Feeling a Sense of Belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An Exploration into a Community of Practice

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Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre:
An exploration into a community of practice

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus joint degree “Master in Early Childhood Education and Care”.

August 2013

International Master of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences,
Dublin Institute of Technology and University of Malta.
DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfillment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate:

August 2013
ABSTRACT

Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre:
An exploration into a community of practice

This exploration is rooted in the vision of a democratic classroom in which all voices are heard and takes place in an early years setting, or community of practice, in Dublin Ireland. The aim of the study is to explore what it means to belong to this particular community of practice from multiple perspectives. The objective is twofold: to respond to our ethical commitment as teachers, and to explore the sense of belonging in a community of practice. This is a qualitative study conducted in three distinctive stages that build on each other. To start, I immersed myself in the setting as a participant-observer for four days to become familiar with routines and to build rapport. These participant-observations informed the design of the focus groups in the second stage of this project in which their sense of belonging was explored: One focus group consisted of five children aged 44 months to 55 months, and one group of two teachers. In the third stage of the data collection I conducted interviews with a parent, an Early Childhood Education student, the centre manager, and another teacher. The findings highlight the ways in which the participants are respected for their unique identities, while sharing some aspects of a social identity with other members of their community. In addition, the findings revealed factors that facilitate a sense of belonging. Children’s invaluable insight into their own perspectives stands out as a strength of this research project, while a limitation lies in the interpretation of the findings without consulting the children. Recommendations for the future include designing spaces for teachers to renew their practice, and researching with, rather than on, children.

Keywords: community of practice, identity and belonging, multiple perspectives
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I kindly acknowledge the professors and visiting scholars who made the IMEC program possible,
Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny who generously offered her invaluable insight, and Dr. Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Cathy Kelleher for going above and beyond.

My gratitude extends to the participating early childhood setting that gave life to this project.

I wholeheartedly thank my academic sisters with whom I laughed and cried, my dear family and friends, near and far, who encouraged me in every imaginable way, and Evan Sutton who held the fort and unconditionally supported me on this journey.
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On many levels, the International Masters in Early Childhood Education and Care program [IMEC] offers a unique opportunity to those of us who are passionate about education. This two-year program is an Erasmus Mundus joint degree offered in cooperation with Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway, Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland, and the University of Malta in Malta. Each cohort of students stays together for the majority of their studies, spending one semester at each of the three participating universities. In the fourth and final semester, however, the students are divided among the hosting institutions to work on their research projects and theses.

In August 2011, the second IMEC cohort comprised of 17 students from around the world came together in Oslo to embark on this academic, personal, and, above all, transformative journey. During the course of our studies we have not only crossed geographical borders together due to the nature of the program, but also conceptual borders that constrained our thinking and let us conceive of what is possible. What stands out today is not only what we learned in our courses, but how we were welcomed abroad. Being far from home, we felt at ease when we found our place in each of the three countries we lived in, in the universities we attended, and within our group of international peers. We find ourselves as members of a vibrant community of practice in which we share our perspectives and engage in issues concerning early childhood education and care. Even more, we have come to consider each other academic sisters, which captures our strong connection quite beautifully. In fact, this journey was possible because of the support we offered each other and the welcoming arms from each of the host countries.

My classmates showed no surprise in the direction that I have chosen for this project. I am known to ensure that everyone is included and even before our arrival in Norway I had made sure that everyone was invited to participate in the forum we had set up online. Certainly, I have chosen this topic because I believe it is essential for our well being to feel that we belong somewhere. Yet, I have also chosen this direction because of the lingering questions that resurface from time to time: What happens
when we do not belong to a group? What are the criteria for membership and who has the power to decide?

I am writing this thesis at a time when my sense of belonging is at odds and in the midst of being renegotiated. Being in our final semester, we have separated as a group and are spread across the three host countries, a transition that has left us feeling uprooted. Essentially, I believe that my identity has been shaped by the countless events and encounters of the past, and surely my academic sisters unconsciously took part in (re)shaping who I am today causing our identities to remain entangled. As we anticipate the next transition in our lives, which will come with graduation from the IMEC program, I wonder where we will find new communities of practice; I wonder where we will belong.
CHAPTER ONE: OPENING NARRATIVE

To say that education is a social function, securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong, is to say in effect that education will vary with the quality of life which prevails in a group. (Dewey, 1944, p. 81 as cited in Nyland, 2008, p. 26)

1.1 Identity and belonging in education

To say that education is a social function...

It is impossible to imagine education without those that engage with it. Like Dewey (1944) in the quote above, I view education as a social activity and believe that learning happens when we construct knowledge together. Within this social constructivist paradigm, each of us offers a different interpretation of knowledge, which allows for multiple perspectives rather than a single truth. This worldview roots my exploration in Dahlberg and Moss’ (2005) vision of the early childhood setting as a site for democratic practice where all children and teachers have a voice and contribute to their community of practice.

...securing direction and development in the immature...

Interestingly, to imagine education without a curriculum has been a common practice, especially for our youngest children. In the field of Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] decisions about what to teach and how to teach have been left in the hands of those who work with children. To provide direction to educators in Ireland, an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2009; Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009a) offers a framework for practice based on four overarching themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communication, Exploring and Thinking. Practically speaking, then, this research informs one of Aistear’s themes: the theme of Identity and Belonging.
I aim to explore the sense of belonging felt in one early childhood centre, or community of practice, in Dublin, Ireland. The members of this community of practice include, among others, children and their families, teachers, and ECCE students, each participating in the daily life in their early childhood setting. This is an inquiry into what it means for these participants to belong to their group. How do they describe their sense of belonging and what is important to them? In other words, how is Aistear’s (NCCA, 2009a) theme Identity and Belonging enacted within this particular setting?

...is to say in effect that education will vary with the quality of life which prevails in a group.

Viewing education as contextualized, as dependent on the interactions between people in their respective environments, alludes to the complexities of education. It can be described as dynamic and alive, ever-changing depending on who participates. This highlights the importance of each participant, each voice, and each interaction and brings with it a responsibility towards those we encounter. As teachers, then, we need to embrace this responsibility in our quest to create nourishing environments, continuously asking ourselves, ‘Do all members in our classrooms participate? Are there multiple ways to contribute? Is everyone respected for their unique identity? Does everyone feel that they belong?’

1.2 Rationale

For the past ten years I have worked as an Early Childhood Educator at a daycare in Vancouver, Canada. After a number of years of working I was fortunate to be selected as a student in my province’s first Bachelor Degree program in ECCE. I attended evening classes while continuing to work with the toddlers during the day. The research project I conducted for this degree was a response to the ethical questions I was dealing with in my roles as student and educator (Bitterberg, 2012). I was struggling with the tension between theories at university that swept the ground from underneath my feet, and practice at the daycare that had become stagnant. I am
forever grateful to my co-workers who participated in this project and agreed to meet once a week for one semester to engage in conversations based on our readings of *Releasing the Imagination* by the educational philosopher and social activist Maxine Greene (1995). As a group of four early childhood educators we responded to our ethical obligation to reflect on our pedagogy. Mac Naughton (2005) stresses the lack of time educators have to engage in reflective practice, their work being governed by daily routines, curricular frameworks, and licensing requirements for example. Indeed, by engaging in this project we experienced many of these obstacles. Yet, the words of Greene (1995) echoed in our classroom and highlighted the importance of looking at our practice anew, “it all depends upon a breaking free, a leap, and then a question” (p. 6).

A few years later, in 2013, I find myself in my final semester of the International Master in Early Childhood Education program in Dublin, Ireland. I continue to believe in the possibilities that arise when we engage in conversations with others and see a profound potential in inviting different perspectives to enlarge our understanding. With the recent publication of Ireland’s Early Childhood Curriculum Framework *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), I believe it to be timely to contribute to the emerging pool of research in this area. In order to refine the focus of the study, I explore one of the four themes highlighted in *Aistear*, the theme of *Identity and Belonging*. What it means to belong to a community might look differently from the various vantage points, thus I have designed this case study to include multiple perspectives. In this way I open up a space for conversation between the different narratives. One perspective is based upon my reflections as a participant-observer gathered by immersing myself into the classroom for four days. Additionally, I draw on the perspectives of children and educators illuminated through focus groups. Furthermore, I add perspectives of a parent, an educator, an ECCE student, and the centre manager, which emerged in interviews. Lastly, I draw from *Aistear*, which offers a theoretical perspective to analyze the sense of belonging at this setting. Overall, I draw on different perspectives in order to marry the written and enacted curriculum, or in other words, theory and practice. The data collection procedure allows me to triangulate my findings, adding not only validity but also richness to the study.
Importantly, if a learning area of a written curriculum, like Aistear (NCCA, 2009), is not assessed, it might disappear over time (Carr, 2008). Making the sense of belonging central to this exploration validates its importance in the enacted curriculum. It contributes to an enlarged understanding of how an early childhood centre develops and maintains inclusive rather than exclusive practices.

1.3 Researching with young children

Children’s expertise offers an invaluable insight into what it means to belong to a community of practice from a child’s perspective. However, my deliberate choice to include children as participants in this project can also be considered from a rights perspective. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] has long advocated for the rights of children on an international level, but just how these rights are interpreted can look strikingly different around the world (Woodhead, 2006). Woodhead (2008) points out that the child’s right to belong is not specifically a right, but its essence is reflected in other rights; article 12, for example, highlights the child’s right to participation. Yet, as Rosen (2010) points out, the implementation of this right often fails to address younger children. This study thus acknowledges children’s right to participate by listening to their voices in regards to decisions that affect their daily lives. This is supported by Aistear (NCCA, 2009a), which puts forth an image of the child as a competent participant.

1.4 Research aim, objective, and questions

Research Aim

The aim is to explore what it means to belong to a community of practice from multiple perspectives.

Research Objective

The objective is twofold: to respond to our ethical commitment as educators and to explore the sense of belonging in a community of practice.
Research Questions

1. How is Aistear’s theme Identity and Belonging enacted in this community of practice?
2. What meanings do children and educators ascribe to the concept of ‘a sense of belonging’?
3. In what ways are the members’ unique identities respected within the community?
4. In what ways can the sense of belonging be observed from an outsider’s perspective?

1.5 Thesis outline

This thesis is divided in six chapters. This introductory chapter offers a brief overview as well as a rationale for the research project. In the next chapter, I review the relevant literature to provide a detailed view of the underlying concepts for this research project and the ideas that I engaged with throughout. Furthermore, I place this project within the theoretical framework that I used to generate and interpret the findings. Then, in chapter three, I describe the methodological approach in detail. This is a qualitative study, which aims to explore the multiple perspectives of members of a community of practice by using various methods: participant-observations, focus groups, and interviews. Within this chapter, the ethical issues involved are addressed and issues that arise particularly in research with young children are highlighted. In the fourth chapter I introduce the key findings that emerged from the participant-observations, focus groups, and interviews by grouping them in themes and including extracts of the participants’ voices to bring out the different perspectives. A discussion of these findings is offered in chapter five. Here I share my interpretation of the findings, which I connect to the ideas discussed previously in the literature review. Lastly, in chapter six I provide a brief conclusion, emphasize the implications of this research project, and offer recommendations for future work. This last chapter should not be seen as a conclusion, but rather as an invitation for further inquiry.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The way in

As a point of departure for this exploration I choose Vivian Paley’s (1992) vision of a democratic classroom. The early childhood setting is often the first place outside the home that children spend considerable amounts of time socializing. In theory, a democratic classroom ensuring equal participation is what we aim for as educators, but what does it look like in practice? Like Paley (1992), I believe it is important here to distinguish between the home as a private place and the early childhood setting as a public place. In the privacy of our homes we experience a certain freedom to do as we desire. Children can play with all of their toys without sharing and can invite their best friends to play. The early childhood setting on the other hand is a public space, which means it belongs to everyone. Here, children are required to share the resources and cannot choose their classmates. Paley (1992) writes about exploring her vision of a democratic classroom in her book *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*. She shares vivid scenes of peer rejection in her kindergarten class, observing that the excluded children often remain outsiders throughout their years at school. Being strongly opposed to the rejection of peers, she sets out to explore this issue with the children. After many discussions with the children about how it could work, a new rule is being implemented: ‘You can’t say you can’t play’ grants everyone equal opportunities to play with their peers. The younger grades seem to believe that implementing this rule is a possibility, while the older children, including this fifth grader, express their doubt: “In your whole life you’re not going to go through life never being excluded […]. So you may as well learn it now” (Paley, 1992, p. 22). This view is supported by research conducted by Junehui Ahn (2011) who writes about children’s understanding of the concept of friendship in a preschool in the United States. Ahn (2011) argues that educators hold an adult-centred view on friendship and “imagine an idealized world where everyone is friends and kind to one another” (p. 298). In her research she finds that children have actively transformed the adult-concept of friendship to fit into their real-life everyday experience. Exclusion, then, happens on a regular basis and is part of socialization practices.
2.2 On imagining possibilities

While reading *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education* by Gunilla Dahlberg and Peter Moss (2005), Paley’s (1992) classroom comes to life for me as the authors infuse Paley’s (1992) narrative with the theoretical background. For one, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) write about the possibility of a democratic classroom rooted in ethical practice, which reflects Paley’s (1992) ongoing commitment to questioning the concept of fairness in her classroom. In addition, in their last chapter entitled *In search of Utopia*, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) write about the importance of imagining possible alternatives to our current practices, something better that is worth striving towards. Yet Utopian thought is not sufficient “to bring about radical change. That needs also a willingness to act” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 179). Paley (1992) envisioned a classroom where all children could feel a sense of belonging and had the courage to act on her vision.

