basis prior to kindergarten entry
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   If yes, please specify type of care arrangement (please refer to Guide for examples):

   2a. Centre-based, licensed, non-profit
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2b. Centre-based, licensed, for profit
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2c. Other home-based, licensed
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2d. Other home-based, unlicensed, non-relative
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2e. Other home-based, unlicensed, relative
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2f. Child’s home, non-relative
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2g. Child’s home, relative
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   2h. Other/don’t know
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

2i. To the best of your knowledge, prior to the child’s entry to kindergarten, was this arrangement
   [ ] Full-time  [ ] Part-time  [ ] Don’t know

3. [ ] attended other language or religion classes
   Specify if known, please print: ____________________________
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

   If yes, please specify:

4. [ ] attended an organized pre-school/nursery school (only if part-time, and
   if it was not the main child-care arrangement)
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

5. [ ] attended Junior Kindergarten
   [ ] Yes  [ ] No  [ ] Don’t know

If you have any comments about this child and her/his readiness for school, list them below, please print.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________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Appendix 7

Adapted Early Development Instrument

Early Development Instrument
A Population-Based Measure for Communities in the West of Ireland
2013/2014

School _________________________________
Teachers Name __________________________
Form Number

Please use a blue or black ballpoint pen. Please fill in the circles like this ●
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child’s date of birth</td>
<td>d d / m m / y y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>O F O M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>E. D. Code</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Class Type</td>
<td>J Infants J + S Infants J + S Infants +1st class Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Date of Completion</td>
<td>d d / m m / y y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Identified Special Needs</td>
<td>Yes O No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Child considered ESL</td>
<td>Yes O No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Child’s first language(s):</td>
<td>English only Other only Other only &amp; Other Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Refer to Guide for language codes in ‘other’ categories. If you do not know the ‘other’ language code, use ‘000’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Communicates adequately in his/her first language</td>
<td>Yes O No  O Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Member of the Travelling Community</td>
<td>Yes O No  O Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Student Status</td>
<td>In class more than 1 month In class less than 1 month (see Guide) Moved out of class (see Guide) Moved out of school (see Guide) Other (see Guide)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Child is repeating Junior Infants</td>
<td>Yes O No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section A – Physical Well-being

1. About how many regular days (see Guide) has this child been absent since the beginning of school in September?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of days absent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know □ □ □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Since the start of school in September has this child sometimes (more than once) arrived:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over or underdressed for school activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know □ □ □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Too tired/ sick to do school work  

| Yes □ □ □ |
| No □ □ □ |
| Don't Know □ □ □ |

4. Late  

| Yes □ □ □ |
| No □ □ □ |
| Don't Know □ □ □ |

5. Hungry  

| Yes □ □ □ |
| No □ □ □ |
| Don't Know □ □ □ |

6. Would you say that this child:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent in washroom habits most of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No □ □ □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Shows an established hand preference (right vs. left or vice versa)  

| Yes □ □ □ |
| No □ □ □ |

8. Is well co-ordinated (i.e. moves without running into or tripping over things)  

| Yes □ □ □ |
| No □ □ □ |

9. How would you rate this child’s:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficiency at holding a pen, crayons or a brush</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good/good □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average □ □ □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor/very poor □ □ □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. Ability to manipulate objects  

| Very good/good □ □ □ |
| Average □ □ □ |
| Poor/very poor □ □ □ |

11. Ability to climb stairs  

| Very good/good □ □ □ |
| Average □ □ □ |
| Poor/very poor □ □ □ |

12. Level of energy throughout the school day  

| Very good/good □ □ □ |
| Average □ □ □ |
| Poor/very poor □ □ □ |

13. Overall physical development  

| Very good/good □ □ □ |
| Average □ □ □ |
| Poor/very poor □ □ □ |
### Section B Language and Cognitive Skills

**How would you rate this child’s:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ability to use language effectively in English</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ability to listen in English</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ability to tell a story</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ability to take part in imaginative play</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ability to communicate own needs in a way understandable to adults and peers</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ability to understand on first try what is being said to him/her</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ability to articulate clearly, without sound substitutions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Would you say that this child:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. knows how to handle a book (e.g. turn a page)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. is generally interested in books (pictures and print)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. is interested in reading (inquisitive/curious about the meaning of printed material)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. is able to identify at least 10 letters of the alphabet</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. is able to attach sounds to letters</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. is showing awareness of rhyming words</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. is able to participate in group reading activities</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. is able to read simple words</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. is able to read complex words</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. is able to read simple sentences</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. is experimenting with writing tools</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. is aware of writing directions in English (left to right, top to bottom)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. is interested in writing voluntarily (and not only under the teacher's direction)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. is able to write his/her own name in English</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. is able to write simple words</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Section B Language and Cognitive Skills

