

2009-09-01

Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education; Teacher's perspectives.

Sandra O'Neill
Technological University Dublin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschssldis>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Sandra: Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education; Teacher's perspectives. Dublin, DIT, September 2009.

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Sciences at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

**Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education;
Teacher's perspectives.**

A thesis was submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for award of Masters in Child Family and Community Studies.

By

Sandra O'Neill

September 2009

Supervisor; Ann Marie Halpenny

Department of Social Science, Dublin Institute of Technology

Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis toward the award of the **Masters (M.A.) in Child, Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of Candidate: _____

Date: _____

Acknowledgements:

Primarily, I would like to thank all of those who participated in the study for taking the time to share their experience with me and for giving their opinions in such an open and honest manner. Without their input this research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my supervisor Ann Marie Halpenny for her advice and support throughout this process.

Special thanks to my family and my colleagues for their endless patience. I'll stop talking about Síolta now, I promise.

Table of Contents

	Page
Declaration of Ownership	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Abbreviations	vii
Glossary	viii
Abstract	x
Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Aims of the study	1
1.3 Rational for the Study	1
1.4 Outline of the Study	2
Chapter Two: Literature Review	4
2.1 Introduction	4
2.2 What is Quality and why is it so Important?	4
2.3 Background to Síolta	6
2.4 Why involve primary schools in an Early Years Initiative?	6
2.5 Current Infant Curriculum	7
2.6 Critique of current practice in Infant classes.....	7
2.7 Why has practical change been so slow?	8
2.8 Teacher’s perspectives on difficulties implementing the curriculum.....	11
2.9 How can Síolta improve practice?	12
Chapter Three: Methodology	14
3.1 Introduction	14
3.2 Background to Qualitative Research	14
3.3 Sample	15
3.4 Sample Access and Recruitment	15
3.5 Research Tool	16

3.6	Limitations of the study	18
3.7	Data Analysis	18
3.8	Ethical Considerations	19
3.9	Conclusion	19
Chapter Four: Findings		20
4.1	Introduction	20
4.2	Structural Issues	20
4.2.1	Work overload	20
4.2.2	Curriculum	21
4.2.3	Resources	22
4.2.4	Play	22
4.2.5	Training and School Evaluation	23
4.3	Dynamic Issues.....	24
4.3.1	Transition to infant classes	24
4.3.2	Teacher’s perspectives of Pre-school services	24
4.3.3	Síolta Structure	25
4.3.4	Awareness of Síolta	26
4.4	Personal Beliefs	26
4.4.1	Teacher’s Attitudes	26
4.4.2	Ill-feeling toward the Department of Education	27
4.4.3	Financial Compensation	27
4.5	Conclusion	28
Chapter Five: Discussion		29
5.1	Introduction.....	29
5.2	Structural Issues	29
5.3	Dynamic Issues.....	33
5.4	Personal Experience and Opinions	35
5.5	Conclusion.....	36
Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations		37
6.1	Introduction.....	37

6.2	Conclusions	37
6.3	Recommendations	39
	Bibliography	40
	Appendices	50

Abbreviations

BA ECCE	Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education
B. ED	Bachelor of Education
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
DES	Department of Education and Science
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
EEMU	Early Education Policy Unit
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project
EU	European Union
HSLO	Home School Liaison Officer
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
JNS	Junior National School
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
NCCA	National Council Curriculum Assessment
NAO	National Audit Office (UK)
NQF	National Quality Framework
QAP	Quality Assurance Process
QE	Quality in Education
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education

Glossary

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

<i>Dip Year</i>	The first practice year of a recently graduated primary school teacher. During this year the teacher's practice and planning will be inspected by the Department of Education and Science.
<i>Early Education:</i>	Any educational programme/strategy for children from birth to six years
<i>Early years sector:</i>	Umbrella term used to describe any and all services for children from birth to six years including; childminding services, sessional services, full and part time day-care and infant classes in Junior national schools
<i>Early Start:</i>	Pre-school service located in Junior national schools staffed by a fully trained primary school teacher and an early years worker
<i>Infant Class:</i>	Describes the infant cycle in Junior national schools; this term refers to both junior and senior infant classes unless otherwise stated.
<i>Infant Teacher:</i>	A person working in a junior national school with ultimate responsibility for delivering the curriculum to a class of junior infants or senior infants (first and second year of school)
<i>Early years professional /worker:</i>	A person working in a service for children from birth to six years (other than an infant class teacher)
<i>Pre-school service/ Setting:</i>	Any setting that provides a care and education service for children the year before they attend school (generally for children from three to five years of age)
<i>Síolta</i>	The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education
<i>Síolta QAP:</i>	Síolta Quality Assurance Process. A formal, twelve step process where an early years setting reviews their practice in relation to 16 Quality standards. If/when the service reaches the required standard the process culminates in a validation from the Office of the

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (see appendix A for further details)

Teacher:

A person working in a national school with the ultimate responsibility for delivering the curriculum to a class of students

Transition Programme:

Formal programme between a pre-school and primary school service that helps children to make the transition from one service to the next

Abstract

The current fragmentation of the early education field in Ireland (primary schools, sessional services, full day care and childminding all coming under this umbrella term) has lead to difficulties in implementing universal quality initiatives. The government has taken steps to address this with the introduction of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Now in its pilot phase, there has been poor uptake from National schools. In this study, semi structured interviews and focus groups were carried out with a group of Infant class teachers and Principals from the pilot programme to explore what factors influence their decision not to implement Síolta. The study also investigates whether this reaction to Síolta is a trend that we can expect to continue during the national roll out? In addition, their narratives were compared to those of infant class teachers with a primary degree in early education. The findings showed teachers have strong negative opinions in relation to Síolta and identified structural, dynamic and personal barriers stopping junior schools from engaging. More specifically, curriculum overload, lack of time during the school day for paperwork and class sizes were identified as major barriers. Additionally, the present study recommended that there is scope for further research of this kind to include different socioeconomic areas and non-DEIS schools.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction:

This paper explores the perspectives of teachers and principals from Junior National Schools (JNS) in relation to Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Chapter one begins by illustrating the aims of the study, explains the rationale for the research and provides an outline for the study.

1.2 Aims of the study:

The overall aims of the study are to explore the perspectives of those employed in the junior national school in relation to Síolta. More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- Why teachers and senior management choose to implement/ not implement Síolta in their school?
- What barriers are stopping teachers from engaging with Síolta?
- Do opinions regarding Síolta differ depending on the type of training an infant class teacher has received?
- Is the reaction to Síolta displayed by teachers in the pilot programme a trend that we can expect to continue as Síolta is rolled out nationally?

In addressing these questions, teacher's choices, perspectives and thoughts regarding Síolta will be explored and opinions teased out. Moreover, the study aims to gain insight with regard to these questions by using a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals.

1.3 Rationale for the study:

This study was undertaken following the pilot launch of the Síolta Quality Assurance Process (QAP). This process supports teachers to reflect on their practice in relation to sixteen 'quality' standards (see appendix A) with the aim of recognising and reinforcing measures of excellence in infant class provision. The Síolta QAP began in September 2008 and to date, not one infant class has been registered.

From a quality perspective, the infant classes in junior national schools are not without their shortcomings. Teachers receive very little training in relation to play, active learning and partnership with children leading to a very didactic approach to early education in infant classes (OECD, 2004). Teachers and children could benefit

enormously from the QAP and yet initial reaction to Síolta in the pilot areas has been entirely negative. Although pre-schools have embraced the QAP, individual teachers and schools appear uninterested in taking on this voluntary programme.

To date, there has been no research relating to the QAP carried out in Ireland. Furthermore, despite the wealth of international research concerned with early education, there has been relatively little attention paid to the standard of early education in junior national schools in Ireland. It has not been widely explored in the literature whether the provision being offered to children is that of quality. The introduction of Síolta would allow for a detailed and comprehensive review of current practice in relation to national and international ‘best practice’ standards in the Irish infant class.

In order for Síolta to succeed in its aim to coordinate and develop early childhood education services (CECDE, 2007) it requires the support of all those currently working in the field, including the formal school system. Síolta was designed to bridge the traditional divide between education and care and between early years settings and primary school education system (Duignan, 2005). If this component is left unfilled a key element of the programme will be missing, making it, to some extent, ineffective.

Interest in this study was garnered because of the enormity of the Síolta project and its possible benefits for children, teachers and the early education field as a whole. Perspectives and opinions of teachers must be explored in order to ensure the survival of Síolta and its roll out in schools on a national level.

1.4 Outline of the Study:

Chapter one gives a brief outline of the research study, the aims of the research and the rationale.

Chapter two presents the literature review. Firstly the importance of quality in early education will be examined, including a definition of quality for Ireland and an overview of the Síolta QAP. The reason for involving the junior schools in an early years initiative will be considered as well as a critique of their current pedagogical

practice. Finally, the researcher will attempt to explain the cause of some of the deficiencies in the primary school system and how, with the support of Síolta, these issues could be overcome

Chapter three outlines the research methodology, presents the sample and the selection of participants. The chosen data collection method is defended and the ethics of the study and analysis of the data are discussed.

Chapter four presents the research findings from the study under a number of headings (structural, dynamic and personal experiences) and under a number of detailed subheadings where necessary.

Chapter five discusses the research findings presented in chapter four in relation to the literature review and the aims of the study. It draws a summary of the main themes that emerged throughout the course of the study and contrasts and compares perspectives of teachers, principals and early education graduates.

Chapter six discusses the findings in light of previous studies carried out, draws conclusions from the present research study and makes recommendations arising from the research study findings and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In the past number of years there has been increased interest in Ireland's Early Education policy. At the centre of the debate is the issue of quality. The current fragmentation of the early education field (primary schools, sessional services, full day care and childminding all coming under this umbrella term) has led to difficulties in implementing universal quality initiatives (Duignan, 2005, CECDE, 2008). To compound this issue, Ireland's infant class provision has received criticism nationally and internationally, and has been labelled as inappropriate, inadequate and prescriptive. Our approach to early education has made us the laughing stock of Europe (Kelleher, 2009). The government has taken steps to address these issues with the introduction of Síolta, the National Framework for Early Childhood Education. Now in its pilot phase, Síolta is being rolled out in three areas across Dublin. However, there has been poor uptake from National schools. So what is preventing professionals in the primary school sector from engaging with Síolta in a formal way?

This literature review will highlight the most relevant research in relation to this topic. Firstly, the researcher will explore the importance of 'quality' in the early years and the development of the Irish quality framework; Síolta. This will be followed by a brief description of the infant class curriculum, the current pedagogical practice and critique of this, from a national and international perspective. Finally, the researcher will attempt to explain the cause of some of the deficiencies in the primary school system and how, with the support of Síolta, these issues could be overcome.

2.2 What is quality and why is it so important?

Early childhood is a crucial period for human development and can shape the remainder of people's lives. It is, therefore, a time when children need high quality care and educational experiences (NAO, 2004, p. 2)

For many years, research studies have suggested that quality early childhood education has positive effects on those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barnett, 1995; Meluish, 2004a; Schweinhart, 2007). Findings have shown that the level of quality in a setting directly contributes to children's developmental progress, (Burchinal et al, 2000; Love et al, 2003) and that positive outcomes increase

proportionately according to the level of quality practice observed. More recently, research evidence has indicated that there are long term benefits of quality early education for all children regardless of their background. The evidence clearly and consistently shows that pre-school provision is beneficial to social and educational development for the entire population (Meluish, 2004).

In the U.K., the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project observed that the quality of provision is directly related to better intellectual/cognitive and social/behavioural development in children and that this has lasting effects (Sylva et al, 2004). Similar longitudinal benefits were found by Wylie et al (2006). Settings scoring highly in areas such as: the provision of a print saturated environment, high level of adult responsiveness to children, teachers guiding children in activities, teachers asking open-ended questions and joining children in their play, and finally allowing children to select activities from a variety of learning areas had a positive, long-lasting effect on students' social skills and academic abilities such as literacy, numeracy and logical problem-solving competence. These associations applied, irrespective of their mother's qualification or their family income. In other words, high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres provide lasting benefits for the participants, and these benefits remained stable for more than a decade, regardless of the child's socio-economic background (Wylie et al, 2009).

Currently the issue of quality and what constitutes quality is a widespread question (Schonfeld et al, 2004). Quality is not easily defined and it has been argued that the concept of 'quality' in early childhood services is constructed and context specific. It is based on the socioeconomic climate as well as the values, beliefs and interests of stakeholders and cannot be defined in an objective way (Moss and Pence, 2004). The idea of a universal definition of quality, uniform and all encompassing that can be transported from one country to the next has been challenged (Mahoney and Hayes, 2006). Consequently, any quality initiative implemented in Ireland would need to allow for Irish values, beliefs, current economy and present early education structure. In order for a quality initiative to be effective, it became clear that a National Quality Framework (NQF) to define and reflect quality in the Irish context would need to be specifically developed.

2.3 Background to Síolta

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established in 2002 with the aim of coordinating and developing early childhood education in Ireland for children from birth to six years (CECDE, 2007). As well as conducting much needed research into early education in the Republic of Ireland and offering policy advice to the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the centre was set the task of developing a quality initiative as envisaged in 'Ready to Learn; the white paper on early childhood education' (DES, 1999). According to the white paper, a 'Quality in Education mark (1999, p. 51)' would be awarded to settings who have reached a minimum standard in a number of key education areas. This 'QE' mark would have a number of functions. Firstly, to generally raise quality in the early education sector in Ireland. Secondly, it would indicate that a setting had reached certain criteria (and therefore help parents to choose a quality provision for their young child) and finally it would give those working in the field an incentive to improve their personal practice (DES 1999).

Within the NQF, three distinct phases were identified. Firstly, a set of standards were published in 2006 to define what we understand by 'quality early education' in Ireland. Secondly, a system of assessment would be established to ensure that quality could be achieved and maintained and finally, a structure to support all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish the quality would be put in place (Duignan, 2004). Although Síolta was published in 2006, completing the first identified phase, services could only engage with Síolta in an informal manner. The system of assessment and support outlined in phase two and three were not finalised until November 2008 and a pilot programme was launched. This formal programme or 'Síolta Quality Assurance Process' (QAP) would culminate with the early years setting being validated as a quality service (see appendix 1 for further details).

2.4 Why involve primary schools in an Early Years Initiative?

The primary school system in Ireland is state funded, well regulated, regularly inspected with qualified professionals and a set curriculum, so why does it need to be a part of a voluntary early years initiative? For many of our counterparts in the western world formal schooling does not begin until the age of six (CECDE, 2004; Rogers and Rose, 2007). Although technically in Ireland school is not compulsory

until this age, in reality, most children begin school much earlier. A recent DES statistical report found that primary schools cater for almost 81,000 children under the age of six years in junior and senior infant classes, making the DES the biggest single provider of early education in Ireland (DES, 2006)

Within the state system, childcare and early education have usually been regarded as separate matters. Responsibility for each has been divided between government departments. Accountability for early education rests with the Department of Education and Science (DES) whilst responsibility for childcare has traditionally been shared by the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform and the Department of Social and Family Affairs (Duignan, 2004). The need to introduce a coordinated approach to early education is clear, and this requirement has been backed up by a number of policy documents (Breathnach & Sturley, 2007). The use of *Síolta* to create coherence for this age group whilst acknowledging the diversity of settings in Irish early education has been recognised (O’Kane, 2008). The coherence it could provide can only serve to benefit young children by establishing structures to formalize transitions and continuity of learning between pre-school and primary school (O’Kane & Hayes, 2007; INTO, 2008; Sharkey, 2008). Furthermore, there is a growing concern that the difference in curricula and culture in pre-schools and schools may have negative consequences for children (O’Kane, 2008). Anecdotal evidence suggests that sharing of knowledge between the two sectors is limited, borne from misunderstanding and lack of communication between the two. A greater sharing of perspectives, both theoretical and personal could lead to gains for children and adults alike. Indeed, one of *Síolta*’s original aims was to bridge the traditional divide between education and care and between early years settings and primary school education system (Duignan, 2005).

An early start to education is beneficial to young children, but there are potential negative consequences if placed in an environment that is not developmentally appropriate (Rogers and Rose, 2007). Concerns have been voiced regarding the ‘push down’ of academic, didactic approaches to early education (O’Kane & Hayes, 2007, Carr, 2000). Whilst play-based pedagogy in early years settings will allow children’s endeavours to be sustained and nourished (Goouch, 2008), the evidence suggests that an early start in *formal* education can have a negative effect on a child’s emotional

well being (Rogers and Rose, 2007). Effective pedagogy in early years has been characterised as having; structured interactions between staff and children; the provision of instructive learning environments and the introduction of ‘sustained shared thinking’ to extend children’s learning (Sylva et al, 2004, p.56) all of which appear to be missing from many Irish infant classes. The general consensus is that young children “are less suited to formal teaching and are more suited to an environment which ensures they are able to socialise, are free to choose and take some responsibility for their own learning alongside more adult led activities’ (Rogers and Rose, 2007, p.55).