The educational philosopher and social activist Maxine Greene (1995) also informs my reading of *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (Paley, 1992). In her book *Releasing the Imagination*, Greene (1995) illustrates how the arts can open up new perspectives. By connecting to a vast variety of her encounters with the arts, including literature, the visual arts, and music she invites new vantage points, which will inform new interpretations. In her writing she envisions how education could be otherwise, ever striving towards giving a voice to students who have long been silenced in classrooms. Rather than advocating for one way to restructure the education system, she embraces the postmodern paradigm and insists that there are multiple ways to renew classroom practice, always contingent on context and people. Similarly to Paley (1992) as well as Dahlberg and Moss (2005), she strongly believes that we need to act on our vision to create a kinder world for all. For her, engaging in conversations with neighbours and those closest to us will be the basis for extending inter-subjective connections further outwards. It is important then, to open up public spaces for people to meet, “the space where visions should take shape, where at odd times and spontaneously, people feel themselves part of the dance of life” (Greene, 1995, p. 72).
2.3 Belonging

Greene’s (1995) colourful description of the dance of life in the previous paragraph is inspired by a painting by Henri Matisse, which he entitled Dance. Visualizing human togetherness through his eyes, highlights the dance between the individual and the group, and even more so, that which lies in the space between. Indeed, belongingness “refers to a psychological feeling and not to mere formal assignment to a social group” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 80). A sense of identity and belonging is foundational, and H. Rudolph Schaffer (2006) identifies the tension between the individual and the social as the “two core human motives: the need to belong and the need to be unique” (Schaffer, 2006, p. 80). Interestingly, Martin Woodhead and Liz Brooker (2008) state that the sense of belonging is easily overlooked, because it is plainly obvious. From a rights perspective, then, they observe that the UNCRC does not identify the child’s right to belong as a right, however its essence is reflected in other rights. Particularly the child’s right to identity (article 8), as Woodhead and Brooker (2008) highlight, is strongly connected to a sense of belonging. “Belonging is the relational dimension of personal identity, the fundamental psycho-social ‘glue’ that locates every individual...at a particular position in space, time and human society and – most important, connects people to each other” (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008, p. 3).

Evidently we feel various degrees of belonging throughout our lives. A positive sense of belonging is promoted when our feeling of belonging is shared with and reciprocated by others, when there is a “balance between belonging and separateness” (Woodhead & Brooker 2008, p. 3), and when belonging does not lead to the exclusion of others (Woodhead & Brooker 2008). Drawing on Axel Honneth’s ideas of recognition, Woodhead and Brooker (2008) illustrate how an early year’s setting can strengthen the feeling of a sense of belonging by incorporating the different types of recognition in their philosophy and pedagogy, which include “warmth and affection; rights; and community approval” (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008, p. 5).

We cannot help but visualize the shadow side of belonging placed on the other end of the continuum. As Caroline Bath (2009) phrases it so eloquently, “forms of discrimination exist to police the borders of belonging” (p. 19). These borders paint a much darker picture about how we live together in the classroom, in our communities,
and the world at large. Paley’s (1992) fifth grader already knows that exclusion and rejection happens and suggests we simply learn to cope with it.

2.4 Identity

The concepts of identity and belonging are closely connected. A positive sense of the self is foundational to a positive sense of belonging (Centre for Early Childhood Development & Education [CECDE], 2006a). This is highlighted in Siolta (CECDE, 2006b), the national quality framework for early childhood education in Ireland supporting Aistear (NCCA, 2009a). Children, and adults alike, feel a sense of belonging when their unique selves are welcomed and valued. Self-understanding is the basis of identity and includes the following three components: “personal memories,…representations of the self, and…theories of the self” (Santrock, 2004, p. 385). Schaffer (2006) writes that social identity should not just be defined in terms of major, stable categories like “gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and class” (p. 80), but also in terms of the minor and more temporal communities like the football club we join, our workplace, our choir, or any other group. Within the socio-cultural paradigm it becomes evident that identity formation is a complex process (CECDE, 2006a): our identity is not something to be reached, it is rather dynamic as a response to our experiences and interactions with others in our communities (CECDE, 2006a; Schaffer, 2006). Wenger (1998) points to the interplay of the social and the individual in the process of renegotiating our identities. Identity for him “is shaped by belonging to a community, but with a unique identity” (p. 146). Our lived experiences contribute to identity formation, children for example “acquire new ideas about themselves and others, and modify old ones, as they encounter their social and physical world” (CECDE, 2006a, p. 3). As young children negotiate their identities, participation in their communities will shape what identities are possible. For example, children are aware of their gender early on in life and learn what it means to be a girl or boy, how to dress, and what toys to play with (DeHart, Sroufe, & Cooper, 2004) by interacting with the members of their communities.

2.5 A community of practice

How we understand learning, then, shapes what is possible in our classrooms. Similarly, “how enlarging, enriching or constraining children’s participation is will be
influenced by cultural practices” (Clerkin, 2013). Thus, in this exploration I view learning through a social constructivist lens. Wenger’s (1998) notion of the community of practice has been highly influential. Contrasting the traditional belief that learning is an individual process, Wenger (1998) proposes instead a social theory of learning. This theory opposes that learning takes place in isolation and thus validates “our lived experiences of participation in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). In his book *Community of Practice*, Wenger (1998) identifies four interconnected elements of his theory as follows: “meaning, or learning as experience; practice, or learning as doing; community, or learning as belonging; and identity, or learning as becoming” (p. 5). Wenger (1998) believes that “the learning that is personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice” (p. 6).

We all belong to several communities of practice throughout our lives (Wenger, 1998). Children, for example, are members of such communities as students at school, as members of a sports club or band. Through their participation in the community the members continually generate and renegotiate meaning. Thus, theory and practice are not placed on either end of a dichotomy; rather they are merged in the ongoing process of negotiating meaning, as we practise theory. The practice within a community operates within a discourse characterized by the explicit “language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, […] , regulations, and contracts” but also the “implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, […] , embodied understandings, underlying assumptions” (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). Marilyn Fleer (2003) argues that it is difficult to step outside the discourse we find ourselves in to question the taken-for-granted.

While the notion of community evokes terms such as belongingness and harmony, a community of practice can also be a place for tensions and disagreements, which can lead to renegotiation of meaning. In fact, I believe these times of disensus are crucial in keeping a community of practice alive. Moreover, since “the world is in flux and conditions always change, any practice must constantly be reinvented” (Wenger, 1998, p. 94). This highlights the impossibility of handing down a practice to the next generation. There is a body of literature urging us to re-think education by questioning our values and beliefs and how we have come to hold them (see for example Burman,
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2008; Fleer, 2003; MacNaughton, 2005). Jan Peeters and Michel Vandenbroek (2011), for instance, distinguish between the notion of “doing things right” and “doing the right things” (pp. 62-76). In the former, a practitioner reflects within her discourse whether everything is going along the right course, while in the latter this “practitioner moves towards becoming reflexive by questioning taken for granted beliefs and by understanding that knowledge is contestable” (pp. 62-76). Communities of practice in schools, then, can be a space for teachers to go beyond their daily routines and explore difficult and foundational questions such as: “[W]hat is the purpose of education?” (Moss, 2010, p. 9)

2.6 The postmodern community

Gert Biesta (2004) has also been very influential in describing the community of practice that I envision for early childhood education. Using postmodernity as a lens allows him to open up to new possibilities that lie in-between the limits of modern binary thinking, thus moving from understanding the world as issues of either/or to both/and. His exploration of two different conceptualizations of the notion of community is grounded in the works of Alphonso Lingis, Zygmunt Bauman, and Emmanuel Levinas. The impact of Lingis can be observed in Biesta’s differentiation of the two communities. The first one Lingis refers to as the “rational community” (p. 311), in which members share common attributes such as language or beliefs. Members serve as representatives of the pool of knowledge of their specific community. They can only refer to what has been said or written before. Consequently, members become interchangeable. For instance, in education teachers transmit an already known body of knowledge to students. What counts is what is said rather than who says it (Biesta, 2004), which renders who says something as meaningless. The other community that Biesta (2004) explores is the one “to which Lingis refers as the community of those who have nothing in common” (p. 315). It is rooted in postmodernity, a paradigm that Biesta (2004) argues to be “thoroughly ethical and political” (p. 310). Conversely, within this community what is said is not important, only that something is said (Biesta, 2004). As members speak, they do not speak as representative of their community, they speak with their own voice, which means that members are not interchangeable (Biesta, 2004).
Bieta (2004) draws on Bauman to address the difficult question of what happens to strangers in the two respective communities. In the rational community, Bauman suggests that people who do not belong are either assimilated or excluded. A third approach becomes visible in ‘the community of those who have nothing in common’: the possibility that lies in between the two ends of the continuum, the possibility of living together. What makes this community ethical and political is our response to the other. As we speak with our own voice in this community, Bieta’s (2004) interpretation of the work of Levinas suggests that we attend to our responsibility in our encounter with the other, rather than reproducing what has been said before.

2.7 Towards an ethics of care

Continuing in the same vein, when thinking about ethics in the early childhood classroom, I am drawn, once again, toward the paradigm of postmodernity. This allows me to situate judgments, always provisional and contextual. Moreover, the paradigm implies that I am implicated in the judgments as I embrace my responsibility toward others by “doing the right things” (Peeters & Vandenbroek, 2011, pp. 62-76). This is in stark contrast to universal ethics, where I can detach my responsibility, referring back to the rules and guidelines that make a decision for me by providing “guidance for an active technical practice” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 68). This kind of practice is dangerous and can lead to exclusion of others and in the worst-case scenario to human extinction as in World War Two (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

Thus, I welcome a different understanding of ethics: one that is based on the possibility of human togetherness. I will draw on the contribution of mostly feminists who have explored the notion of an ‘ethics of care’ (as discussed in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Vasconcelos, 2006; Cockburn, 2005). The ‘ethics of care’ can be understood in terms of a mindful practice rather than technical application of rules (Vasconcelos, 2006). It dispenses of the universalistic approach that allows us to determine right from wrong in any circumstance, foregrounding instead the importance of real situations and relationships (Cockburn, 2005). “At its heart, therefore, the ethics of care is about how to interpret and fulfil responsibility to others” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 76). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) draw on the work of Joan Tronto who
outlines our responsibility toward others by shifting from universal ethics to an ‘ethics of care’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 75). Tronto’s ideas about our responsibility toward the other connect with the work of the French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Vasconcelos, 2006) who questioned practices and knowledge that make the other into a knowable subject. The alterity of the Other is central to his philosophy (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Sharon Todd (2001) thinks with Levinas and what his philosophy offers to education. How can the unique identities of children be respected? Todd (2001) notes that education seeks to grasp the Other by learning more “about those who have been Othersoned (p. 68). Instead of something tangible, such as knowledge about the other, Todd (2001) proposes something rather intangible and perhaps difficult to teach: attending to our responsibility toward an Other who is completely different from me. This “Other is not socially constructed, not defined by discursive power, but is an unassimilable and unknowable alterity” (Todd, 2001, p. 69).

2.8 On making multiplicity visible

In search of a paradigm to root this research project, my responsibility toward welcoming multiplicity and questioning the taken-for-granted practices remains paramount. Moreover, how I work with the research participants, in particular the children, is very important to me. Marc Jans (2004) draws on work of Prout and James as well as Percy-Smith stating “that immaturity of children in a certain sense is a biological fact” (p. 35). These authors “emphasize that the meaning given to this immaturity is culturally determined and hence varies in function of place and time” (Jans, 2004, p. 35). To illustrate this further and to ground my study in a paradigm I will look closely at the image of the child from two different perspectives, that of developmental psychology and the sociology of childhood.