*Would you say that this child:*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If yes, please specify:______________________________________________________________

---

---
**Section C – Social and Emotional Development**

**How would you rate this child’s:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>very good</th>
<th>good</th>
<th>average</th>
<th>poor/very poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. overall social/ emotional development</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ability to get along with peers</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Below is a list of statements that describe some of the feelings and behaviours of children. For each statement, please place an “O” in the circle that best describes this child now or within the past six months.**

**Would you say that this child:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>often or very true</th>
<th>sometimes or somewhat true</th>
<th>never or not true</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. plays and works cooperatively with other children at the level appropriate for his/her age</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. is able to play with various children</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. follows rules and instructions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. respects the property of others</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. demonstrates self-control</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. shows self-confidence</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. demonstrates respect for adults</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. demonstrates respect for other children</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. accepts responsibility for actions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. listen attentively</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. follows directions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. completes work on time</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. works independently</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. takes care of school materials</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. works neatly and carefully</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. is curious about the world</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. is eager to play with a new toy</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. is eager to play a new game</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. is eager to play with/ read a new book</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Section C – Social and Emotional Development**

*Would you say that this child:*

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. is able to solve day-to-day problems by himself/herself</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. is able to follow one-step instructions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. is able to follow class routines without reminders</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. is able to adjust to changes in routines</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. answers questions showing knowledge of the world (e.g. leaves fall in the autumn, apple is a fruit, dogs bark)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. shows tolerance to someone who made a mistake (e.g. when a child gives a wrong answer to a question posed by the teacher)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. will try to help someone who has been hurt</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. volunteers to help clear up a mess someone else has made</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. if there is a quarrel or dispute will try to stop it</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. offers to help other children who have difficulty with a task</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. comforts a child who is crying or upset</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. spontaneously picks up objects which another child has dropped (e.g. pencils, books)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. will invite bystanders to join in a game</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. helps other children who are feeling sick</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. is upset when left by parent/guardian</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. gets into physical fights</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. bullies or is mean to others</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. kicks, bites, hits other children or adults</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. takes things that do not belong to him/her</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. laughs at other children’s discomfort</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. can’t sit still, is restless</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. is distractible, has trouble sticking to any activity</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. fidgets</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. is disobedient</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section C – Social and Emotional Development

*Would you say that this child:*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Often or very true</th>
<th>Sometimes or somewhat true</th>
<th>Never or not true</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46. has temper tantrums</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. is impulsive, acts without thinking</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. has difficulty awaiting turn in games or groups</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. cannot settle to anything for more than a few moments</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. is inattentive</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. seems to be unhappy, sad, or depressed</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. appears fearful or anxious</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. appears worried</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. cries a lot</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. is nervous high-strung or tense</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56. is incapable of making decisions</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57. is shy</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58. sucks a thumb/finger</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section D – Special Concerns

1. Does the student have a problem that influences his/her ability to do school work in a regular classroom? (based on parent information, medical diagnosis, and/or teacher observation)
   - O yes
   - O no
   - O don’t know (If answered no/don’t know go to question 5)

   **If YES above, please mark all that apply.**
   **Please base your answers on teacher observation or medical diagnosis and/or parent/guardian information.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES Observed</th>
<th>YES Parent Info/Medical Diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f. emotional problem</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. behavioural problem</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. home environment/ problems at home</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. chronic medical/ health problems</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. unaddressed dental need</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Other (if known print below)</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2a. physical disability | O | O |
2b. visual impairment | O | O |
2c. hearing impairment | O | O |
2d. speech impairment | O | O |
2e. learning disability | O | O |

3. If the child has received a diagnosis or identification by a doctor or psychological professional please indicate (see the Guide for codes)

### Section D – Special Concerns con’t

4. Is the child receiving any school based support(s) (e.g. educational assistant, equipment)?
   - O yes
   - O no
   - O don’t know

5. a. Is the child currently receiving further assessment?
   - O yes
   - O no
   - O don’t know

   b. Is the child currently on the waiting list to receive further assessment?
   - O yes
   - O no
   - O don’t know

   c. Do you feel that this child needs further assessment?
   - O yes
   - O no
   - O don’t know
Section E – Additional Questions