2.5 Current infant curriculum:

In 1999 the revised infant class curriculum was launched by the Department of Education and Science. It represented a ‘major departure in the history of primary education in the Republic (DES, 1999a, p.2)’ and announced a fresh approach, incorporating innovative educational practice and theory. The pedagogical principles on which the revised curriculum is based encourages ‘active learning, fostering wonder and the natural curiosity of children, using the child’s existing knowledge and teaching in a holistic manner with integrated learning (DES, 1999a, p 11)’. There was widespread approval of the new curriculum after its release in 1999 (INTO, 2006). Nic Craith and Fay commented on the improved suitability of the revised programme, allowing for ‘exploration, activity, discovery, investigation, play and problem solving (2007, p. 210)’ all elements known to be beneficial for young children. The focus returned to the children with their learning organized through play activities where ‘language development and the use of concrete materials are clearly given prominence (Murphy, 2004, p.247)’. Indeed the aim of the revised curriculum was to satisfy the educational and developmental needs of the children by providing for immediate learning needs and interests, and by laying the foundation for further education (DES, 1999a).

2.6 Critique of current practice in Infant classes

In recent times the revised curriculum, or more accurately how this has been implemented in practice, has come under scrutiny. Many of the new approaches outlined in the revised curriculum have been left unrealized. O’Kane (2008) argues that there is still a greater emphasis on direct instruction within the infant class

system, which has been legitimized as a requirement in order to deliver the pre-set curriculum. Primary teachers feel a definite pressure to deliver the prescribed outcomes of the curriculum in their entirety (Cassidy, 2005). The preoccupation with set outcomes in early education has been identified on an international level, and according to Moss and Petrie (2002) this has led to 'joylessness' in children's provision. The belief that goals/outcomes in early childhood education must be predetermined, and pre-planned has reduced teaching to curriculum delivery rather than 'engagement with other minds' (Pring, 2004, p.68). It is no longer a personal act. Instead it has become a technical activity, a passing of information from teacher to child (Goouch, 2008). It appears that more attention is now being given to targets and specified goals than to the children themselves.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2004) the pedagogical practice in junior infant classes in Ireland are highly inappropriate for the age and developmental stage of the children. The OECD review team expressed concern regarding the "predominantly didactic approach" towards early learning. "The model of the teacher as the source of learning, from whom young children receive knowledge, is still strongly felt within the system, while the notions of the well-being and involvement of children or the construction of knowledge through play, participation and choice, need to be developed (2004, p.77)". In the Irish context there is a need to redress the balance between the emergent curriculum and the prescribed one, based on the children's current interests. Ideally, the teacher's first concern should be the children's particular learning characteristics and needs with the development of knowledge and skills in particular curriculum areas accommodated as part of this (Dunphy, 2007).

The lack of specific regulations for differentiating classroom design, training and educational methodologies when catering for younger children has also come under scrutiny (OECD, 2004). Research carried out by Dunphy (2007) highlighted the need to engage distinctly different pedagogical approaches for children in infant classes. Nevertheless, elsewhere Nic Craith and Fay (2007) observed no significant difference between the methodologies used by teachers of infant classes and those in 1st to 6th class. This leads one to question whether the range of individual difference in learning processes between age groups has been taken into account, as outlined in the revised

curriculum. Teachers are not engaging in age appropriate pedagogy. Although the INTO insists that ‘play, movement and noise is an integral part of the learning environment for young children (2006, p.73)’ teachers still place a great value on the child’s ability to sit still and stay quiet (O’Kane & Hayes, 2007). Observations carried out by Murphy (2004) found that children were required to play in silence in the classroom, a practice which is at odds with both the INTO’s position on active learning and in contradiction to the revised curriculum. According to O’Kane (2008, p.52) the issue of ‘sitting still, listening and concentrating is a contentious one’. Hence it is clear that although the rhetoric of the department has changed, little difference has been seen on the ground.

2.7 Why has practical change been so slow?

Research carried out in senior infant classes found that in practice, teaching methods have remained the same since the introduction of the revised curriculum (Dunphy, 2007). There is little to indicate that reforms suggested in the curriculum have been adopted; this is due to a lack of understanding on behalf of the teachers of the consequences of such a reform (de Paor, 2003). Evidence suggests that teacher’s have found it difficult to move away from more formal approaches and embrace play and active learning as a way of enhancing holistic development of their youngest students. A study by Walsh and Gardner (2006) found that the introduction of a play-based curriculum in Northern Ireland has had similar outcomes; many teachers remain unconvinced of the long term benefits of a play-based approach. Furthermore, whilst these teachers agreed that play could help develop social skills, they were reluctant to agree that literacy and numeracy skills could be taught without direct instruction from them. Walsh and Gardner (2006) concluded that some aspects of the new curriculum, in particular child-initiated activity and choice in classroom, may never be employed until teachers change their personal pedagogies and begin to see the benefits first hand. De Paor (2003) believes that convincing teachers to change their pedagogical beliefs with a view to adopting new approaches, technologies or materials will be difficult. Teachers need to be supported through continued professional development; a support that could be provided through the Síolta QAP. Certainly, several teachers commented that lack of real change in practice was due to the fact that they had not received any in-career training or preparation prior to the implementation of the revised curriculum (Murphy, 2004). The compacted nature of the training and its

feasibility in a real life classroom situation has been questioned (O'Connell, 2008). The new curriculum states that each “teacher needs to adopt innovative approaches to teaching and to be aware of changes and developments in educational theory and practice (INTO, 2007 p.13)”, but the subsequent training offered to teachers was in general described as inadequate (Murphy, 2004).

It has been suggested that teachers have found new methodologies difficult to adopt for a number of reasons. Firstly, the term ‘active learning’ has not been defined for them (INTO, 2007) so each individual is working from their own personal understanding which may or may not be an accurate reflection of the term. The INTO (2007) has acknowledged the fear that teachers may feel in allowing children to have more autonomy. This curriculum gives much more freedom to teachers and therefore more professional responsibility (de Paor, 2003). This implies a new, partnership-based approach to learning which may make teachers ‘uncomfortable (INTO, 2007, p.25)’. Furthermore any change to the status quo is bound to meet with some resistance. As Whitaker (1993) puts it, when imposed change conflicts with long held practice and beliefs it is common for those involved to reject and find fault with the proposition.

Pre-service training has also been identified as in need of improvement (INTO, 2008; Dunphy, 2000; OECD 2004). The time allotted to early education in the B.Ed is insufficient, currently one core module in first year (OECD, 2004). The white paper for early childhood education proposed that there should be an increased emphasis on early learning in pre-service teacher training (DES, 1999). According to Dunphy (2000), even with the addition of an elective course in early childhood education for third year students, it is still not possible to provide for the depth of study desirable. The integration of the various aspects of early childhood education is an area where student teachers need support and help (Dunphy, 2000). It is crucial that teachers have the opportunity to explore issues such as principles and educational methodologies, and come to appreciate the differences in the education of children of a younger age.

According to the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA, 1999) planning in all classes should involve the teacher liaising with others and consulting assessment records in order to establish the children’s previous learning experience.

“It is important, too, that the teacher continues to consult the children’s previous class teachers. This can be of great value in addressing particular learning difficulties of individual children (DES, 1999a, p.65).” Presumably, in relation to infant classes this also means taking into account what the child has learnt in a previous setting i.e. a pre-school or crèche? This is a difficult task. Teachers are unfamiliar with the BA in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and the associated research (Breathnach & Sturley, 2007). Furthermore, a Scottish study has revealed that teachers have little interest in children’s previous experience and rarely use this knowledge to plan their classes (Stephen & Cope, 2003). Although the majority of teachers and pre-school teachers believe links between the two settings would benefit the children, very few had managed to arrange formal, professional associations (O’Kane and Hayes, 2007). According to Neuman (2000) staff in both settings are cautious of developing formal links as this is seen as a threat to their individual approaches.

Although there has been a conscious effort to bridge the divide between the early years and more formal schooling, it appears there is a gap in understanding between these two sectors. The culture, objectives and educational approaches in pre-school and infant classes are very different (INTO, 2008). This has led to marked differences in pedagogy in these two consecutive year groups, which can impact children’s experiences of learning and cause confusion for the child (Arline Fisher, 2009). Much like here, in the UK they found that the pedagogy in stage one was far more teacher led and prescriptive leading to a sense of disjointedness (Arline Fisher, 2009, p.133) for these young children.

Additionally, the shared language used by teachers and early years professionals is not always a mutual one, which can cause tension and confusion (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Anecdotal evidence suggests that understandings of the term ‘play’ and ‘child-led activities’ are poles apart in each sector. Much research has pointed to the misunderstanding of the benefits and even what is meant by the term ‘play’ amongst primary school teachers (Dunphy, 2007). Although play and active learning are core elements of the new infant curriculum it is unclear whether teachers value play as a learning tool. Murphy found that little effort, planning or structure was evident in play activities in infant classes. Instead playtime is considered by teachers as an ‘opportunity for a breather (2004, p. 254)’, it is used as a time-filler rather than a tool through which children can learn, with little or no interaction between teachers and

pupils present. As a result of this, the play experiences provided in senior infant classes are sporadic, cognitively undemanding and do not represent the holistic play approach outlined in the 1999 curriculum.

Teachers in the Irish infant system have an inability to identify pedagogical opportunities as they misunderstand play (Dunphy, 2007). Even when children are allowed to play in the infant class, teachers may unwittingly bring an adult agenda ultimately undermining and disempowering children's play (Canning, 2007). Implementing an activity based curriculum is a complex task requiring preparation and reflective practice. According to Murphy (2004) teacher training in this area is inadequate and teachers lack the knowledge and understanding required to implement this pedagogical approach. There is a lack of opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective practice (Dunphy, 2007) an issue that needs to be addressed in order to develop and improve the quality of early childhood pedagogy in infant classes.

2.8 Teachers' perspectives on difficulties implementing the curriculum

Each decade, a curriculum survey is completed by those in the primary school profession, the most recent of which was conducted in 2005. The results showed divided opinion regarding the 1999 curriculum. Although many of the teachers voiced their support for the new curriculum describing it as 'child friendly; modern; exciting' there were an equal number of negative comments relating to curriculum overload, funding and resources, class sizes, time and planning (INTO, 2006).

Of those who did praise the new curriculum, many commented on the difficulty of implementing such active learning methodologies with such large numbers of children (INTO, 2006). Certainly, this opinion has been expressed elsewhere; teachers interviewed by Murphy (2007) spoke of the impossibility of using active play methods in their class. Over 100,000 pupils, many of those in infant school are now in classes with over 30 pupils (Carr, 2008). The likelihood of a infant class teacher being able to deliver such a modern curriculum using the methods prescribed with such large groups of children is questionable; especially when teachers are required to be an "inspirer, task setter, analyser, nurturer, nurse and surrogate parent (Dunne, 2008)". The issue of class sizes is one to be questioned. The difference in ratios between primary and pre-primary settings has not gone unnoticed. State legislation allows a ratio of one adult to every eight children in a preschool, but the same four

year olds can be placed into classes of thirty or more in the local primary school (DOHC, 2006).

A play/activity based curriculum requires play materials which need to be provided by the DES. At present not all schools have classrooms appropriate to deliver the infant curriculum as outlined in the revised curriculum (INTO, 2006a). In fact, almost a quarter of infant class teacher's felt their classrooms were inappropriate for young children (INTO, 2008a). Furthermore, Haugh (2009) argues that the curriculum in DEIS schools is overloaded, and time, or lack thereof is a real issue in infant classes. According to O'Connell (2008) curriculum overload and lack of time for planning is creating problems for teachers. Teachers have expressed difficulty in delivering the curriculum as much of their time is taken up with other duties such as house keeping and 'minding' children due to their lack of independence and their need for help with coats or even toilet training (O'Kane, 2008, p.58). Challenges felt by teachers also included helping children adjust to the new routine, encouraging them to sit still, trying to keep lessons fun and dealing with clingy children (INTO, 2006).

2.9 How can Síolta improve practice?

Many aspects of the infant teacher's practice are in need of change. Most notably; the lack of play provision and active learning activities in infant classes; the scarcity of early education in-service training; the lack of opportunities for reflective practice; the deficient pedagogy and poor professional relationships between the primary and pre-primary sectors. Furthermore the INTO (2008) have recommended that teachers should up-skill and have identified a need for them to be introduced to new forms of assessment which should be made an integral part of teaching and learning.

As Síolta is a new programme in its pilot phase we can only speculate as to it's effects based on similar schemes elsewhere. Indeed, Síolta was designed to improve such shortcomings such as those observed in the JNS. Firstly, it will act as a unifying influence for all those adults engaged in the provision of services for children. Using the same terminology and resources can help professionals identify common goals, regardless of the context; thereby providing a common base for primary and pre-primary teachers to begin formal professional communication. Secondly, the role of the Síolta coordinator involves conducting observations, giving feedback to teachers,

providing information and resources, supporting reflective practice and providing or sourcing training (CECDE, 2008a). All of these tasks can be used to model good practice in relation to play and active learning in infant classes, and help teachers to reflect on their current pedagogy and access formal early education training all with the aim of improving educational attainment and personal development of the children. Thirdly, Síolta provides self-reflection guidelines for teachers, encouraging them to think about current practice and to identify elements that are positive as well as those in need of attention. In doing so, individuals can improve the quality of provision for young children (CECDE, 2009). Finally, in a whole school context, Síolta can introduce a focus for team work and development, be used as a tool for management, for strategic planning and policy development (CECDE, 2009)

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The core objectives of this study are to establish why teachers and senior management choose to implement/ not implement Síolta in their school. The researcher proposes to explore the barriers preventing teachers from engaging with Síolta; examine if opinions regarding Síolta differ depending on the type of training an infant class teacher has received and speculate whether the reaction displayed by teachers to date in the pilot programme is a trend that will continue as Síolta is rolled out nationally?

This chapter provides an overview of the method choice, research design and development. Details of the sample are outlined, ethical considerations are described and data analysis of research is discussed. Finally a conclusion is drawn.

3.2 Background to Qualitative Research

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate. Both focus groups and individual semi structured interviews were carried out with twenty eight participants in order to capture and explore perspectives in relation to Síolta. The rationale for adopting such an approach will be discussed below.

Firstly, the study's research questions are open ended, suggesting a study of an exploratory nature. As this is a relatively new area of research the questions asked cover broad topics and are designed to encourage discussion and generate new ideas and theories in relation to Síolta in a school setting. Secondly, the aim of qualitative methods is to capture reality through the experience of the respondents (Sarantakos, 1998) which is exactly what the researcher hopes to explore in this study. Quantitative methods lack this subjectivity and generate poor examples of personal opinion and feelings towards a new programme such as Síolta, subsequently limiting the emergence of meaningful data from which to draw conclusions and recommendations. Thirdly, a method that would generate data relating to teacher's individual experiences and opinions was essential in order to illustrate the culture teachers work within, pressures they are under and, moreover, to give a clearer picture of the realities of working with young children. Sarantakos (1998) notes that qualitative methods have multiple strengths; they achieve a deeper understanding of the

respondents' worlds, allow higher flexibility and present a more realistic view of the world. From the data collected, comparisons and differences in opinions could be established. Qualitative methods are especially adept at capturing the multiple voices of different actors engaged in some aspect of social behaviour e.g. a group of professionals (Barbour, 2007). They illuminate the very different situations individuals find themselves and the different concerns they bring to bear when discussing topics and produce additional insight especially important in an exploratory study such as this.

Finally, it was apparent at proposal stage that a large sample would be unobtainable, as the QAP is still in its pilot stage, and has only been offered in a single community in Dublin. Therefore the numbers of teachers with the in-depth knowledge of the programme required is severely limited. Considering all of these factors, it was clear that qualitative methods seeking comprehensive and meaningful opinions would be more appropriate for this study.

3.3 Sample

The researcher used a convenience sample as the Síolta QAP is being piloted with infant teachers in Dublin 17. The sample will be taken from three designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools. Although such a sample will not guarantee that those interviewed are representative of the entire population, (Blaxter et al, 2006) at this time Dublin 17 is the only area where the research can rationally be carried out.

3.4 Sample Access and Recruitment:

The sample groups were accessed in a number of ways. The researcher is working on the Síolta Pilot Programme and therefore has a positive working relationship with and admission to the schools on a regular basis. Therefore interviews and focus groups were arranged with teachers and principals in a timely manner and access was not difficult. The focus group with early education graduates was arranged differently. The researcher contacted a number of acquaintances and invited them to take part in the study; all of whom agreed.

Focus groups: Focus group one was carried out with junior school teachers who also have an early years qualification. These teachers were not sourced from Dublin 17 but

from another DEIS area in Dublin. The addition of early education professionals will shed light on differences in theoretical understanding and approach to professional development in the two sectors. Focus groups two, three and four were carried out with teachers from Dublin 17 who have been offered the Síolta QAP in their school.

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
Number of participants	4	4	5	11
Educational Background	BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education <i>and</i> Higher Diploma in Education	Bachelor of Education	Bachelor of Education	Bachelor of Education (8) <i>or</i> Higher Diploma in Education (3)
DEIS school	Yes (1 participant from 'breaking the cycle')	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female

Interviews: Four interviewees were chosen to allow the researcher to explore certain points in further detail. Two principals and two male teachers from Dublin 17 were interviewed. These individuals were chosen in order to compare and contrast differences of opinion depending on role in the school or indeed depending on the sex of the teacher.

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Current Position	Principal JNS	Principal JNS	Home School Liaison Officer	Junior School Teacher
DEIS school	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sex	Female	Female	Male	Male

3.5 Research Tool:

The researcher used multiple qualitative measures to analyze experiences of individuals and groups. Sarantakos (1998, P. 169) accurately notes that 'the use of a number of methods can allow the researcher to explore a variety of information on the same issue, achieve better reliability and validity and expresses a commitment to thoroughness.' According to Barbour (2007) there are no set rules when mixing

interviews and focus groups; in certain cases it may eliminate issues of power and allow for a more frank discussion and disclosure. Focus groups and interviews were conducted under a number of broad headings including: the participants understanding of Síolta; perspectives regarding the implementation of Síolta; knowledge of pre-school education, and opinions of the revised infant curriculum (for further details see appendix B)

Two research instruments have been employed; focus groups and interviews both of which will be discussed in further detail below.