Developmental Psychology has been the dominant discourse in the field of ECCE and has shaped countless guidelines and best practices. One characteristic of developmental Psychology is that it “seeks to build universally applicable…statements about how children develop” (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 23). Influenced by the work of the child development psychologist Jean Piaget, this paradigm brings forth a universal image of the child based on the belief that children’s
development progresses through universal stages. Furthermore, it creates an image of
the child as becoming a future adult, gradually acquiring competence. Teachers
working within this paradigm are guided by developmentally appropriate practice
based on knowledge about children’s development and, being embedded in this
discourse, it is difficult to imagine other pedagogies (Woodhead, 2006; Burman,
2008). The role of these teachers is that of a technician (Moss, 2006), which means to
“apply a defined set of technologies through regulated processes to produce pre-
specified and measurable outcomes” (Moss, 2006, p. 35). Hence, teachers implement
the curriculum, produce measurable outcomes, develop competences, and prepare
children for school.

Children’s natural progression from one stage of development to the next draws
attention to normal development. However, thinking of the child in terms of normal is
questionable, as children who deviate from the norm are rendered invisible (Burman,
strong image about the power of the discourse we find ourselves in. While he writes
about the stories of North America’s Natives, his words speak to other minority
groups including children, who have been rendered invisible. King (2003) asks, “Yet
how can something that has never existed- the Indian- have form and power while
something that is alive and kicking- Indians- are invisible” (p. 53)? Evidently, a
universal image neglects the diversities found in children and thus silences children
who are “alive and kicking” (King, 2003, p. 53).

I welcome a rather different image of the child put forth by the sociology of childhood
(James & James, 2004; Jenks, 2005), a paradigm highlighting that childhood is at
once a social category common to all children while stressing the diversity of lived
childhoods. As Bath (2009) points out, viewing childhood as socially and culturally
constructed is rooted in Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological approach, which
“emphasises responsive learning contexts and reciprocal interaction and also lends
itself to the notion that children’s learning is situated within family and cultural
context, rather than that of developmental psychology” (Bath, 2009, p. 2). The focus
shifts from seeing the child as a becoming to seeing the child as a being. Children,
then, are seen as competent actors in their communities. James and James (2004)
highlight that “children are not simply passive objects, the product of universal
biological and social processes, but are active participants in their own social worlds and in those of adults” (p. 24). The task of education is no longer to mold the future generation, but to engage with the children as participants in their learning. In contrast to the notion of the teacher, or “worker as technician” (Moss, 2006, p. 35), I envision the role of the teacher in this discourse as that of a researcher as described by Moss (2006). This teacher continuously revisits learning to create richer understandings. Rather than passing on knowledge, the teacher as researcher co-constructs knowledge, engages in conversations, and makes new meanings with children (Moss, 2006).

Understanding the child as being brings forth the notion of the child as citizen, which can be conceptualized from a rights perspective. The UN CRC has advocated for the rights of children on an international level. Woodhead (2006), however, notes that “this universal prescription for childhood has also been contested, especially for endorsing distinctively western liberal and individualistic discourses of childhood” (p. 25). Martin Woodhead and Liz Brooker (2008) highlight that the child’s right to belong is not clearly expressed as a right. However, the right to belong is reflected in other rights as for example in article 12, which focuses on the child’s right to participate (Rosen, 2010). Strikingly, as Rachel Rosen (2010) points out, the implementation of this right often fails to address younger children. Similarly, Berit Bae (2010) writes about the child’s right to participate in the Norwegian kindergartens stating that how this right is interpreted is affected by the educators’ understanding of the concept of participation (Bae, 2010, p. 209).

Children’s participation in research concerning them can be looked at from the perspective of the sociology of childhood. “[T]he child must be viewed as the subject rather than the object of any research about her or him” (Bath, 2009, p. 44). Thus, traditional research is put into question, and new ways of researching with children as participants are being explored (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005). Particularly Clark and Moss (2011) have envisioned opportunities for children’s participation in research, where children are seen as experts in regards to decisions that affect their daily lives. Their Mosaic approach involves listening to children’s perspectives by using a variety of different methods including for example, observations, child interviewing, and photography. This approach lends itself to listening to children and is closely connected to an approach that emerged in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where both
listening and relationships are at the heart of the pedagogy (Clark et al., 2005). The Mosaic approach is embedded into the daily life at the school (Clark et al., 2005), which adds a natural character to the research. This evokes both Moss’ (2006) image of the teacher as researcher and Wenger’s (1998) image of the community of practice in which we practise theory.

2.9 Curriculum

As ECCE “move[s] up the policy agenda” (Moss, 2010, p. 8), the concern about what and how our children learn becomes more eminent. Due to this increasing interest in ECCE, curricular frameworks are being developed for the first time, offering guidance to those working with young children (see for example Government of British Columbia, 2008; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 1996; NCCA, 2009). Overall, conversations on an international level play an important part in the process of developing a national curriculum, (OECD, 2004) however, the OECD (2004) highlights that a curriculum, based on a country’s aims and aspirations for the present and future, cannot simply be copied and implemented in a different part of the world. These curriculum documents and guidelines for best practice are rooted within -and simultaneously create- a discourse.

Ireland has responded to this trend and has introduced its first Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009a) in 2009 to support children from birth to age six. Aistear, which is the Irish word for journey, symbolizes the framework’s belief that children are on their journey as lifelong learners. The learning promoted within the framework is organized into four themes, namely Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communication, Exploring and Thinking. Aistear provides a flexible framework to think with rather than strict guidelines to apply. It is not mandatory at this stage and the individual early childhood settings choose whether to adopt it or not (Forster, 2013). However, as a key developer of Aistear, Arlene Forster (2013) pointed out that it is tied to program funding, which is an incentive for early years settings to take it on board. In the development phase it went through consultation with other national and international stakeholders and it reflects Ireland’s goals for its children (NCCA, 2004; NCCA, 2009b). Curricular development is influenced by the way a nation thinks about children and children. Viewing children
as being competent and as members of their respective communities, *Aistear* embraces the paradigm of the sociology of childhood. Children are seen as unique, which means that they bring their “own set of experiences” (NCCA, 2009a, p. 7). Furthermore, “[c]hildren are citizens with rights and responsibilities. They have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy” (NCCA, 2009a, p. 8).

A notable curriculum framework is New Zealand’s *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 1996), which is “widely regarded as progressive” (Bath, 2009). *Te Whariki* is the Maori word for *woven mat*, a metaphor that also highlights the interconnectedness of the different strands that build the foundation of the curriculum. The notion of belonging is a strand and is woven through the curriculum. This is reflected in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), which also shifts away from developmental domains as the centre of curriculum and instead focuses on more abstract concepts. It identifies a sense of belonging as foundational for early learning, and thus “the theme of *Identity and Belonging* is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community” (p. 25).

Similarly, Ted Aoki (2005) writes about the educational project questioning the assumption that “the school subject, the teacher, and the child” (p. 281) are distinct components of curricula, where one can be chosen to be the central focus, such as in the child-centred curriculum. He instead imagines a curriculum that tends to the spaces in-between the usual three centres, thus acknowledging that they are indeed interconnected rather than separate units. In Aoki’s (2005) words, “life in the classroom is not so much *in* the child, *in* the teacher, *in* the subject; life is lived in the space between and among” (Aoki, 2005, p. 282). This curriculum affirms the intangible moments of education that lie in the meeting points. Aoki’s notion of the de-centred curriculum fits beautifully as it moves from a binary either/or approach towards both/and thinking. It makes visible all the learning that falls outside the traditional curriculum.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 An exploration into a community of practice

This small-scale research project was situated in an early years setting in Dublin, Ireland. Throughout the project I was particularly interested in exploring the participants’ sense of belonging within their centre. At times I zoomed in on the perspectives of some members within this community, while at other times the community as a whole was considered a participant. This project was an exploration, which called for the “[u]se of an open, flexible approach combined with introspection and continued revision of initial concepts” (Hart, 2005, p. 321). Therefore, I was flexible and at times adjusted the methods for data collection slightly. I also kept a reflective journal and had regular meetings with my supervisor to discuss my progress. The data were collected in March and April 2013. Overall, this research project contributed to the already existing community of practice by offering the participants a space to reflect on their sense of belonging and to create meaning together. I began this exploration wondering, ‘What does it mean to belong to this early years setting’?

3.2 Research aim, objective, and questions

Research aim:

The aim is to explore what it means to belong to a community of practice from multiple perspectives.

Research objective:

The objective is twofold: to respond to our ethical commitment as educators and to explore the sense of belonging in a community of practice.

Research questions:

1. How is Aistear’s theme Identity and Belonging interpreted/enacted in this community of practice?
2. What meanings do children and educators ascribe to the concept of a sense of belonging?

3. In what ways are the members’ unique identities respected within the community?

4. In what ways can the sense of belonging be observed from an outsider’s perspective?

3.3 Selecting the setting

I used both purposive and convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012) to select the setting. Purposive sampling was important because my aim was to explore the notion of a community of practice. Thus, I was interested in exploring perspectives within a setting that had established a communal culture. During the selection I concentrated mainly on teachers and children at the setting and their participation in their community of practice. Convenience sampling ensured that I was able to access a suitable setting within a restricted time frame and that the participants were open to participate in the proposed project. To choose the setting I consulted with my supervisor and relied on her network and experience with early years settings in Dublin to determine an appropriate fit for this exploration.

3.4 The roads to complexity

As I am interested in exploring the sense of belonging within a group I have adopted a case study approach, which “entails immersion in the setting and rests on both the researcher’s and the participants’ worldviews” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 55). To gain an in-depth description of what a sense of belonging might look like in this community from multiple points of view, I have chosen a qualitative approach to generate the data (Bryman, 2012). A qualitative approach invites both my voice in this project and my interaction with the participants rather than distancing myself from the project (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, I considered which epistemological position to adopt in order to determine what I consider “as acceptable knowledge” (Bryman, 2012, p. 27). Viewing knowledge as subjective and contextualized rather than objective and universal, this project embraces an interpretivist position (Bryman, 2012). Overall, the project is designed to invite multiple perspectives, which adds
complexity rather than seeking to find one true understanding of what it means to belong.

3.5 Data generation

The research project was conducted in three stages, each stage informed and shaped the next. This reflected my initial decision to be flexible in this exploration. I have used different types of data collection throughout this project, moving from participant-observation in stage one, to focus groups in stage two, and lastly interviews in stage three. During the participant observations, all members of the community of practice can be considered participants as I moved freely through the setting and spent time in each of the classrooms. In stage two I set up two focus groups. The participants of one group were five children aged 44 to 55 months, while the participants of the other group were two teachers. Lastly, the interviews in stage three were conducted with the centre manager, a parent, an ECCE student, and one teacher. Within the interpretivist paradigm, triangulation of methods and data sources certainly adds to the validity of the findings, but more importantly paints a more complex picture (Hart, 2005) of the community of practice.

3.5.1 Stage one

Initially, I spent four days within the setting as a participant-observer. On these days I arrived by 8:45 in the morning and stayed until 2:15 in the afternoon. Altogether, there are three preschool groups for children between the ages of three and six, and two playgroups for children between the ages of two and three. Overall, there are about 10 children in each class. For many children the day started at 9:00 in the morning and ended at 2:00 or 2:20 in the afternoon, however some groups of children were enrolled in half-day sessions, which are two and a half hours long. The centre has seven childcare teachers, including the manager, and eight additional staff who are taking, for instance, community employment training. These staff members work in the administration, maintenance, the kitchen, or as support teachers in classrooms. The centre also provides placement practice experience to ECCE students from local colleges.
One immediate advantage of this method is that the participants are in their natural environment (Bryman, 2012). Originally, I expected to focus my observations on one class, but after the first day it was clear that moving around freely would allow me to see a more comprehensive picture of the community as a whole. My role throughout the day shifted between that of an observer and that of a participant (Bryman, 2012; Warming 2005). I used a journal for detailed field notes and documented the routines, children’s interactions with each other, teachers’ directions, the general atmosphere, the physical space, and other observations. Though my observations were not limited to the children in the setting, I concur with Hanne Warming (2005) who believes that “this method has great potential for listening to children” (p. 51). Being able to observe body language (Warming, 2005), for example, allowed me to look at how the sense of belonging was enacted without interviewing the children. Most times, I tried to focus on being a participant in the program to help the members of the community of practice feel at ease with my presence. Therefore, I kept note taking to a minimum while I was in the setting and elaborated on my notes later the same day. By becoming part of their practice for these days, I was able to build relationships with the children and staff, allowing me to start breaking down the insider/outsider barrier. I was aware of the power relationships between researcher and the researched. David Bridges (2009), in fact, considers “the sensitive negotiation of these boundaries between insiders and outsiders…one of the key responsibilities of the researcher” (p. 119).

Focusing on participation rather than observation brought with it another, and rather unexpected, benefit. It opened the possibility for me to feel the sense of belonging. Drawing on the work of Carla Rinaldi, Hanne Warming (2005) describes how “in the participant approach the researcher uses all her senses to listen” (p. 56). Thus, by participating I did not only rely on what I could see or hear, I started to feel a sense of belonging (Warming, 2005). As Warming (2005) points out, through observations with eyes and ears I “may get a sense of the child’s experience” (p. 56) while through participation I “may get a sense of the culture” (p. 56). Overall, both observations and participation were important in this project to explore what it might mean to belong to this community. While immersing myself in the setting I had two main aims in mind: The first one was for me to observe how the sense of belonging is enacted within this
community. The second aim was to become familiar with the setting and people to be better able to facilitate the focus groups in the second stage of this study.