To the best of your knowledge, please mark all that apply to this child:

1. attended an early intervention programme
   If known, please specify

2. attended an organised pre-school

3. If yes, was this
   a. an Early Start pre-school programme
   b. another pre-school programme based in your school
   c. another pre-school programme based in a different school
   d. a pre-school programme based outside of school
   e. don’t know

4. If yes, was this
   a. unpaid care (relative or friend)
   b. paid care in own home
   c. paid care in someone’s home
   d. care in centre/ crèche
   e. don’t know

4f. to the best of your knowledge, prior to the child’s entry to Junior Infants was this arrangement

If you have any comments about this child and her/his readiness for school, list them below:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________

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Appendix 8
Research Promotion Poster

Is Your Child Starting Junior Infants??

September 2013

Research is taking place in this community to find out about what it is really like to start primary school for the first time

Please contact me or ask in School A/B if you would like to find out more about this research or if would like to take part. Lots of different views are needed.

Contact Details
Máire Hanniffy
Doctoral Fellow, Child and Family Research Centre,
National University of Ireland, Galway.
Email: m.hanniffy2@nuigalway.ie

MOB:
Appendix 9
Caregiver Questionnaire

Please fill in the circles like this ⭑ or ☐. Whenever you are asked about “your child”, please answer the question based on your child in Junior Infants.

SECTION A            CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Is your child male or female?    Male ☐    Female ☐

2. What is your child’s nationality?  __________________

3. When was your child born? ________day ________month ________year

4. What was your child’s weight at birth? ________ lbs ________oz or ________grams

5. Does your family have a regular family doctor or health care provider that you can talk to about your child’s health?    Yes ☐    No ☐

6. In general, would you say your child’s health is:

   Excellent ☐  Very Good ☐  Good ☐  Fair ☐  Poor ☐

7. Do you feel your child has a special need that is not yet recognized by the school?

   Yes ☐  No ☐

ID Number __________________
**SECTION B  EARLY YEARS EXPERIENCES**

8. In the years before your child started Junior Infants how often did your child attend:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Once a Week or More</th>
<th>Once a Month</th>
<th>3 or 4 Times a Year</th>
<th>Once a Year</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play-based children's programmes (e.g. drop-ins, Parent and Toddler Group, Family Centre)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and family reading programmes (e.g. story times, etc)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Club (Beavers, Ladybirds, Boys and Girls Club)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music, Arts or Dance programmes</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a public library</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a book shop</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/language/ethnic programmes</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. In the years before your child started Junior Infants, did your child get help from any of the following services:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>On Waiting List for Assessment</th>
<th>On Waiting List for Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech and Language Services</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind or Low Vision Services</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational of Physical Therapy</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing Services</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmes / Services for Behavioural Issues</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmes / Services for Developmental Issues</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Programmes / Services</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmes / Services for English as a Second Language</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. In the years before your child started Junior Infants, were you unable to access services to help your child because of any of the following reasons: *Mark all that apply*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waiting list was too long</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost was too much</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No services near where I live</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No way to get there (no car, no buses, cost)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't have information about services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times did not work for me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't know services were available in my language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services were not available in my language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

___________________________

__Other__
SECTION C  PRE-SCHOOL AND SCHOOL

11. In the year before starting school, did your child attend a pre-school?
   Yes
   No

   If yes, where
   _____________________________________________________________

12. We would like to know more about your family’s experience with Junior Infants

   My child is excited about learning
   Strongly Disagree × 0  Disagree × 0  Agree × 0  Strongly Agree × 0

   As a parent, I feel welcome in my child’s school
   × 0

   My child is able to manage the school day
   × 0

13. Since the beginning of this school year, have you:

   Attended a parent-teacher meeting?
   Never × 0  Once or Twice × 0  Three or More Times × 0

   Attended a general school meeting (e.g. open meeting, parents council meeting)
   × 0

   Attended a school or class event (e.g. school play or concert)
   × 0

   Volunteered in the school? (e.g. helped in the library, helped with a fundraiser or school event)
   × 0
### SECTION D  YOU AND YOUR CHILD

14. In the **PAST 7 DAYS**, have you or someone close to your child done the following things with your child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Yes, Everyday</th>
<th>Yes, Many Times</th>
<th>Yes, Once or Twice</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Played simple maths games (cards, counting, puzzles, board games)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sang songs or said rhymes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told or read him/her a story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked on arts, crafts or drawing with him/her</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked on the sounds of letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped with printing letters, numbers or child’s name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Done household chores together like cooking, cleaning, putting away toys, setting the table, caring for pets, gardening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Have you ever attended a class, workshop, programme or event meant to help you in your role as a caregiver?