Focus groups can generate a rich understanding of the participant's beliefs, values and experiences. They have a number of fundamental strengths considered crucial for a study of this kind. Bringing a group together will allow them to compare and discuss their different ideas regarding the change being introduced in the schools 'The give and take of group discussions among clients who share an interest in these changes should produce very useful insight into what matters to most of them (Morgan, 1998, p.5). In essence, focus groups allow the researcher to listen to people and learn from them; essentially 'structured eavesdropping' (Powney, 1988). Nevertheless, the researcher is aware that there are negative aspects to group discussions. For example; conditions may force participants to hide their true feelings; domination of discussion by one /two participants could affect direction and outcome of the focus group as well as leading to agreement with the dominant person. However, the researcher feels this last 'negative aspect' could, in fact be very illuminating. As the decision to roll Síolta out in schools will, in general, be made by the entire staff team, this method may highlight whether a dominant opinion becomes the accepted norm within the school.

The second method used is semi structured interviews, encouraging the respondents to discuss as many themes as possible in relation to Síolta. It is estimated that over 90 percent of social sciences investigations use interviews in one way or another (Silverman, 2004) and is undoubtedly the most widely used technique for systematic social inquiry. This is crucial in generating theories as to why there has been little acceptance of Síolta amongst teachers and as Barbour puts it 'qualitative research can and does provide explanations (2007, p.15)'. It is envisioned that interviews will provide a greater depth of knowledge and understanding into the selected subject area

and provide a more detailed account of the principals' perspectives. This will enable the researcher to identify evidence from raw data and demonstrate connections between the research question and findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Interview and facilitation skills are crucial in ensuring that abundant and honest evidence is collected and that the research is managed correctly. Therefore the importance of adopting a "reserved, non-directive position may be best (Sarantakos, 1998, p.184.)" to ensure that participants answers are not influenced by the researcher.

3.6 Limitations:

There are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, access to schools, principals and teachers was limited to only one area in Dublin where Síolta has been offered which severely limited the number of teachers who can realistically be asked to take part in this study. Secondly, as the researcher is working on the Síolta programme, the data generated in Dublin 17 may not be dependable. The close working relationship between the researcher and professionals in this area may affect how questions are answered. Thirdly, the study was limited to women as the researcher failed to find access to any male teachers who has been assigned to work with infant classes. An attempt to counteract this was made by carrying out detailed interviews with male teachers working in other roles in JNS. Finally, the use of interviews/focus groups with such a small sample will not lead to generalizable findings and will not represent the wider population but the opinion and experience of a specific few. In this case, it is still believed to be the best method to generate further research questions regarding the use of Síolta in school settings.

3.7 Data analysis

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. As all methods were conducted following the same general headings, the data collected could be organised and summarised efficiently (see appendix B for further details). Repeated readings of the interview transcripts further enabled the researcher to identify recurrent patterns, detect repeated answers and identify common themes and sub-themes across the

different participants. The information is then presented under a number of these common themes.

3.8 Ethical issues

Gomm maintains that in terms of codes of ethics, informed consent is paramount as participants need to know what they are ‘letting themselves in for before they make the decision to cooperate (Gomm, 2004, p. 307)’. The research complies with the research ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland (2002) and the ethical guidelines as set by the Dublin Institute of Technology. These guidelines dictate that the researcher should safeguard the interests of the research participant and recognise any conflicting concerns which may arise (Martin, 2003). Therefore, the research was explained as fully as possible, in terms that were meaningful to the participant what the research is about, who the researcher is and how the information generated would be used. Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were respected at all times and any guarantee given to participants has been adhered to. A letter providing a detailed description of the study and the use of any information generated was distributed and participants were allowed time to weigh up their decision before agreeing to participate (see appendix C).

The data gathered was held in the strictest confidence. Centres/schools and individuals are not named, care was taken to ensure they are not identifiable by any other means. Interviewees were informed of their choice to opt out of the programme at any time, without reason and have had this choice respected. Written consent was required from all interviewees (see appendix D).

3.8 Conclusion:

This chapter has described the selection and sample of participants, justified the use of a multiple method approach, and substantiates the use of a qualitative method to meet the aims of the research. The ethical framework was established, as was the framework for the protection of the research participants.

An account of the research findings is presented in the next chapter.

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline and present the main themes that emerged from the four qualitative interviews with principals and male teachers and four focus groups carried out with twenty four junior infant teachers. The participants' views will be presented under the broad headings of structural issues, dynamic issues and personal experience and opinions. Structural concerns refer to barriers that arise due to structural restrictions that teachers cannot change, for example; the breadth of the curriculum, the square footage of a classroom or the class size. Dynamic issues refer to the underlying sense of unease, mistrust and perhaps misunderstanding between the well established profession of primary teaching and the relatively new early years sector in Ireland. It appears that this uncertainty has coloured teacher's opinions regarding Síolta. Finally, personal concerns will be outlined, where teachers' own personal beliefs, feelings or situation prevents them from engaging with Síolta. In addition, sub-themes will be explored where present.

4.2 Structural:

The structural concerns facing teachers emerged as a major finding and dominated many of the narratives. Issues such as work overload, curriculum, resources, difficulty implementing play, and training and evaluation were all listed as barriers to implementing Síolta in infant classes. These issues will now be presented in further detail.

4.2.1 Work overload

Participants in all four focus groups referred to the workload in infant classes as a barrier to implementing Síolta in their classrooms. It appears that teachers already have a large workload and an additional voluntary programme has little chance of being implemented in this sector.

“The idea of another programme I'm afraid is nearly taboo for us at this stage. We just want to say no.” (Participant 11)

The focus groups were carried out with teachers from DEIS or ‘breaking the cycle’ schools. These schools often take on additional programmes aimed at improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for children. These are in addition to the planning, lesson delivery and organisation of the environment. Even though junior school teachers are given an hour at the end of the day to carry out these tasks, time or lack thereof, continues to be a problem. The pressures of trying to prepare for lessons whilst keeping on top of DEIS planning were further emphasised:

“It’s not like we have this hour where we could sit down and fill out all extra work like, that hour goes very fast because you are preparing for the next day” (Participant 5)

“I find myself some days I might be here until three some days four. Just to get sorting out the environment, just to get it prepared for the next day or the next week.” (Participant 9)

“In fairness to the teachers I would say that they have taken on quite a lot in the school in recent years, with the DEIS plan.” (Participant 26)

When asked whether Síolta would be easier to roll out in a non-DEIS school the participants had mixed reactions

“I actually think if we hadn’t had so many initiatives people might in fact, take it on” (Participant 16)

“no, I don’t think you are going to roll this out anywhere.” (Participant 21)

Teachers appear to be tight for time and already feel burdened. All but one of the focus groups described Síolta as an extra ‘pressure’ or ‘hassle’ on top of their everyday work. Teachers’ views conveyed a sense of frustration and to some extent anger at the pressures they are currently experiencing

“Because it’s still experimental we’ll probably have to do it on top of what we are doing already, so for all that paper work I think anything else coming at me now might be a bit much” (Participant 2)

“We don’t have the time to sit down and go through this mighty nonsense we just don’t have it” (Participant 13)

4.2.2 Curriculum

Curriculum delivery was mentioned in all but one of the focus groups. Teachers commented on areas such as social skills, manners, lack of independence, inability to

sit still and the failure to self manage as things that needed to be taught before they would even consider trying to deliver the prescribed curriculum.

“There is just a lot on the curriculum they don’t take into account, that there’s so many basic things to be taught, before you even get into the curriculum” (Participant 5)

“You have to teach so many basic things that the curriculum has to go out the window until they are able to actually sit down and keep themselves to themselves” (Participant 6)

Again, the matter of work overload applied to curriculum delivery. Teachers are having difficulty covering all areas of the curriculum sufficiently. Although it is accepted that teachers may not always cover everything as outlined in a substantial and comprehensive curriculum, the narratives suggest that teachers are simply touching on areas rather than covering all subjects in depth.

“There is no way that you could fit everything in. To give the required length of time for everything ‘cause it just won’t fit” (Participant 10)

“It’s getting worse and worse. There is so much to do in English and maths. There’s so many different areas that I’m not getting to cover. Some weeks I don’t even get to touch Irish or I don’t get to touch SPHE at all.” (Participant 11)

A school principal commented on the inspector’s recommendation to prioritise when faced with this overload

“I don’t know how the department could expect a teacher to get through the amount of work. However, I suppose if you were to talk to an inspector about it they would say ‘well you use the curriculum like a menu and you take as much as you can from it’ and that’s what you do. You prioritise.” (Participant 26)

Furthermore, teachers in these DEIS areas appear to be struggling to even deliver basic numeracy and literacy skills.

“Every teacher is pulling their hair out at the end of the year. They are not even covering literacy and numeracy outcomes at the moment” (Participant 3)

“You really are you are struggling to try to balance between the, the main areas, literacy, learning maths things like this” (Participant 7)

The methodologies of active learning, child-led activities and play-based lessons do not seem to be used in these particular schools. When asked whether the syllabus can

be delivered using the methods described in the curriculum participants in one of the focus groups responded:

“No, not at all” (Participant 5)

“You would need children who never ever said anything, children that never moved anywhere” (Participant 6)

“[you would need] Children who wanted to learn” (Participant 8)

4.2.3 Resources

A number of the focus groups talked in detail about the lack of resources provided by the Department of Education. They felt this inhibited them from delivering the curriculum as outlined. As one teacher described:

“We have all these brilliant ideas and the ideal way to teach but they don’t back it up with resources.” (Participant 12)

The accounts suggest that this lack of resources is stopping teachers from implementing Síolta in their class rooms. They already feel strongly about the lack of funding and can not see how this new programmes will improve their situation.

“Why roll out a new programme when the programmes that are there are not catered for” (Participant 18)

“We know if we take this on, we’re, you’re never gonna get the funding for it. We won’t get money to buy the equipment” (Participant 21)

4.2.4 Play

The participants’ understanding of play as a teaching methodology seems to be limited. There was no discussion of play being used to foster imagination, creativity, independence, literacy, numeracy, communication or verbal skills. One teacher spoke of the benefits of play she witnessed to encourage children’s social and emotional development when play equipment was in used in her room

“It was very nice, it was very pleasant; very calming for a child that might be upset or em, who had come from a traumatic home when they needed time to just, chill” (Participant 8)

Since then the same teacher has removed this equipment. Although she commented that play is still is used in the classroom it is not the child initiated, active play described in the curriculum

“We teach through play but it’s, it’s like, cognitive. It’s the play we want them to do. It might be counting out things or something. It’s play, they are still playing. But it’s not play as in what they want to do, you know what I mean? That’s the difference. But it takes a long, long time to get that message across; but they learn. You know, they cop on after a while” (Participant 8)

The focus group carried out with early education graduate teachers highlighted the lack of importance that is placed on play as part of the infant pedagogy. As a result the utilization of play in some infant classrooms is limited, and is discarded in favour of more ‘important’ elements of the curriculum.

“They had to take play away to do the easy steps writing, the free writing part. That time was allocated for children to practise their free writing because there was no other available time of day to do it. So their play, the little bit of play they had in the morning... That’s even been taken off them” (Participant 3)

“I think a lot of junior teachers see play as a period to settle the children in the morning because it’s routine every morning, they know it’s play time every morning and at starting time play is put away and that is work for the day. I think they see it as a settling exercise more than for the importance of play” (Participant 4)

Furthermore, one teacher pointed out how the management structure, ethos or culture in a school can affect how play is used in practice.

“There are principals who want to see their infants at a desk, making no noise.” (Participant 20)

Finally, the number of children in the classroom and large ratios means that infant teachers find it difficult to implement the methods outlined in the curriculum

“Floating and sinking with four year olds. Good luck. It’s like, how is that supposed to happen? You can’t really engage in the methodologies in the curriculum properly without any help.” (Participant 12)

4.2.5 Training and School Evaluation

A further two structural areas were emphasised by the early education graduate teachers. The first was the lack of any type of regular assessment for JNSs. Whole school evaluations should occur at least every three years, where every aspect of the school is inspected and evaluated. In one instance the teacher reported that she has never even seen the school inspector.

“There hasn’t been one in our school since about four or five years before I started. So I’d say it’s been, yeah, towards ten years.” (Participant 1)

Secondly, this focus group made reference to the need for further training for all teachers. Comments regarding professional development, reflective practice, grasp of early education theories and understanding of Síolta were frequent in this group.

“It {Síolta} needs to become not just a seminar but become a subject in the training college” (Participant 2)

“I think Síolta is good for teachers; for their own personal development, it really is... I suppose if you learnt it {Síolta} in early education in college and you did implement it you might think that way all the time; always self analysing and evaluating from there on in ” (Participant 3)

4.3 Dynamic Issues:

A number of more dynamic topics were also highlighted by the qualitative research. Subjects such as; transition programmes between preschool and primary school settings, teachers’ perspectives on early education and their awareness of Síolta affected teacher’s decision on whether to implement the programme in their class.

4.3.1. Transition to infant classes

Teachers in all four focus groups commented on the lack of formal communication with pre-school settings in their area. Although some did receive limited information about children

“They’ll just arrive at the door on the first of September” (Participant 2)

“Well occasionally I’ve had information on some children” (Participant 13)

Where a pre-school is run by the Department of Education and located on the school premises, certainly contact is more regular, but there is no set transition programme with a formal handover of information for each child.

“The only information we get would be from the children who attended the early start in the school. And that’s literally, maybe, do they know their colours, do they know this, it’s nothing. And, we might get an idea of their personality from the teacher. And they know nothing about us” (Participant 4)

4.3.2 Teacher’s perspectives of Pre-school services

Another theme that dominated many of the narratives was the negative opinions of other early years settings and their need for improvement. Three focus groups expressed an understanding of the need for a quality initiative in other early education settings but not in infant classes.

“I can understand why they need to standardise the service to children in playgroups and I can understand that. As far as I’m concerned in primary school we already have all of that. All of those safeguards are there, because we have inspections, we have a school evaluation every couple of years... I mean, you won’t get away with much in a primary school” (Participant 8)

“{Síolta is} probably not as necessary in a national primary school as it would be say in a play school or a pre-school. And the reason I say that is that we have a curriculum already laid down so that we, it’s not that we are automatically wonderful but there is an amount of work that we have to get through and a level we have to reach and a standard we have to reach anyway. So in a sense that is predetermined” (Participant 26)

Furthermore a number of teachers questioned the ability of a pre-school service to implement and complete a complex, self reflective programme such as Síolta. The professionalism of the pre-school sector was also called into question

“If you have a crap pre-school I don’t know how the people in the pre-school would be able to successfully achieve the Síolta standards. And, I don’t know how successfully they would be able to even fill out the reports and be, I don’t know? How self reflective they are as practitioners. A lot of pre-schools aren’t very good” (Participant 12)

“Well I would think that the childcare area is not professionalised, like the primary schools. In saying that, that playgroup, you know the one, _____ playgroup. They seem to be great very professional but they are in the minority around here.” (Participant 27)

The educational background of the Síolta coordinator was a source of some debate as participants failed to agree whether the coordinator should be trained as a teacher, as well as having a specialised early education qualification.

“It couldn’t hurt to have a coordinator from a teaching background. Teachers might have more respect or more in common with a coordinator who has been through the mill and knows what the difficulties are in the classroom you know? The practicalities of it all.” (Participant 27)

Other participants felt that a Síolta coordinator with a specialised knowledge would be more beneficial for a teacher in infant class

“I’d be far less intimidated if you were coming into me with early years knowledge. I’m not looking at you as judging me then as you have a different expertise to me altogether. I think it would be easier to let you come in and share your stuff and for me to share mine” (Participant 3)

4.3.3 *Síolta Structure*

Many of the teachers found the sheer size and structure of *Síolta* very off putting and questioned its overall value when compared to literacy and numeracy programmes

“I don’t think that ticking boxes, you might pick up a few little ideas or, a more efficient way of doing something but I don’t think it’s going to make a huge difference” (Participant 5)

“I think just handing over this thing and saying now fill this out and evaluate yourself become reflective over night is a very tall order for a lot of people. It’s not going to happen” (Participant 12)

There was agreement that *Síolta* should remain a voluntary programme. Teachers commented that it was a wise decision to allow individuals to choose to implement/not implement according to their preference. Indeed they felt that a mandatory programme would turn teachers off working in infant class

“You’ll have teachers running out of infants if they do it” (Participant 10)

“It[a mandatory programme] would be a deterrent” (Participant 12)

4.3.4 *Awareness of Síolta*

The fact that *Síolta* is in its pilot phase, has also restricted the acceptance of *Síolta* in the JNSs. The newness of the programme, the limited knowledge that teachers have of potential benefits coupled with *Síolta*’s lack of publicity has led teachers to dismiss the scheme. *Síolta* has no ‘obvious image’ or reputation and teachers fail to see how it could improve their personal standing or the status of their school.