3.5.2 Stage two

In the second stage I facilitated two types of focus group meetings within the setting: one focus group meeting with the teachers and two meetings with the children. The guiding questions for the conversation emerged from my participant-observations. The format of a focus group mirrored my aim to explore a community, and, thus, I determined that conversations with small groups of people were more suitable than interviews.

I arranged two focus group meetings with five children aged three to four, or more precisely aged 44 to 55 months. They all attended the same class. It was difficult for me to choose children, because of the nature of the project: I was exploring the sense of belonging and I did not want to exclude children. However, I felt that facilitating focus groups with the whole class would have been too difficult within the limited time I had as I wanted to explore the sense of belonging in detail. Drawing on a range of authors, Hennessy and Heary (2005) recommend a group size with “no fewer than five children and no more than eight” (p. 241). Thus, with the help of the teacher, five children were selected randomly on the last day of my participant-observations by considering the dynamic between peers (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). We selected a group of children who were playing together that day. There were four girls and one boy. The focus group meetings lasted approximately 25 minutes and were audio recorded. All five children were present at the first meeting, but due to a child’s absence only four children participated in the second meeting. These meetings took place in a room familiar to the children as this facilitates a more relaxed rapport (Hennessy & Heary, 2005, p. 245). Both times we gathered around a child-sized table in the common lunchroom away from the larger group. This is also the place where children signed their consent forms the previous week. One teacher was always nearby, though she did not join the meetings. The cook was in the adjoining kitchen preparing the lunch. The focus groups included a blend of questions, other playful activities, and visual props to ensure that the children’s interest was captured. In addition to conversations, the two sessions included drawing and imaginative games.
to keep the children’s interest (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). I prepared an outline to guide the flow of the focus groups, but was ready to alter the format during the meeting by omitting or adding questions for example (see appendix 7).

The focus group meeting with the teachers lasted about one hour and was held in a meeting room, which provided privacy. Originally, three teachers volunteered to participate, however one teacher was ill and could not attend the meeting. Both teachers were female and started working at the centre more than 16 years ago. My role was that of a facilitator (Bryman, 2012) and I used open-ended questions to guide the meeting (see appendix 5). At times I altered the order of questions to be better able to follow the flow of the meeting. Unfortunately, due to a technical shortcoming this meeting was not audio recorded. I took thorough notes to capture the content of the conversation and later that same day produced a detailed transcript based on these notes.

### 3.5.3 Stage three

After re-reading my field notes gathered in stage one and transcribing the focus group meetings from stage two, themes emerged. This process is referred to as inductive analysis and is opposed to deductive analysis where the researcher works with already existing themes (Patton, 2002). Upon reflection on these themes I decided to change the third stage. Originally I intended to bring together the children and teachers who participated in the focus groups to share some of the findings and discuss what it means to belong to their school from different perspectives. I decided instead to conduct short interviews with other members of this community of practice, which allowed me to explore additional perspectives. This decision was based on the profound sense of community feeling inherent at this school. It was evident that not only children and teachers belong. Within the interpretivist paradigm, then, inviting new perspectives added complexity to this project. Therefore, I decided to conduct short interviews with four additional members of this community in stage three of this project. These interviews lasted between 10 to 15 minutes and were audio recorded. I interviewed the centre manager, a parent, and an ECCE student. In addition, I held an interview with one teacher who did not already participate in the focus groups in stage two. This was done because the original meeting with the teachers in stage two was
not audio-recorded and I wanted to follow up on some of the topics discussed in the focus group to add validity to my notes. All interviews followed the same framework (see appendix 10), but were individualized to suit the role of the interviewee within this community of practice.

3.6 Data analysis

In order to analyze the various sources of data I familiarized myself with the data at every stage of the project. After stage one I reread my journal entries and grouped the entries into different segments (Creswell, 2009). To do so, I went “from the specific to the general” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184), which means broad themes emerged from my descriptive field notes. To analyze stage two and three I transcribed the children’s focus group meetings, added to my transcript of the focus group with the teachers, and transcribed the interviews. Then I reread these transcripts and added notes about what was not captured in the recordings and my notes (Creswell, 2009), for instance the atmosphere in the room and how engaged the participants appeared to be. Afterwards, I was able to organize the data that emerged from the transcripts into themes. Overall, I adopted an inductive analysis approach (Patton, 2002). Lastly, I looked closely at how these themes connect to my research questions (Creswell, 2009). Throughout the project, the research questions never changed.

3.7 Ethical issues

I have made myself familiar with the guidelines for conducting research at Dublin Institute of Technology and have obtained ethical clearance for this study from the Head of School of Social Sciences and Law. I negotiated access to the setting by contacting the centre manager first (see appendix 1). I was then invited to a staff meeting to introduce myself, talk about the project, and answer questions. In this way I met most of the teachers before I started the research project. All participants received letters describing the project and what their participation would entail and were given time to ask questions (see appendix 3 and appendix 8). They signed informed consent forms before the beginning of the project and were reminded that they could withdraw at any point (see appendix 2, appendix 4, appendix 6, and appendix 9) (Bryman, 2012).
I reflected on the potential risks associated with the participation in this study and did
my best to prevent the participants, and myself as the researcher, from any harm.
However, I am aware that I cannot predict all possible situations and that even the
notion of a sense of belonging might evoke feelings of exclusion for some and could
cause emotional stress. If issues should arise I will discuss them with my supervisor
or the centre manager. A further ethical consideration addressing harm to participants
includes my responsibility to keep their identities anonymous. As Bryman (2012)
points out, this often proves harder in qualitative research than in quantitative research
due to an in-depth inquiry of the phenomenon with a small number of participants,
which might make it possible to identify individuals. To ensure anonymity,
pseudonyms were used throughout the transcripts and this thesis. All data were stored
in a safe place and all digital files were password-protected. After the submission and
grading of the thesis the data will be destroyed. Still, after reflecting on the initial
issues that might arise in the proposed study, I was aware of the need to revisit these
ethical issues throughout the study. For this a reflective journal was kept and my
academic supervisor at DIT supported me on an ongoing basis. This ensured the
continuous engagement with ethical issues.

3.8 Engaging young children in research

Ethical issues arise in any research project, but particularly so when researching with
young children. This project is rooted in the paradigm of the Sociology of Childhood
that views the child as a being and a bearer of rights, which impacts what children’s
participation in a project might look like. Malcolm Hill (2005) writes that “the United
Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and children’s legislation emphasize
the importance of enabling children to express their opinions on important matters and
decisions affecting themselves” (p. 61). Though parents give consent to students
wanting to carry out research at this early years centre when they enrol their child at
this setting, I deemed it important to ask the children themselves if they wanted to
participate. I took time to explain the project to the participating children on the last
day of my participant-observations. I explained to children that I am trying to write a
story about their school and that I needed their help because they are the experts.
Children could ask questions and we filled out the consent form together. At both
focus group meetings I asked the children if they were still happy to participate, both times they said, ‘Yes!’ with excitement.

I was also aware of the power imbalances of adults and children that may leave children in a vulnerable position (Hill, 2005). These imbalances might be intensified considering the status I have as a researcher and stranger in their community. However, taking part in the daily routine for four days and immersing myself as a participant-observer allowed me to interact and play with the children before the focus group sessions. Children appeared to feel confident talking to me. As Hennessy and Heary (2005) note, “[t]he peer support provided in the small group setting may also help to redress the power imbalances between adult and child that exist in one-to-one interviews” (p. 237). The room in which the meetings took place was very familiar to the children. I sat at the same level as the children to lessen the power imbalance. Overall, the conceptual framework and research design allow for children to be competent participants in this project. Furthermore, I was genuinely interested in hearing their perspectives.

3.9 Reflections

From the very beginning I myself felt a sense of belonging to this community of practice. I was invited to speak at their staff meeting, had tea with the staff, and felt as though I was welcome in their community. We agreed on a suitable date to start the project and decided that I would spend some time moving freely through every classroom on the first day before settling in with one class for the remaining days. Little did we know that this would re-shape the study and add to the community feeling I was trying to explore. The teachers were flexible and so I was able to be part of every classroom for the rest of my participant-observations. This gave me a tremendous insight into their community of practice. In addition, my own sense of belonging was re-affirmed during each stage of the project. As a researcher I was aware of my emotional investment in this setting. By drawing on multiple perspectives I hope to increase validity of my findings.

Another issue arose as I was transcribing the children’s first focus group meeting. In the recording we were talking about things that make us sad at school like kicking,
hitting, and when someone takes our food. When I least expected it, one child stated that a family member was hurting him/her. It was a brief comment, but because this was a potentially serious matter, I could not offer confidentiality to the child and shared my finding with the centre manager the next day (Hill, 2005). I also informed my supervisor of the incident and my actions. What stays with me today is that I did not hear this comment during the focus group session, because I was listening to another child. However, I believe this incident highlights the friendly and warm atmosphere at this early years setting where a child can feel safe and talk about difficult topics.

3. 10 Limitations

The project had to be completed within a given time frame and the data needed to remain manageable for the scope of this project. However, to get a better understanding of the community of practice the use an ethnographic approach could be more suitable as this would allow more time collecting and generating more detailed data with the participants. Moreover, a case study approach cannot be generalized. The research project was carried out in Ireland where I have lived for two academic semesters. At times it was difficult to understand the children’s accent. In addition, I might not be aware of some cultural aspects or subtleties, which might affect my interpretation of the data. Lastly, there is a potential for me to be biased in favour of the practice at the centre. Thus, drawing on multiple perspectives in the data collection phase serves to counterbalance any possible bias.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings that emerged from my analysis of the data generated throughout the three stages of the project are presented; beginning with a brief reflection on the research process, then describing the findings of the participant-observations, the focus groups meetings with both the children and teachers, and lastly the findings of the interviews conducted with a parent, a student, a teacher, and the centre manager. Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure anonymity.

4.2 Openness to participate in research

Overall, I found that the staff members at this centre were happy and even excited about participating in this project. When I first introduced myself at one of their staff meetings and informed them about the research project, I was greeted with open arms and we had a very engaging first conversation. They asked many questions, and when they discovered that the project was flexible and still evolving to a certain degree they helped me to shape the project. Throughout the project they inquired about the process and genuinely wanted to contribute. As examples, a teacher that could not attend the focus group meeting was disappointed that she had missed it and wanted to be filled in. Another teacher, who was unable to participate in the focus group meeting, approached me during the third stage of the project and I was able to have an interview with her at that point. A lovely episode happened when I brought in the poem ‘I like dressing up’ (see page 38) that the children had inspired during the focus group meeting. The manager published the poem in their newsletter to share it with all the families and staff members. I later discovered that she also posted a copy of it in her office. Lastly, I was invited back to the centre to present some of the initial findings to the teachers. I felt that the engagement with the project was reciprocal and in a way contagious; it grew with the engagement of all the participants. Consequently, rather than considering this exploration as my project, I believe it is our project.
4. 3 Stage one: participant-observations

As a starting point for this exploration the concept of belonging within this community of practice was explored by immersing myself into the centre. The data revealed how the sense of belonging is both nurtured and enacted on a daily basis. Four main themes are identified in this section: A warm space for everyone; the members of the community of practice; the practice; and being part of a community. Sub-headings will be used to elaborate on each of these themes.

4.3.1 A warm space for everyone

The purpose-built setting

First and foremost, the structural design of the building offers a warm space for all its members. The purpose-built setting has various classrooms, a staff room, a parent room, an office, a large kitchen and lunchroom, and a playground, all of which are wheelchair accessible. Interestingly, the centre manager was involved in the design of the building and was able to incorporate some of their dreams into their new centre, which included a parent room as well as suitable classrooms for the children.

Flexible boundaries

Through the participant-observations I discovered that the practice at the centre can be described as being inherently social, highlighting the interconnectedness of every member. While the design of the centre accommodates the needs of the individual members to ensure that they can both contribute and belong, there is a lot of overlap and interaction between the members throughout the day. For example, rather than staying in one classroom, the five groups of children rotate through all of the classrooms and take turns playing in the construction room, the art and dramatic-play room, and the table-toy room allowing for friendly conversations in the hallway during transitions. Moreover, the centre manager does not sit isolated in the office, but is very much part of the programs by spending time with her staff and the children in classrooms, or greeting families at the front door. The cook interacts with the teachers and children who are in the lunchroom. The atmosphere in the staffroom is warm and
welcoming, inviting all staff members and ECCE students to spend their lunchtime together.