- Yes
- No

16. In the past 12 months, how often has your child:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Once a Week or more</th>
<th>Once a Month</th>
<th>3 or 4 Times a Year</th>
<th>Once a Year</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Played a sport WITH a coach or instructor, outside of school activities (e.g., swimming lessons, GAA, hockey, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Played a sport or done physical activities WITHOUT a coach or instructor (e.g. cycling, skate-boarding, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. In a typical school day, how many hours does your child watch TV, use the computer or play video games at home?

- 5 or more hours per day
- 4 hours per day
- 3 hours per day
- 2 hours per day
- One hour or less

18. On a typical school night, how many hours of sleep does your child get?

- Less than 8 hours
- 8 to 10 hours
- 11 to 12 hours
- 13 to 14 hours
- More than 14 hours

19. Check the statements below that you as a caregiver find challenging. Mark all that apply.

- Finding family time
- Playing with your children
- Getting your child ready for the day
- Preparing healthy meals
- Getting your child to eat healthy
- Making ends meet (i.e. finances)
- Motivating your child to be physically active
- Having enough food for my family
- Dealing with a gambling problem in the family
- Use of drugs or alcohol in the family
- Being aware of what children should be or could be doing at a given age
- Encouraging appropriate behaviour & discouraging inappropriate behaviour
- Dealing with a grandparent’s failing health (mental, physical)
- Assisting your child in transitioning from one form of care to another, or from one programme to another during the day
- Other, please tell us: ________________________________
SECTION E  YOUR COMMUNITY

20. Please tell us about your neighbourhood, the area where you live:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is safe to walk alone in my neighbourhood after dark</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>Sometimes True</th>
<th>Not True</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is safe for children to play outside during the day in my neighbourhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are safe parks, playgrounds and play spaces in my neighbourhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there is a problem around here, the neighbours get together and deal with it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are adults in my neighbourhood that children can look up to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People around here are willing to help their neighbours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can count on adults in my neighbourhood to watch out that children are safe and don’t get into trouble</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I’m away from home, I know that my neighbours will keep their eyes open for possible trouble</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21. Does your family have access to the following places in your community? Access might mean walking, driving your car a short distance or taking the bus (15mins)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public park or sports grounds</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping centre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community centre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocery store/ Supermarket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22. Do any members of your family regularly join in the activities of any of the following types of organisation?

- Sports clubs (Parish, GAA, Golf, Other), gym, exercise classes
- Political parties, trade unions, environmental groups
- Parent-teacher associations, tenants groups, residents groups, neighbourhood watch, youth groups, other community action groups
- Church or other religious/parish groups, charitable or voluntary organisations (e.g. collecting for charity, helping the sick, elderly)
- Evening classes, arts or music groups, education activities
- Social clubs (e.g. mother & toddler group, club, women's groups, men's group, elderly group)
- Other, please tell us _________________________
SECTION F  BACKGROUND INFORMATION

23. What is your nationality?  ______________

24. When were you born? ________day ________month _________year

25. Are you male or female?  Male  ○  Female  ○

26. What is your relationship to this child in junior infants?
   Biological parent  ○  Foster parent  ○
   Step parent  ○
   Adoptive parent  ○  Guardian  ○
   Other _________

27. How old were you when your first child was born? _________

28. What is your marital status?
   Married  ○  Separated  ○  Living with partner  ○
   Single, never married  ○  Divorced  ○  Widowed  ○
   In a relationship but living apart  ○

29. Which of the following best describe your family situation?
   One Parent Family  ○  Two Parent Family  ○
   Two Parents Sharing Custody  ○  Other _________

30. What is your spouse/partner's relationship to this child?
   Biological parent  ○  Foster parent  ○
   Step parent  ○  Adoptive parent  ○
   Guardian  ○  Other _________
   Not applicable  ○