“How widely recognised will it be? Like, everyone knows what the green school is... Will anyone know or even care about Síolta?” (Participant 4)

The fact that this is a pilot programme and that teachers have rarely, if ever, heard of it has left teacher’s feeling rather sceptical

“It just sort of came from nowhere and all of sudden we are expected to take it on?” (Participant 15)

“To be honest, before today I had never even heard of Síolta. And I would think that most teachers are the same. You, if you are to expect teachers to work with this, this Síolta thing then they need to know about it. Why hasn't it been publicised?” (Participant 27)

4.4 Personal Beliefs:

Further to the structural and dynamic issues it appears that personal choice and attitudes play a very significant role when teachers are deciding whether or not to implement Síolta in their classroom.

4.4.1 Teachers' Attitudes

Teachers who have been working in the sector for a long time are particularly uninterested in the programme

“personally, at this stage in my life, writing out notes and writing out schemes and assessments and things like that you know I couldn't. I would find that at this stage you know, I couldn't be bloody bothered.” (Participant 8)

“Being accredited as being a super dooper Síolta teacher is of no interest to me.” (Participant 11)

Furthermore, the early years graduates pointed out that teacher's often shy away from self reflection once their Diploma year is complete. This group suggested that teachers are happy to continue on working in the same way without help from an outside source. Fear of failure or having their deficiencies highlighted was also mentioned by a number of participants

“There is egotism involved in teaching a little bit and when people get their training years over them they don't want to be too open. You know it would be hard for some people just to go ‘oh god I'm failing there I'm failing there,’ they might not want it so blatantly put in front of them. And that's why they might shy away from it a little bit. It's so much easy just to close your door and you won't have to deal with it kind of thing. Nobody else is ever gonna come in again and judge you on it. So you would have to be very open to change” (Participant 3)

“I just think sometimes people feel uncomfortable with another person in the classroom - any way it's not even necessarily what background you are from it's just like ‘they are watching me’ and you are very aware of that person being in the room” (Participant 4)

4.4.2 *Ill feeling Toward the Department*

The current political and economic climate has also been listed as a factor that may turn teachers off a voluntary programme. It appears that recent pay cuts and curtailing of resources and benefits has led to ill feeling toward the department, especially from the newly graduated teachers

“More attention from the department is unwelcome at the moment”
(Participant 4)

“It’s just too much. I just can’t see this ever working at the moment the way things stand. We are up to our eyes with everything that is going on and why should we bale out the department of education?” (Participant 21)

“They {teachers} have been treated badly by the department and they feel that they are underappreciated so who can blame them? That’s how people feel at the moment, especially the younger teachers.” (Participant 27)

A number of teachers questioned the Department’s reason for rolling out another voluntary programme. Overall, remarks suggested that the department’s handling of the programme and the junior schools in general is not as coordinated and comprehensive as it may appear and in some cases, this is causing frustration

“In the Department the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing, it’s a bit all over the place” (Participant 1)

4.4.3 *Financial compensation*

Although it was mentioned in a number of the focus groups and interviews, the largest focus group in particular strongly felt that teachers should be financially compensated for their time when taking on additional work such as Síolta.

“Realistically it’s too much extra work, voluntarily. Gimme a few extra grand a year and I’ll think about taking it on.” (Participant 21)

“I wouldn’t mind doing it if I was paid a lot better because really, I would love to see the children of (the school) benefitting from all the standards I really would.” (Participant 22)

One of the principals interviewed was asked what she would need in order to roll out Síolta in her school. She commented on the need for further investment in order for her to convince her staff to take part in the programme

“I would say funding as an incentive to teachers to help them. It’s a bit like when teachers take part in school completion programmes and after school, homework clubs and so on they get a nominal payment. It’s not that they need to be paid for everything that they do, they don’t. Nor would they expect to be; but it would just be, they would feel less put upon. I don’t know if that makes sense.” (Participant 26)

Again, many of the participants highlighted recent pay cuts as a deterrent to a new voluntary programme of work. It is clear that teachers are frustrated and upset by the way they have been treated by the Department of Education and see this as further evidence of their disregard for teachers’ unenviable financial position.

“I think the fact that it’s voluntary at the moment maybe the fact our pay has been cut and everything else, I think you would be very pushed to get anybody to do anything voluntary at the moment” (Participant 2)

“We are being asked to do extra work, voluntary work whilst taking pay cuts? We are systematically getting less money and being asked to do more work you know?” (Participant 15)

“I just personally wouldn’t even consider doing anything voluntary when I’m getting pay cuts all the time. I wouldn’t even consider it. I wouldn’t even want to know. I’d just have no interest at all especially when we are getting pay cuts. I wouldn’t take on anything” (Participant 23)

4.5 Conclusion:

This draws a conclusion to the main findings of this present study. The next chapter will discuss these in relation to the research questions and make comparisons with current research.

DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the main themes that emerged from the findings will be discussed. The findings were based on four focus groups carried out with infant class teachers and four semi structured interviews with principals and primary school teachers for a more in-depth perspective. The findings are discussed in relation to the three broad themes; structural, dynamic and personal issues regarding to Síolta. These themes will be examined in greater depth in the following section highlighting the relevance in the roll of Síolta on a local and national level. This chapter will also examine the findings in relation to literature linking commonalities and identifying differences.

5.2 Structural issues:

The most frequently cited barriers to teacher's implementation of Síolta were those of a structural or physical nature. Regardless of the teacher's educational experience and/or position in the school, almost all made reference to the lack of time available to them outside of direct teaching time, the sense of curriculum overload and additional literacy and numeracy schemes they have undertaken as part of the 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)' programme.

Teachers in this study referred to time, or lack thereof, as the biggest obstacle to implementing Síolta. Children in infant classes usually go home at 1.30pm and teachers are required to stay until 2.30pm in line with other national school teachers. The participants in this study are in general, afforded five hours non-contact time per week to complete plans, arrange their classroom and attend meetings. In comparison, to the other ten services in Dublin 17 who have agreed to implement Síolta these teachers have the longest and most regular amount of non-contact time; time which could be used to complete work required for Síolta.

Teachers quite rightly described the sense of curriculum overload in infant classes. This finding is in line with current literature. Haugh (2009) has argued that the curriculum in DEIS schools is overloaded, and lack of time is a real issue in infant classes, whilst O'Connell (2008) has noted curriculum overload is creating problems for teachers. It has been suggested by participants that they must instead 'prioritise' as they will not or cannot deliver such a broad curriculum in its entirety.

All of those involved in the present study are employed in DEIS or 'breaking the cycle' schools. Although teachers have cited this as a barrier to implementing *Síolta*, the two programmes share many common goals. For example, areas of priority identified by DEIS include: improving planning, co-ordination and processes for monitoring and evaluating progress; supported focused professional development; strengthening Early Education supports in junior schools; and improving literacy and numeracy standards. The DEIS plan also places a renewed emphasis on the involvement of parents, family members and the community in children's education (DES, 2005). As *Síolta* would actually help schools to meet their DEIS targets¹ it appears that participants have misunderstood the aim of *Síolta* and its ultimate goals. Furthermore the narratives indicate that the area of literacy and numeracy outcomes has been singled out as a priority, perhaps to the detriment of all others.

Formal, structured literacy and numeracy schemes in use in all of the schools involved in this study, are, in some ways at odds with current research (Sylva et al, 2004; Wylie et al, 2009) relating to children's long-term academic abilities. As Rose and Rogers (2007) point out an early start in such a formal academic atmosphere can in fact damage young children emotionally. The revised curriculum aims to cater for children's needs and potential as they evolve day by day, stating "by meeting these needs, the curriculum enriches the child's life and the foundations are laid for happiness and fulfilment in later education and in adult life (DES, 1999a, p.6)". The narratives suggest teachers are preoccupied with results rather than developing the child in a holistic way and giving them what they need to achieve in later life. This instructive approach to teaching has been noted elsewhere "The model of the teacher as the source of learning, from whom young children receive knowledge, is still strongly felt within the system, while the notions of the well-being and involvement of children or the construction of knowledge through play, participation and choice, need to be developed (OECD, 2004, p.77)".

The matter concerning set outcomes for children remains a contentious one. Teachers, by the very definition are required to teach the set curriculum and according to Cassidy (2005) they feel a pressure to deliver the prescribed outcomes of the

¹ As part of the QAP, priority areas listed in the DEIS plan would be reviewed, strategic plans would be developed, carried out and evaluated to ensure the highest quality

curriculum in their entirety. The narratives were littered with references to literacy and numeracy outcomes. Even the early education graduates who defended the use of play in the classroom expressed a concern about limited outcomes for children whilst using play methods *“I know you are trying to do the curriculum through play but doing that they are not going to be achieving results that quickly”* (Participant 3). There is no doubt that the teachers who participated in this study are committed to delivering the best education to the children under their instruction the best way they know how. As such, their focus is to reach literacy and numeracy targets. In fact, it is considered so important that two of the schools involved in this study changed their daily routine order to facilitate literacy and numeracy programmes; one moving break time and the other removing ‘play time’ in order to allow more time for these schemes.

Lack of resources, space and large class sizes were named as further structural obstacles to delivering Síolta. Whilst it has been noted by numerous sources that classrooms are unfit, resources are scarce and ratios too high (INTO, 2006; INTO, 2006a; INTO 2008a; Carr, 2008) the findings suggest that more specifically, teacher’s felt these structural issues would limit them from reaching the requirements for the play standard of the Síolta QAP. Although schools need not have play facilities in order to take part in Síolta, they must have the capacity to reflect on a number of areas² and try to change practice that they have been deemed deficient (CECDE, 2008b). The teachers’ accounts indicate that they do not feel they would reach ‘best practice’ standards in relation to play and therefore they do not wish to take part in the Síolta QAP.

What is more alarming is that the findings hint that they do not understand how play materials would be used if such resources were available, a finding that is in line with recent literature (Murphy 2004; Dunphy, 2007). Consistent with de Paor’s study (2003) teachers’ accounts were also rather contradictory in terms of the type of play that is offered in the classroom when compared to the methods outlined in the curriculum. De Paor claimed that when asked, teachers will indicate engagement with the methodologies in the new curriculum but this is contradicted by their actions in

² The standards covered under The Síolta QAP are: Rights of the Child, Environments, Parents and Families, Consultation, Interactions, **Play**, Curriculum, Planning and evaluation, Health and welfare, organisation, Professional Practice, Communication, Transitions, Identity and Belonging, Legislation and Regulations, and Community Involvement.

the classroom ‘it seemed that they were happy to speak the language of reform while continuing with the pedagogical approaches already in use (p.101)’.

Furthermore, the early education focus group raised concern over how teachers use play arguing that it is used to “fill the gap (participant 3)” and “settle the children (participant 4)”. It seems that the early education graduates appreciated and understood the uses of play in much greater detail “I would be reluctant in the junior classes to take away play from children, because they don’t really get the type of play they need at home, they don’t necessarily get imaginative play or structured play (Participant 4)”, which she argued is due in part, to the early education degree “I think people who come from an Early Education background can see the benefits of it more so than someone coming through on a B Ed.” In contrast an issue prevalent in the other focus groups was the perceived need to have children sitting at their desks at all times. One participant made her position very clear: *“No matter what way you put it they have to sit in their chairs more or less all day. Once they come in they are on their chair. Now, we try to make it as pleasant as possible but basically they are sitting. End of ”*(Participant 8).

Although none of the teachers stated this openly there was sense of discomfort or even fear of the use of play in a classroom, a subject that has been raised by the INTO (2007). The revised curriculum gives much more freedom to teachers and therefore more professional responsibility (de Paor, 2003). It implies a new, partnership-based approach to learning which may make teachers ‘uncomfortable (INTO, 2007, p.25)’. The need to retrain or inform teachers of the different approach required for younger children has been expressed in the literature (DES, 1999; Nic Craith & Fay, 2007; Dunphy, 2007) and this was apparent in the current study. As teachers receive only one core module in Early Education as part of the B. Ed. their grasp of early years pedagogy may be limited. This limitation was pointed out by one participant who challenged her colleagues understanding of play *“You know that {description of play} actually would not be the kind of thinking behind play at all... That’s not what the play I am doing is involved in, it’s a different area all together”* (Participant 20). It should be noted that this individual was the only teacher from focus groups 2, 3, and 4 who defended the use of play to teach academic skills. Through the Síolta QAP teachers would have the opportunity to reassess their understanding of play, receive

training and meet with teachers who are successfully using this methodology in an infant class. These opportunities would be tailored to meet the needs of the specific teacher over a two year period (CECDE, 2008b). However, teachers would first have to question the importance they place on ‘play’ as a teaching methodology.

The early education graduates in this study strongly felt that if Síolta was ever to be rolled out successfully in schools it would first need to become a substantial part of teacher training. Participant 2 commented that the way to ensure acceptance was to have Síolta as a subject in the training colleges, and in this way it could move up and throughout the school over time. The lack of specific regulations for differentiating training and educational methodologies when catering for younger children has also come under scrutiny (OECD, 2004). As highlighted by the findings in relation to play in infant classes, change in favour of more active learning methodologies has been slow. In line with Whitaker’s assessment of change in schools (1993) the findings draw attention to the rejection of new methods, when imposed change conflicts with long held practice and beliefs. This was clearly felt by one of the participants who said *“Just because a curriculum changes doesn’t mean the teachers mind frame does. If you have been taught in a specific way that is the way you teach. It would take someone with a lot of time and interest to independently research the new ways of doing things. Especially for teachers who have been working as long as me... it’s hard to change what you do.”* (Participant 27)

5.3 Dynamic issues:

Dynamic issues raised in the findings were generally concerned with the difficulty of reconciling the differing theoretical bases of primary and pre-primary sector. The findings point to a sense of unease between the two and the relationship described by participants is not one of sharing and support. In general, the teachers appear to have a very low opinion of the early education services in their locality; such an opinion may be mutual, but exploration of this was beyond the scope of this study. Neuman (2000) has uncovered this animosity elsewhere, which he attributed to each sector feeling threatened by an approach other than their own.

The fact that teachers do not know a lot about Síolta, coupled with the fact that it is an early years initiative may also be a barrier to implementation in JNSs. Many of the

teachers questioned where the programme came from and were dubious not only about the research base but the section of the department who were rolling this out. As one participant put it *“I think its bit half baked. I don’t trust the people who are doing this because we already know that we know more than them”* (Participant 17). If teachers have little confidence in a programme it is safe to assume that they will not engage with it. Furthermore, many of the participants commented on the relative newness of the programme. They remarked that there has been little publicity, little information, and poor explanation of the goals and benefits of Síolta from the Department of Education and from local sources. Difference in training between teachers and early education graduates was evident in this regard. Whilst teachers in the early education focus group spoke of Síolta with authority and a clear knowledge of its merits, the other teacher’s understanding of the programme was, in a lot of cases, incorrect. Recently, there has been a lot of talk about quality in the early years sector (Schonfeld et al, 2004) but the data from the current study suggests that teachers do not see ‘quality’ as a concern. Although, the primary school curriculum lists ‘quality in education (DES, 1999a, p.9)’ as a key issue, perhaps understanding of this term is different in each sector. Fabian and Dunlop (2002) have suggested that whilst the two sectors may be using the same terminology, they are in fact describing two very different theories; a situation that can lead to frustration and misunderstanding.

As well uncovering a need to increase understanding and relationships between the two sectors, formal transitions programmes should be established. Formal transition programmes in this area have not been developed even though there is a growing concern that the difference in curricula and culture in pre-schools and schools may have negative consequences for children (O’Kane, 2008). Consistent with data from the present study, Stephen and Cope (2003) found that teachers have little interest in children’s previous experience and rarely use this knowledge to plan their classes. Consequently, input from early years workers in Dublin 17 not valued or sought after. In fact the only time where teacher’s referred to formal communication between pre and primary schools was when the pre-school service was run by trained primary school teachers within the school grounds. This highlights the sense of trust that exists between teachers, a trust which may be lacking between teachers and early years workers. This could be explained by Breathnach and Sturley’s study (2007) who

found that teachers were unable to work collaboratively with others and did not feel that ECCE professionals would be an asset to their work.

Teachers seem to have a poor opinion of many pre-school services referring them as ‘crap’ and ‘unprofessional’. Obviously, this attitude affects the way these two groups interact. Teachers were quick to point out deficiencies in the pre-primary sector, whilst stating that the primary school sector already has sufficient ‘checks’ in place. The early education graduates revealed that in their opinion, school inspections are not regular enough or thorough enough and argued that Síolta would help with teachers’ self reflection skills and subsequently improve practice. In comparison, all other focus groups and interviews made reference to the regular checks in place and implied that Síolta is, therefore, surplus to requirements. However both the INTO and Department of Education outline the need for more regular and thorough evaluation, review and reflection in primary schools (DES, 2005; INTO, 2007; INTO, 2008). As part of the Education Act (DES, 1998) schools should be inspected regularly, but findings in this study suggest the visits are not frequent. Furthermore, it has been noted that self-reflection rather than inspection has a longer lasting effect on quality in early education (Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994; Rodd, 1994; Jorde-Bloom, 1995; Stephens & Wilkinson, 1995). Therefore, this is something that should be encouraged on a local level. The early education graduates clearly stated that many teachers do not want to review their practice for fear of failing. *“Teachers may not be wanting to write all these bad things about themselves ‘I’m failing in this area, I’m not doing the best in this area, this area, this area; and then the teacher next door is doing brilliantly in those areas. And then when the principal reads both of these reports.”* (Participant 2).