*Comfort and security*

As I spent time in the centre I became aware of the importance of comfort and security for the children especially, and indeed for all members of the staff within the centre. Being an early childhood centre, it is important that children feel comfortable in the setting. The children certainly appeared happy to come to the centre every day. I observed only two instances when children had difficulties saying good-bye to their parents in the morning. In the first example a child cried, and after some negotiation between the parent, the child, and the teacher, they decided to get stickers for the child, which made the transition easier. When I followed up on this instance with the teacher I found out that this child is rarely sad to say good-bye. The stickers were for a new suggestion box that the child was responsible for decorating and it would be placed in the hallway, inviting families to leave short notes about what they would like to do at the centre. I witnessed the beautiful moment the next morning when the child beamed when she walked in with the finished box in her hands, happy to be at the centre. In the second instance mentioned above a child appeared sad for most of the morning and did not want to join in the play. The teachers made every effort to help and eventually a story caught the girl’s attention. Upon reflection on this situation with the teacher, I found out that this child’s living arrangement had recently changed, which caused her to miss her parents. Importantly, what stands out is that in both of these situations the teachers were attuned to the children’s individual needs and their response suggested that they wanted to make the children feel supported and welcome.

4.3.2 The members of the community of practice

*The members*

At the beginning of this project I set out to explore the perspectives of children and teachers as members of their community of practice. However, a major finding was that membership extends beyond children and teachers to include students, parents,
the cook, and others. I noticed a high level of collaboration and cooperation between all the members. On my first day I could not make a distinction between the students and the teachers, because students worked seamlessly alongside the teachers. The community extends into the lunchroom where it became apparent how the cook fits in to the centre engaging in friendly conversation with everyone.

**Openness and inclusiveness**

From the moment I entered the centre I became part of the complex community of practice through my contribution in my role as researcher and felt very welcome to be there. A teacher took the time to show me around, to introduce me to children and other staff members, and became my main contact person. The centre manager suggested spending time in each of the classrooms on the first day of my participant-observations before settling in one classroom. As the project evolved, however, I ended up being part of every classroom, rather than one classroom. The teachers were interested too and continued to invite me to their classrooms all week.

**Rituals and routines**

Every member is celebrated both on special occasions and in daily life. I was able to attend two birthday parties, which are very special events. Everyone meets in the common lunchroom and sings happy birthday to the child or staff member. Even though I was new, I became caught up in the moment and felt compelled with everyone to hug a staff member on her birthday. There were many other occasions where the members of this community were celebrated: when a boy finished his puzzle, a girl proudly showed a painting to her friends, or when a girl rode the bike uphill on the playground. These every day moments are acknowledged with smiles, praise, and encouragement.

**Traces of identity**

There are traces of the children and teachers throughout the centre so that as the children transition through the classrooms they get a sense of each other’s presence in every room. Photographs, artwork, and other projects displayed in the classrooms and
hallways indicate who belongs to this centre. Interestingly, there were not only photos of the current staff and children, but also group photos taken in previous years. Moreover, the children’s artwork is displayed in every classroom. A growth chart made by a group of young children shows everyone how tall they are.

4.3.3 The practice

*Children as agents*

What stands out is how each member of this centre is seen as being competent. This includes the ECCE students who work alongside the teachers and are encouraged to implement their activities and practice their guidance. Children are also considered competent, which can be observed when teachers interact with children and support them in their decisions. In one art activity a child made a dinosaur out of cardboard boxes. The child was very involved and the teacher allowed space for the project to grow. The teacher facilitated the project further by helping the child find the needed materials. In the end, the child proudly held his creation in his hands as he showed it off to his parent. In addition, the design of the space also allows for children to be competent. They can go to the bathroom without asking for assistance and easily reach the toys that they wish to play with.

*Negotiation as part of the daily practice*

The participant-observations revealed that there is a high level of negotiation at the centre. For example, rules are open to negotiation. In one situation I observed how the children were allowed to go headfirst down the slide. In some centres this might be a safety concern and thus I talked to a staff member about my observations. She informed me that in the past children were not allowed to do this, but upon reflection on the rule, they have decided to change it. Furthermore, the teachers are flexible during the transitions from room to room. When they need more time in a given room, they negotiate with their colleagues how they could accommodate that and usually find a way. It is interesting that they did not appear to see negotiation with their colleagues as an obstacle to implementing their own agenda, instead daily
communication is part of their practice and they are flexible to change their routine. Overall, they appear to work together.

**Watching out for others**

And lastly, the findings show that members of this community of practice watch out for each other. This was illustrated beautifully in the mornings, when a parent could drop-off her child with the comfort of knowing that a teacher was watching her newborn baby in the car, making the morning much easier for the family. I also felt a sense of being taken care of, when a teacher went out of her way to show me a better route to go home. On another occasion, a parent brought in a gluten-free cake mix for her child’s birthday celebration. A teacher, then, made the cake with all the children, because the birthday child could not eat regular cake.

### 4.3.4 Being part of a community

During my days of participant-observation I noticed many practices that contributed to a community feeling. There are some practices that the whole centre participates in, such as the afore-mentioned birthday parties in the lunchroom, a parade through the neighbourhood to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, and the movie afternoon at the end of the week in the lunchroom. Additionally, as the children and teachers transition from classroom to classroom, they meet each other in the hallways and interact with each other. This appeared to be an important time to socialize, exchange short stories, and remember that they all share the resources of the centre. Then, there were other moments that happened spontaneously during the day within the different classrooms. One morning, for instance, the children decided to arrange large wooden blocks in a circle. They started balancing and one child after another joined in until everyone was part of the circle. In another scene, the whole class danced with streamers to music. I experienced this dance as a participant and was moved by the overwhelming feeling of belonging to the group.
4.4 Stage two: Focus groups

In this stage of the project I conducted two focus group meetings with one small group of children and one focus group meeting with two teachers. With both groups we explored their sense of belonging by having conversations about their days at the early childhood centre. The findings are illustrated separately beginning with the focus groups with the children and then moving to the focus group with the teachers.

4.4.1 Focus groups with the children

A sense of wellbeing

One important finding in the present research project is the sense of wellbeing which the children seemed to feel while at their school. This sense of wellbeing was, in turn, associated with the children’s apparent familiarity and ease with the daily routine of the setting. This theme emerged many times during the focus groups and is illustrated very well when I asked the children how they say good-bye to their families in the mornings. The children stated, “You give them a kiss. And a hug!” However, I noticed that children think about their families a great deal throughout the day and often shared stories about home. During the focus group, one child burst out with the exciting news, “I’m getting a new baby”. At another time I learned about some of their favourite activities such as “going to the park with my doggy Daisy.”

Feeling safe and protected

Another theme that emerged was that the children feel safe. First of all, they were excited to talk to me about their centre, after only having met me a few times prior to the sessions. What is more, one of the children brought up a sensitive issue during the first focus group meeting (see section 3.9). That shows that the child was comfortable to talk to a small circle of friends and me about what might be happening at home. Furthermore, when I asked the children whom they could ask for help they said, “My mommy and daddy”. I wondered what would happen when mommy and daddy were not at school and another child replied, “Well, Shannon or Ashleigh or you”, in other words, they could ask their teachers or me. The children can approach a number of people for help when necessary, which allows them to feel safe in their environment.
Following in the same vein of wanting to feel safe and unharmed, the children were also very concerned about the things that make them or their friends sad. One child told me, “Joey was crying yesterday, he was sad.” This statement prompted us to think about what might make us feel sad. In general, the children want to have their bodies, their possessions, and also their environment protected. This is revealed in the following excerpt of our conversation:

*What makes you sad at school?*

*It makes you sad, hitting.*

*And kicking.*

*Somebody takes your food.*

*When somebody takes your toys.*

*And somebody gets Easter eggs off the branch.*

**The children as experts**

The children are comfortable at their school and can be considered as being experts. When I met with the children to ask them whether they would like to participate in this research project, I explained to them that I am writing a story about their school and that I needed their help writing it. Having said that, I felt that I needed to write something that I could bring back to the children. Thus, in the second focus group session we composed a poem together. I merely triggered the children with keywords such as “I like...” or “I play...” and they thought of what to include. They talked about their peers, families, and teachers and how to take care of each other. They also talk about their play and their favourite activities. While reading the poem I picture a complex community of practice to which these children belong, with all its members and rituals.
I like dressing up

I like dressing up
I like dressing up too
I like everything in school

I play dressing up

Riding a bike

I’m really good at running.

I am very good at skipping sometimes

I play with my mommy and daddy and my doggy

And friends

Hang on, ...the teachers!

I’m happy when you meet us

Dressing up

Playing with everything

I’m happy when I’m in school

And I like them things up there... mushrooms and carrots and tomato and broccoli

When someone is sad I hug them

I hug everybody

It makes them happy!

You say, what’s wrong?

You play with them

Then we have to help them.

And my teachers?

Teachers.

Teachers don’t have a home!

They just live here.
4.4.2 Focus group with the teachers

A home for the teachers

“Teachers don’t have a home! They just live here.” Evidently, for children there is no question that teachers belong to their school and some might even consider their teachers as part of the inventory. The focus group meeting with the two teachers revealed a similar finding as both of them identified a strong sense of belonging to their school stating that “this is like a home for us.” They have both worked at the setting for over 15 years and recall getting offered a permanent position after three years of work as one of their favourite moments. Though the teachers have gone through difficult times over the many years of work, they feel that they can count on the support of their colleagues, noting that, “We have each other”. Interestingly, it was difficult for them to identify what they could wish for if they got their hands on a magic wand, which suggests that they are very content at their job.

Openness and adaptability

One theme that emerged from the conversation with these teachers evolves around being open to change. This is illustrated beautifully when the teachers reflected about their day, telling me that they feel they do not have enough time to implement the daily curriculum. Especially, the teacher who works in the part-time program says that, “I often feel like I have to do some catching up.” They both believe that they feel less rushed since they have started working with Siolta (CECDE, 2006b), Ireland’s national quality framework for ECCE. Siolta gives them the tools to slow down the practice and follow the children’s interests by listening to them. Now they are more attuned the interests of the children. They remember, “We used to plan much more what would happen in a day, but now we are more flexible.” Changing their practice was somewhat difficult after so many years of working in a certain way, but it proved very rewarding for them. In addition to this example of changing their practice, the teachers informed me that they are about to try a new morning routine. Usually the children start their day in the same classroom every morning, but with the new routine, all classrooms will be open once a week and the children choose where to play themselves. This means that teachers are stationed in the different rooms while
children move freely from room to room depending on their interests. The teachers have discussed this idea at various staff meetings and are ready to implement it.

**Respect**

Another theme reflected in these interviews addresses the high level of respect the teachers display for all members of the community of practice, including their colleagues, the children, the families, and the ECCE students. First of all, teachers expressed that they have a lot of respect for each other as colleagues. Their perspectives in revealed that in order to belong it is essential for them to be themselves. “*I can come in and be myself.*” Feeling comfortable with who they are and having support from colleagues contributes to the warm and friendly atmosphere that they both described in the focus group. In addition, this respect for others extends to their work with children and families, and one of the teachers highlights that being tolerant is one of the most important attributes of their work. The open-door policy, for example, respects families by inviting them into the centre. In fact, when I asked the teachers whether they think the staff members of the centre have a common aim, one teacher said, “*I think we are very child-centred, and we welcome families.*” Likewise, when I asked about children being excluded from play, one teacher says, “*Oh, no. I say that everyone is allowed*”, and then shares the example of boys being delighted to dress up as princesses in her classroom. And lastly, when working with ECCE students, the teachers value them and the ideas they bring to the centre. “*They always come in with new ideas. We have had very competent students...It’s a safe space for them to try and they show a lot of initiative.*”
4.5 Stage three: Interviews

In the last stage of this exploration I spent one more day at the centre to conduct four brief interviews with a parent, an ECCE student, a teacher, and the centre manager. This range of participants allowed me to further explore what it means to belong to this centre from quite varying perspectives. I prepared a general interview schedule to guide the interviews, but added tailored questions to bring out each participant’s differing point of view.

4.5.1 The perspective of a parent

Parental involvement

The theme of parental involvement at this centre clearly stands out during the interview. The manager and staff at this centre move well beyond brief conversations with families at drop-off and pick-up and think of other ways to engage the parents. “The teachers are brilliant, because they involve us. We have coffee mornings and we do classes. Another preschool mightn’t do all of that.” These events are wonderful opportunities for the parents to meet each other, learn each other’s names, and to “have a cup of tea and a chat and then a laugh”. There are other events such as outings to the zoo or aquarium that the parents can participate in. This parent enjoys the friendship and “camaraderie between the staff” and that she can feel comfortable being with them.