31. What is your spouse/partner's nationality?  ______________

32. Who else shares your household? (include all children and their date of birth)

____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

420
33. Do you live in a

House ○
Apartment/ flat / bedsit ○
Other, please tell us _____________________

34. Which of the following best describes your home?
- Owner occupied (with or without a mortgage) ○
- Being purchased from a Local Authority under a Tenant Purchase Scheme ○
- Rented from a Local Authority ○
- Rented from a Voluntary Body ○
- Rented from a Private Landlord ○
- Living with and paying rent to your parent(s) or your partner's parent(s) ○
- Occupied free of rent with your parent(s) or your partner's parent(s) ○

35. What language do YOU speak most often at home?
English ○ Irish ○ Other (please specify)_________

36. What language does YOUR CHILD speak most often at home?
English ○ Irish ○ Other (please specify)_________

37. How old were you when you left school? _____

38. Did you gain any qualifications at school? Yes ○
   No ○
   (If so please give details)
   __________________________________________

39. Did you receive any further qualifications after leaving school? (e.g. College, FETAC, PLC etc.)
   Yes ○ No ○
   (If so please give details)
   __________________________________________
40. Which category would best describe your weekly income
   €200 or below  ○  €201 - €250  ○  €251 - €300  ○
   €300 or above  ○

41. What is this income mostly made up of?
   State Benefits  ○  Maintenance payments for child(ren)  ○
   Wages  ○  Other (specify) ________________

42. Are you working at the moment?
   Yes, full time  ○  Not working but looking for a job  ○
   Yes, part time  ○  Not working by choice  ○

43. What is (or was) your specific job or occupation?
   __________________________________________________________________________

44. Is your spouse/partner working at the moment?
   Yes, full time  ○  Not working but looking for a job  ○
   Yes, part time  ○  Not working by choice  ○

45. What is (or was) your spouse/partner’s specific job or occupation?
   __________________________________________________________________________

46. In general, would you say your health is:
   Excellent  ○  Very Good  ○  Good  ○  Fair  ○  Poor  ○

47. Please tell us about your household in relation to the following items

   Yes  No, Cannot afford  No, other reason
   Does your household eat meals with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) at least every second day?  ○  ○  ○
   Does your household have a roast joint (or its equivalent) at least once a week?  ○  ○  ○
   Do household members buy new rather than second-hand clothes?  ○  ○  ○
   Does each household member possess a warm waterproof coat?  ○  ○  ○
Does each household member possess two pairs of strong shoes?  
Is your household able to replace any worn out furniture in the home?  
Has your household been without heating at some stage in the last year  
Can the household have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month?  
Can the household buy presents for family or friends at least once a year?  
Has your household had a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last two weeks for entertainment?  
Can the household keep the home adequately warm

Thank you very much for your participation
Appendix 10
Distressed Person’s Protocol

Study

Life Foundations An Exploration of School Readiness

Research that elicits stories of experience is by its very nature probing. The possible occurrence of feelings of distress or of a participant becoming uncomfortable with the topics depends on the person, their characteristics and personality, and their individual experience. This is therefore difficult to forecast.

If a participant indicates that they are uncomfortable or experiencing emotional distress, or if they exhibit behaviours suggestive of such, the course of action will be;

1. Suspend the interview, offer immediate support and understanding, and intuitively assess the situation.
2. If the participant wishes to continue and the researcher’s assessment of the situation does not raise any concerns then the interview will resume or be rearranged, with a reminder to the participant that they are free to withdraw at any time.
3. If however the participant does not wish to continue, or the researcher’s assessment of the situation raises concerns the interview will be discontinued.
   - Where the participant is a child the researcher will inform the school and the child's caregiver. Identified support services will be suggested to their caregiver.
   - If warranted the participant or their caregiver will be encouraged to contact their GP or mental health provider (a suggestion of contacting a friend or family member may also be useful at this stage).
   - With participant/caregiver consent the researcher will contact a support service or person, on their behalf.
4. Time will be given to assure that their distress or upset has diminished substantially prior to exiting the meeting.
5. A follow up courtesy call will be made (with participant/caregiver consent) to check on the well-being of the participant.
Appendix 11
Skew and Kurtosis Scatterplot and Histogram

Physical Health and Well-Being Scale

Normal Q-Q Plot of Physical well-being
Social Competence Scale

Normal Q-Q Plot of Social competence

Expected Normal

Observed Value
Emotional Maturity Scale

Normal Q-Q Plot of Emotional maturity

Expected Normal vs. Observed Value
Language and Cognitive Development Scale

Normal Q-Q Plot of Language and cog devt

Expected Normal

Observed Value
Communication and General Knowledge Scale

Normal Q-Q Plot of Communication and General Knowledge
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435


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