Finally, it should be noted that a number of participants were very firm and extremely vocal in their opinions during focus groups. This may have effected the direction and outcome of the focus group as well as leading to group agreement with the dominant opinion in the group. Consistent with theories of group dynamics and deindividuation (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2007; Brown, 2007) it appears that teachers in general have conformed with the status quo in their work place. As the decision to roll Síolta out in schools is, in general, made by the entire staff team, this method highlighted how the dominant opinion becomes the accepted norm within the school. Additionally, some

of the participants suggested that if the management team or Principal made the decision to roll Síolta out the teachers would follow suit stating that “although the teacher might complain, they would have little choice in the matter (participant 25)”

5.4 Personal Experience and Opinions:

Understandably, personal situations influence a teacher’s willingness to implement the Síolta QAP. Individual circumstances such as getting married, having a family, completing their dip. year and being near retirement age were all cited as personal barriers to Síolta. Those who had been working for a long time were certainly more vocal about their personal feelings toward the programme and their reasons for not implementing. Accounts suggest that these teachers feel it is not relevant to them in their time of life as a number of teachers who had been working in the primary sector for many years expressed their lack of desire for another voluntary programme stating *“I mean the likes of myself I’m going no-where, only out to grass! Being accredited as being a super dooper Síolta teacher is of no interest to me”* (Participant 11).

Although participants did not state this openly, it is clear from the narrative that there is a sense of anger towards the Department of Education at present. One focus group in particular were quite vocal about their annoyance that yet another thing was being asked of them whilst privileges and pay were being deducted. Additionally, there was a strong belief held by participants that they should be financially compensated for their time. Síolta is, and will continue to be a voluntary programme. Payments cannot be made to teachers as this would set precedence and then all participants, including staff from preschool services and crèches would be entitled to receive a similar payment.

5.5 Conclusion

This brings to a close the discussion of the main findings. In the next chapter conclusions will be drawn and recommendation in relation to the Síolta QAP will be outlined.

Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The aim of the study was to explore teachers' perspectives in relation to Síolta. The purpose of the study was to identify opinions, positive and negative, regarding Síolta; identify barriers to implementation and to discover whether the educational background of the teacher has any effect on their understanding of Síolta.

6.2 Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to explore teacher's perspectives in relation to Síolta and to try to discover what teachers perceived as barriers to the implementation of Síolta QAP in their school. The three dominant barriers to Síolta named by participants were structural barriers, dynamic issues and personal experience or opinions. The overwhelming reaction to Síolta was one of immediate dismissal. This reaction is understandable. Infant class teachers are already implementing a broad and challenging curriculum with large groups of children (double or triple the ratios in a pre-school) in small classrooms. Although the revised curriculum points to a progressive, partnership-based approach to learning, in reality, this is not possible. Firstly, teachers have not received adequate training in the area of early childhood pedagogy. The challenge of running a classroom based on active learning methodology cannot be met unless a person has received extensive training in this approach. Secondly, the resources required to deliver such a programme have not been provided by the Department of Education. The space and materials needed simply are not there. Thirdly, such a programme would require a lot more hands on involvement from the teacher. This is extremely difficult to manage without a second, qualified adult in the room.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the pressure of delivering a pre-set curriculum whilst focusing on literacy and numeracy outcomes required by DEIS plans is strongly felt by teachers. Consequently, all of their energy is concentrated on meeting DEIS plan targets. Further training in early education philosophy and research would highlight the need to develop the whole child, to focus on relationships, independence and developing a love of learning, rather than pushing formal academic standards on children before they are ready.

A further structural barrier frequently cited in the findings was the lack of time afforded to teachers to complete the work required by Síolta. Although infant teachers are awarded an hour at the end of the school day specifically for this, they felt this is insufficient. In comparison with local early education centres who have agreed to implement the QAP, the infant teachers have the greatest amount of paid, non-contact time with children (ie they are given at least five hours a week paid time to complete plans, reports and so on).

The relationships between the primary and pre-primary sector appear strained. Although some teachers made some very positive comments about local childcare services these were outnumbered by remarks of disapproval. This feeling seems to be directly related to participant's perceptions of Síolta. As it is an early education strategy, based on early education principles and philosophy teachers question it's relevance in a school setting. For the most part, negative opinions regarding Síolta were prevalent.

The next objective of the study was to explore whether opinions regarding Síolta differ depending on the type of training an infant class teacher has received. It is obvious that the type of training a teacher has received is paramount in forming opinion relating to Síolta. The early education graduates spoke accurately with authority and determination in all matters relating to Síolta. The teachers from the other three focus groups did not understand the theory behind Síolta. This is purely due to lack of training. All early education graduates studied Síolta and could list the benefits to the school the teacher and the children.

Furthermore their understanding of the need for play, their accurate understanding of the term and the need to offer this to young children was obvious.

However it should be noted that the early education graduate teachers confirmed that structural issues would indeed stop them from implementing Síolta in their classroom regardless of these benefits.

Finally, the study set out to determine whether the reaction to Síolta displayed by teachers in the pilot programme a trend that we can expect to continue as Síolta is rolled out nationally. It is the researcher's opinion that a number of issues, outlined

below need to be addressed before the OMCYA should attempt to roll this out in any other area.

6.3 Recommendations

Structural barriers to Síolta dominated the narratives and are without doubt the most difficult to change. However many changes can be introduced if and when Síolta is given pride of place in early education courses in

- see the merits but there are structural limitations ie class room size and resources
- more training needed; teachers do not understand the terms active play and child led activities
- Shift from focus on outcomes to developing the whole child/soft skills
- culture of change not present in schools
- More research re síolta; where are the results? Comparing classes with/without Síolta is needed?

Teachers will not take ownership of their own work and are blaming the department, the resources, the children for their shortcomings.

Dynamic:

1. formal links between the two professions need to be met
2. System needs to focus on Síolta if this will ever be rolled out
 - a. Convince parents who are results driven/ don't realise the deficits of the system
 - b. Publicised and sold to teachers
 - c. Emphasis on the new approach to learning with international acceptance

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Arline Fisher, J (2009) 'We used to play in foundation, it was more funner': investigating feelings about transition from foundation stage to year 1. *Early Years* 29(2), p.131-145

Barbour, R.S. (2007) *Introducing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage

Barnett, W.S. (1995). Long term effects of early childhood programmes on cognitive and school outcomes. *Future of Children*, 5(3), p.25-50.

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., Tight, M., (2006) *How to Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Breathnach, D & Sturley, J (2007) Working together to develop the 3Rs – An exploration of roles, responsibilities and relationships between ECCE students and Teachers in Irish Primary School Infant Classes. *Vision into Practice; CECDE International conference, Dublin Castle, February 8th-10th 2007*. Dublin: CECDE.

Brown, R (2007) *Group Processes (2nd Edition)* Cornwall: Blackwell Publishing.

Burchinal, M., Roberts, J. E., Riggins, R., Zeisel, S.A., Neebe, E., & Bryant, D (2000) Relating quality of centre based childcare to early cognitive and language development longitudinally. *Child Development*, 71(2), p 339-357.

Canella, G.S. (2002) *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: Social Justice and Revolution*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.

Canning, N. (2007) Children's Empowerment in Play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. 15(2), p. 227-236

Carr, J (2008a) *Class sizes; INTO Press Release 31st August 2008*. Accessed on 12/8/09 at

<http://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/PressReleases/PressReleases2008/ClassSize31808/>

Carr, J (2008b) *Statement by John Carr, INTO General Secretary, on Budget 2009: Most Over-Crowded Classes in Europe 15/10/08*. Accessed on 19/7/09 at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/PressReleases/PressReleases2008/Budget2009MostOver-CrowdedClassesinEurope151008/>

Carr, M (2000) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings*. London: Paul Chapman.

Cassidy, M (2005) 'They do it Anyway' a Study of Primary 1 Teacher's Perceptions of Children's Transition to Primary Education. *Early Years*, 25 (2), 143-153.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2008a). *Síolta Implementation Toolkit; Síolta Coordinator Manual*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2008b). *Síolta Implementation Toolkit; Quality Assurance Process- An Overview*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2008c) *Síolta Implementation Toolkit; Portfolio Building Guide*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2007) *Síolta Workshop Materials*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development Education

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2004). *Talking About Quality – Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. & Pence, A (1999) *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care*. London: Routledge.

De Paor, R. (2003) A Policy analysis of the 1999 Revised Primary Curriculum: Thesis (Ph. D.) Leeds Metropolitan University in INTO (2008a) *The Primary School*

Curriculum; INTO survey 2005 and proceedings on the consultative conference on Education 2006. Dublin: INTO.

Department of Education and Science (1998) *Education Act*. The Stationary Office: Dublin. Accessed on 30th August 2009 at http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/act_51_1998.pdf

Department of Education and Science (1999a) *Primary School Curriculum Introduction*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Department of Education and Science (1999) *Ready to Learn: the White paper on Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Department of Education and Science (2005) *DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools)- An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion; Summary*. Dublin: DES. Accessed on 12/6/09 at http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/DEIS_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion_summary.pdf?language=EN

Department of Education and Science (2006) *Statistical Report 2004-2005*. Dublin: The Stationary Office. Accessed on 30th July 2009 at <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=17216&ecategory=17325&language=EN>

Department of Health and Children (2006) *Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations 2006*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children. Accessed on 27/5/09 at <http://www.dohc.ie/publications/childcaresi20060604.html>

Duignan, M (2004) *Reflections on a National Review of Policy, Research and Practice in Ireland*. CECDE Questions of Quality Conference, Dublin Castle, 23-25/9/04. Dublin: CECDE.

Duignan, M (2005) *A Vision for the Future – Principles of Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland*. OMEP Conference Proceedings

2005. Accessed at

http://www.cecde.ie/english/pdf/conference_papers/A%20Vision%20for%20the%20Future.pdf

Duignan, M. & Walsh, T. (2004) *Talking About Quality - Report on a Consultation Process on Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: CECDE.

Duignan, M. & Walsh, T. (2004a) *Insights on Quality; A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004*. Dublin: CECDE.

Dunne, A (2008) *INTO Press Release on Overcrowded Classes; Statement from Angela Dunne, President INTO on 24/3/08*. Accessed on 12/8/09 at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/PressReleases/PressReleases2008/ClassSize24308/>

Dunphy, L (2000) *A Response to the White Paper on Early Childhood Education. Proceedings of Early Childhood Conference*. St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, February 2000. Dublin: INTO/ St. Patrick's College Publication. Accessed on July 12th at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/EarlyChConf.pdf>

Fabian, H & Dunlop, A W (2002) *Transitions in the early years: Debating Continuity and Progression fro children in Early Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Fallon, J (Ed) (2005) *Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives*. CECDE: Dublin.

Gomm, R (2004) *Social Research Methodology: a critical introduction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan

Goouch. K. (2008) Understanding playful pedagogies, play narratives and play spaces. *Early Years*, 28(1), p. 93-102

Haugh, K (2009) Learning to Read; Learning Experiences of a DEIS School. *In Touch*. (100), p. 49.

Huczynski, A.A & Buchanan, D. (2007) *Organizational Change*. Harlow, England: Prentice Hall

Irish National Teacher's Organisation (2003) 2003- A Meeting of Minds? General Secretary's Letter, *In Touch* (46) p.2.

Irish National Teacher's Organisation (2006) Into Curriculum Survey 2005, *In Touch* (81) p.24-27.

Irish National Teacher's Organization (2006a) *Leading Early Years Education*. Dublin: INTO.

Irish National Teachers' Organization (2007) *Approaches to Teaching & Learning 2007; INTO Consultative Conference on Education*. Dublin: INTO.

Irish National Teachers Organisation (2008) *Transitions in the Primary School: Discussion Paper. Education Conference 2008*. Dublin: INTO. Accessed on 12 May 2009 at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/WhatsNew/Conferences/EducationConference>

INTO (2008a) *The Primary School Curriculum; INTO survey 2005 and proceedings on the consultative conference on Education 2006*. Dublin: INTO.

Jorde-Bloom, P. (1995) Shared decision making: The centrepiece of participatory management. *Young Children*, 50, 55-88.

Kelleher, D (2009) *Press Release: Declan Kelleher, INTO President's speech to INTO Annual Congress, Letterkenny, Monday 13th April 2009; Early Childhood Education*. Accessed on 12/6/09 at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/NewsEvents/PressReleases/PressReleases2009/INTOPresidentonEarlyChildhoodEducation130409/>

Kiernan, G., Axford, N., Little, M., Murphy, C., Greene, S and Gormley, L. (2008) The school readiness of children living in a disadvantaged area in Ireland. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 6(2), p.119-144

Love, J., Harrison, L, Sagi-Schwartz, A., van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Ross, C., et al (2003) Childcare quality matters. *Child Development* 74(4), p 1021-1033

Mahoney, K and Hayes, N (2006) *In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives Executive Summary CECDE Research Series 2006*. Dublin: Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology.

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. (2006) *Designing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage

Martin, S (2003) *Parents as partners in early childhood services in Ireland; an exploratory study*, unpublished M. Phil thesis, Dublin Institute of Technology Mountjoy Square.

Murphy, B (2004) Practice in Irish infant classrooms in the context of the Irish primary school curriculum: insights from the study of curriculum implementation. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. 12 (3), p 245-257.

Melhuish, E. C. (2004) *Child Benefits: The importance of investing in quality childcare*. London: Daycare Trust.

Melhuish, E. C. (2004a). *A literature review of the impact of early years provision upon young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged*

backgrounds. Report to the Comptroller and Auditor General. London: National Audit Office. Available at

<http://web.nao.org.uk/search/search.aspx?Schema=&terms=A+literature+review+of+the+impact+of+early+years+provision+upon+young+children,+with+emphasis+given+to+children+from+disadvantaged+backgrounds>

Morgan, D (1988) *Focus groups as Qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Moss, P. and Petrie, P (2002) *Children's services to children's spaces; public policy children and childhood*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Moss, P. and Pence, A. (1994) *Defining Quality: Values, Stakeholders and Processes* (in) Moss, P. and Pence, A. (Eds.) *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services: New Approaches to Defining Quality*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, pp. 1-9.

Moyles, J, Adams, S., & Musgrove, S. (2002) *SPEEL: Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning*. Norwich: Her Majesty's Stationary Office. Accessed on 27/7/09 at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR363.pdf>

National Audit Office (2004) *Early Years; Progress in developing high quality childcare and early education accessible to all*. Report to the Comptroller and Auditor General. London: National Audit Office. Accessed on 04/7/09 at http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0304/early_years_progress.aspx

NCCA (1999) *Primary School Curriculum and Introduction*. Dublin: NCCA.

Neuman, MJ (2000) Hand in Hand, improving links between ECEC and schools in OECD countries, in SB Kramer (ed) *Early Childhood Education and Care: International Perspectives (p177-217)*. New York: The Institute for Child and Family Policy at Columbia University.

Nic Craith, D & Fay, A (2007) The curriculum in infant classes in Primary Schools in Ireland; Creating learning experiences. *Vision into Practice; CECDE International conference, Dublin Castle, February 8th-10th 2007*. Dublin: CECDE

O'Connell, A. (2008) *The 2005 INTO curriculum survey findings*. In INTO (2008) *The Primary School Curriculum; INTO survey 2005 and proceedings on the consultative conference on Education 2006*. Dublin: INTO.

OECD (2004) *OECD Thematic Review of early childhood care and education policy in Ireland 2004*. Dublin: The Stationary Office

OECD (2009) *TALIS Report 2009*. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. Accessed on 5/5/09 at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/8/7/43072587.pdf>

OECD (2008) *Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators*. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. Accessed on 12/8/09 at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/23/46/41284038.pdf>

O'Kane, M (2008) The Transition from preschool to Primary school in Ireland: Views of Primary School Teachers in Irish National Teachers Organisation (2008) *Transitions in the Primary School: Discussion Paper. Education Conference 2008*. Dublin: INTO. Accessed on 12/5/09 at <http://www.into.ie/ROI/WhatsNew/Conferences/EducationConference>

O'Kane, M & Hayes, N (2007) The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland; Teachers Views. *An Leanbh Óg*, 1(2), p125-139

Powney, J (1988) 'Structured Eavesdropping', *Research Intelligence; Journal of the British Educational Research Foundation*. Vol (28), 10-12

Pring, R (2004) *Philosophy of Education*. London: Continuum.

Ridgeway, A (2003) *Using a multiple intelligences and teaching for understanding approach with young learners*. Transformations; Theory and Practice in Early Education, OMEP Conference Proceedings 3rd April 2003.

Rodd, J. (1994). *Leadership in Early Childhood*. Buckingham: Open University press.

Rogers, S. and Rose, J (2007) Ready for reception? The advantages and disadvantages of single point entry to school. *Early Years*, 27(1), p. 47-63

Sagie, A. & Koslowsky, M. (1994). Organizational attitudes and behaviours as a function of participation in strategic and tactical change decisions: An application of pathgoal theory. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 15, 37-47.

Sarantakos, S (1998) *Social Research (2nd edition)* Hampshire and New York: Palgrave

Schonfeld, H., Kiernan, G. & Walsh, T (2004) *Making Connections; A review of international policies practices and research in early childhood care and education*. Dublin: CECDE.

Schweinhart, L.J., (2007) *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project Through Age 40; Summary Conclusions and FAQs*. Michigan; High/Scope Press. Accessed on 12/8/09 at http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/3_specialsummary%20col%2006%2007.pdf

Sharkey, P (2008) *An exploratory Study of continuity of Children's learning during Transition from the perspective of pre-school teachers an primary school teachers*. Unpublished Thesis. Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square.