Availability and sensitive responsiveness

Another finding is that from a parent’s point of view it is important that teachers are available to listen to them and treat the information confidentially. “The staff are so friendly, you can talk to them any time. There is a lovely and friendly atmosphere and you feel secure. You feel as if you can talk to the teachers and they wouldn’t repeat it to anybody.” She further notes, that the staff communicates the information respectfully, sharing it only with other teachers who work with her child. She values the teacher’s advice and their perspective.
A blend of education and care

A major finding is also that parents desire a combination of both care and education for their children. The parent remembers that her child has always been very happy to come to the centre. The aspect of care was very important in the beginning. For example, before he started, they took the time to show him all the different rooms and meet the teachers, which made her son’s first day much easier. “He was brilliant. He just literally ran in and took to it. He didn’t cry or anything.” While the parent believes that it is important that she can trust the staff to mind her child throughout the day and perhaps “spend an extra couple of minutes a day if they know there is something going on at home”, it is also important that the environment at the centre is stimulating for children’s overall development and preparation for school. She adds that at this centre they teach the children how to write, and points out that they have a white board and computer. In particular, the social aspects of development stand out, and she notes that her “child made lovely little friends. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

4.5.2 The perspective of a student

Difficulty of being a student

It is important to remember that starting a practicum can be a very anxious experience. The student that I interviewed was a first-year ECCE student on her first practicum; she had been at the centre for about four months. Initially she was anxious, but she started looking forward to coming to the centre once she learned what to anticipate. “I think when you understand their daily routines, you know what to expect. That’s what makes it a lot easier for me.” From this student’s perspective, then, it is helpful to be prepared for what to expect.

Time to practice

A second theme which emerged within this interview was the importance of creating possibilities for students to practice being a teacher. This student noted that she felt encouraged to plan and implement activities. This is important from a student’s
perspective since it is one of the main requirements for their practicum. However, tending to the students’ responsibilities might not be the norm at every placement: “I am actually encouraged to do activities here. I know from other people that are in other placements, that they are not really encouraged to do activities.” She emphasizes, “my teacher would always ask me to have an activity planned for the next week.” The student highlights, “They give us a lot of time here and they appreciate our work”. She feels fortunate that she is not left alone when she implements the activities and receives ongoing feedback. As she points out, knowing that she can talk to her supervisor and ask for help certainly makes her more confident. She remembers that she was made to feel comfortable and was able to bring in her ideas. She understands that some days might not be suitable for an activity and negotiates a better time with her practicum supervisor. “I feel as though I’m one of the teachers, but I’m not.”

4.5.3 The perspective of a teacher

Welcoming others

A key theme which emerged early in this interview was the particular emphasis which staff members place on welcoming new people that come to the centre. Having worked at the centre for about three years, she can still recall her comfort when she first started and says, “I instantly slotted in. There wasn’t really getting to know you.” She remembers that there was time before her shift to meet the colleagues in the staffroom and “have a chat with everyone”. This teacher noted that the staff at this centre are used to having “new people coming in so everybody is used to having people around. We are very social”. Furthermore, this teacher feels that she contributes to the team, “I feel like I am given a lot of responsibility and my opinion is valued.”

Collaboration

Another finding is that the supportive atmosphere at the centre encouraged the staff to ask for help and use each other as resources. For example, when this teacher first started she was a special needs teacher with little experience. She remembers that the
manager directed her towards staff members that had a lot of relevant experience. Being told to ask for help made it easy for her to approach her colleagues. The teacher tells me that “even yesterday we had a meeting, and I had a problem with a child. I didn’t know what to do and asked for advice and it was really good.” Being able to talk about her difficulties without being judged was very important for her. “Before working here I would have felt that if I ask for help, I’m not working well enough, but everyone at the meeting suggested to try this or try that.”

**Being a professional**

A third theme that emerged in the interview with the teacher is her wish for ECCE to be more recognized. For example, the teacher states that having a curriculum for all children is important, but at the moment Ireland’s early childhood curriculum *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) is not mandatory. In addition to that, staying updated with current practices is important. Working with *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006b), Ireland’s national quality framework for ECCE, has been exciting for her and inspired her to engage with fresh ideas. Like in other professions, ongoing professional development is important “if we are going to be taken seriously”.

4.5.4 The perspective of the centre manager

**Staff morale**

From a management perspective, building up the staff morale is very important in order to create a sense of belonging at the centre. The manager remembers that the staff morale used to be very low when she first started managing over 17 years ago. Today she can say that they “value each other very highly. There is a huge amount of respect for each other and respect for each others abilities and qualities.” She continues to remind the staff of her motto, “If we can’t look after each other, there is no point in looking after all of the families we look after.” The manager found that one way to build up the morale was to ensure that there is time allocated for staff interactions and “non-contact time with the children”, which in her opinion “just means that nobody feels isolated”. Therefore, the staff members have time to meet at
the beginning and end of their day, at lunchtime, and sometimes even at social outings.

**Being committed to the community**

A further finding is that the centre is rooted within its larger community. For example, the manager tells me that children go on walks within the neighbourhood or visit the seniors in the nursing home nearby. She continues, “*We are very involved in the community, with the schools, the health centre, the youth club, and the church.*” This community spirit has to be nurtured and she notes, “*It takes work. It does take work.*” Additionally, there are hopes for development in their neighbourhood, which would then connect their centre to the Health Service sector. The manager points out, that the possibility of working alongside other professionals in a multidisciplinary team connects to the dream that they had when they designed the building.

**Advocacy**

Finally, she highlights the importance of believing in and advocating for the work we do within the early childhood sector. In the manager’s opinion, it is time to improve documenting “*what is happening within your service and what should be happening in your service.*” Both *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) and *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006b) have brought recognition for the sector and were a way of documenting our work. The manager believes that their centre already has a high level of quality, and thus *Aistear* and *Siolta* have not changed their practice as such, but have verbalized what they are already doing. However, she feels that teachers do not always believe that they are doing extraordinary work because “*it is just part of our day.*” Therefore, an aim is to continue to practice documenting their work.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to draw together the key findings that were presented in the previous chapter and to provide a discussion of these findings by building on the main themes that emerged and making connections to relevant literature. This detailed analysis of the data is accomplished always bearing in mind the aim of this research project, which was to explore the sense of belonging within an early childhood setting, or within a community of practice, from multiple perspectives. Upon reflection on the findings, the following discussion highlights how the members’ individual and social identity is supported within this centre, how children contributed to the research project, factors that facilitated a sense of belonging for the various members, and how a community of practice can be a space for renewal. Combined, these aspects of the discussion formulate a rich picture of the pedagogical approach at this centre.

5.2 Identity and belonging

A key topic explored in the present study was the extent to which a sense of identity and belonging can be generated and promoted within an early years setting. It is noteworthy that Ireland’s curriculum framework *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) emphasizes the theme of *Identity and Belonging* as one of its four themes. This theme reflects a shift from traditional curricula which are structured around more traditional concepts such as developmental domains or school subjects. *Aistear*, on the other hand, focuses on more abstract concepts and attempts to access a more holistic portrait of early childhood learning and developments. The emphasis moves away from exclusive measurement of children’s abilities to an emphasis on documentation and description of children’s learning. For example, in comparison to math skills, the theme of *Identity and Belonging* is difficult to measure. The present study addresses this need to document and describe a sense of identity and belonging, which is also reflected in the methodological approach chosen for this research project. As a result, the sense of belonging of the members of the community of practice is revealed through narratives and observations rather than completing a checklist.
The findings of this exploration revealed that members of this community do feel a sense of belonging. Interestingly, fostering a sense of belonging characterized this centre’s practice even before adopting *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a). From the interviews I learned that members of this community of practice feel fortunate about being a member of this centre and most believe that the practice is better than elsewhere. Though their practice has not changed noticeably with *Aistear*, a national learning framework remains valuable. For one, *Aistear* acknowledges the work being done at this centre by giving recognition to teachers. Moreover, it is important for a country to have a document like *Aistear* to highlight aspirations for the present and future (OECD, 2004), draw attention to the importance of ECCE, and to improve the overall level of quality in ECCE. In the following section I discuss two of the four aims of *Aistear’s* theme of *Identity and Belonging*; I will start with individual identity and then move on to discuss social identity.

### 5.2.1 Individual identity and belonging

A striking theme that emerged in the present study was the support provided for the development of children’s individual identity and sense of belonging. In his work on communities of practice Wenger (1998) confirms the interconnectedness of identity and belonging. The author states that members have a unique identity, which continues to be renegotiated through participation in their communities of practice. Thus, our identity is neither fixed nor can it be reached and the groups we belong to inform our identity.

Interestingly, the lens through which we view children informs children’s possibilities for participation. Corresponding with the image of the child put forth in the sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; Jenks, 2005), children at this setting were seen as beings and active participants with unique interests, needs, and abilities. In this research project children appeared to have the space to *be* themselves and, as Wenger (1998) suggests, to renegotiate their identities. For instance, in the focus groups I learned that dramatic play or “dressing up” is one of their favourite activities at the centre. In their play they can try out different identities and explore other possible identities for themselves. Engaging in dramatic play allows children to enter different worlds and explore different vantage points. The findings revealed that the teachers do
not make gender distinctions during dramatic play, and as such it can offer an avenue for children to re-define what it means to be a boy or a girl. Similarly, this connects to the work of Greene (1995) who believes that the arts can invite new perspectives to interpret life. Rather than rejecting difference, imagining other ways of being might lead to children living comfortably with difference.

A theme that resurfaced throughout the research project was that children are members of their families and communities. For children to feel a sense of belonging, their learning must be situated within their unique contexts and acknowledge that they come with their own histories (Bath, 2009). Celebrating their cultural heritage on St. Patrick’s Day with a parade through the neighbourhood, or carrying a photo of the new baby sister are examples from my participant-observations that reflect that the practice is indeed responsive to the children’s heritage. Hence, the focus shifts from seeing the child as becoming a future member of society to seeing the child as being a member of its community today (James & James, 2004). Consequently the learning in this community is meaningful to the children within this unique context, an approach to learning also put forth in Aistear (NCCA, 2009a).

Overall, I found that the centre provides a safe and welcoming space to its members where everyone is respected for their unique identity. A key aspect of this support was the warm and welcoming atmosphere within the setting, which was highlighted across all interviews. Feeling comfortable, valued, and welcome in your community is important because it nurtures a positive image of the self (CECDE, 2006a). Woodhead and Brooker (2008) highlight how recognition can strengthen a sense of belonging. An early years centre can build on this finding by reflecting the importance of affection and the child’s right to identity in their pedagogical approach (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). Likewise, in the present study the findings indicate that recognizing the members’ right to identity is strongly connected to their sense of belonging. Furthermore, the warm atmosphere allows members of this community to put themselves in vulnerable positions, as they can trust that other members will respond respectfully and withhold judgement. The practice therefore highlights our responsibility toward the uniqueness of other members. Todd (2001), who elaborates on the work of Levinas, states that refraining from making the other the same allows us to attend to the intangible space between members of our community. This brings
ambiguity to education, as our response to the other is not predictable. Importantly, in this pedagogy members can be themselves with their own unique and complex heritage without risking exclusion from their community.

5.2.2 Social identity and belonging

Interestingly, the present study’s findings revealed that not only individual identity, but also social identity is an important factor in supporting a member’s sense of belonging. This sense of social identity appears to be deeply embedded within the culture of the centre. A very important feature of this sense of identity were the connections and interdependence which were evident in the narratives of the children, practitioners, parents, and other participants. A sense of belonging is often connected to intangible moments, which lie in the space between (Aoki, 2005) the members of the community of practice. For example, social identity and a sense of belonging were evident when the children of a classroom danced together as a group, when all children came together to watch a movie in the lunchroom, or when children and teachers meet each other as they transition to the next classroom. In addition, the new routine that allows children to choose where to play in the mornings, will bring about more interaction between the different groups and accentuates the idea that children are members of the centre at large not just their own classrooms. Likewise, the display of class photos in the hallway contributes to the sense of belonging to this community of practice. These shared practices can be considered as the ‘glue’ that holds us together as described by Woodhead and Brooker (2008).

In addition, the findings of the study revealed that it is not sufficient to imagine a caring community, the members have to work at creating and maintaining it. This is congruent with Dahlberg and Moss (2005) who state that Utopian thought is not enough “to bring about…change” (p. 179); it also requires action. The sense of belonging at this centre was a dream that has been acted on by the manager and multiple members of the community now maintain it. The manager’s motto stands out, reminding the staff of the importance of nurturing the space between each other, “If we can’t look after each other, there is no point in looking after all of the families we look after.” Greene (1995) also reminds us of the importance of connecting people with each other. The author’s ideas of creating spaces where we know each other’s
names as the basis for reaching out beyond our immediate communities are reflected within the culture at this centre where members take care of each other and offer help.

In the same caring vein, the teachers at this centre tell me that they do not let children exclude one another during play. This can be likened to Paley (1992) who opposes peer rejection and enacted the rule ‘You can’t say you can’t play’ in her classroom. It appears that the teachers at this centre share Paley’s dream. Similarly to Paley (1992) and Greene (1995), the members of this community of practice envision a caring and humane world for all. Within this world, decisions are situated within their context and affect real people. It allows them to respond to their responsibility toward others and thus embrace an ethics of care (as discussed in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Vasconcelos, 2006; Cockburn, 2005). A teacher watching a baby in the car while the parent drops off the other child at the centre is an example of the extraordinary level of care for each other.