Silverman, D. (2004) *Qualitative Research; Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage

Sociological Association of Ireland (2002), *Ethical Guidelines Sociological Association of Ireland*, Accessed on 12/5/09 at <http://www.ucd.ie/~sai/saiethic.html>,

Stephens, C. & Wilkinson, J.E. (1995). Assessing the quality of provision in community nurseries. *Early Child Development and Care*, 108, 83-98.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] Project; Effective Pre-School Education ;A Longitudinal Study funded by the DfES 1997 – 2004*. London: University of London.

Stephen C. & Cope P. (2003) An Inclusive Perspective on Transition to Primary school. *European Educational Journal*. 2 (2), p262-276.

Walsh, G. & Gardner, J. (2006) Teachers' Readiness to embrace change in the Early Years of Schooling: A Northern Ireland Perspective. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. 14(2), p.127-140

Whitaker, P. (1993) *Managing Change in Schools*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press

Wylie, C., Hodgen, E., Ferral, H., Dingle, R., Thompson, G., & Hipkins, R. (2006) *Growing Independence; A Summary of Key Findings from The Competent Learners @ 14 Project*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Accessed on 13/7/09 at http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/7718/cc-growing-summary14.pdf

Wylie, C., Hodgen, E., Hipkins, R., & Vaughan, K. (2009) *Competent Learners on the Edge of Adulthood: A summary of key findings from the Competent Learners @ 16 project*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Accessed 31/7/09 at <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2567/35076/35079/2>

Appendix A: The Síolta Quality Assurance Process

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established in 2002 with the aim of coordinating and developing early childhood education in Ireland for children from birth to six years (CECDE, 2007). As well as conducting much needed research into early education in the Republic of Ireland and offering policy advice to the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the centre was set the task of developing a quality initiative as envisaged in 'Ready to Learn; the white paper on early childhood education' (DES, 1999). According to the white paper, a 'Quality in Education mark (1999, p. 51)' would be awarded to settings who have reached a minimum standard in a number of key education areas. This 'QE' mark would have a number of functions. Firstly, to generally raise quality in the early education sector in Ireland. Secondly, it would indicate that a setting had reached certain criteria (and therefore help parents to choose a quality provision for their young child) and finally it would give those working in the field an incentive to improve their personal practice (DES 1999).

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, is a national quality assurance framework which details new methods for early childhood care and education. It aims to improve the quality of early childhood care and education settings working with children between the ages of 0 and 6 years. This framework has been designed by the Centre for Early Childhood and Education (CECDE) and was launched in May, 2006 by the Minister for Children. The Síolta framework is the first nationally agreed upon set of quality standards for early childhood education in Ireland. According to the Síolta manual, this framework "represents comprehensive guidance for quality in service delivery and professional practice. Together with other documents...it contributes to a blueprint for the development of early childhood care and education in Ireland."

Síolta was developed with the intention to define, assess, and support quality of early childhood care and education settings and operates by allowing early childhood care and education settings to reflect upon and assess the quality of service they are providing to children. To this effect, the Síolta programme aims to recognize strengths of an early childhood care and education centre while simultaneously identifying areas in need of improvement, therefore encouraging continuous quality and improvement in early childhood care and education settings for young children in all areas of Ireland.

Síolta operates under twelve inter-dependent principles^[1] representing a comprehensive idea of quality standards in early childhood care and education settings. The twelve Síolta principles have helped inform the sixteen national standards^[2] developed under the Síolta framework, which together form a broad structure for quality in early childhood care and education settings. Each standard is

1] The twelve Síolta principles are: value of early childhood, Children First, Parents, Relationships, Equality, Diversity, Environments, Welfare, Role of the adult, Teamwork, Pedagogy, Play

2] The sixteen Síolta Standards are: Rights of the Child, Environments, Parents and Families, Consultation, Interactions, Play, Curriculum, Planning and Evaluation, Health and Welfare, Organisation, Professional Practice, Communication, Transitions, Identity and Belonging, Legislation and Regulations, Community Involvement

broken down into several components, each having multiple areas of reflection. These reflection points are open-ended questions used to facilitate thoughtful discussion in which staff members reflect on quality of individual and centre work.

Síolta is currently being piloted in the preschools and primary schools in the *PFL* catchment area. As part of this process, *PFL* has employed a Síolta coordinator, familiar with the Síolta framework, to oversee this work. The Síolta coordinator works directly with the early childhood care and education centres to facilitate achievement of the Síolta standards.

There are three stages in the Síolta process. First, an early childhood care and education centre must register with the Síolta programme. This involves expressing interest in the programme, learning about the programme, and familiarizing with the process of the Síolta programme. The second step consists of a baseline assessment and evidence collection period. During this time, the early childhood care and education centre engages with a Síolta coordinator to conduct a self assessment, develop a plan of action, and build a portfolio for the centre. The self assessment is carried out with the Síolta coordinator. During this process, participants are asked to reflect on the practices of their centre. Reflection of centre practices is focused on the 16 Síolta standards. To facilitate the self assessment, the 16 Síolta standards are broken down into 75 components upon which the reflection is based. The self assessment is done as a centre and during the process centre staff review and reflect, as a group, on the level of quality practice as it relates to each Síolta component. To this effect, the staff rate their centre on a scale of one (low) to four (high) for each component. Ratings include 'no evidence of quality,' 'some evidence of quality,' 'significant evidence of quality, but some issues still outstanding,' or 'comprehensive evidence of quality.' In addition to providing the numerical ratings of their centre, the group describes why they rated the centre in such a way and provides evidence to support this rating. This assessment happens after the early childhood care and education centre has made the decision to engage with Síolta. Upon completion of the baseline assessment the centre works with the Síolta coordinator to produce an action plan to gather evidence in support of the self assessment, identify a timeline for the process to improve upon the Síolta standards, and describe the work that will take place over a fixed period of time limited to a maximum of 18 months. Once the developmental work has been carried out, early childhood care and education centres review and submit the self assessment tool. At this stage, it is hoped that all 16 Síolta standards have been completed by the centre.

The final stage in the Síolta programme is validation. During this phase, the self assessment tool has been submitted and a blind, external validator re-evaluates the quality level in the centre. Once an external validator has assessed the setting, a decision as to whether or not the centre has achieved the desired level of quality outlined in the portfolio submitted by the centre. If the desired level of quality has been achieved a quality rating, valid for a two year period, is given to the centre.

Appendix B: Interview/ Focus group discussion topics

Agenda	Focus Groups
Welcome and Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome and introductions • Housekeeping • Brief outline of the study • Explain ethical considerations • Reiterate right to remove themselves from the study at any time • Ensure everyone has signed informed consent slips • A copy of the finished study will be provided for each participant should they wish
Síolta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanation of the Síolta programme, support offered and timelines envisaged • Each group will be given the exact same information, which has been taken directly from Department of Education and Science documentation (see below) • Approximately five minutes
Discussion	<p>The following topics will be discussed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial reaction to programme • Would they choose to implement such a programme (reasons why) • Perspectives on pre-school education in Ireland • Perspectives on infant class curriculum and methodologies outlined • Difficulty in implementing new programmes • Whether formal transition programmes are in place? • What is needed to encourage teachers to take part?
Cool Down	<p>Thank participants for their time Ensure confidentiality and reiterate their right to withdraw at any time Distribute contact details</p>

Questions used in semi-structured interviews for principals/ Male teachers:

1. Could you please explain your understanding of Síolta?
2. Can you discuss whether, in your opinion, Síolta has any benefits for the school?
3. Perceived reasons why the school has chosen to implement or not implement the Síolta Quality Assurance Process?
4. Can you talk a little bit about your personal opinions regarding the current infant class curriculum? And the new methodologies outlined?
5. Are there difficulties implementing new schemes in DEIS schools?
6. What are your opinions/experiences regarding the local childcare/early education services?
7. Are there any links/ formal transition programmes between school and the childcare services?
8. What is needed by principals (or teachers) to implement Síolta in their schools?

Appendix C: Letter to Teachers/ Principals

Address

Number

Dear Junior/ Senior Infant teachers,

My name is Sandra O'Neill and I am a postgraduate student with Dublin Institute of Technology. I am currently carrying out a Masters Research Project under the supervision of Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny. The purpose of the study, entitled '*Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Years Education: Teacher's perspectives*', is to investigate teachers' views, ideas and needs in relation to Síolta. In particular, the study will focus on teachers' feelings towards implementing Síolta as a voluntary programme in their classroom.

Síolta is a quality assessment process launched by the Early Education policy unit in the Department of Education and Science. It has been designed to allow any service working with children from 0-6 years to engage with it, providing a mentor, creating support and offering advice. Síolta is now in its pilot phase and is due to be rolled out nationally at the end of 2009.

I would be very grateful if you and your colleagues could take the time to meet with me for a brief focus group to discuss your perspectives regarding Síolta. Total anonymity and confidentiality is guaranteed.

Should you have any further questions or wish to confirm your availability please do not hesitate to contact me on the number above. Alternatively, you can contact Dr. Anne Marie Halpenny on 4024255.

Sincerely

Sandra O'Neill BA ECE

Postgraduate student

Address

Number

Dear Mrs,

Please find enclosed letters for all *current* junior and senior infant teachers as discussed. I would be grateful if you could distribute these to appropriate staff.

As you are aware the purpose of the study is to investigate teachers' views, ideas and needs in relation to Síolta. In particular, the study will focus on teachers' feelings towards implementing Síolta as a voluntary programme in their classroom. Síolta is a quality assessment process launched by the Early Education policy unit in the Department of Education and Science. It has been designed to allow any service working with children from 0-6 years to engage with it, providing a mentor, creating support and offering advice. Síolta is now in its pilot phase and is due to be rolled out nationally at the end of 2009.

I would like to thank you for allowing me access to your school for the purpose of data collection for my study. I would again like to reassure you of the total anonymity and confidentiality guaranteed. Data collected will only be seen by myself and will not be made available to a third party.

I would sincerely like to thank you for your cooperation in facilitating this project. Should you have any further questions please do not hesitate in contacting me on the number above.

I look forward to meeting with you,

Sincerely,

Sandra O'Neill

Postgraduate Student

Appendix D: Consent form

FCN1

CONSENT FORM

Research Topic/ Title of the project; Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education; Teacher's perspectives.

Researcher: Sandra O'Neill

I confirm that I have read the information leaflet for the above research study

Yes

No

Any questions have been answered satisfactorily

Yes

No

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time

Yes

No

I understand that the information collected may be presented and or published in academic journals and at conferences

Yes

No

Signed:

Date:

Name in Block letters:

Appendix E: Sample Coding

STRUCTURAL ISSUES

Work overload

"I wouldn't do it purely based on the paper work. I'm still falling behind in reading, the first steps writing stuff that we got a few months ago, the first steps reading stuff I haven't opened; that we got the last staff meeting. The ready set go maths I'm trying to plan because it's all assembling stuff beforehand" (Participant 2)

"Because it's still experimental we'll probably have to do it on top of what we are doing already, so it's, for all that paper work I think anything else coming at me now might be a bit much" (Participant 2)

"It's just so much and while doing all the English stuff, I'm still doing our English scheme and our English phonics scheme, that's three English programmes and I'm spending most of my day doing that" (Participant 2)

"It's not like we have this hour where we could sit down and fill out all extra work like, that hour goes very fast because you are preparing for the next day" (Participant 5)

"(because of DEIS) We've that little bit extra to be doing" (Participant 5)

"I don't think it's going to make a huge difference to take on that amount of paper work, and reading and trying to fit in assessing from the book as well as your normal everyday assessment and trying to get through your curriculum" (Participant 5)

"It's more pressure, you know? It's an extra pressure" (Participant 7)

"...an added pressure. Yeah, another hassle. I was just bombarded the day we went through that. Even the thought of having to do something else like that" (Participant 7)

"You feel like screaming, not another one {programme}..." (Participant 8)

"I find myself some days I might be here until three some days four. Just to get sorting out the environment, just to get it prepared for the next day or the next week." (Participant 9)

"I think maybe it needs someone full time doing it. Do you know? I don't think a teacher would have the time to do it at all. I think you would nearly need someone to sit there and observe the kids all day every day and write, write, and do it. I don't think a teacher would have time at all." (Participant 10)

"You have to bring it home with you" (Participant 10)

"to plan all your lessons for the next day, get your materials ready, whether it's art getting glue pots ready or whatever. Hanging up pictures on the wall. Correcting...the amount of work is huge" (Participant 10)

"You know because it's hands on all the time in class you don't get a break in class you know? Carry on loads to next lesson in class. You have to be ready to go when the next lesson comes. Otherwise it makes life harder for yourself." (Participant 11)

"Somebody to do it for them, because teachers won't have the time. Do you know? Somebody to sit there and observe" (Participant 11)

"Not with the overload we have at the moment. 'Cause we've taken on a lot of new programmes in the past couple of years. And, really, at the moment we're trying to fit those in. So the idea of another programme I'm afraid Sandra, is nearly taboo for us at this stage. We just want to say no." (Participant 11)

"That'd be too much pressure on us" (Participant 11)

"We don't have the time to sit down and go through this mighty nonsense we just don't have it" (Participant 13)

"We are being asked to do extra work, voluntary work whilst taking pay cuts? We are systematically getting less money and being asked to do more work you know?" (Participant 15)

"I actually think if we hadn't had so many initiatives people might in fact, take it on" (Participant 16)

"It's just too much, I just can't see this ever working at the moment the way things stand. We are up to our eyes with everything that is going on and why should we bale out the department of education?" (Participant 21)

"Why go through the hassle of doing all the paper work with you?" (Participant 21)

"I don't know whether the amount of time and effort and just the sheer volume of paper work whether teachers have the capacity right now." (Participant 25)

"If they could take on one or two standards like Heino suggested and see how they reacted to it? Whether they managed it with their own workload possibly? But from looking at Jan's work load, you know? I just don't know" (Participant 25)

"In fairness to the teachers I would say that they have taken on quite a lot in the school in recent years. With the DEIS plan. Like obviously each school would have to have eh a school plan anyway; so the DEIS plan is simply a follow through of that. But I many ways it's more focused on the four areas, now." (Participant 26)

"One of the reasons I would say that the teachers were reluctant to buy into another project was because they fill out em, forms for PFL anyway in September. As I day they devote a lot of their time and energy to the literacy project. In recent years we've also em, become very involved in the coordination and implementation of a new code of conduct or discipline policy and every teacher in the school has bought into that as well. So there has been a lot of extra curricular, well, extra involved." (Participant 26)

"There is a huge amount of work but that, I mean it's nationwide. Every teacher would have the same difficulties, or whatever. Time constraints; time is a huge factor and I think a lot of the teachers would have mentioned that to you. Time is the biggest element in their refusal of doing of taking part because the day simply isn't long enough." (Participant 26)

"Ah teachers are very bogged down, very bogged down the pressure is immense." (Participant 27)

"If teachers say no {to implementing Síolta} I'm imagining it is down to time. We just are doing so much already." (Participant 28)

"The curriculum is very broad and in a DEIS area you are almost fighting a losing battle. You need to prioritise, big time." (Participant 28)

"When they {the children} start off that far behind it's hard to catch up. That's why DEIS plans focus on literacy and numeracy and things like that. It's just vital. We may leave out other areas but that's what happens in a DEIS school." (Participant 28)

Curriculum

"Every teacher is pulling their hair out at the end of the year. They are not even covering literacy and numeracy outcomes at the moment" (Participant 3)

“And (with) the new curriculum I just don’t see how anyone would volunteer for it to be honest”
(Participant 3)

“Well I find that in our school, they are not reaching their targets” (Participant 3)

“I know you are trying to do the curriculum through play but doing that they are not going to be achieving results that quickly, do you know what I mean” (Participant 3)

“You have to teach so many basic things that the curriculum has to go out the window until they are able to actually sit down and keep themselves to themselves” (Participant 5)

“There is just a lot on the curriculum they don’t take into account, that there’s so many basic things to be taught, before you even get into the curriculum” (Participant 5)

“You really are you are struggling to try to balance between the, the main areas, literacy, learning maths things like this. And then you try to balance across really and; but it doesn’t flow the way reading the curriculum book“ (Participant 7)

“No matter what way you put it they have to sit in their chairs more or less all day. Once they come in they are on their chair. Now, we try to make it as pleasant as possible but basically they are sitting. End of. Now, they can’t just get up in the middle of a thing and wander around”
(Participant 8)

“I would end up spending more time on maths and English then we are supposed to on a daily basis” (Participant 9)

“I would find that we are sort-of neglecting some areas to accommodate other areas” (Participant 10)

“There is no way that you could fit everything in. That, give the, required length of time for everything ‘cause it just won’t fit”
(Participant 10)

“you know it’s getting worse and worse. There is so much to do in English and maths. There’s so many different areas that I am, that I’m not getting to cover. Some weeks I don’t even get to touch Irish or I don’t get to touch SPHE at all like.” (Participant 11)

“some of our kids are just so young, you know? That a lot of it kind-of goes over their head. I find they don’t, they can’t comprehend it.” (Participant 11)

“Well the revised curriculum is brilliant you know, it was difficult at first, I think for teachers to change their methods and really embrace play and active learning in the start but it was always, they would have used as a tool for settling children and for social development and those kinds of skills you know? Now it is a lot more progressive and the teachers really embrace it, really embrace it. But it requires a lot of planning on an individual and department level and with all the work already being done” (Participant 25)