5.3 Competent children

Importantly, children are seen as competent members of this community of practice. This view of children contributes to their sense of belonging. For instance, the purpose-built centre allows children to be successful and independent, since the environment is designed with children’s participation in mind so that children’s agency is not constrained. Similarly, understanding the child as being competent is also reflected in the pedagogy at the centre. Children are listened to and taken seriously. This became evident especially during the participant-observations where I observed a practice that respects children and their interests. This corresponds with the framework for working with children put forth in Aistear (NCCA, 2009a). Importantly, it appears that coming to the centre is worthy of the children’s time. They can participate in activities they like such, as dressing up, and they can socialize with their friends and teachers. Enabling children to make decisions about their day corresponds with the image of the child put forward within the paradigm of the sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; Jenks, 2005) where children are seen as active agents.
The children’s contribution to this project is invaluable and drawing on their expertise added richness to the research project as they shared what it means to belong from their perspective. The educational philosopher Greene (1995) believes in the importance of drawing on multiple perspectives to generate new understandings. The children, then, offered a unique insight into their world, which, if taken seriously, can inform the theory and practice at this centre. For example, in my conversations with the children I found that children like to talk about their families throughout the day. The centre’s open-door policy, which invites families at all times, reflects the important role that families play in the children’s lives. The perspective offered by the sociology of childhood supports this. Here children are considered as active agents and Woodhead (2006) emphasizes that children are entangled in a net of relations within their complex cultural context. In light of this, continuing to strengthen these connections between home and the centre appears important.

A limitation to doing research with young children lies in the interpretation of the findings. Due to time restrictions I analyzed the findings separately, rather than in collaboration with the children and other participants. However, including children in this phase might have affected my understanding of the findings. Including children in the interpretation is congruent with seeing the child as a competent member of their community. Similarly, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest that children’s perspectives can reveal surprising interpretations of the findings. In addition, this technique invites multiple interpretations rather than one true interpretation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This notion of incompleteness resonates with me in particular as it leaves room for uncertainty and ambiguity.

5.4 Factors facilitating a sense of belonging

5.4.1 Rituals

This community of practice has numerous rituals that foster the members’ sense of belonging. For example, the children and staff are celebrated on their birthday, adults have a cup of tea together, and children watch a movie at the end of the week in the common lunchroom. These rituals can be interpreted as the enactment of the underlying theories that shape the practice at this centre. This idea is supported by
Wenger (1998), who states that members of a community of practice draw on explicit documents and regulations in their work. For instance, *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) can be seen as a guiding document for practice and provides a loose framework to follow. Likewise, the manager’s motto about taking care of each other informs these rituals. Performing these rituals adds to the development of a social identity at this centre.

Remarkably, the members of the community can read subtleties a stranger would not understand. Wenger (1998) refers to these as implicit rules or guidelines. An example of this is the hourglass that is used to give the children a warning that clean-up time is about to happen shortly. The children understand this ritual, and the teacher no longer needs to explain what happens when the sand runs through the clock. Likewise, Fleer (2003) points out that “[m]eaning does not reside in an individual or even in printed matter, but, rather, meaning exists through a dynamic process of living in the world” (p. 76). A sense of belonging is felt when a member learns to interpret the explicit and implicit practices of their community of practice. As this research project was conducted more than half a year after the beginning of the school year the members had sufficient time to become familiar with the practices at this centre.

### 5.4.2 Communication

The findings revealed that there is a strikingly high level of communication between all members within this particular ECCE setting, which contributes to the sense of belonging in this community of practice. This includes various levels of communication, between children, teachers, the manager, the families, the cook, and ECCE students. The flexible boundaries facilitate communication, as members of the centre meet each other throughout the day. What stands out is that members at this centre practice a model of conversation that is characterized by the back and forth exchanges between members rather than being one-directional. This is particularly evident in the teachers’ interactions with the children. The findings show that children are indeed listened to and heard, which is foundational to the pedagogical practice in Reggio Emilia (Clark et al., 2005). Furthermore, viewing children as capable roots the practice at this setting within the paradigm of the sociology of childhood (James & James, 2004; Jenks, 2005), where children active participants in their communities. Likewise, the daily dialogue between families and teachers mirrors the belief that
children are actors in complex social systems (James & James, 2004). The boundaries between the child’s home and the early childhood centre constantly overlap and thus the child’s learning at home informs the learning at the centre and vice versa.

From a postmodern perspective, ‘the community of those who have nothing in common’ comes to mind (Biesta, 2004), where members are unique and not interchangeable. Importantly, what matters in this community is that something is said, however what is said is meaningless (Biesta, 2004). The response to the other is what counts, such as responding to the parent who was going through a difficult situation at home. Shifting the focus from what is said to that something is said makes ‘the community of those who have nothing in common’ “ethical and political” (Biesta, 2004, p. 310) and brings with it the possibility of creating a space for everyone to be heard. How ethics and politics inform the practice in this centre becomes evident in the teachers’ focus group, which revealed that tolerance is very important in their work with families. As Bath (2009) states, “discrimination exists to police the borders of belonging” (p. 19). Perhaps, then, being open towards others helps to break down these borders, which creates a sense of belonging for all members of this setting.

5.4.3 Time

An interesting theme that emerged from the findings is that of allowing time for all members of the community of practice to be. The findings revealed that students are provided sufficient time to implement their activities, parents are given time to be listened to, teachers have time to meet in the staff room, and children are given time to play. Providing ample time for everyone to participate on a daily basis and to perform in their roles as members in this community might enhance their sense of belonging. Not feeling rushed allows members to experience a sense of comfort and security. Taking time to listen and giving time to talk not only slows down the practice, it also shows that all members are valued and being taken care of. This pedagogy connects to the work of Aoki (2005) who reminds us that curriculum unfolds in the spaces between children, teachers, and the school subjects. This interpretation of curriculum invites us to focus on the lived experiences.
Moreover, time plays an important role in the sense that it takes time and long-term commitment to build a community. Greene (1995) stresses that “[i]n thinking of community, we need to emphasize the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like. Community cannot be produced simply through rational formulation nor through edict” (p. 39). This stands true in this centre as well, as it takes ongoing commitment and dedication to build up the staff morale and family involvement. A challenge that remains is how to inspire all members to participate. Thus, acknowledging the different ways the members participate is important. It involves bringing out and responding to everyone’s strengths as a base for creating opportunities for successful participation. For example, the new suggestion box in the hallway might be suitable for families who are less verbal and would prefer to write down a comment. Offering different workshops for families gives them yet another way to participate. For children on the other hand, rotating through the various rooms gives them a chance to participate in their favourite play – which appeared to be dressing up during the data collection phase.

Lastly, one of the findings relating to time is in connection to the curriculum. Teachers point out that they used to feel rushed throughout the day, due to the pressure to plan and implement the curriculum with the children. With Siolta (CECDE, 2006b), however, teachers have been able to shift their attention to dedicating more time to follow up on the children’s interests. While the teachers feel less rushed, this practice is also more sensitive to the children’s needs. For example, though the children appear to enjoy rotating through the rooms on a daily basis, some children might feel rushed with the amount of transitions. Having all the rooms open one morning a week eliminates these transitions for the children, allowing them to slow down and get engaged in their play at their own pace, which allows for a richer and more meaningful experience in their community.

5.5 A space for renewal

One of the interesting findings in this research project was the centre’s openness to new ideas. Through participation in their communities members renegotiate meaning (Wenger, 1998), which highlights that meaning is not static. Whether ECCE students bring in new activities during their practicum, or teachers plan to change the daily
routine at the centre for one morning a week, or families are invited to bring in suggestions, all these ideas are welcome and open for negotiation. The practice of negotiation between the members in this early childhood centre shows that all members are valued and consulted. Negotiation is central in a community of practice and affirms that there are multiple ways of doing things, rather than one right way.

Consequently, learning is also characterized by a back and forth between the members rather than a more traditional model in which teachers hold the knowledge and passes it on to students (Moss, 2006). For example, ECCE students are part of the daily operations of the centre and feel very welcome to be there. The learning is reciprocal and while students learn from the teachers and children during their practicum, teachers and children also learn from students. Indeed, teachers highlighted that the students keep their work fresh. Furthermore, this early childhood centre displayed openness toward the proposed research project and toward me in my role as researcher. In fact, after collecting all the data I was invited back to the centre to speak at a staff meeting about some of the initial findings of the study, which is another indicator that the staff members show commitment to engage in reflective practice. Indeed, their practice and enthusiasm to make new meanings brings to mind Moss’ (2006) image of the teacher as researcher.

Mac Naughton (2005) highlights that generally the “conditions of professional learning in much of the early childhood field starve early childhood educators of the nutrients that support them to proactively, enthusiastically and knowingly draw on leading edge theories to push the possibilities for democracy” (p. 190). Conversely, this centre dedicates time for reflective practice. Setting aside time for weekly staff meetings, Siolta (CECDE, 2006b) training, the supervision of students, or even a research projects such as this one shows that the renewal of practice is a priority of the teachers at this centre.

Fleer (2003), however, reminds us, that it is difficult to step outside the discourse we find ourselves in, yet, by inviting others into their space, this centre creates opportunities to challenge what they take for granted. Wenger (1998) proposes that a community of practice “is a good context to explore radically new insights” (p. 214). In this research project, the community of practice welcomes new perspectives. This
allows the members to make their work transparent and open to the public, by inviting ECCE students, for example. Negotiating these different points of views keeps the practice thoughtful and engaged. In this pedagogical approach it is impossible for teachers to plan a prescriptive and detailed curriculum, rather the curriculum is generated in the encounter mainly between the teachers and the children, but also the other community members. This can be likened to the approach that emerged in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Clark et al., 2005). Rather than implementing a predetermined curriculum, the curriculum evolves and responds to the interests of the children.

Likewise, the staff members work closely with Siolta (CECDE, 2006b), Ireland’s national quality framework for ECCE. By engaging in Siolta training, they learn to reflect on their work as professionals. One teacher tells me about the training and states in the interview that “it does change the way you think. It keeps your mind going and thinking.” This ongoing professional development allows the staff to step outside their discourse (Fleer, 2003) and to engage with their work from a critical stance and infuse their work with ethical and political thought. On a larger scale, Siolta can be seen to create a community of practice for Ireland’s ECCE professionals, giving them a common aim to strive for. Indeed, communities of practice are recognized as a means of professional development (Sheridan, Pope Edwards, Marvin, Knoche, 2009). A benefit of communities of practice is the sustained engagement with learning that can help teachers develop new “skills, behaviors, and dispositions” (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 379).
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1 Conclusion

This research project was carried out in Dublin, Ireland, and aimed to explore what it means to belong to an early childhood centre from various perspectives. The project was conducted in three distinct phases, each phase informing and shaping the next. This dynamic nature of the project opened up the possibility to include the perspectives of an ECCE student, a parent, and the centre manager in addition to the children and their teachers. This added richness and complexity to the project, placing the study in the postmodern paradigm and resisting the possibility of finding one true understanding of what it means to belong to this centre or any centre. Hence, the findings are contextualized and cannot be generalized, though they certainly offer rich data that can trigger further research.

The research project was a response to the ethical commitment as teachers to create democratic classrooms where everyone is heard. Paley’s (1992) fifth grader comes to mind again. Accepting exclusion as a matter of life he believes that “you may as well learn it now” (Paley, 1992, p. 22). Strikingly, the pedagogical approach observed at this community of practice is responsive to its members nurturing their unique identity and their sense of belonging. The approach encompasses all members of the community of practice.

The research questions were explored in depth. They were woven throughout the project and guided the inquiry at all three stages. To sum up, the findings drew a picture of how Aistear’s (NCCA, 2009a) theme Identity and Belonging is enacted in this community of practice revealing that a sense of belonging is nurtured both by a high level of respect for individual identities and by the interconnectedness of members. In addition, the narratives of multiple members and what it means to belong from their perspective enriched this project. Themes that stand out are the importance of rituals, time, and communication, and, above all, respect. As a researcher I was able to enter the community of practice. Interestingly, the borders between insider and outsider became blurred, due to the emphasis placed on welcoming strangers to their community.
6.2 Implications

*To say that education is a social function, securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong, is to say in effect that education will vary with the quality of life which prevails in a group.* (Dewey, 1944, p. 81 as cited in Nyland, 2008, p. 26)

Revisiting Dewey’s words after carrying out the research project and analyzing the findings enriches my initial interpretation of the quote. Education at this centre is indeed understood as a social process unfolding within their community of practice. Children, teachers, families, and ECCE students, among others, participate and shape the learning within their group. The amount of respect for all members and the strong sense of belonging suggest that members create a good life for themselves at the centre. Dewey highlights the interconnectedness of education and the quality of life. Following his idea, it becomes evident that a sense of belonging has an impact on learning experiences in our classrooms. The implication of this project, then, is to continue dreaming about a better state of education and to have the courage to act on your dreams. This attaches us to the daily practices and makes our work ethical by assuming responsibility and rejecting exclusionary practices. This is true on all levels, from teachers to managers as far as curriculum and policy developers.