“For me, the two greatest aspects of the revised curriculum are active learning and the fact that there is an emphasis on oracy. Em, I relation to the width and the breadth of the curriculum”
(Participant 26)

“I don’t know how the department could expect a teacher to get through the amount of work. However, I suppose if you were to talk to an inspector about it they would say well you use the curriculum like a menu and you take as much as you can from it and that’s what you do. You prioritise.” (Participant 26)

“Just because a curriculum changes doesn’t mean the teachers mind frame does. If you have been taught in a specific way that is the way you teach. It would take someone with a lot of time and interest to independently research the new ways of doing things. Especially for teachers who have been working as long as me you know? All this new research, it’s hard to change what you do. You

could know it and appreciate it but, it's difficult to run your class this way without support. You know?" (Participant 27)

"I know in our school everyone is struggling with trying to deliver the curriculum as well as literacy like and numeracy so I think time would be the biggest factor." (Participant 28)

"I know great things were expected from the curriculum when it was released but things are slow to change on the ground you know? And when the supports, like resources, training, resource teachers; when they are not provided teachers can't really use active learning or participatory learning or when they are provided and removed as they have been this year it's even more difficult to do it.." (Participant 28)

When asked whether it can be delivered using the methods described in the curriculum participants responded:

"No, not at all" (Participant 5)

"You would need children who never ever said anything, children that never moved anywhere" (Participant 6)

"Children who wanted to learn" (Participant 8)

Resources:

"I don't have the materials to work with" (Participant 5)

"They are better off you know, putting their money into extra resources, and, for, for the likes of buildings rather than running a programme like that...that would be probably more effective than running a programme that people probably really don't want to do." (Participant 5)

"we have all these brilliant ideas and the ideal way to teach but they don't back it up with resources." (Participant 14)

"I would have an interest in taking it on if I got in the play and environment thing and if there was funding." (Participant 17)

Why roll out a new programme when the programmes that are there are not catered for? In the curriculum? (Participant 18)

"when you look across at the people in the UK, and they have play you know. Play you know 80% child initiated and 20% adult initiated they actually put two infant classes together, they knocked down walls, they put in outside provision, they gave the infant class, one infant class, three trained teachers. We are being asked to do it without any funding, with one teacher" (Participant 20)

"If I knew that I had everything, if they said this is everything that you need, all you have to do" (Participant 21)

"we know if we take this on, we're, you're never gonna get the funding for it. We won't get money to buy the equipment" (Participant 21)

"we want to become better teachers but it's just not...You wouldn't send a child to school without their pencil case or their books" (Participant 22)

"To have every teacher on board to support and help each other but then the resources needed would be huge. They really don't have the time for anything as big as this." (Participant 25)

"Resources are always something that teachers would look for. Not necessarily concrete resources but resources in the form of support and I know you have said you would supply that." (Participant 26)

“when they (resources) are not provided teachers can’t really use active learning or participatory learning.” (Participant 28)

Play

“I know in our school we run golden time anyway, the teachers run it in the classroom where you let children play freely for a half an hour, its just a half an hour. And for junior and senior infants really need a bit more. But in the senior infants two of the teachers I have been working with this year haven’t even been running golden time or their play activities in the morning. They had to take that away to do the easy steps writing, the free writing part. That time was allocated for children to practice their free writing because there was no other available time of day to do it. So their play, the little bit of play they had in the morning when they came in for twenty minutes what they’ve always done that’s even been taken off them so I couldn’t imagine how they would squeeze in something like this.” (Participant 3)

“We can’t start classes anyway until twenty past nine because we have them still coming in the door, you could only have ten kids sitting in front of you. You couldn’t actually physically start teaching anyway so play fills that gap.” (Participant 3)

“I think it’s down to the teacher really. The importance the teacher puts on play. Some teachers put more importance on play than others.” (Participant 3)

“I would be reluctant in the junior classes to take away play from children, because they don’t really get the type of play they need at home, they don’t necessarily get imaginative play or whatever” (Participant 4)

“I think a lot of junior teachers see play as a settle as a period to settle the children in the morning because it’s routine very morning they know it’s play time every morning and at starting time play is put away and that is work for the day. I think they see it as a settling exercise more than for the importance of play” (Participant 4)

“Apparently play is the way you sort out, em, making friends and who is being greedy, who is grabbing everything. This is all done through play. That was a very useful but we don’t have room anymore” (Participant 8)

“It was very nice, it was very pleasant; very calming for a child that might be upset or em, who had come from a traumatic home when they needed time to just, chill” (Participant 8)

“We can no longer do that because we no longer have the room in the classroom. And em, while we have a lot of equipment in the classrooms it’s very much, eh, it’s geared more towards learning rather than specifically toward play” (Participant 8)

“We teach through play but it’s, it’s like, cognitive, it’s the play we want them to do. It might be counting out things or something, it’s play, they are still playing. But it’s not play as in what they want to do, you know what I mean? That’s the difference. But it takes a long, long time to get that message across; but they learn. You know, they cop on after a while” (Participant 8)

“Floating and sinking with four year olds. Good luck. It’s like, how is that supposed to happen? You can’t really engage in the methodologies in the curriculum properly without any help.” (Participant 12)

“I know principals having been phoning up and they are either for it or against it. They’ve actually phoned up and said ‘we don’t want this, you’re student anymore, we don’t want play’ there are principals who want to see their infants at a desk, making no noise and so you know, they’ve had that experience of ‘tell your student she’s not doing play’.” (Participant 20)

“You know that actually would not be the kind of thinking behind play at all... That’s not what the play I am doing is involved in, it’s a different area all together”. (Participant 20)

“The teachers try their best and work inline with the curriculum. Play is used during the day but this being a DEIS school literacy and numeracy have to take precedence and that’s a decision that we as a school have made in the best interests of the children.” (Participant 25)

"I think the children have a far better chance of learning and retention when taught through play so not in a million years would I suggest that play should go. No, no I'd be very definite about that. And I think most people and teachers of infants would agree." (Participant 26)

"Well I wouldn't know about play really, that is a new element to the curriculum and I've been the HSLO for a while now and in the older school so..." (Participant 27)

Class size/Ratios

"You'd need a third party involved to assist each teacher in forming their observations and putting the things together" (Participant 2)

"We don't have the space in the classes because the numbers are so big. I don't have space for play areas." (Participant 5)

"By taking part in the Siolta it's not going to make my situation in this room any better. I could be ticking boxes in it but I still don't have the space to actually give them for play areas" (Participant 5)

"You do your best, within the circumstances but you can only do a certain amount. We are very limited and em, our numbers are large, the class rooms are this size. There isn't a lot you can do about that" (Participant 8)

"It's not particularly wonderful like when you've twenty five in a classroom in junior infants you know?" (Participant 8)

"Previous years where we would have had smaller numbers we would have been able to have eh, a play house area where they did dressing up" (Participant 8)

"trying to implement these programmes with children with special needs without a classroom assistant or a classroom assistant for an hour a day or whatever you know? And all of that just adds up to the amount of time you have. You know?" (Participant 9)

"I know people will sit there and say it's only fifteen, but you know it's still a scrap because you know, it's double what's in a preschool" (Participant 20)

Staff/Curriculum Assessment

"The problem is you have your school inspector who maybe comes in once or twice a year to look at like school attendance, but numbers... they probably don't even see the teachers they just go to the principal's office" (Participant 2)

"they come in and evaluate everything about the school every three to five years but it's about every ten years. If you're lucky" (Participant 2)

"There hasn't been one in our school since about four or five years before I started so I'd say it's been, yeah, towards ten years. But that's', they are just overrun" (Participant 1)

"I think that's why we don't actually have or haven't had a whole school inspection in so long because practically every year there are so many diploma's but now that's starting to stop because for a lot there won't be any job in September so there are less dips and maybe there will be more whole school inspections" (Participant 4)

Training

"If it needs to come into schools it needs to come into teacher colleges" (Participant 2)

"It needs to become, not just a seminar but become a subject in the training college" (Participant 2)

"If it was brought in that way then it could move up the school but I don't think you can walk into a school and just hand it out to all of the teachers. I don't think the uptake would be as high" (Participant 2)

"...and understanding Siolta. Because I don't think it's the biggest thing in the world but that's because we studied it for a year" (Participant 2)

"I think it's good for teachers for their own personal development, it really is" (Participant 3)

"Because a lot of primary teachers have no idea what goes on in early years do you know what I mean? They just don't. Well I didn't" (Participant 3)

"I specialised in seven to eleven year olds. So, I actually got no training when you think about it in early years whatsoever and that's why I freaked out when I had to go to a junior school, I was like, I just don't even know how to teach four year olds. We only briefly touched on it" (Participant 3)

"I suppose if you learnt that once in early education in college and you did implement it, you might think that way all the time; always self analysing and evaluating it from there on in" (Participant 3)

"I think people who come from an Early Education background can see the benefits of it (Siolta) more so than someone coming through on a B Ed. like that coming through purely from going into primary school teaching. If you had a history in Early education previous to that" (Participant 4)

"I think what would probably put people off like that didn't necessarily have a background in early education background is just kind of the size of it and because there are so many standards and they don't realise that they probably are implementing" (Participant 4)

"I would think that teacher training is where you would be putting the energy into." (Participant 12)

"I don't know I thought that there was good work going on in the training colleges." (Participant 20)

"I just finished Pat's last year. And like, for your lessons you could use play as a lesson and be inspected on it" (Participant 24)

"I have never taught infants. I have no interest. I much prefer the older children. You can have a chat and there is less minding on them. I think maybe I wouldn't be comfortable especially being a man in that class but maybe, now that I think about it it could have been the lack of confidence with that age group cause they are just so small. So small and eh..." (Participant 27)

Support from management

"I know it sounds really bad but unless the principle was on board, and the vice principal and that they're really gonna try to get the teachers on board" (Participant 3)

"There are principals who want to see their infants at a desk, making no noise." (Participant 20)

"You know you really need the management on board. If a principal and the board decided that this is a new programme we are doing it and that's it then what could they do? They'd moan yeah but, they'd get over it!" (Participant 27)

Outcomes for children?

"Testing... It's a way of filtering them you know? Monitoring them. And the records, ya know that you keep for them." (Participant 3)

"Every child in the country goes through them {tests}. Up until last year parent's we're really given results you kind-of say your child is average above average below average but now parents have an entitlement to see all of the results. Like it gives the child a reading age you look at the

child's current age they might be six years and two months, but their reading age might be four years and two months or seven years and two months. It gives you a rough reading age" (Participant 2)

"The programmes we use are focused on improving outcomes for children and acquiring levels similar to the national average." (Participant 25)

"Well I think from my point of view before I would even approach my team about this I would like to know more information. You know? Has it been proven that this works? That it will improve outcomes for children? Because that is what the teachers will ask, that is what the senior management and board will want to know, what difference will it make to literacy and numeracy outcomes for children." (Participant 25)

"If this was research based and there were studies to show that teachers going through this programme would improve then maybe we could consider making it mandatory asking all teachers to take part, but at this point teachers are already doing so much. I just can't ask them to take on another programme and I wouldn't. Where are the results? Where is the research? Can you show me that this will improve literacy and numeracy in a DEIS school?" (Participant 25)

"I think that something that's missing in Irish education. We have standardised testing in every other level in the junior school except at junior infants. We've standardised testing in senior infants- the MIST, em, in first and second class where we do the micro-T and the sigma. So we've the only class that's missing standardised testing would be junior infants so I think that could be a benefit. A huge benefit." (Participant 26)

"For instance, we changed our morning break from twenty past ten to half past ten to allow us to have an hour and a half of literacy each morning. And so it really is a huge chunk of the day. It has paid dividends in that our scores in our standardised testing enormously the first year that we were involved and we have managed to maintain them ever since. So that's very good." (Participant 26)

"Ah yeah well, like I've said yeah. The children are from difficult backgrounds you know? A study was done there a while ago comparing the children in this area to others, to the norm in Ireland and children were so far below even coming into school. When they start off that far behind it's hard to catch up. That's why DEIS plans focus on literacy and numeracy and things like that. It's just vital. We may leave out other areas but that's what happens in a DEIS school." (Participant 28)

Síolta Structure

"When you actually sit down and look at it and remember 'oh my god I totally forgot that I learnt that in college and it just went out of my head and I never thought about it again' (Participant 1)

"Because it's still experimental we'll probably have to do it on top of what we are doing already, so it's, for all that paper work I think anything else coming at me now might be a bit much" (Participant 2)

"But when you walk into a class with this kit, it actually would take while to read through it all, to sit down and it's not as big as it, it seems quite daunting" (participant 2)

"{if this programme was made mandatory} There would probably be a reluctance to teach in the early years classrooms then" (Participant 4)

"You've this set of standards which is all lovely and all the rest and then they, they're real set of standards which is what they have at home and they are miles apart. Miles apart." (Participant 8)

"I don't think that ticking boxes, you might pick up a few little ideas or, a more efficient way of doing something but I don't think it's going to make a huge difference" (Participant 5)

"You'll have teachers running out of infants if they do it {make the programme mandatory}" (Participant 10)

"I think just handing over this thing and saying now fill this out and evaluate yourself become reflective over night is a very tall order for a lot of people. It's not going to happen" (Participant 12)

"It {making Siolta mandatory} would be a deterrent" (Participant 12)

"This just ain't going to have the same effect on the kids learning. I just really believe that it can't it won't have the same effect" (Participant 12)

"I think its bit half baked. I don't trust the people who are doing this because we already know that we know more than them. They don't know, they don't really know..." (Participant 17)

"I would be kind of worried... how representative it would actually be you know, they might come out saying oh yes, we've done really well with Siolta but because they don't have the volume of work that we would be doing it wouldn't be representative saying well we took it on then, the results would be kind of skewed in that way". (Participant 19)

"I don't think you are going to roll this out anywhere." (Participant 21)

"If something works, would it not be better to stick with the play project and maybe roll that out in the schools, get the funding for that and do that everywhere instead of having just another thing." (Participant 19)

"I know that it is a pilot programme and I think there are a number of issues outstanding you know? Some kinks that need to be ironed out before it can really be a suitable proposition for National schools." (Participant 25)

"We are already doing a pretty good job, we are ahead of the curve and are doing a lot better than some of the schools around here so why take this on?" (Participant 25)

"Obviously any accreditation and up work that we are doing would be welcome but probably not as necessary in eh, national school, national primary school as it would be say in a play school or a pre-school. And the reason I say that is that we have a curriculum already laid down so that we, it's not that we are automatically wonderful but there is an amount of work that we have to get through and a level we have to reach and a standard we have to reach anyway. So in a sense that is predetermined" (Participant 26)

"Also, I think involving the whole school rather than just a handful of teachers would be better and that was my recommendation that I fed back to our board that we would need total acceptance or but in from the team of teachers for it to be viable." (Participant 26)

"I could equally argue the case for one or two teachers doing it because they would be doing it because they are volunteers and would be more interested in doing it" (Participant 26)

"Everyone will need to sign up to this for it to work and I'm just not sure if this is the right time."(Participant 27)

"I've been working in primary schools for over twenty years now and it's very hard to bring in change, I know. I know. New programmes are always very difficult to bring in and it's takes a lot of effort on behalf of everyone. All the staff, the HSL0, the principal management." (Participant 27)

DYNAMIC

Transition programmes

"The only information we get would be from the children who attended the early start in the school. And that's literally, maybe, do they know their colours, do they know this, it's nothing."