6.3 Recommendations for future work

Firstly, the findings of the research project suggests that providing teachers with space and time to work together was an important component of their practice. Therefore, designing more spaces for teachers to meet and to engage in reflective practice is crucial. These spaces can be sites for teachers to renew their practice and question what is commonsensical. In other words, creating possibilities for teachers to connect will contribute to the development of communities of practice in ECCE. These communities can begin at the local level and then extend further outwards. For instance, with the support of regional leaders in ECCE and advocacy groups, teachers of one early childhood centre can start to network with other centres within their community, their city, or even their country. Support in forms of funding for teachers
should be provided to establish these communities of practice. These communities can empower teachers to make ethical judgments and contribute to innovative practices. Moreover, as teachers find their voice together, they can start making an impact on the broader community as well as policy level by sharing their ideas in newsletters, articles, or seminars. As Wenger (1998) points out, learning in communities of practice can be transformative for its members. This highlights the importance of allowing teachers to support and inspire each other and establishing communities of practice as a catalyst for change. In addition to setting up communities of practice, researching their effectiveness over time as a mode of professional development is an area still unexplored (Sheridan et al., 2009).

Secondly, to further develop a framework for best practices and to create a richer picture of the factors that facilitate or hinder a sense of belonging, a comparative study of two or more early childhood settings can be conducted. Interestingly, this study can potentially provide valuable feedback on the implementation of Aistear [NCCA, 2009a]. In addition, a longitudinal study exploring the impacts of a sense of belonging in early childhood and can highlight some of the reasons that make it so important for early learning. Growing up in Ireland (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2013) is such a study, however more focus on the early years is needed. This becomes staggeringly important in light of a recent crisis in the early years sector in Ireland in response to a documentary in which secretly recorded and disturbing aspects to practice in private early childhood settings were shown (Carroll, 2013, May 29 in The Irish Times). Consequently, this has drawn a lot of attention to the issue of quality in ECCE and in particular to the importance of interaction between children and the professionals working with them in these settings.

Thirdly, viewing children as agents and experts of their life has been a main theme of this research project. Working in partnership with children was essential. To ensure that education is worthy of children’s time, children must be seen as participants. Hence, consulting with children in regards to valuable learning experiences and the structure of services provided becomes a priority. Clark and Moss (2011) have already developed helpful tools to draw on children’s perspectives. Their mosaic approach builds on researching with children, rather than on children, by building on their
strengths. More research with children can inform our understanding on best practices.

Lastly, more research with young children needs to be carried out not only in Ireland, but also on a global level. As ECCE is climbing up the agenda (Moss, 2010) it can gather momentum for policy development. Designing professional development, including graduate programs, communities of practice, and other training opportunities for early years teachers should be prioritized at this stage. In this way, countries can develop a pool of ECCE researchers, which will allow teachers to conduct research themselves and contribute to the current developments foregrounding complexities and multiple truths. These teachers will have the tools to re-construct the field of ECCE and re-envision education from within.
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Appendix 1: Invitation letter to centre manager

Dear Centre Manager,

My name is Antje Bitterberg and I am a postgraduate student in the International Master in Early Childhood Education program at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This program is offered in cooperation with Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences and the University of Malta. To complete my studies I will be conducting a small-scale research project that will be central to my Master’s thesis. This project is entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”.

This is an invitation for your setting to participate in this research project. I am interested in exploring the perspectives of educators and children about their understandings of the concept of ‘a sense of belonging’. The topic for this project resonates with the theme Identity and Belonging found in Aistear. If you wish to participate, I will spend a week in your setting to meet the children and educators and join them in the daily activities. After that initial week I plan to have a focus group with one small group of your educators and another focus group with about five of the children aged four. Lastly, I intend to have one more meeting with the participating educators and the children together so that they can exchange their understandings of ‘a sense of belonging’ and make meaning together. This project intends to contribute to your community of practice.

Your setting as well as the participants will remain anonymous and all information will be kept confidential. The information gathered will be shared with my academic supervisor Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny at DIT. I have obtained ethical clearance for this study from the Head of School of Social Sciences and Law. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, I would be happy to speak to you. You can reach me by e-mail at antje@mydit.ie or by phone at 085-236 8871.

Thank you kindly for your time and consideration, Antje Bitterberg
Appendix 2: Consent form centre manager

Participant’s Consent: Centre Manager

I agree for my centre to take part in the study entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”, which has been explained to me. By participating in this study I am happy to invite Antje Bitterberg into the classroom as a participant-observer for one week and to provide access to my staff and children to participate in focus groups provided that they give their consent.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I have been informed that the name of our centre will not be disclosed and the identity of all the participants will remain anonymous. The information gathered will be written up as the researcher’s Master Thesis and might lead to the publication of an article in the future. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from the study at any time.

________________________________________

Participant’s Name (please print)

________________________________________

Participant’s Signature

________________________________________

Date
Appendix 3: Invitation letter to staff members

Dear staff member,

My name is Antje Bitterberg and I am a postgraduate student in the International Master in Early Childhood Education program at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This program is offered in cooperation with Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences and the University of Malta. To complete my studies I will be conducting a small-scale research project that will be central to my Master’s thesis. This project is entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”.

This is an invitation for you to participate in the proposed research project. I am interested in exploring the perspectives of educators and children about their understandings of the concept of ‘a sense of belonging’. The topic for this project resonates with the theme Identity and Belonging found in Aistear. If you wish to participate, I will spend up to a week in your classroom, joining you and the children in the daily activities. After that initial week I plan to have a focus group with you and your participating colleagues and another focus group with a group of children. Lastly, I intend to have one more meeting with the participating educators and the children together to exchange understandings of ‘a sense of belonging’ and make meaning together. This project intends to contribute to your community of practice.

Your setting as well as your identity will remain anonymous and all information will be kept confidential. The information gathered will be shared with my academic supervisor Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny at DIT. I have obtained ethical clearance for this study from the Head of School of Social Sciences and Law. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, I would be happy to speak to you. You can reach me by e-mail antje@mydit.ie or by phone at 085-236 8871.

Thank you kindly for your time and consideration,

Antje Bitterberg
Appendix 4: Consent form for teachers

Participant’s Consent: Teacher

I agree to take part in the study entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”, which has been explained to me. Participation in this study entails the following: the researcher, Antje Bitterberg, will join the daily routine in the classroom for up to a week and I will participate in two focus group meetings.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I have been informed that the name of our centre will not be disclosed and the identity of all the participants will remain anonymous. The focus group meetings will be audio recorded. The information gathered will be written up as the researcher’s Master Thesis and might lead to the publication of an article in the future. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from the study at any time.

___________________________
Participant’s Name (please print)

___________________________
Participant’s Signature

___________________________
Date
Appendix 5: Focus Group schedule for teachers

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How long have you worked here? Which age group of children do you work with? What is your educational background?
2. How do you welcome children at the beginning of the year? Do you continue any of these practices throughout the year to ensure that children feel that they belong to your centre? How does this extend to the families?
3. What does ‘a sense of belonging’ mean to you? What are the ingredients you would combine to create a ‘sense of belonging’?
4. How/ in what ways do you think children feel valued in your school?
5. In what ways do you attend to the interests of the individual child? And how do you attend to the needs of the group of children? How do you balance this?
6. In what ways do the physical features of your school and your approach to working with children contribute to the understanding of the child as a capable learner?
7. How do you respond when someone is excluded because of their ability, gender, age…?
8. Your centre is always open to ECCE students. In what ways does working with students affect your work and the culture at your centre?
9. What are the benefits/disadvantages of sharing the rooms and materials?
10. Do you have time set aside to reflect on your work together? Is there room for you to disagree with each other and bring up conflicts? How do you work together as a team?
11. Are you involved with the wider community?
12. Other than making a living, when you come to your school in the mornings, do you have an aim in mind what you would like to do? Do you think you have a common goal? If so, what could that be?
13. Can you think of your favourite time/moment/event at your centre? Why does this stand out?
14. If -for some reason- you go to another centre, what would you like to hold on to and bring with you to your new setting?
15. If you had a magic wand, what would you do?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix 6: Consent from for children

Participant’s Consent: Child

My name is: ________________________________

I have met Antje and she explained this project to me. I can ask questions if I don’t understand.

I am happy to participate in the group meetings with Antje and share my ideas.

I know that I can change my mind and stop participating in the group meetings.

My name or what I say will not be shared with people outside this group.

I know that the conversations are recorded and had the opportunity to listen to my voice.
Appendix 7: Focus Group schedule for children

Getting to know you:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Who is in your family?
2. Which language do you speak?
3. What makes you feel happy? And at school?
4. What makes you feel sad? And at school?

Spending time in the school:

1. Who brings you to school? How do you say good-bye?
2. Do you know if your parents talk to your teachers?
3. What do you look forward to when you arrive in the morning?
4. Who do you like to play with?
5. Do you like playing in the different rooms? Think of the rooms together (The construction room? The messy room? Outside?) Do you have a favourite?
6. Is any of your art on the wall or do you know if there is a photo of you? (class photos of everyone.)
7. What is your favourite thing about your school?
8. What do you think do your teachers love most about being here?
9. How did you like going on a parade with your friends last week at school?
10. How do you like the movie Friday?
11. What’s the difference between your home and your school?

The group of peers:

1. What are you good at?
2. What do you need help with? How do you help each other in this group? Who helps you? Whom do you help?
3. How do you choose the games that you play and who will play with you?
Relationship with the teachers:

1. What do you do with your teachers?
2. How do you and the teachers choose what to do when you come to school (e.g. what toys to play with, what to do for art…)

Conflict:

1. What happens when there is a conflict at school? For example, what do you do when a friend takes your toy or breaks what you’ve been working on?
2. How does that make you feel? Who helps you? How does the conflict get resolved?

What does it mean to belong?

1. What does the word mean to you?
2. Do you know what it means when we say you belong to a place or a person?
3. Do you feel you belong to your school? What makes you feel that?
4. Who belongs to your school?

Other ideas for focus group sessions:

1. Last third of the first session: Drawing a picture for our story.
2. Last third of the second session: In this story about your school, what should we write about? Some possible cues for our story:

   I like...
   I play...
   I’m happy when...
   When someone is sad I...
   I’m really good at...
   My teachers...
   If I had a magic wand I would...
   I laugh when...
Appendix 8: Invitation letter to interviewees

Hello,

My name is Antje Bitterberg and I am a postgraduate student in the International Master in Early Childhood Education program at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This program is offered in cooperation with Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences and the University of Malta. To complete my studies I will be conducting a small-scale research project that will be central to my Master’s thesis. This project is entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”. The topic for this project resonates with the theme Identity and Belonging found in Aistear.

This is an invitation for you to participate in the proposed research project. I am interested in exploring the community of practice at your centre from various perspectives. Your understanding of the concept of ‘a sense of belonging’ within this community offers an invaluable and unique perspective. If you wish to participate, I plan to have a brief interview with you, which could last up to 15 minutes.

Your identity will remain anonymous and all information will be kept confidential. The information gathered will be shared with my academic supervisor Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny at DIT. I have obtained ethical clearance for this study from the Head of School of Social Sciences and Law. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, I would be happy to speak to you. You can reach me by e-mail at antje@mydit.ie or by phone at 085-236 8871.

Thank you kindly for your time and consideration,

Antje Bitterberg
Appendix 9: Consent form interviewees

Participant’s Consent:

I agree to take part in the study entitled “Feeling a sense of belonging in the Early Childhood Centre: An exploration into a community of practice”, which has been explained to me. My participation in this study entails a brief 15 minute interview with the researcher, Antje Bitterberg.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I have been informed that the name of the participating centre will not be disclosed and the identity of all the participants will remain anonymous. The interview will be audio recorded. The information gathered will be written up as the researcher’s Master Thesis and might lead to the publication of an article in the future. My participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from the study at any time.

____________________________________

Participant’s Name (please print)

____________________________________

Participant’s Signature

____________________________________

Date
Appendix 10: Interview questions Stage Three

1. Please tell me briefly about yourself and your connection to this school. (E.g. What is your role? How long have you been here.)
2. Do you remember what it was like to start at this school?
3. How would you describe your sense of belonging to this school? What are the ingredients?
4. What does your relationship with others in the school look like (with the teachers, parents, children, students).
5. What is important to you as a __________ working in an early childhood setting?
6. If there were a problem would you feel confident approaching someone to discuss it with?
7. What would you miss if you moved on to a new school?