And, we might get an idea of their personality from the teacher. And they know nothing about us” (Participant 2)

“They’ll just arrive at the door on the first of September” (Participant 2)

“We did actually work very closely with them” (Participant 4)

“Well the home school liaison teacher does come in there because she would be on the board of some of the pre-schools... She is on the board of some of them so she has a fair knowledge, and I mean she certainly would you know maybe have pointers towards families and things like that” (Participant 10)

“In fairness to the pre-school teachers I think they are very open to and crèches and things like that but eh, our liaison teachers are very valuable resource that we have you know? And of course from the pre-school as well down below we’ve always had great input from the teacher” (Participant 10)

“that’s not coming from them(pre-school teachers)” (Participant 12)

“well occasionally I’ve had information on some children” (Participant 13)

“There are no formal links no. We contact them when we start taking names for September and we know the managers by name. The HSLO would have a more thorough knowledge of the workings of the preschools.” (Participant 25)

“Well all information would come through the HSLO especially if we have already been made aware of a family through siblings or the HSE or the like. Generally it’s basic things like learning difficulties so we can provide support for those children so it’s there when they arrive you know and we do things like that.” (Participant 25)

“We have started this year to look in and visit early start and spoke to the teachers. Traditionally all the children from early start would be brought over on a special day this year we had an open day as well and the children came over. But they will come over em and they will be given a tour of the junior infant classes but possibly we could work on a stronger transition programme” (Participant 26)

“I know very little about them. There are a few in my class that go to afterschool but I never really see them or talk to them. Sometimes when they are collecting children but that’s it” (Participant 28)

“Ah no, no formal links {with early years services}. Maybe the HSLO does but I wouldn’t know anything about that. There definitely aren’t any for the older children” (Participant 28)

Perspectives on Early Education

“There is no point pushing that {formal education} on a three year old, leave it. Like its hard enough pushing it on a five year old. There is no point making a four year old do it or a three year old I would think. I mean there’s plenty, they are going to be writing their name for the next 18 years in school” (Participant 2)

“In play groups you see, well, I don’t know what they do” (Participant 8)

“I can understand why they why to standardise the service to children in playgroups and I can understand that. As far as I’m concerned in primary school we already have all of that. All of those safeguards are there, because we have inspections, we have a school evaluation every couple of years. We have various people, you know, who kind-of come in and keep an eye to make sure that everything is as it should be, you know? I mean, you won’t get away with much in a primary school” (Participant 8)

“I mean you could see the value of that for pre-schools and things like that.” (Participant 10)

"I feel the only thing that's going to improve the plight of young children is to have a very very good standard of pre-schooling." (Participant 12)

"if you have a crap pre-school I don't know how the people in the pre-school would be able to successfully, achieve the Siolta standards. And, I don't know how successfully they would be able to even fill out the reports and be, I don't know how self reflective they are as practitioners. A lot of pre-schools aren't very good" (Participant 12)

"So, you know, as educators the department of education needs to say we are going to make sure every single teacher in pre-school is qualified. And is kind-of, you know competent. And just kinda have a basic standard rather than allowing dodgy pre-school to exist and then after the fact, in a retrograde way trying to fix them, through self evaluation . It just seems a bit backwards and a bit ad hoc."
(Participant 12)

"I can see the need for having a scoring system and rating the childcare centres and I applaud that. They need to have some sort of system put in place to support them. It's about time, but here? Teachers are checked, they are inspected we have regular planning, meetings, reviews."
(Participant 25)

"We have a good relationship with many of the pre-schools and obviously with_____. Some are better than others at preparing children for life in school. Many of the children still can't sit still or listen when they arrive so that is something that the teachers must contend with in September but; the pre-schools are fine you know? They do their job and we do ours" (Participant 25)

"I think they are terrific. They are wonderful. I think that fact that so many children in this area have the chance to go to preschool em, to go to crèche or early start is wonderful." (Participant 26)

"Well I would think that the childcare area is not professionalised, like the primary schools. In saying that the playgroup you know _____ playgroup they seem to be great very professional but they are in the minority around here." (Participant 27)

"I dunno you know? I can only speak for myself but I have to say, there are a few out there now who would give it a bad name". (Participant 27)

Siolta Coordinator

"Maybe there would be a need to in fact be a trained teacher with the same background as us"
(Participant 2)

"I'd be far less intimidated if you were coming into me with early years knowledge. I'm not looking at you as judging me then as you have a different expertise to me altogether. I think it would be easier to let you come in and share your stuff and for me to share mine" (Participant 3)

"I just think sometimes people feel uncomfortable with another person in the classroom any way it's not even necessarily what background you are from it's just like 'they are watching me' and you are very aware of that person being in the room" (Participant 4)

"one young thing from the department won't be able to manage a gaggle of teachers who are happy the way they are" (Participant 27)

"Eh it couldn't hurt to have a coordinator from a teaching background. Teachers might have more respect or more in common with a coordinator who has been through the mill and knows what the difficulties are in the classroom you know? The practicalities of it all. But in saying that, you know maybe they need an outsider to come in with fresh eyes and shake things up ya know? It couldn't hurt." (Participant 27)

Awareness of Siolta

“See that’s the thing with Síolta, your not gonna have any sort of image thing that’s going to be obvious for” (Participant 3)

“That’s why I don’t know if it’ll ever make the gap. They don’t want to know, I don’t mean to be knocking it but...” (Participant 3)

“Knowing about a thing makes a big difference” (Participant 3)

“How widely recognised will it be? Like, everyone knows what the green school is...” (Participant 4)

“Will anyone know or even care?” (Participant 4)

“Parents in this area are not going to say this pre-school has a Síolta A-1 rating, and this pre-school doesn’t. Our parents send their kids to the closest school.”(Participant 12)

“We didn’t get any information on it, really. I mean no one came to tell us. ‘Cause it seems like quite a big project and no one, given the size of the project. It seems slightly pre-emptive for somebody to offer it to us without coming out and saying this is what it is and this is why you would do it” (Participant 12)

“We didn’t really see what the benefit might be for our children and for our school” (Participant 12)

“I think in a DEIS school if we are going to take on more work we want it to be quite practically based. We want to see literacy and numeracy results. Um, so, we have taken on a lot of new programmes just through DEIS and that means we don’t have time for things I think that aren’t, we know, that we’re aren’t guaranteed are going to really improve the standard of education in the school” (Participant 12)

“It just sort of came from nowhere and all of sudden we are expected to take on another load of work?” (Participant 15)

“To be honest, before today I had never even heard of Síolta. And I would think that most teachers are the same. You, if you are to expect teachers to work with this, this Síolta thing then they need to know about it. Why hasn’t it been publicised? Why aren’t the department running training? Or sending information or the INTO ya know?” (Participant 27)

“Teachers would need more information on Síolta. A lot more. Maybe some training or something like that? Someone to be singing it’s praises. Then you might get a bit more interest” (Participant 28)

PERSONAL OPINIONS /EXPERIENCE

Teacher’s Attitudes

“I don’t think it’s the biggest thing in the world but that’s because we studied it for a year” (Participant 2)

“Teachers may not be wanting to write all these bad things about themselves ‘I’m failing in this area, I’m not doing the best in this area, this area this area; and then the teacher next door is doing brilliantly in those areas. And then when the principal reads both of these reports. It depends on the teacher” (Participant 2)

“We have one or two people in particular who would be very willing to try out new things and I think they would do their best because they give their best to everything, but the average teacher who just wants to come in, get their job done, they are getting paid for” (Participant 3)

“There is egotism involved in teaching a little bit and when people get their training years over them they don’t want to be too open. You know it would be hard for some people just to go ‘oh god I’m failing there I’m failing there,’ they might not want it so blatantly put in front of them. And that’s why they might shy away from it a little bit. It’s so much easier just to close your door and you won’t have to deal with it kind of thing. Nobody else is ever gonna come in again and judge you on it. So you would have to be very open to change” (Participant 3)

“They are better off you know, putting their money into extra resources, and, for, for the likes of buildings rather than running a programme like that...that would be probably more effective than running a programme that people probably really don’t want to do.” (Participant 5)

“The mention of an inspector as well” (Participant 6)

“they’ve had enough of this bloody hassle. You know what I mean?” (Participant 8)

“personally, at this stage in my life, writing out notes and writing out schemes and assessments and things like that you know I couldn’t, I would find that at this stage you know, I couldn’t be bloody bothered.” (Participant 8)

“Being accredited as being a super doper Síolta teacher is of no interest to me.” (Participant 11)

“I think the thing of doing yourself. I know I would kind of feel well I kind-of do that, I’ll just say I’m really good at it! I would, I would. ‘Cause if I say I’m not good at it you’d have to start doing stuff to improve, to get good” (Participant 12)

“We are too willing now to do things voluntarily, and I think it’s time we stopped.” (Participant 21)

“That’s when we were happy and there was money in the country. We’d say yes to anything then!” (Participant 22)

“I just personally wouldn’t even consider doing anything voluntary when I’m getting pay cuts all the time. I wouldn’t even consider it. I wouldn’t even want to know. I’d just have no interest at all especially when we are getting pay cuts. I wouldn’t take on anything” (Participant 23)

“I can imagine the teachers being quite indignant. The feedback I have gotten is that they do not want to take part.” (Participant 25)

“At the end of the day teachers are like everyone else. Teaching is a job, it’s no longer a vocation; and in the current climate teachers are reluctant to do anything above and beyond the call of duty. That’s an awful thing to say and it sounds terrible but it doesn’t make it untrue.” (Participant 27)

“No I wouldn’t take something like that on right now. Personally, I’ve a lot going on so...” (Participant 28)

“I’m getting married, I have a new baby; taking on voluntary work is not something I would consider right now, you know? Maybe a few years ago; but with everything that is going on. People with families wouldn’t be able to take the time to give to this and that’s it” (Participant 28)

Professional development

“I would bring it in because it does make you analyse every area of the classroom from the environment to the play, break time play, classroom play... the whole way through and that’s a very good idea for teachers to look at what they are doing” (Participant 1)

“I have to say that I am slightly confused by, by the award at the end of all of this. If one or two teachers do it and finish it and, and hand in their work the school gets the award not the individual? ...that’s not a good system at all” (Participant 14)

"The fact is that there are no real benefits for the teacher. Am I correct? The school gets the award whilst the teacher carries out all the work. I know that there is professional development and those type of benefits like you say, but; this is not a recognised award. It won't get you a pay increase; it won't get you a job promotion. Schools won't put in their job descriptions 'must have Siolta experience' so you need something to really sell it to teachers. What's in it for them?" (Participant 27)

Money

"I think the fact that it's voluntary at the moment maybe the fact our pay has been cut and everything else, I think you would be very pushed to get anybody to do anything voluntary at the moment" (Participant 2)

"We are being asked to do extra work, voluntary work whilst taking pay cuts? We are systematically getting less money and being asked to do more work you know?" (Participant 15)

"Realistically it's too much extra work, voluntarily. Gimme a few extra grand a year and I'll think about taking it on." (Participant 21)

"I wouldn't mind doing it if I was paid a lot better because really, I would love to see the children of (the school) benefitting from all the standards I really would." (Participant 22)

"I just personally wouldn't even consider doing anything voluntary when I'm getting pay cuts all the time. I wouldn't even consider it. I wouldn't even want to know. I'd just have no interest at all especially when we are getting pay cuts. I wouldn't take on anything" (Participant 23)

"I would say funding as an incentive to teachers to help them. It's a bit like when teachers take part in school completion programmes and after school, homework clubs and so on they get a nominal payment. It's not that they need to be paid for everything that they do, they don't. Nor would they expect to be; but it would just be, they would feel less put upon. I don't know if that makes sense." (Participant 26)

Ill feeling toward the Department of Education

"Yeah, really in the Department the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing, it's a bit all over the place" (Participant 1)

"More attention from the department is unwelcome at the moment" (Participant 4)

"we are being asked to do it (introduce quality) piecemeal" (Participant 20)

"it's just too much, I just can't see this ever working at the moment the way things stand. We are up to our eyes with everything that is going on and why should we bale out the department of education?" (Participant 21)

"They wouldn't dare do this to any other sector" (Participant 21)

"it's just you know the government saying, 'ah yeah, we did that'. Yeah great and realistically we've done it for them. Give us the thanks first and then we'll do it." (Participant 23)

"They have been treated badly by the department and they feel that they are underappreciated so who can blame them? That's how people feel at the moment, especially the younger teachers." (Participant 27)

"The Department aren't doing themselves any favours you know? They've expected too much from people and with the way things are now no one is willing to muck in" (Participant 28)

Appendix F: Sample Interview

R: What is your understanding of Síolta?

P: As far as I can recollect Síolta is an accreditation of early infant education. Which would be given to the school, yet would be carried out by an individual or group of teachers.

R: In your opinion, do you Síolta has any benefits for an infant school?

P: Oh Yeah, I think anything um; well I don't know but one of the ideas I had when I heard about it was that I had always thought that we should have a bench mark when the children come in to the school. So that anything that we taught them would then be value added. And I suppose, for that reason alone I think Síolta would be a huge benefit. I'm not sure if that's even applicable, would it be?

You know, to an extent I think it might be. I think that something that's missing in Irish education. We have standardised testing in every other level in the junior school except at junior infants. We've standardised testing in senior infants- the MIST, em, in first and second class where we do the micro-T and the sigma. So we've the only class that's missing standardised testing would be junior infants so I think that could be a benefit. A huge benefit. Em, Obviously any accreditation and up work that we are doing would be welcome but probably not as necessary in eh, national school, national primary school as it would be say in a play school or a pre-school. And the reason I say that is that we have a curriculum already laid down so that we, it's not that we are automatically wonderful but there is an amount of work that we have to get through and a level we have to reach and a standard we have to reach anyway. So in a sense that is predetermined. Does that answer your question?

R: Absolutely. Em, the next question is perceived reasons why the school has chosen to implement or not implement as the case may be?

P: Unfortunately, unfortunately I stress, we are not implementing it. Now, in fairness to the teachers I would say that they have taken on quite a lot in the school in recent years. With the DEIS plan. Like obviously each school would have to have eh a school plan anyway; so the DEIS pan is simply a follow through of that. But I many ways it's more focused on the four areas, now. The teachers

R: Apologies what are those four areas?

P: Literacy, numeracy, attendance, em... Em, gosh what's the forth? We'll come back to it. Eh... parental involvement? Anyway, I started to say about the school plan. The, teachers would be involved in that anyway. In our school, we've taken on a literacy project in the last four years. Every single teacher, in every single class, and every resource teacher, every learning support teacher is involved in that. Now, they are involved in that to a, to a large extent and it takes up a lot of their day. For instance, we changed our morning

break from twenty past ten to half past ten to allow us to have an hour and a half of literacy each morning. And so it really is a huge chunk of the day. It has paid dividends in that our scores in our standardised testing enormously the first year that we were involved and we have managed to maintain them ever since. So that's very good. We are now nearer the standard norm which would be unusual for a disadvantaged school. So that's fantastic. One of the reasons I would say that the teachers were reluctant to buy into another project was because they fill out em, forms for PFL anyway in September. As I say they devote a lot of their time and energy to the literacy project. In recent years we've also em, become very involved in the coordination and implementation of a new code of conduct or discipline policy and every teacher in the school has bought into that as well. So there has been a lot of extra curricular, well, extra involvement.

R: What's your opinion about the current infant class curriculum?

P: There is a huge amount of work but that, I mean it's nationwide. Every teacher would have the same difficulties, or whatever. Time constraints; time is a huge factor and I think a lot of the teachers would have mentioned that to you. Time is the biggest element in their refusal of doing of taking part because the day simply isn't long enough. I already alluded to the fact that we have taken an hour and a half out of the day for literacy. Obviously under the new revised curriculum, for me one of the greatest aspect of the revised curriculum is the fact that there is such an emphasis on oracy. That's something that I fought for for years with our inspectors and whilst we had a lot of em, a lot of time devoted in the past to Irish oral language, and I used to say well some of these children can't speak English. So surely we have to devote time. Obviously in a disadvantaged areas that would be even more important so for me, the two greatest aspects of the revised curriculum are active learning and the fact that there is an emphasis on oracy. Em, in relation to the width and the breadth of the curriculum, I don't know how the department could expect a teacher to get through the amount of work. However, I suppose if you were to talk to an inspector about it they would say well you use the curriculum like a menu and you take as much as you can from it and that's what you do. You prioritise. Em now, what else? Is there any other aspect to that question?

R: You spoke about active learning there. Is that one of the first things to go? Is it even a realistic teaching method?

P: I think it is. I was trained in Froebel, so for me play would be a huge part of my training and therefore something that I would have used in teaching and active learning comes into that. I think the children have a far better chance of learning and retention when taught through play so not in a million years would I suggest that play should go. No, no I'd be very definite about that.

R: What type of relationship would you have with the local early education services?

P: I think they are terrific. They are wonderful. I think that fact that so many children in this area have the chance to go to preschool, crèche or early start

is wonderful. The parents in this area don't know how lucky they are but they are very very lucky to have those services. For me one of the best aspects of it is that the services are integrated and that they work so closely together. We would work quite closely and very well with the local health centre and the mater child guidance clinic and with Túrás and springboard. And PFL in recent times.

R: Are there any links between the school and the preschools; transition programmes?

P: well now, that's an interesting point. We are trying to. We have a structured transfer programme this year for the first time from second class and third class. The transition from junior to senior school So that's actually very very important for us because it's so daunting for the children to leave second going to third class. We have also discussed with the staff the necessity for doing the very same at the other end for children coming into the school. We have started this year to look in and visited early start and spoke to the teachers. Traditionally all the children from early start would be brought over on a special day this year we had an open day as well and the children came over. But they will come over em and they will be given a tour of the junior infant classes but possibly we could work on a stronger transition programme

R: What sort of information would be helpful to receive about children?

P: Well we always ask the HSLO, and the coordinator of the set team would get as much information as possible from the teachers in early start. Particularly in relation to special needs children in order to get resources for the children and to set them in place before they come. In relation to behaviour, I know we shouldn't label children but obviously it helps us if we know certain children spark off each other and it's helpful for us to know that. Or if children have a particular difficulty it good for us to know that that difficulty exists.

R: What in your opinion is needed by principals to implement Síolta?

*P: I would say funding as an incentive to teachers to help them. It's a bit like when teachers take part in school completion programmes and after school, homework clubs and so on they get a nominal payment. It's not that they need to be paid for everything that they do, they don't. Nor would they expect to be; but it would just be, they would feel less put upon. I don't know if that makes sense. Resources are always something that teachers would look for. Not necessarily concrete resources but resources in the form of support and I know you have said you would supply that.
Now to get back to the DEIS four areas, literacy, numeracy, attendance and punctuality and involvement with external agencies which brings in parental involvement and all that. Now is there anything; have we left out anything?*

R: No unless there is anything else you would like to add?

P: For me the overriding feature of Síolta would be of benefit to the school would be that this could provide a bench mark for junior infants for the school and that we would then know where they had begun from so I think that would be fabulous, a huge benefit and something that I would focus on if asking teachers to do this again.

Also, I think involving the whole school rather than just a handful of teachers would be better and that was my recommendation that I fed back to our board that we would need total acceptance or but in from the team of teachers for it to be viable.

But there is for and against. I could equally argue the case for one or two teachers doing it because they would be doing it because they are volunteers and would be more interested in doing it but also em, we have a teacher here doing a play project and doing it particularly well and she is the only one doing it and doing it with a heart and a half but again, time. Time is a huge factor. It is a huge problem. So...